Slipped Sideways

by Romiress

Summary

Slade and Bruce finds themselves on an Earth that isn't their own, surrounded by familiar faces with completely different life stories.

To say the least, they're not a fan.

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The all but inevitable 'what if the More To Being a Father universe crossed over with comic canon'? First chapter notes contain a brief 'what you need to know' for anyone interested in hopping in.

In Summary: What if GoodDad!Bruce and GoodDad!Slade met their less than good counterparts?
For anyone hopping in, this spins off from the rest of my 'More to Being a Father' series, which is a canon divergence of Arkham. This will make a lot more sense if you've read that, but assuming you haven't and would prefer to jump right in, the most important details to know are that they split off six years after Arkham Knight would have happened, and that the events of that game never took place. Instead, Slade bonded with Jason, helped him work through the worst of his issues, and brought the family together. Everyone is in more or less a good place with each other, Slade and Bruce fall for each other, and by the time the series wraps up Bruce is A) retired from being Batman, B) on the Justice League as Bruce Wayne, and C) married to Slade.
Chapter 1

Slade isn't used to having people around him with better senses than him, so it throws him off when Clark's head suddenly jerks up, his eyes wide, head cocking as his senses try to pick up something that they can't quite put their finger on. Jon follows shortly after, and only then does Slade feel it. A *thrumming*, something deep and throbbing that puts him on edge, every nerve in his body lighting up.

Something is happening. He doesn't know what, but he doesn't like it.

He acts without thinking when he feels the portal start to crack open beside him. It's bright orange and makes his eye burn from the intensity of the light, something that probably shouldn't be happening at all. He grabs Lois's arm out of pure instinct, literally tossing her across the room to get her away from it. He can manage. Clark can manage. Lois? Lois is a human, and whatever happens isn't going to end well for her.

But the thrumming is only that much more intense, the portals light brightening, and he feels a hand—Bruce, definitely Bruce—close around his forearm before he stops being able to feel anything at all.

Bruce wakes, rolls over, and vomits onto the floor. He feels like his entire body was just sucked through a straw, and it takes him several minutes to orient himself enough to recognize that he still has all his limbs.

Beside him, Slade groans and pushes himself to his feet.

"What the *fuck* was that," Slade says. Bruce doesn't manage a response, squinting down at the floor he's lying on top of and letting out a groan. The floor seems to be made entirely of a blue-tinted semi-transparent crystal. Like glass, only impossibly perfect, and... he doesn't even know. He raps his knuckles against the floor and gets nothing. The whole thing's solid, but he can't see far through it.

"Teleportation," Slade says, reaching down to help Bruce off the floor as they both take a look around.

Bruce hasn't ever seen anything like this. The entire room—which is absolutely massive—is made of the same blue crystal material. The room is filled with pedestals holding all variety of strange things. Some of them look like weapons. Some of them look like collectibles. There's a massive glass bottle on one, and Bruce is just stepping over to inspect when a door opens at the far end of the room.

A robot comes in. There's no real other way to describe it, because it's human shaped and made of metal, but *obviously* a robot. It ignores them completely, heading over to where Bruce has vomited on the floor and beginning to laboriously clean the spot.

Slade grabs his forearm and starts to haul him towards the door, but it snaps shut before they get even halfway there.

"Intruders," a synthetic voice says through some kind of unseen public announcement system. "Please remain still until Superman can arrive."

Bruce exchanges a glance with Slade.

"Clark," he mutters, "has a lot of explaining to do." Clark's never mentioned anything like this. So much of what around them is blatantly alien, and Bruce is struggling to imagine why Clark would
have hidden it from them.

Slade slides closer to him as the robot leaves, but the door closes again with a snap.

"Let's just wait," Bruce says. "Clark will get here, we'll give him hell, and then we can go."

But Bruce doesn't sound as certain as he'd like. He's struggling to imagine why Clark would have hidden it. If he was willing to hide this—a whole vault room with robots and alien technology and who knows what—what else is he hiding?

It just doesn't seem like him. But the system called him Superman, not Kal-El, so it's not as if it's been set up without his knowledge.

They don't have long to wait. It hasn't even been five minutes when a part of the ceiling slides open, and there's a flash of blue and red.

"That's not Superman," Slade says quietly.

The figure is most definitely not Clark. They're far smaller as they drop down towards the ground, but when they reach eye level Bruce realizes he recognizes them... mostly.

"Jon?" Bruce asks. It looks like him. It's the same messy hair, the same wide eyes, the same features. But this Jon is older. Maybe four or five years older, just on the edge of adulthood. Slade curses beside him, and Jon looks down at them, confused. He's wearing his costume, which probably isn't a good sign, but hasn't started blasting them, which is.

"Time displaced," Slade says, cursing again. "If we've been gone this long..."

Four years. Maybe five. That long without the boys. That long missing... They've missed a lot, and Bruce feels his stomach sink.

"...Mr. Wayne?" Jon says, looking absolutely baffled as he looks between them. He stays at eye height, Bruce realizes, making no move to settle down on the floor. His costume's different, but that doesn't seem that strange. If anything, it'd be strange he was still wearing his old costume after so long.

"Jon," Bruce says. "Where's your father?"

Jon is somehow managing to look more confused by the second, but he's no longer taking his eyes off Slade.


The same synthetic voice speaks from far above.

"Unable to locate," it says. "Teleportation suspected."

Oh no.

"Replay," Jon says.

Bruce jerks away as a hologram appears not far from them, standing just to the side of where they landed. It's not just Clark; it's Clark and Lois, with Clark in his suit and Lois in a winter jacket, talking about something. The hologram has no sound, but he watches in confusion as their conversation continues, and then something flares beside them. There's an empty pedestal, but in the hologram there's an object there, some kind of cube, and it flares to life as Clark turns to stare at it in
horror. The light is blinding—the same blinding light as the portal—and when it fades, Clark, Lois,
and the cube are gone. Bruce turns his head and finds a hologram of himself and Slade on the cave
floor, apparently unconscious from the trip.

"What?" Jon says. He zips over to the empty pedestal, and the hologram vanishes. "System, track
Kal-el."

"Unable to track."

"System... Identify this pedestal's contents."

"Suspected fatherbox," the system says. "Unknown."

Jon lets out a cry of frustration and turns back to them.

"What did you do?" He asks, sounding desperate. He's just seen his parents vanish, and the only
clue he has is them.

"Whatever it was, It happened-"

"Don't talk," Jon snaps, glaring at Slade. "I was talking to Mr. Wayne." Mr. Wayne. Not Bruce. And Bruce realizes that they're wrong.

"Oh," he says. "We weren't time displaced. This is another dimension entirely."

Jon squints at him.

"The source wall has been weakened for a while," he says finally, as if Bruce should know what that
is. "It's possible that allowed the... the father box thing to activate..."

"It didn't take us," Bruce says. "It swapped us. That Clark and Lois are probably with our Clark and
Lois."

"Hopefully with the cube," Slade says, completely ignoring Jon's earlier instruction.

Bruce lets out a small sigh of relief, despite how serious the situation is.

"This is fine," he says. "They have the cube. There's two Clarks to figure out the problem and swap
us back. We just have to wait."

"You want me to just wait?" Jon protests. "Those are my parents! I need to - I need to tell the
League."

"That's fine," Bruce says. "If anyone would know what to do... probably someone on the League." He
considers his options for a moment. "Or Tim."

Jon looks at him like he's grown another head.

"I'm telling Batman," Jon says.

Bruce feels a sinking feeling in his stomach.

"Is that me?" He says. "Or is that Jason?"

"What?" Jon says.
Bruce feels like someone's poured ice water down his back, the sinking sensation almost overwhelming him.

"Jason," Bruce says. "You know Jason, right?" For a moment, he's terrified that the answer is going to be no. That this world is one where Jason doesn't even exist.

Jon is looking at him like he's crazy, and the longer he does it, the more confused Bruce is that something has gone horribly, terribly wrong.

"I know Jason," Jon says. "But he's definitely not Batman."

Bruce can't stop himself from letting out a sigh of relief. At least Jason's alive.

"Listen," Slade says, "we're from another dimension-"

"I got that," Jon says. Most of his attention seems to be on Slade, scrutinizing him, and Bruce feels his stomach start to sink again. "This isn't exactly the first time this has happened."

"What?" Bruce can't stop himself from saying. "This has happened before?"

"Not with your world, obviously," Jon says. "But others. Like I said, the source wall's been weakened, so now there's a lore more intrusions. That's why we need to tell Batman."

"Let's hold on for a second," Slade says. "Obviously we have some major universal differences, so let's just... backtrack here, and make sure we're operating from the same place. Utter basics. His secret identity is..."

Slade gestures to Bruce, and Jon's eyebrows go up and down as if he can't decide if he wants to answer.

"...Batman," Jon finally says.

"And you're Jon Kent, the son of Clark and Lois, and Clark is Superman?" Bruce asks.

Jon nods.

"And you're friends with my son, Damian Wayne?" Bruce adds quickly, earning himself another nod.

Alright, they've got that much so far.

"The Justice League exists," Slade says, which was already established. "And the three of us are members? Your dad, I mean. Not you."

Jon looks at Slade, right back to being extremely confused.

"No," he says. "You're not. You're... you're Deathstroke."

Slade cringes.

"Did I not retire in this universe?"

"From being Deathstroke?" Jon asks. "No. You... no. You didn't retire. Deathstroke doesn't retire."

"Is Deathstroke not... associated with me at all? With Batman?"
For every bit of information they've gained or shared, Bruce half expects Jon to start relaxing. He doesn't. Every new bit of information seems to only make him even more confused, glancing between them as if expecting a _gotcha_ at any moment.

"No," he says. "You fought him sometimes. Is he... was he on your side before? I mean in your world."

"He's been working with us for years," Bruce says.

"This doesn't mean that," Slade says. "Not everyone knew. Maybe the Kents don't in this universe." He turns to Jon. "What about the Gotham Knight?"

"The sports team?"

"The vigilante."

Jon wrinkles his nose.

"We don't have that. Whatever that is."

It's a world without Slade. A world where he kept being Deathstroke, where he never...

"Oh god," Bruce says. "What about Jason? If you didn't help him..."

Slade's face pales, and both their eyes slip over to Jon.

"He's... uh, running the casino?" Jon offers less than helpfully.

"He's _running a casino?_" Bruce asks. He's not sure if he heard that right, because it makes absolutely no sense in context with anything else they've heard.

"The Iceberg Lounge," Jon adds. "Damian was complaining about it. Apparently Bruce is—the other Bruce—really angry at him for it. And all the other stuff."

"We need to talk to Jason," Slade says, absolute certainty in his voice.

"Wait, hold on," Jon says. "We need to talk to the League. We need to - Batman needs to know. _This_ world's Batman."

"I need to find out what's happening with my children," Bruce says. "You can either help me get to them or I'll find my own way." He knows he sounds desperate and he doesn't care. His brain is still caught on _the Iceberg Lounge_, trying to wrap itself around the idea of Jason being friendly with Penguin.

"We're not far from the north pole," Jon points out. "So good luck with that."

The _North Pole_? Apparently his shock and confusion shows on his face, because Jon lets out a sigh.

"Listen," he says. "I don't know how things were for you, but things are a big mess here. Like... everything is a big mess. And your family is a big mess. And Damian's even _more_ of a mess lately, but if you guys want to go and try and fix things, then... maybe that would be better."

Jon's arms fold across his chest, his lips pressed in a thin line.

"I should report you," he adds. "Because that would be the right thing to do. But then all that would happen is Batman would put you on lockdown and send you back. So..."
He trails off for a moment, and then turns his full attention back to Bruce.

"How's Damian, in your world?"

"He's good," Bruce says. "He - he's Shrike, in our world. A vigilante."

With no Slade and maybe no Jason, he's not sure how much of that is even true.

"But is he happy?" Jon asks, and Bruce realizes that that is what he's looking for. They're still friends, but Damian is even more of a mess, and Jon wants to fix that.

"Yes," Bruce says. "He's close with his brothers. Especially Jason. He's friends with you. The two of you... you're taking art classes together. He has a dog named Titus and a cat named Portia. He loves going on patrol, but he's expanding his interests beyond just... vigilantism. You're helping him get used to being around people closer to his own age."

Jon looks pained by the idea.

"Alright," he says. "I'm going to..." He pauses for a moment, and then shrugs. "You know what? I didn't see you at all. But if you happened to climb into this one capsule and it took you right to Gotham Harbor, that sure would be a shame, wouldn't it?"

It saves him from having to explain himself. It gives him plausible deniability. And that's all Bruce needs. He needs to know what happened to his family in this world. His own family is safe at home, guarded by each other. By Clark. By two Clark's apparently. Even if they are gone for years like they first thought, that won't change things. They have each other. They'll hold strong.

But this world needs help. Maybe that's what they're there for.
Chapter Notes

If DC Comics writers can't keep their canon straight, I cannot be held to this standard either. In general terms:
- Jason is running the Iceberg Lounge, with Red Hood having been run out of Gotham (Approximately RHATO 34ish)
- House of Bane hasn't happened, which means no Tims were harmed in the making of this fic
- Tim is over with the Young Justice team most of the time
- Ric never happened because I'm not familiar enough, but Dick is still up in Bludhaven doing his thing
- Deathstroke didn't die, and we're juuuuuust before he would have

That said, you don't need to have read any of the current comics, because Slade and Bruce are going to be blundering their way through discovering the present state of things.

Slade curls against Bruce in the tiny capsule, shooting through the ocean at speeds that are probably too fast to be safe. His teeth are chattering together from the vibrations, and he's sure Bruce has it even worse. The capsule is clearly intended for one person, and the two of them are crammed together like sardines. There's no controls, and the only mercy is that there's nothing to get jammed into. They've already been moving for thirty minutes, shooting towards Gotham Bay at absolutely blinding speed.

Slade wants to make a snippy comment about Jon's choice of transportation, but the point is that they're getting where they need to be quickly, and he's too worried that if he opens his mouth he's going to bite through his tongue and get blood everywhere.

It feels like forever before the capsule starts losing speed, finally halting and bobbing to the surface. The top pops open, and both of them spill out, gasping for fresh air.

"That was awful," Bruce says. "Who designed that sort of thing?"

"It was probably intended more for someone Damian's size," Slade says. "Not two fully grown men."

Slade cranes his neck until he sees the lounge, and then starts to paddle the capsule towards it.

It's not the same lounge he knows. The general aesthetic is similar, but this one is set out on a pier, and the design of the building is totally different.

At the very least it's hard to mistake for anything else. It's lit up for business, and looks significantly less grungy than the one he knew.

"Are we going in through the front door?" Bruce asks. "Or through the top?"

"We don't have gear," Slade points out. "So we're going through the top."
"Doesn't-" Bruce starts.

"You look like the Bruce Wayne for this world," Slade points out. "The fewer people who see us before we get gear, the better, and if you show up anywhere the one from this world is going to know."

Slade pauses to consider, eye flicking towards the far shore, searching for the lights of Wayne Manor.

"We could get gear," he suggests.

"And get mauled by Batman," Bruce mutters. "I know how I would react if someone showed up looking like me. He'd probably think I was Hush."

Slade doesn't feel the need to point out that Hush might not even exist in this timeline. Instead he grunts, hauling them up onto a part of the dock, just out of sight. He helps Bruce out, slamming the capsule lid shut, and then watches as the capsule sinks down below the surface, darting off.

Hopefully back to Jon.

"Let's take inventory," Slade says carefully. "We have an emergency communicator for Jon. I have... the clothes on my back." Casual, thankfully, but not particularly good for climbing. "I've got a pocket knife in my belt..."

Bruce produces a small nylon sack, hardly bigger than an envelope, and grins at him.

"Remember when you told me I was being paranoid bringing anything to visit with Clark?" Bruce says. "I believe you owe me an apology for that."

Slade drags him over for a kiss and takes the sack. There's not a lot to it. A communicator that picks up nothing. A pair of gloves, intended to keep prints off things. A lockpicking set. Slade carefully tucks them away, and then snaps on the gloves.

He wishes they had more, but he's done more with less.

There's no argument for how things are going to be done. The building's side is sheer, a challenging rock climb for the best of people. Slade is well beyond the best of people, and with the gloves pulled on he lets Bruce climb onto his back, arms wrapped tightly around him as he starts to scale the side of the building.

Once they're past the first bit, the building becomes a lot easier to climb. It's bizarre ice-like structure makes it easy to find handholds, and at several points the angle is low enough Slade can effectively just walk up the side.

"It's Penguin," Bruce says. "He'll be at the top."

Or Jason will, in theory. Slade doesn't understand why Jason is running the Iceberg Lounge, but the idea of him working with the Penguin of all people... Even if Jason was going to be a criminal, he could do better than that.

"Found it," he hisses down when he finds a window that looks into what is obviously the main office. He can tell because the glass is bulletproof, and there's a massive desk with a wall-to-wall aquarium just inside.

He doesn't go into the office. The security's going to be too tight, and the glass is durable enough it's
going to take a few swings to get through. Instead, he slides to the side, finding the next window. That one isn't bulletproof, looking into what looks like an empty conference hall. Probably used for meetings too large for the main office.

"Cameras are too far for me to reach," Slade says. "So we're going to get spotted. What are we going to do?"

Bruce is still clinging to his back, and he takes a moment to decide.

"It's Jason," he says. "We go in. A security team lets whoever is running the place know we're there. Jason should have enough say to intervene, and then we can get a moment to talk with him. So we get through the window, head to the hallway, and handle it from there."

Slade nods and hauls the window open, breaking the lock. There's no blaring of an alarm, which is good, and Slade carefully lets Bruce climb off him.

They don't make it to the door. Before Slade can even grab the handle the wall starts to move, literally surging over top of the door as he reels backwards. The bricks glow purple, and Slade's first thought is very uncreative violet lantern.

"That's a meta," Bruce says. "Something's-"

The bricks start to appear around them, rapidly closing in, and Bruce grabs Slade's arm before he can swing.

"This is intelligent security," Bruce says quickly. "Someone's behind it. Unless they're stupid, they're not going to kill us, just hold us in place until someone can check on us. So we just need to sit tight."

Slade doesn't want to sit tight. He wants to punch through the bricks that are blocking them in. He knows he can break Hal's constructs, and he doesn't doubt he can manage whoever it is this is. No one in Penguin's employ has ever been that good.

At least in their own timeline, anyway.

But Bruce's back pressed up against him reminds him that he doesn't need to, and he stands down, letting the bricks surround them. Once they're trapped in a space the size of a small closet, the bricks stop moving, and they're left isolated.

"Good thing I'm not claustrophobic," Slade mutters under his breath.

Bruce is still and silent behind them as they wait, seconds ticking by.

"He's got five minutes-" Slade says, and then the back of the wall starts to open up.

It gives them space to back out of it, the glowing bricks shifting to block the window they came in through.

It's only when the bricks in their prison start to completely dissolve that they get to see the man behind it. He's young, with reflective black glasses, a purple shirt and a little soul patch, and he doesn't look amused.

And immediately beside him is a very angry Jason. They almost match, the same sort of suit, only Jason wears red where the man at his side wears purple, and his face is less annoyed and more murderous.
He looks different. Bruce was expecting, based on Jons age, for Jason to be in his early thirties. Instead, he looks mid-twenties at the oldest, even younger than they're used to seeing him.

And way more angry. So much more angry. Slade wants to say he looked this angry when he scraped Jason out of Arkham and started gluing the pieces together, but he didn't. That was a different kind of anger. That was a lost, broken, hot anger, and this is cold. Seething.

"Maybe I wasn't being clear enough," Jason says. "You aren't welcome here. I assumed that was implied." Every time he speaks he shows a bit of teeth, his anger almost a physical thing.

"Should I get rid of them...?" The man at his side says, and it's at that point that Jason's eyes flick to Slade himself.

He goes stiff, eyes narrowing. It's not a friendly look.

"Slade," he says, and his eyes flick back to Bruce. "Are you kidding me? You're sending him after me? You can't handle things yourself, so you-"

"This is a misunderstanding," Bruce says, and he sounds desperate to Slade's ears. "We just need to speak to you in private."

Bruce is clearly trying to be delicate in front of someone who may or may not know who Jason is, but Slade has no interest in that.

"What he means is that we're from another dimension," he says. "He's not the Bruce Wayne you know, and I'm not the Slade Wilson you know."

Even with how nonchalant about it Jon was, he's expecting more of a reaction from Jason. Instead what he gets is Jason rolling his eyes.

"Of course," he says. "And the first thing you did when you came into this dimension is-"

He falters, squinting at Bruce.

"Are you wearing a wedding ring?" He asks, and then tips his head back and laughs. "Of course. Of course you are. So you're, what, the version where you married her and now you're coming back in time to tell your dumb ass you should have gone through with it? No kidding."

Slade abruptly realizes that his ring is hidden under the gloves he put on to climb the building.

"Wait," Bruce says. "Who are we talking about?"

Slade suspects Talia. He's pretty sure Bruce is thinking the same thing.

"Selina," Jason says with a wave of his hand. "God, this is hysterical. Of course you'd come to me. You couldn't go to the golden boy or Timbo or anything like that. No no, you came straight to me to tell me how you fucked up your relationship or something like that."

"It's not like that," Bruce says, and he looks and sounds confused. Things are going very fast, and Jason seems to be going a mile a minute. "We were just trying to figure out why you were here. It's not-"

"Where I should be? And where should I be?" Jason leans forward, cupping his ear as if he's waiting to hear.

Slade immediately knows there's no right answer. This Jason—not theirs, and yet so similar—is too
angry for there to be a right answer.

"At home," Bruce says. "With your family."

"And you lost me," Jason says with another laugh. "Whatever fucked up world you come from, it's sure as hell not this one. So you can get the hell out and go bother someone else, thanks."

The man at Jason's side feels like a small mercy, because he looks twice as confused as Bruce does, unable to follow the conversation even slightly.

"Jason," Slade says, making at least one attempt. "We came here to find you. To check and make sure that everything's alright. Superboy." And he's not even sure that his name is Superboy, but he doesn't want to name names in front of someone he doesn't know. "-Said that things were bad with the family."

"Good to know literally everyone knows the family's a fucking mess," Jason fires back. "But you've said your piece, and now you can get out."

Jason is not alright. It's written on every gesture he makes, in every word he says. He's agitated and furious, and bizarrely, most of his anger is focused on Bruce.

Not on Slade, who's supposed to still be Deathstroke, but Bruce. His father.

"We're just here to try and help," Bruce says. "We're family, and even if we're from another-"

"We're not family," Jason spits. "You know how I can tell?"

He stares at Bruce, waiting for a response, and Bruce finally shakes his head. He doesn't know what this is, and Slade's instincts—protecting Bruce and helping Jason—are at war with one another.

"Because I already know how you're going to answer this question: Did you kill the Joker?"

Which tells Slade what he needs to know. That this Jason was hurt the same way theirs was. Only this Jason didn't have a helping hand to push him into reconciling. To force Bruce to be better at things. To repair what was broken between them.

"Jason," Bruce says, his voice cracking.

"No matter where you're from," Jason says, and his voice is a hiss, "it's always the same. You say you care, you say we're family, but in the end it's the exact same thing. The only thing you care about is your code. That is the only thing that matters to you. Not your life. Not your kids. And sure as hell not me. So you can-"

"I would have," Slade says. "No hesitation."

Jason falters like someone's pulled the emergency break on his anger, his eyes swinging over to look at Slade.

"What?" Jason asks.

"I would have killed the Joker," Slade says. "If he was still alive in our world, anyway. We killed Croc for what he did, and we took Zsasz for the same. But the Joker was out of our reach before that."

Slade doesn't worry, just for a moment, about what Bruce thinks. He already knows about Croc and Zsasz. He knows Bruce doesn't approve of revenge. But for Slade it wouldn't be about that. It would
be about making absolutely sure it never happened again. That there was no one else. To make absolutely sure that Jason was the Joker's last victim.

Jason stares at Slade, confusion obvious.

"What?" He says. "What the hell does that matter? You'd kill anyone you were paid to."

"No," Slade says. "In my world I'm retired." He struggles for a moment, trying to figure out a way to summarize everything. To explain something that feels beyond explaining. "I took you in. You're as much my son as Bruce's."

Jason stares at Slade for a long moment, and then a look of pure disgust washes over his face.

"Are you kidding me?" He says. "Are you saying that you're my dad in your world? You didn't get enough of fucking up your own kids, so you had to adopt everyone else's?"

"Jason," Bruce says. "Things are different there-"

"Shut up," Jason snaps. "Don't think I didn't notice you not answering. You didn't kill the Joker, did you? You didn't. You failed your world's Jason the same way this one did. You're probably the exact same kind of shitty person he is."

Bruce is silent.

"Do you want me to?" Slade says, and Jason pauses, turning to squint at him.

"What?"

"Kill the Joker," Slade says. "Because there aren't many things in the world that would make me happier than putting him down, knowing what he did."

Jason looks confused, staring down at Slade, face twisted with revulsion.

"If anyone's killing him," Jason says. "It's me."

"Then it's water under the bridge," Slade says. "We're just trying to get the lay of the land."

He can't treat this Jason like his own. It's not going to work. He's too angry for that. So he has to keep him at a distance, the way he did when he first met Jason and he was still the angry young man in a prison jumpsuit.

Jason stares at him, scrutinizing, and then turns away.

"Miguel, give them one of my phones," he says. "And then kick them out. I'll send someone to pick them up."

"Jason-" Bruce says, voice so desperate it hurts.

"Shut up," Jason snaps, "and leave while I'm still in a good mood."

Slade had thought he was prepared for this when they'd left Jon. He'd thought he was prepared. But this is something else, and watching Jason storm out of the room, leaving his confused security behind is... unpleasant. It feels raw in a way Slade isn't used to.
Chapter 3

Bruce doesn't make a fuss as Jason's assistant shows them out of the building. He could throw them out on their asses, but he seems to realize that Slade is seething and does things gently anyway. He shows them out the back, passes them a phone, and then with a wary look wishes them luck before closing the door.

"We should go back," Bruce says. "If we talk to him-"

"He's not going to listen to talk," Slade says. "This is beyond that. We need to have a better idea of what happened here before we do anything."

"We're his fathers," Bruce says, but even as he says it he knows that it's not true. He is Jason's father. Slade isn't, apparently, anything to him at all. He tries, just for a moment, to imagine it. To imagine a world where Slade was never part of their lives. Where he never helped Jason come to terms with his anger. He's struggling to imagine how different it would be.

"We are," Slade says, "but he doesn't recognize that yet."

Slade rests a hand on Bruce's shoulder and gives it a squeeze, and Bruce takes a second to pull himself together.

"We need a next step," he says. "We need to figure out where we're going. Who can we contact?"

"Numbers are probably different," Slade says, and just to prove a point he dials a number, holding it up to his ear for a moment.

"...Number not in service," he says. "That would have been the manor, so we can assume they're all different."

"Which means the only person we can reliably contact is Jim," Bruce says. "Assuming he still works at the station."

"We're not calling emergency services," Slade says. "And we're not contacting Jim. If we do, he's just going to contact this Bruce and then we're back to square one."

The moment they run into his counterpart, Bruce knows their options are going to be limited.

"What about you?" Bruce says. "Shouldn't we be worried about the fact that you're still running around in costume?"

"Not really," Slade says as they head into Gotham proper. "Knowing me—which I definitely do—I'd want to fight myself. If we ran into me, he'd probably gear me up to see how I fare. I think I'd get along with me just fine."

Bruce rolls his eyes.

"That's one option," Slade says. "But I'm sure we can think of something better."

It's night, although not terribly late, and the fact that they're in Gotham isn't helping much at all. It's not the same Gotham. The street layout is different, and plenty of the buildings are in the wrong places. There's the Wayne Enterprises building (eliminated for the same reason Jim would be a poor person to go to), and Bruce is disappointed to find a newsstand only for it to be closed.
"That would have been helpful," he mutters under his breath.

The phone they were given rings, and Bruce stares at it for a moment before answering.

"Hello?"

"Bruce?"

It's Dick. It's definitely Dick. The same voice, at the very least, and Bruce lets out a sigh of relief.

"I would say the one and only, but apparently not," he says. "Where are you?"

"Up in Bludhaven," he says. "Where are you?"

Bruce looks around, checking for street signs.

"We walked straight from the casino up... third. We're near a park. Are you coming down?"

He wants to see Dick. This Dick seems... or at least sounds normal. After seeing Jason, so alien from the one he knows, he wants that. He wants that bit of normality to ground him.

"I'm sending a friend," Dick says. "Jason called me to let me know what was going on, but getting down there isn't exactly easy."

A friend.

"Who?" Bruce says. He almost wants to ask do I know them, but decides against it.

"Uh," Dick says, "you'll see them soon?"

Not exactly the best answer he could have gotten.

"Okay, so, I have to ask," Dick says, and he sounds almost eager. "Do you actually have Slade with you? Because I wasn't sure if Jason was-"

"He's here," Bruce says. "He's giving me a funny look right now."

"Holy hell," Dick mutters under his breath. "And you're... what, friends?"

Bruce eyes Slade.

"Something like that," he says. Maybe it's better not to have that conversation over the phone.

"Alright," Dick says. "I'm going to try and get down there, but when the girl shows up—just the girl, this is important—know that you can trust her, okay?"

The girl. Great.

Slade elbows Bruce and points upwards, and Bruce spots a small orange dot in the sky, rapidly approaching them.

"Are they orange?" Bruce says.

"That's her," Dick says. "I'll call you back. Be nice."

He hangs up without even a goodbye, and Bruce stares at the phone for a moment before tucking it away.
Slade grunts, shifting a bit so he's mostly in front of Bruce as the orange dot slams to a stop in front of them.

Bruce is having a hard time moving past his first impression, which is why is she wearing so few clothes. He's sure he should probably be focused on the fact that she has orange skin or pure green eyes or the fact that her hair is glowing, but he can't get past the fact that she's wearing shockingly little clothing.

Why is her midriff exposed? She's going to get shot.

"You are the other Bruce Wayne?" The girl says, smiling down at them. There's not many people on the street, but most people don't give her more than a passing glance.

It's bizarre.

"I... yes?" Bruce says. The entire situation is so strange that when she reaches out to take his wrist, he doesn't even bother to protest.

Dick said to trust her.

"Come!" She says. "This would be better on the roof."

She grabs at Slade's wrist, and he scowls until Bruce nods and he finally lets her grab him.

The glowing woman lifts them without showing any sign of real exertion, lifting them up towards a nearby roof. Off the ground, Bruce finds he feels a tiny bit safer, stretching out to try and ease the tension in his shoulders.

It's not going away.

"My name is Koriand'r," she says. "Nightwing said you would likely need help, and that I was to collect you and ensure you were alright."

So he's still Nightwing, and Bruce ticks off that little box in his head. One less thing to worry about.

Slade's head twists around.

"Incoming," he says. "At three."

Bruce turns, spotting a white dot in the sky, and wonders just how many fliers the city has.
Slade doesn't like any part of what's happening. Even if Koriand'r is supposed to be a friend, that doesn't really mean anything. A friend of this world's Dick isn't the same thing as being a friend of their world's Dick, and a part of him worries Bruce has forgotten that. That Bruce is so desperate for something familiar he's willing to trust this world's Dick implicitly.

Slade isn't so willing to do so. They don't know anything about the standards of this world. Things are different. And just because someone seems friendly at first glance doesn't mean they'll stay that way.

The second flier is human sized, but so far out that's all he can get. Slade stays still, and not for the first time wishes he had an actual weapon. He wants a sword. He hasn't had a sword in ages, but right then? Right then he wants a sword.

Koriand'r turns her attention towards the approaching figure, and then her face lights up with recognition, her hair literally pulsing with light in response.

"Ah!" She says. "Jericho. Nightwing must have called for him."

"This would be better if we had suits," Bruce says. "The longer I'm out here, the faster the Bruce Wayne of this universe is going to recognize we're here."

"Are you hiding?" Koriand'r asks, turning her attention back to him.

"Avoiding," Slade says. "From what we've heard things aren't great here, and we'd like to get the lay of the land before this Bruce puts us on lockdown."

"He would likely do that," Koriand'r admits. "You just arrived?"

"A few hours ago," Bruce says. Slade's too focused on the white dot zipping towards them, rapidly growing in size.

It stops maybe forty feet up, surveying them. The suit's almost entirely white, with Black coloring down the side. It's sleek, pulling all the way up to the wearer's forehead, meaning the only visible skin is a strip of flesh just below their messy blond hair. It is, by Slade's guess, probably intended for high speed flight, because there's minimal protrusions: Only a ring of pouches around the waist, each pouch tapered to minimize drag.

It's definitely not one of the bats. It sticks out too much at night, practically painting a target on them. Slade's first thought goes to Clark and his blue and red getup, but the more he looks at it, the more convinced he becomes that this is something else entirely, totally unknown to their world the way Koriand'r is.

"You know them?" Slade asks, letting his eyes flick back to the woman in front of him.

"He is an old friend," she says. "We were on the Teen Titans together."

"The what?" Bruce says.

"The-" Koriand'r falters for a moment, lips pinching together. "Do you not have the Teen Titans? Or the Justice League? Or-"
"We have the Justice League," Bruce says. "And the Green Lanterns, and Team Arrow, and then my people. We don't have a... Teen Titans."

"How strange," Koriand'r says. "I will have to let Nightwing know."

Her old friend is still hanging in the air, surveying them, which doesn't exactly give Slade a good feeling. No, they're just being watched by some random stranger, chatting with a... a what, an alien?

"I don't mean any offense," Bruce says in his most political voice, "but I'm hoping to see my sons. Do you know where, ah... Robin is?"

Robin is probably the worst name he could give, because there's absolutely no telling who has the name.

"Probably back at home," Koriand'r says with a shrug. "I could contact him, but if you wish to avoid your doppelganger, I would recommend against it."

Bruce exchanges a look with Slade, who shrugs. There's no telling who they're talking about. Tim? Damian?

Bruce reaches up, rubbing at his temples, the headache obviously starting to settle in.

"We're going to need a place to stay," he says. "And doing that without getting noticed is going to be hard."

They're trying to play chess blind, groping around to figure out which piece is where, and it's slow going.

The figure in white drops down, finally landing on the roof. He's slim, and probably a man, but there's no way to tell with so little of him actually visible, the suit hiding almost all of it. Slade knows how much a well done suit can change the look of someone's build, and he tries not to read too much into it. Definitely on the slimmer side either way.

"Jericho!" Koriand'r says. "It has been quite some time."

The man in white nods, and Slade picks up the crackle of... goddamnit. It takes him a second to realize he's picking up an extremely muffled bit of communicator chatter, the communicator itself hidden behind Koriand'r's hair. Slade knows enough about subvocal microphones to figure out what's happening, but the why it's happening is enough to make him paranoid.

There's absolutely no reason for them to be having a private conversation unless something is going on they don't want them to hear, but the voice is quiet enough that he can't quite hear it.

Slade is ready to bolt.

"Oh," Koriand'r says. "Well, if you insist. But I will be nearby."

She lets out a sigh, and then nods to Bruce and Slade.

"I am sure I will see you around soon!" She says, and then lifts off.

Which means the guy in white wants some privacy. Slade steels himself for it, waiting for the guy to say something, and isn't prepared for him to pull his mask down.

Slade's brain stops working.
Because it's not a stranger looking out at him. It's not one of the bats, or someone he sort of knows. It's Joseph. It's his son.

He's older than he was when he died, already into his twenties, but it's still him.


"Joseph," Slade says, and he can hear his voice crack.

Slade doesn't make a conscious decision, but one moment to the next he's at Joseph's side, pulling him against him in a desperate hug.

Because he's alive, and right then that's all that matters.
Chapter 5

Bruce doesn't recognize the man when he pulls his mask off. He doesn't make the connection until Slade says his name, and only then does he get it.

Joseph. Slade's dead son, only not half as dead as he is in their world. He looks to be in perfect health right up until Slade pulls him into a hug that looks tight enough to bruise, burying his face into Joseph's shoulder.

Bruce suspects Slade is crying. He has ever reason to.

But Joseph makes a choked noise and Bruce catches his hand furiously gesture.

"Slade," he says, grabbing Slade's shoulder in an attempt to pull him off. "Slade."

When he doesn't immediately release him, Bruce digs his fingers in, throwing his weight against Slade, and it's only then that Slade releases his grip.

"Can't I just-" Slade says, and he sounds so sad that it hurts Bruce just to hear him.

"You're hurting him," Bruce says. "And he's signing."

Slade's head swings back around to Joseph, who's rubbing at his no doubt sore ribs, and then his eye drops down to Joseph's hand, holding a sign to signal that he's fine.

"He-" Slade says, his eyes flicking up, and Bruce follows his gaze but sees nothing. He's sure Slade's looking for a scar, because the connection isn't too hard to make. Joseph had his throat cut and died in their world. Joseph is mute in this world.

It's not hard to connect the dots.

"Sorry," Bruce says. "I know that was sudden. In case Nightwing didn't say, we're not-"

From our world, Joseph signs. Do you have a phone?

Bruce produces the phone, Joseph stares at it, the screen lighting up.

"Sorry," the voice on the phone says. "This is easier. Sub-vocal transmitters."

Slade's still staring at Joseph like he's staring at a ghost, and Bruce decides that he effectively is. He reaches out, resting a hand on Slade's arm, jolting him back to reality.

"You didn't...?" Slade asks, and Bruce doesn't think he's ever seen him so lost.

"You died in our world," Bruce says, eager to avoid misunderstandings. "When you were young. I never met you."

"Cut throat?" The phone says, and Joseph reaches up, pulling the mask farther down to show the thick band of scar tissue along his throat.

Slade swallows and averts his eyes. It's the worst day of his life playing out in front of him all over again.

"We didn't mean to confuse you," Bruce says. "I guess Nightwing called you directly?"
"He said he'd gotten a call that there were dimension hoppers, and that one of them was my dad."

Bruce abruptly realizes that while Joseph might know who Slade is, that doesn't mean he knows who Bruce is. The longer he's there, the more he's risking this world's Bruce's identity, and he cringes at the thought.

"He didn't say who the other one was," the phone says, "but I guess I shouldn't have been surprised with who was calling."

He's looking right at Bruce as he says it.

Which more or less determines if he knows.

Bruce grunts in response. He still feels like he's outing his counterpart, which isn't a pleasant idea.

"You're..." Slade's voice cracks again, and Bruce slips between them, looking up at Slade.

"Deep breath," he says quietly. He has no idea what abilities Joseph's inherited from his father (last he checked Slade can't fly either), so he doesn't put too much effort into keeping quiet. "It's not your Joseph. But that's alright. This is... a chance to get to know him. To see what he's like." It's a pleasant, if short lived, dream.

"Are you two... together?" The voice on the phone says, and it feels difficult to reconcile the voice he's hearing with the man standing behind him. Bruce spares a glance over his shoulder, wondering what gave it away. The proximity?

"Yes," he says, and Joseph's eyes widen even though he was the one who asked.

"Wow," the voice on the phone says. "That is - uh, wow. Did not see that one coming. Did you tell Dick that?"

"Nightwing," Bruce says. "Until we're in private."

Joseph pauses for a moment, then nods.

"No," he says. "I thought that might be better to say in person. From what I understand, Deathstroke never retired here. He never..."

Is it insulting to say 'improved'?

"Got better?" Joseph offers.

Bruce winces.

"Yes," he says. "He's a better person. For that matter, I'm a better person."

"I got that," Joseph says. "With the... hug."

Slade squints at him.

"With the hug?" Slade says. "Do I not - does he not -"?

"Uh," Joseph says, and his uh sounds so weird in the synthetic voice. "No, not really. He's not exactly a huggy person."

Slade grinds his teeth, and Bruce almost points out that a few years ago Slade himself wouldn't have
been willing to hug someone. It's a new thing, in the end.

"We'll work on that," Bruce says. "When we run into him."

He doesn't believe it's an if. It's a when.

"You know where he is?" Joseph asks.

"No," Bruce says. "But I'm sure he'll track us down. The same with my counterpart."

"I would," Slade says, "so he probably will."

"Probably," Joseph agrees. "Who have you already seen?"

"Jason," Bruce says. "And the two of you. We talked to Nightwing on the phone."

Joseph wrinkles his nose at that.

"Not many," the phone says. "And if you stay out here too long, someone's going to spot you."

"Most likely," Bruce says. "We're limited on options, and I'm not sure who I know well enough to stay with who isn't going to just report back to my counterpart."

"Wintergreen," Joseph says. "He'd be the one."

"Of course," Slade says, reaching up to rub at the bridge of his nose. "He'd be the obvious one. Assuming he's the same person I knew, he'd have no qualms about putting us up for a few days and keeping us out of sight."

"Either him or Oracle," Bruce says. "Assuming she exists."

Joseph offers a shrug.

"Gotham isn't my territory," he points out. "I'm assuming she's someone from here?"

"Wintergreen's fine," Bruce says. "Can you put us into contact with them?"

Joseph takes a moment to tear his eyes away from Slade before nodding.

"I'll call him," he says. "We're still in touch."

He turns away, pulling out his own phone to make a call, and Bruce exchanges a quick look with Slade.

It's a start, at least.
Chapter 6

Slade has a hard time pretending to be surprised when the orange woman—Koriand'r—returns to the roof. Her smile is wide and bright, but Slade can't quite take his eyes off Joseph where he stands on the far side of the roof, making a phonecall Slade's doing his best not to listen in on.

"Did you make arrangements?" She asks, glancing between him and Bruce, and Slade decides to let Bruce handle it.

"We did," Bruce says. "Hopefully we get to see Nightwing soon, but I understand it's a bit of a drive, and he probably has other things to do."

Bruce is the picture of politeness.

"Please stay in touch with him," Koriand'r says. "He seemed quite excited to have you here."

"We'll keep the phone," Bruce says. It's still in his hand, just in case Joseph needs it, and Slade wonders if there's a better way. A communicator would work, but they don't have one right then, so he makes a note to ask Wintergreen.

He wants to talk with him. A real talk. Not just this half-hearted banter. He wants to know what he's like, and he feels, for the first time, like he really understands what Bruce went through when he first found out that Jason was alive.

It hurts. It hurts because it's not real. Because, at the end, they'll end up going home.

And then Joseph will be dead again.

He tears his eye away from Joseph's back, glancing to where Bruce is talking with Koriand'r about Dick, and she glances over to him as he does.

She gives him a bright smile, and then nods.

"I must be going," she says. "But I am sure if you stay long, we will see each other soon. And I will see you as well, Joseph!" She calls a bit louder, and he raises a hand, giving her a quick wave as she streaks away.

Joseph doesn't turn, but his voice comes from Bruce's phone anyway.

"Wintergreen says he's got space," Joseph says. "He has a safehouse in Gotham he can put you up in, and he'll get here in the morning."

"So that's one night handled," Bruce says with a sigh. "But we need to be smart about this. Who are the people we should be most concerned about hunting us down?"

Joseph turns back to them at last, tucking his own phone away.

"You?" He says, looking to Bruce. "Hard to say. Gotham isn't my home, and I don't keep up much with Bat business. The obvious suspect is yourself, but beyond that I'm not really familiar with who might be actively looking for you."

"And me?" Slade makes himself ask.

"Also yourself," Joseph says. "You know what, hold on."
Joseph doesn't say anything, but his eyes are moving around, his concentration obvious. It's not entirely clear what he's doing, but Slade surmises he's probably on... what, a phone call? There's no phone in his ear. This is something else entirely.

Finally he shakes his head.

"He's around," he finally says, "but I think he might be... indisposed. We probably don't have to worry about him right now."

Slade grunts. It's all too easy to flip the idea around. Not what he thinks, or what he would think, but what he would have thought years ago, back when he was still Deathstroke and that was all his life was.

"If he catches wind of me, he'll be after us," Slade says. "No question."

"Agreed," Joseph says, which is encouraging in a strange way. It means they're on the same page. "I'd say he's your biggest threat. Beyond him..." He considers, then shrugs. "Rose. Maybe mom."

Slade grimaces at both.

"Let me guess," he says, "Rose wants to kill me?"

"I'd have to flip a coin to figure out if she wants to kill you or not," Joseph says. "Last I heard you were on good terms, but there's no telling. You two piss each other off with surprising regularity."

"And Adeline?"

It only occurs to Slade after he says it that there's no guarantee that mom means Adeline.

"Still hates you," Joseph says. "I guess that's a universal constant?"

"Seems like it," Slade says. "I haven't seen her for years in my world. I think she finally decided we were better off away from each other."

Joseph's eyes are sliding over to Bruce, and he doesn't even seem to notice it.

"Just ask," Bruce says. "You want to."

"Sorry," Joseph says, and he reaches up to scratch at the back of his neck. Slade doubts the suit he's wearing is comfortable. "I'm still caught on the fact that you two are together. And you're still... you know?"

Joseph makes a little flapping motion that Slade takes to mean the Batman.

"I retired," Bruce says. "A few years ago. A lot happened, but I understand that all of that lot didn't happen here. Things went differently with Jason, and that seems to be our primary point of divergence."

"Not our only one," Slade says. "You're too young for that. You should be a lot older."

"I mean," Joseph says, giving Bruce another glance, "you're older yourself. And so is he. So time isn't quite the same from one place to the next."

"Would we pass for ourselves here?"

"To someone who didn't know you, you probably could," Joseph says. "I might have thought you
were if I hadn't cheated."

"Cheated?" Bruce asks.

Joseph reaches back, tapping the top of his spine.

"Pop has an implant. Among other less than useful advantages, I can transmit to him. Also lets me track him if I really want."

"I'm sorry," Slade says, brain slamming to a halt. "You know where he is?"

He's having a hard time imagining any version of him being okay with that, and he can't imagine he took it well.

"If I look," Joseph says with a shrug. "That was what I did earlier. Basically called him up to see what he was doing."

He pushes away all the thoughts he's having. That this Slade—who doesn't even appreciate it—can just have his Joseph call him up at any time.

He doesn't appreciate it. He definitely doesn't.

"We should get going," Bruce says. "To wherever it is. You can fly, but-"

"It's the suit," he says. "Isherwood made it."

Slade feels like every other thing Joseph says is a hammer blow.

"Isherwood? My team's old tech specialist? I thought he was-"

Only no. He probably was dead in their own world.

"He died," Slade corrects himself. "As did everyone on our team except Wintergreen."

"Either way," Joseph says, "I can... uh, probably carry the two of you if we're careful. I've got the coordinates and Wintergreen gave me the access code."

Getting dangled through the sky by Koriand'r was mildly demeaning. Getting carried by Joseph feels that much worse. He pulls his mask up, lifts off, and takes each of them by a hand, lifting them from roof to roof. It's slow going, and it's obvious he's trying to avoid jostling them too much, but Slade knows it's a strain on Bruce's arm.

Bruce has had worse, but Slade still doesn't like it.
Chapter 7

Wintergreen's safehouse turns out to be modest but perfectly serviceable. It's a one bedroom affair not all that much bigger than a hotel room, and it opens easily to the access key that Joseph punches in. There's a living area, a little kitchenette, and when Slade checks the wall he finds a secret panel with a weapons cache.

Bruce is sure that's not the only one, but it's the only one Slade seems to find almost automatically.

Bruce can't stop himself from sagging down onto one of the armchairs, head tipping back. He's exhausted. He's still not fully recovered from the initial trip over, and he's suffering what feels like the world's worst case of jetlag.

Slade, on the other hand, obviously only has eyes for Joseph. Every time Bruce looks, he catches him staring, and it makes his heart hurt to think about it.

It's only temporary, he reminds himself. He got Jason back for good, but Slade's only getting Joseph back for a little bit.

"Sorry," Bruce says once Joseph grabs himself a drink. "What should I call you? Jericho is your... hero name?"

God, he hopes it's a hero name. It's equally likely it's his villainous alias.

"It is," he confirms. "Joey is fine. I guess you're going to be..." He glances between them. "Bruce and Slade?"

This universe's Slade is just pop, apparently, and it doesn't seem like Joey is close enough to him to be on a first name basis. He's probably more of a Mr. Wayne.

"Wait," Joey says suddenly, leaning forward to look at him. "Are you wearing a wedding ring?"

Joey seems particularly stuck on the whole dating his father thing, and Bruce can't entirely blame him. He doubts any of his boys are going to take it half as well. Slade's still a criminal here, and even with Jason being in the room with the evidence, he still didn't realize.

Slade pulls off his gloves, stowing them away.

"Wow," Joey says, eyes flicking between the rings. "That is - wow, that is a thing."

"So we've gathered," Bruce says. "Can you tell us about... I guess you would know about this world's Slade?"

He doubts he's going to get much about the boys, even if he's itching to ask.

"Kind of hard to know where to start," Joey says. "Just stop me if anything's wrong, I guess?"

He pauses for a moment, and then starts to just list stuff off.

"You got experimented on, you left the military, you married mom, you started to take mercenary work, you had Grant-

"Wait," Slade says. "Grant?"
Joey seems caught off guard, staring at him, the drink in his hand forgotten.

Of all the strange things about the situation, the fact that he's talking without his mouth moving keeps throwing Bruce off.

"My brother? Your... other son?" Joey says.

Slade's eyebrows press together in a tight line, and Bruce knows what he's thinking. He's weighing out the odds that he does have a second son, and Adeline just hid it from him.

"What's the age difference?" He says, and Joey blinks at him.

"He's a year older," he says. "Was."

Slade goes from almost hopeful to gutted in an instant, sinking back into his chair.

"What happened?"

"He ran away," Joey says, and even if his modulated voice sounds the same, his body language gives away how sensitive of a subject it is. "HIVE recruited him, told them they could make him like Deathstroke, and sent him against the Teen Titans. His heart gave out. You - I mean, he blamed them for what happened to Grant."

There's that name again.

"Your team?" Bruce asks.

"I wasn't on it at the time," Joey says. "That was back when Dick was in charge."

Slade seems to be dwelling on the thought, and then shakes his head.

"There's no Grant on our timeline," he finally says. "Why, I can't begin to guess."

Bruce has a few guesses, but all of them seem bad. He doesn't want to bring them up. The wound's raw enough.

"You mentioned Rose," Bruce asks, and Joey nods.

"Picking up where I left off... you had me. You went off to find Rose, and this happened..." He gestures to his throat. "But I lived, obviously."

"Wait," Bruce says, exchanging a glance with Slade. "He went to get Rose?"

"You have a Rose, right?" Joey says, looking more confused by the second.

"I didn't go and get her," Slade says. "I didn't know she existed. I only found out about her relatively recently."

"Oh no," Joey says, "we knew about her fairly early, by your standards. That was why mom shot you."

Joey eyes Slade's eyepatch.

"...She did shoot you, right?"

"She did," Slade confesses. "Which I think is why we don't have a Grant. I confessed to her about
the affair. When you...

He hesitates. Even with how much he's changed, it's rare to see Slade so bothered, and it's obvious that Joey's having a hard time with it.

"When you died," Slade makes himself finish, "she shot out my eye. We divorced after that."

"So that's the big stuff," Joey says, apparently eager to not talk about what happened to his counterpart. "More recent stuff obviously deviates, because as far as I know you haven't had any... romantic entanglements."

Joey's making a face that looks almost disgusted, and Bruce exchanges another glance with Slade.

"Everything alright?" Slade asks, and Joey sighs, running his hand through his hair as he sits down himself.

"Not particularly," he says. "Just... things are pretty different here. It's kind of hard reconciling who you are with who... well, you are."

"If it helps," Slade says, "it sounds like I was mostly the same person a few years ago as he is now."

"Doubt that," Joey fires back. His mood has soured even worse than it did when they brought up his death, and Bruce is trying to figure out why.

"What about you?" Bruce says. "I know Slade would love to hear more about what your life has been like."

He's hoping that will give Joey a chance to talk about himself. He's hoping it'll lift the mood. Instead, it seems to make it worse.

"Awful," he says, "lately it's been awful."

"...Because of me," Slade guesses. "My counterpart."

Joey doesn't answer, which really says it all.

"Are you actually gay?" Joey says, which comes out of nowhere as far as Bruce can tell, and Bruce exchanges another glance.

"I'm gay," Slade says. "Bruce isn't."

"Completely?" Joey says. "No interest in women-"

"At all," Slade finishes. "I tried to convince myself otherwise when I was younger, but I made my peace with that."

Joey is silent, chewing at his lip as he stew on whatever he's thinking about. Bruce can think of five or six possible options, reasons why he'd randomly ask are you actually gay? Like it's an important question, and he likes each one even less than the one before it.

"What did I do," Slade asks, unable to help himself from referring to his doppleganger as himself, "that necessitated that question?"

"Slept with my fiance," Joey says, and gets up. There's a stunned, confused silence, and Joey digs into the cabinet, pulling out a bottle of whiskey. "Drink?"
Slade seems lost for words, trying to process what he just heard.

"I slept with your fiance?" He says. "Was it at least an accident?"

They all know the answer to that, but Slade asks it anyway.

"No," Joey says, and he sets a glass of whiskey down beside each of them before putting the bottle back. He takes his own glass, knocking it back.

Bruce wants to say he's going to have words with this world's Slade, but he's not entirely sure that his Slade is going to leave enough pieces behind for him to have words with.

"Jesus," Slade hisses.

"You said you were pretty much the same person he was," Joey says, "but I doubt it. There's... a lot of little differences. A lot of things that feel different about you."

He's silent for a moment, and Bruce takes his own glass, knocking back the whiskey. He's having a hard time imagining Slade doing something so awful, even when he was Deathstroke. It feels so... so callous. Slade was a lot of things, but that kind of petty to his own son?

"Probably doesn't mean much," Slade says, "but I wouldn't have done that. It was a shitty thing, and he shouldn't have done it either."

Joey laughs at that, and bizarrely enough, the mood seems to lighten.

"That right there," he says. "He'd never have owned up to something like that. He'd never have admitted fault. Pretty sure you could have annihilated the human race and he'd have defended you, just because you were him."

Well that's grim.

"Tell me about your kids?" Joey says, and he settles back down. "I want to hear about them."

Slade still hasn't tasted his drink, and only after a moment's thought does he lift the glass to his mouth, taking a taste.

"Dick's the oldest," he says. "He's a cop up in Bludhaven. Jason's the second. He's a vigilante, and he runs Wayne Outreach, which does community assistance. Tim's our third, and he's a teacher, although Bruce has been trying to convince him to come over to Wayne Enterprises. Damian's our fourth by... a wide margin. He's still adjusting to things, but he loves animals and art."

"Rose?"

Slade frowns.

"Not really part of the family," Slade says.

"Jason writes to her," Bruce says, and Slade seems surprised by that. "She tried to kill a lot of people based on... a big misunderstanding. She thought Slade knew about her, and he didn't. She's in jail."

"Sounds like her," Joey says. "She has a hair trigger temper."

"Jackson's our grandson," Bruce adds. "He's three."

Joey looks away, and it takes Bruce a moment to realize he's crying. Not a lot. It's almost easy to
miss with how silent he is, and the phone lying on the table between them is silent.

"Joey," Slade says, and Bruce averts his eyes as Slade steps over, leaning down to comfort him. It feels personal, even as close as he is to Slade, and he gives them their privacy.
Chapter 8

Joey doesn't seem immediately comfortable with the hug, but he eases into it after a moment. It isn't entirely unfamiliar territory to Slade—god only knows he's hugged the boys enough—but it seems to be for Joey, which just makes him feel that much sadder. He waits until he's stopped shaking and then pulls back, giving him the space he probably needs.

"Sorry," Joey's voice says, but there's not much of a tone to it. "Even that kind of caught me off guard. You look like him, but you're not like him at all."

Slade's strongly considering whether or not his no murders in Gotham rule applies to parallel universes.

"Do you know why you're here?" Joey asks.

"Accident," Bruce says. "Most likely. Superboy said something about the source wall being weakened, but as far as we can tell we swapped places."

"No offense meant," Joey says, "but you don't seem all that eager to get home."

Slade exchanges a quick glance with Bruce, just to be sure they're on the same page.

"We want to go home," Slade says, "but home is fine without us for a little bit. Here is... not so much. The first thing we found out when we got here was that things were a mess, and the second thing we found out was that Jason's running the Iceberg Lounge for some reason."

"I heard that didn't go well," Joey says. "Dick didn't give me the details."

"I doubt Jason shared them," Bruce says. "He wasn't happy to see us."

"You'd probably want to ask Dick or Tim," Joey says. "If you want, I can try and get Tim's number. I'm not sure if Dick's already told him or not."

"It's like the world's most complex game of vigilante telephone," Slade mutters under his breath.

"I'll do that tonight," Joey says. "Just after I leave. And Wintergreen's coming in the morning."

"We've got a full social calendar," Bruce says.

"And I should be going," Joey says. "Please don't... go wandering or anything like that."

"The odds are that if I go wandering, I'm going to get spotted by a Bat," Bruce says. "That's the last thing we want."

Joey gets up and gives them a small nod.

"Then I'm going to take off," he says. "And... see you tomorrow, if I can. I'll call in sick."

Slade almost asks where he works, but pushes that aside. That's for later. It's late, and he's probably tired, and Slade is exhausted in a way he probably shouldn't be able to be.

He waits until Joey is gone before he finally acts on his rage, punching the wall hard enough to crack the plaster. He never does that. He never gives in to his anger. But right then? He needs to do something before he hurts someone who can actually get hurt.
"I slept with his fiance?" Slade says. "What kind of a fucking father does that?"

Bruce reaches out, tugging him away from the damage, and leans against him.

"It's not you," Bruce says. "He looks like you, but he's not you. You wouldn't have done that. Even at your worst."

Slade tries to remind himself of that. That Bruce believes in him.

"Christ," Slade hisses under his breath and turns away.

They don't have anything to change into, and they don't have any armor. They take inventory again, carefully packing things up in case they need to bolt.

"Worst comes to worst," Bruce says, "we can always head to the manor and find Alfred."

It's an option they're making a point to leave open. A just in case.

"It's terrible here," Slade says quietly when they end up lying down for the night. "Everything's awful. Every single thing about me is awful here. I have a son I don't like, I'm constantly fighting with my daughter, and my only romantic entanglement was sleeping with my son's fiance."

"Maybe we'll give them ideas," Bruce says, pressing a kiss to the back of his neck. "Or maybe we can straighten them out. We'll see. We just have to... make all the difference we can before Clark jerks us back home."

Which could be at any time.

"I should have... taken a picture," Slade says. "Something - remind me. Next time we see him. So I can..."

"I know," Bruce says, and he curls against him. "I'll remember."

The idea of it—that they might just go home —hurts to think about.

Everything about the situation hurts to think about. How angry Jason was. The fact that he had a son he didn't even know about, who died before he even met him. How Joey reacted to being hugged.

Slade buries his face in his hands and lets Bruce hold him until they fall asleep.
Chapter 9

Bruce wakes before dawn to find Slade trembling beside him, and he carefully coaxes him out of the nightmare, rubbing his back until he's finally calm.

It's not home, but there's enough prepared for them to manage a morning routine. Bruce showers while Slade cooks with the nonperishables stocked in the cupboards, and then they eat together before Slade finally goes to manage his morning routine.

Bruce regrets not having actual clothes. Changing back into the same clothes from the night before is unpleasant, and Slade's in particular look dingy from his climb up the side of the Iceberg Lounge.

The clock says it's just after eight when there's a knock at the door, and moments later it opens to reveal... Wintergreen.

Mercifully, he looks about the same. Maybe a few years younger, but mostly the same, and he shrugs off his coat, hanging it just inside as he closes the door.

"Coffee?" Bruce offers.

"If it's already ready," Wintergreen says automatically. "I was warned ahead of time, but even still I must admit I find myself caught off guard."

"I'm starting to suspect that we don't have long before everyone knows," Bruce says, and Wintergreen laughs.

"The entire second generation, at least," he says. "From what young Joey said, I'm the only adult who knows."

"We're getting into fully fledged conspiracy territory," Slade says, and makes a point of holding out his hand. Wintergreen takes it, and they shake.

"How different am I?" Wintergreen asks, and Slade shrugs.

"Maybe a little bit younger," he says. "Otherwise, you seem the same. In my timeline you were my broker for my work as Deathstroke."

"Joey said you'd retired."

"I did," he says. "A few years back."

They swap general details, but it's obvious that Joey has already gone out of his way to fill Wintergreen in. There's really only one detail he hasn't, and it becomes increasingly obvious as they talk.

"Joey mentioned several times that you were, to quote him, 'very different'," he says. "But when I asked, he was evasive as to what he meant."

Wintergreen's eyes sweep across the pair of them, and Bruce gets the impression he already has some guesses.

Slade grunts, his mood souring.

"I'm not a complete monster to my children, for one," Slade says. "Did I - did he actually sleep with
"He did," Wintergreen says. "In what little defense I can offer for him, she was spying on him and appeared to be using Joey to get close to Slade."

"That doesn't make it better," Slade says immediately. "There are better ways to deal with that then to *sleep with her too.*"

"I agree," Wintergreen says. "I doubt your counterpart would."

"Then he's an idiot," Slade says, and he sinks a bit deeper into his chair, eyebrows furrowed together. "What kind of a father."

"Slade loves his children," Wintergreen says, and Bruce has a hard time believing it. "But describing him as *emotionally unavailable* is being too kind to the situation. He does not understand what his children want, let alone what they need, and continues to muddle his way through life, unaware that he is ruining theirs."

Wintergreen hasn't commented on the hole Slade punched in the wall, and he averts his eyes as Slade's fingers dig into the arm of his chair, leaving deep impressions and further damage.

"He is making an effort," Wintergreen says, "as of late. It is simply not particularly good."

"If his *making an effort* involves *sleeping with his son's fiance,*" Slade snaps, "then I'd hate to see what he was like before he started making that effort."

"You would," Wintergreen says flatly. "That much is clear."

Bruce doesn't want to ask. He so desperately doesn't want to ask.

"He was *worse* before?" Bruce asks anyway, because they have to know.

"It might be better not to discuss it," Wintergreen says, his eyes falling to the rapidly increasing damage that Slade's grip is doing to the arm of his chair.

"Did Joey tell you about himself in our world...?"

"Dead," Wintergreen says, "he gave me the general idea. No Grant that you're aware of. Your history with Rose is quite different. I'm more interested in this reform that Joey mentioned. He said not just that you retired, but that you were working for the other team, so to speak."

"Playing for the other team," Bruce says, fighting back a laugh despite the seriousness of the situation.

Wintergreen gives him a puzzled look, and then the realization hits him.

"You're -" He starts, and then glances between Bruce and Slade. "...That would explain the billionaire playboy."

"He's part of the life," Slade says, and a part of Bruce's brain screams at that, because if Wintergreen doesn't know-

"He backs my vigilantism," Slade adds, and Bruce is happy he managed to keep a straight face.

"You can stop pretending," Wintergreen says. "I know the family butler from my time in the service."
Bruce takes a second to make the connection.

"You know Alfred?" He says, confused, and then spares a glance to Slade. "Did you know that?"

"I didn't," Slade says, "assuming it's even true in our timeline."

"Wayne's secret is safe with me," Wintergreen says, "so it hardly matters either way."

"Should I assume that the me of this universe isn't?" Slade asks.

Wintergreen offers a shrug.

"He's certainly interested in women," Wintergreen says. "If he's interested in men, he's never told me. Not that he would if he was."

"We're not the sharing type," Slade says, and there's a flicker of anger across his face. His relationship with his doppleganger has gone from tense to terrible very quickly, and Bruce can see that it bothers him as he struggles to come to terms with what sort of a man the Slade in this universe is.

"The only thing he has over me," Slade mutters under his breath, "is that he thought to check for Rose."

Wintergreen's face pinches, and Bruce immediately knows that he's wrong.

"I'm afraid you can't credit him for that," Wintergreen says. "We were sent to retrieve Rose's mother as a job. Instead we found her. The you of this universe was just as oblivious to her existence as you apparently were."

"So he has nothing over me," Slade says, gritting his teeth.

"Generally speaking, I would be against this sort of cross contamination," Wintergreen says. "Universe should stay in their own place, and all that. We've already had enough trouble with the you-from-this-universe attempting to alter the timeline in order to revive Grant."

Wintergreen leans forward in his seat, his expression dark.

"Truth be told? Listening to Joey be broken up about the fact that you gave him a hug was a step too far for me. I don't know if a swift kick to Slade's teeth will help things, but I do know it would help Joey and Rose a great deal to know that there's at least one version of their father who cares about them."

Bruce half expects for Slade to mention his own very complicated feelings about Rose. He doesn't. His mouth is set in a grim line, his expression dark. He has a face that says he's plotting murder, and Wintergreen raises a hand, giving a theatrical bow.

"You have my blessing and my support," Wintergreen says. "Do what you need. Now, what assistance can I render?"

"Clothes," Bruce says immediately. "I'm going to have difficulties going around just in this."

"I can hardly provide a replica of the batsuit," Wintergreen says, "but I can provide some tactical gear for the both of you that will prevent you from looking a shade less like Bruce Wayne."

"I'd settle for a pair of pants that don't feel like they've been welded to my body even after showered," Bruce says.
Slade rolls his eye at that.

"If you give me your sizes, I'll put something together," Wintergreen says. "Slade looks to be about the same size as his counterpart."

Wintergreen's already standing up, straightening his shirt and drawing out a phone. He's a man of efficiency, and they changed numbers in short order.

"Please don't leave the safehouse until I return," Wintergreen says. "I shouldn't be too long."

"Bring lunch," Slade says automatically, and then seems to second guess himself. "If that's alright."

Wintergreen stares at him for a long moment, and then shakes his head.

"When Joey said you were different, I think I might have underestimated how much."
They make a plan when Wintergreen's gone. There is, at the very least, a general lay of the land. A general understanding.

Slade doesn't generally do revenge. Not really. His anger is short lived at best, sparking and then dying out unfed. There are only a few people he'd kill just for the sake of it, and almost none of that is personal.

He'd kill the Joker to let Jason sleep at night. To let him know that he's safe, and that he's someone worth protecting.

He'd enjoy it, but it's still not the same thing as true revenge. There's a reason for it. A cause.

He tries to let Bruce give him the cause then. He can't think of one. He just knows that he wants to hurt his counterpart.

Wintergreen's It might be better not to discuss it sticks with him. He can't make it go away. Because those few short words make it clear that there is more. That whatever kind of person he was in his own world, he's different enough here that Wintergreen isn't even willing to tell him.

"What if I hurt them," Slade says to himself more than to Bruce, who spares him a short glance. "I was an awful father to Joey, but that was because I wasn't there. I wouldn't have hurt him."

Even though he's talking to himself, that doesn't stop Bruce from sliding over, resting a hand on each shoulder.

"He isn't you," Bruce says. "You're different people."

"We're the same person," Slade says. "We have the same name. We have the same experiences. We're the same. He's what I could have been."

"It's not that simple," Bruce says. "It's never that simple."

"You saved me," Slade says, and it feels true. It hurts but it feels so true. "You dragged me-"

Bruce presses a hand over his mouth, silencing him, and Slade goes quiet.

"You're not him," Bruce says, his tone sharp. "And you saved yourself. You saved Jason long before you fell in with me. You brought him back to us on your own, entirely of your own free will. You can't blame the differences on finding me. You saved yourself."

Slade is silent, and after a moment he lets himself sink forward, resting his head against Bruce's chest as Bruce wraps his arms around Slade's shoulders.

"We need to find him," Slade says. "We need to make things better. Make him understand what he's doing to his children. We need to... to leave this world better than it was when we arrived."

Bruce rubs circles on his back and he lets his eye drift closed, relaxing into the hug.

"And then we can fix things on my end," he says. "I don't think - I doubt we'll be able to make things the way they are at home. But we can make things better for the kids. For all of our kids. Help this Bruce make things better with Jason. Help this Slade make things better with Joey and Rose."
They eat lunch from the supplies they have and wait for Wintergreen to return.

They've barely finished eating when someone taps at the window.

Bruce doesn't hear it, but Slade certainly does, his head snapping up as his eye narrows.

They are, last he checked, on the fourth floor.

Which means no one should be tapping at the window.


"Koriand'r?"

"Possibly," he says. There's another sound, but this is more of a knock, like someone seeking entry. The windows are bulletproof, but that isn't going to stop someone with enhanced strength, and the curtains blocking their view are more of a hindrance than a help right then.

Slade pulls them open, and what he sees... doesn't help.

There's two boys just outside the window. One's wearing the bog-standard blue-and-red Kryptonian gear that everyone even vaguely related to Clark seems to wear. He's also wearing a black leather jacket with studs and more belts than could ever be considered practical.

Dangling from his hands is a Robin.

There's no question it's a Robin, because the costume is the same red-green-yellow with the little R symbol, but the costume itself seems a lot less... durable. They've got a domino mask on, and they wave excitedly through the window at him and Bruce.

"I don't think the window opens," Bruce says.

"It shouldn't," he confirms, and settles for flashing 4-3-8 on his fingers through the window. The Robin nods enthusiastically, and they vanish from sight, hopefully looping around to take the stairs and reach the front door.

Bruce pulls the curtains closed.

"That was a Robin, right?" Bruce says, second guessing himself.

"I have no idea either," Slade says after a moment.

Older than Damian, but younger than Jason or Tim. Slade guesses maybe seventeen?

"He's too pale for Damian," Bruce adds. "And too old."

"Jon was older," Slade points out. "He might have aged up."

"Damian wouldn't be that enthusiastic," Bruce points out. "Especially not-

There's a knock at the front door, and Slade grunts and goes to get it. He's not sure how they found the safehouse, but he's guessing the answer is Joey.

Wintergreen doesn't seem the type.

He comes right on in, accompanied by his definitely-a-Kryptonian counterpart, and Slade closes the door behind them with a grunt.

"Wasn't prepared for that," the Kryptonian says.

"At least we were warned," the Robin says. "If we'd walked in and found him here I think we'd probably have jumped him on pure instinct."

He turns to Bruce, beaming, and Slade realizes that they're expecting... something. Recognition?

"We aren't sure who you are," Slade says. "I don't think you have counterparts in our world."

"Wait," the Kryptonian says, "you have a Jon but not a me?"

"We don't know who a you is, so yeah," Slade says.

The Kryptonian huffs.

"I'm Superboy-"

"Isn't Jon Superboy?" Bruce asks, glancing between them.

"We're both Superboy," the Kryptonian says. "We share. But if this is going to be a problem, just call me Conner."

Conner. Which sounds like a completely non-Kryptonian name.

"You're his brother?" Slade asks.

Conner wiggles his hand in a definite sort of gesture.

"Sort of," Conner says.

"He's a clone," the Robin adds helpfully. "So he's sort of Jon's brother but sort of his dad but sort of his uncle."

Slade makes a face at that.

"You're just confusing them," Conner says. "They don't need to know all of that."

"You're a clone of Superman," Slade says. "As far as I'm aware, no one's cloned him yet."

"Okay, so," the Robin says, "let's talk about what's important. I don't exist in your timeline?"

Bruce winces.

"No," he says. "We have Robins, but you're... not one of them."

The Robin's face falls, and he exchanges a quick look with Conner.

"Oh," he says. "Well - alright. That's-"

He's definitely upset by the fact, and Slade winces as well.

"Why don't we do introductions," Slade says. "Proper ones."

"Oh, right-" The Robin says. "I'm Red Robin. My real name is Tim Drake."
Slade's brain stops working as he stares at the skinny teenager in front of him. He's not the only one. Bruce is staring at Tim, his jaw clenched, eyes wide.

"Tim?" Bruce finally manages to say.

"Wait," Conner says, "so you do know him? I thought Jon said you mentioned him."

Slade is struggling to reconcile the Tim he knows with the Tim in front of him. Even the photos of Tim from when he first joined the team seemed different. He was bigger, for one. Less... skinny.

"We have a Tim," Bruce croaks. "He's just... very... different."

Conner's face lights up.

"Oh boy," he says. "Hit me. I'm ready for this."

"I need to sit down," Bruce says, and does just that, falling back into one of the safehouse's armchairs.

Tim looks like he's just about dying of curiosity, leaning over to inspect.

And then, of course, he spots the ring Slade's wearing, and his eyes flip over to where Bruce sits with a nearly identical ring on his own finger.

His mouth forms a little o.

"Hold on," he says. "Are you married?"

"What?" Conner says, doing his own frantic glancing between the two of them. "Jon just said they were friendly."


Tim looks like he's having a brain aneurysm at the idea.

"Oh my god," he says. "The others don't know, do they? You didn't tell anyone."

"Joey knows," Slade says. "And Wintergreen. Did you not talk to them?"

"Nope," Tim says.

"We followed your emergency tracker when we heard you'd made contact with Nightwing," Conner says.

Bruce produces the little tracker, squinting at it warily.

"Great," he says.

"Sorry, I'm still stuck a bit on the fact that Bruce Wayne is married to Deathstroke?" Conner says. "Because in terms of bizarre marriages that has to be near the top."

"My Slade is significantly less of an asshole compared to yours," Bruce says. "He still was Deathstroke, but he's retired."

"Retired," Tim says. "Wow. So are you going to tell me what I'm like in your world?"

Slade exchanges a look with Bruce.
"Older, for one," he offers. "Tim just turned thirty."

"I'm thirty?" Tim says. He sounds almost horrified.

"You operate as Robin-

"What about Damian?" Tim asks immediately. "Shouldn't he be Robin?"

"He's Shrike," Bruce says. "He wanted the Robin mantle, but it was yours. We stopped... passing down names around that point. Everyone just has their own."

"A sensible policy," Conner says with a nod, as if he isn't one of two totally separate people going around using the name Superboy.

"You're a teacher," Slade says. He already knows what the reaction he's going to get is, and he's careful about it. "And you're married with a son."

Tim looks like he's about to fall over.

"I'm thirty and married and have a kid?!"

"You're older than Jason," Bruce points out. "Which doesn't seem to be true here."

The timeline of it all is giving Slade a headache to think about. They did seem to be older in time—older than either the Slade or Bruce of this world—but everything else feels shuffled around as well.

"I'm begging you," Conner says with a tone of mock seriousness, "please tell me who he married so I can torment him with it for the rest of his life."

Tim tips his head back and groans.

"That feels like confidential information," Slade says.

Conner ponders for a moment.

"I'll bribe you," he says.

Slade can't stop himself from laughing at that.

"With what?"

"I'm working on that," Conner says.

"Never tell him," Tim begs. "I'll never hear the end of it."

"This is good," Bruce says. "This is - Jason wasn't exactly... helpful when it came to understanding the state of things with the family."

Tim makes a face.

"He was kicked out," he says, "which is probably why. He's not exactly friendly with our version of you."

Bruce's eyebrows shoot up.

"He was kicked out?" He says. "For what?"
Slade considers a you can't kick someone out of the family, and then remembers Rose and keeps his mouth shut.

"Uh," Time says with a quick glance towards Conner. "He killed the Penguin. Or tried."

"Why?" Bruce says. He doesn't even sound upset. Just... confused.

"Hold on," Slade says. "He tried to kill the Penguin?"

"He shot him point blank on live TV," Tim says. "So Bruce had to kick him out. He tried to arrest him, but Jason got away, and then with what happened with Roy, I don't think Bruce wanted to anymore."

"Hold on," Slade says, "With what happened to Roy?"

"Roy is-"

"We know who Roy is," Slade says. "What happened?"

Tim's face pinches, and his eyes fall down.

"He... uh, died. A little while back."

He died. Roy died.

Slade's head reels.

"How?" Bruce asks. He looks hurt, like someone just took a knife to him, and Tim seems almost taken aback by the reaction.

"It's a long story," he says. "It was an accident."

"And Jason knows?" Slade asks, getting a nod in response.

It explains part of Jason's answer. He can't imagine a world where they weren't friends. They got along so well, and the fact that Roy is dead...

Bruce reaches up, dragging a hand through his hair, and Slade sags back in his chair.

"Sorry," Tim says. "I didn't realize you guys were... uhm, friendly with Roy."

"He stayed with us for a while," Slade says. "I think he was Jason's best friend."

"I mean... pretty much the same here," Tim says. "He-"

A phone rings, and it takes a few seconds of everyone pulling out their own to figure out that it's Tims.

"That's Dick," he says. "Sorry, I told him I'd let him know where to go. Give me just a second."

He picks up the phone, turning away, and focuses on giving Dick directions.
Chapter 11

Dick turns out to not be far away, which means in the end they sit and wait. Bruce is happy for the chance to let it all sink in, his brain trying to reconcile what he knows, snapping the pieces together.

A Jason, ousted from the family for trying to murder Penguin. He feels like there's issues with every single part of that sentence. Like he could spend all day taking it apart and get no answers.

It's a relief when someone knocks at the door, because it means he gets a reprieve from letting his mind spin through the different options.

It's Dick. He looks more or less like the Dick they know, only a few years younger. His face lights up when Tim answers the door, and he heads right on in. He's dressed casually, without the sort of costume that both Tim and Conner wear, and his arrival makes Conner stand up.

"I should actually probably go," he says. "This seems a lot like family business, and... well, I should probably go check on Jon and see how things are going on that front."

Jon. Jon, whose parents have both been relocated. Bruce winces at the idea and nods.

"I'll see you around," Tim says. "And it was... uh, nice to meet you both."

He gives a quick nod to Bruce and Slade, fistbumps Dick, and heads out before the door can even close.

"Wow," Dick says, his eyes falling to Slade. "This is something."

Bruce is, truth be told, expecting for him to get some attention. Dick barely seems to notice him, looking over Slade instead.

"You don't know the half of it," Tim says. "Apparently I'm thirty years old, still Robin, and married."

"What?" Dick says, glancing over to him. "To who? Steph?"

Tim goes red in the face.

"Stephanie Brown?" Slade asks, and Dick and Tim both glance back to him. "She's Batgirl, and Tim's protege."

"Wow," Dick says. "This is like... twelve things at once. Steph is Batgirl? And Tim's protege? And Slade is-"

Tim leans in and elbows Dick in the side.

"Look at his hand."

The room is silent as Dick's eyes slooooowly settle on Slade's ring. The room somehow goes even quieter as his eyes slooo0000owly slide over to Bruce's hand, settling on his ring.

"Holy shit," he says.

"No kidding," Tim says right back.
"I thought Jay said you were married to Selina," Dick says, his voice small and hoarse like he simply cannot process what he's seeing.

"He didn't see Slade's ring," Bruce says. "He made some assumptions and kicked us out before we could explain."

"I'm going to be honest, you've tried to kill me like... two, maybe three dozen times? And my brain still hasn't quite gotten past the fact that you're apparently, one, a good guy, and two, married to Bruce," Dick says.

"I'm thirty, Dick! How do you think I feel?"

"Thirty, with a shaved head, and you're about as bulky as Jason is," Slade adds.

"What!" Tim yells, sounding outraged. "Please tell me you have a picture."

"We don't have anything," Bruce says. "We came over with the clothes on our back, more or less."

"Well, you're making do," Dick says, "which I suppose is good. What's the plan, exactly?"

Dick hasn't hugged them. It's strange and noticeable and Bruce is sure Slade is noticing that fact, but he's sitting and doing his best not to act on it. He didn't even try. He didn't even think about it.

"We're trying to get the lay of the land," Slade says. "From what I understand, the me from this dimension has made some mistakes, and I plan to rectify them."

There is a very clear implied with my fists.

Bruce doesn't argue.

"Uh," Dick says, "what about going home?"

"We're not concerned," Bruce says. "There will be two Clarks and entire Justice League, along with the thing that brought us here trying to get us home. Everyone can manage just fine without us for a few days. There's more important things to worry about."

Dick's eyebrows go up, and they stay up, leaving him looking perpetually surprised.

"Oh," he says. "Like?"

"Jason, for one," Bruce says. Slade can deal with Slade problems. He has Wayne problems to deal with. "In our world, Slade's the one who helps rescue him. He helps him come to terms with his anger, return to the family, and find his place in it. Only Slade obviously never did any of that."

Tim and Dick exchange a look that practically screams we do not follow.

"Rescue him?" Dick finally ventures.

"Let's skip the dancing around the point," Slade says. "And go from the beginning. Jason Todd was a street urchin who saved Batman from the Joker. As a result of that, he was arrested, he got a second chance at a boarding school thanks to a Wayne Enterprises grant, and a few months after that he was recruited as Robin."

Dick and Tim seem to have very different reactions to Slade's explanation. Tim's eyebrows keep bouncing up and down as he goes from surprise to confusion, where as Dick stays stuck on confusion.
"No," Dick says. "I mean... in general terms. He was living on the street after his mom died and he stole the tires off the batmobile, and you brought him home."

"The details are different," Bruce says, "but it sounds around the same. He was fifteen when I adopted him."

"He was your ward," Dick corrects. "And a bit younger than that."

There's an awkward silence that makes it obvious to Bruce that they both are expecting the same thing. The same how long was he Robin before he was taken by the Joker?

He exchanges a quick glance with Slade and then steels his nerve.

"He was Robin around six months before he went missing."

Bruce expects a nod. Maybe a correction. Instead he gets dual looks of confusion as Tim and Dick exchange a look.

"Missing?" Dick finally says.

Bruce doesn't get it. He already knows that the Joker took Jason. Jason said as much when he asked why Bruce hadn't killed him. So the look of confusion doesn't add up.

"When the Joker took him," he says, carefully controlling his voice.

There's another look exchanged between the boys.

"When he... died?" Tim says, obviously trying to be as gentle as he can.

"He didn't die," Slade says, and confusion, rather than horror, wins out. "The Joker took him. He faked his death after six months, but he didn't die."

"Six months?" Dick says. "He was barely gone a week. The Joker killed him, you buried him, and that was the last we heard of him for years."

Someone's taken a sledgehammer to his brain.

Not just taken. No, Jason was killed. Jason was murdered. He was buried. For years.

"That doesn't make any sense," Slade says. "We met him here. He's just down at the casino-

"He died," Dick says. "For real. But he came back a few years later, just... crawled out of his grave. No one's really sure on the how. He was really dead, though. He doesn't talk about it."

Bruce sags back in his seat. Dead. Jason died. He came back from the dead, but it wasn't faked or anything.

"What happened with... with your Jason?" Tim says, sounding wary.

"The Joker took him," Slade says. "Kidnapped him when he went after him alone. He was missing for months while everyone tried to find him, and then the Joker sent Bruce a video of him killing Jason, making it clear he'd been alive the whole time. Really, he hadn't killed him - he spent years breaking Jason down so he could use him as a weapon against Bruce."

Dick's mouth is hanging slightly open, his eyes wide. Tim won't look at them anymore, and his body language is screaming how uncomfortable he is.
"And he... he came back from that?" Dick says.

"He did," Slade confirms. "With help. He escaped from where he was being held, and met up with me. I helped him plot how to kill Bruce, and when I started to realize how twisted up in the Joker's schemes he'd been, I helped him come to terms with it."

Tim says something particularly vile under his breath, still refusing to look at them.

"Jesus," Dick says. "That is... that is a lot. Jason..."

He pauses, then scrubs at his face with his hands.

"It wasn't like that for our Jason. It was more about... about him losing his family. About him wanting a family. He found out that his mom wasn't dead, and he went running off to reunite with her, and she sold him out to the Joker. The Joker... beat him really badly, and then blew up the building. Killed Jason and his mom in one go."

It feels like something they should be hearing from Jason. Something deep and personal. But it's also obvious to Bruce that Jason isn't ever going to tell them.

"He came back years later as the Red Hood."

Slade makes a choked noise, and Dick turns his head, confused.

"He tried to use that name with us," Slade says. "I wouldn't let him. I told him it was too grim."

"He came back as the Red Hood," Dick continues, "and took over Gotham's underworld. We didn't know who it was, and he did this whole... insane... thing. He tried to get Bruce to break his code to prove he cared, and it... didn't really go great."

"What happened?" Bruce asks. He has to know, but Dick only shakes his head.

"Bruce isn't exactly an open person," he says. "No offense. He didn't talk about it much."

"None taken," Bruce says. "What happened with the Penguin?"

"He shot him," Dick says, "and Bruce kicked him out for it. I only heard it second hand."

It just doesn't sit right with Bruce. It feels wrong, and he's having a hard time putting his finger on it.

There's a knock at the door, and four heads turn.


He goes to get the door, and is proven right. Wintergreen has two large bags, and doesn't look particularly surprised to see Tim or Dick.

"Boys," he says with a nod. "Good to see you both."

Tim and Dick nod back, and Bruce glances between them.

"Does everyone know each other?" He asks. Things are interconnected in a way he's still struggling with. It feels like everyone knows everyone else.

"His counterpart," Dick says with a nod to Slade, "blackmailed me into training Rose when we were younger. I met Wintergreen then."
"I've only met him in passing, if that helps," Tim says.

"It doesn't," Slade says. "But we're adjusting. There's a lot to keep track of."

Wintergreen drops the bags in the living room, starting to unpack them. Some of them are simply extra supplies (some perishables for the fridge and cupboards). Some are toiletries. Some are clothes.

"For you," he says, holding out a change of clothes that Bruce is all too eager to snap up.

"Thank you," he says. "I'm going to change."

He claims the bathroom before Slade gets a chance.
Chapter 12

Slade grunts as Bruce heads into the bathroom, turning his attention back to those already there. He wants to change, but Bruce is a tiny bit more on the ball, leaving him stuck with their guests.

Or he supposes they're the guests.

"I've got to say," Dick says, "I thought I was ready for this and I am so not."

"No kidding," Tim says. "Thirty years old."

Mercifully, Bruce doesn't take very long, emerging in, of all things, a superman-branded hooded sweatshirt.

"Really?" Bruce asks Wintergreen pointedly.

"I thought it might avert attention," Wintergreen says, "and it's funny."

"At least he admits it," Slade says, grabbing his own clothes and heading into the bathroom. He shaves quickly with the provided toiletries, then changes. Wintergreen's stuck him with one with a Flash logo.

"Don't tell Barry," Slade says as he emerges from the bathroom. "I'll never live it down."

"I also have suits for you," Wintergreen says, tapping an extra bag, "should you wish to go out during the night for less than respectable activities."

Slade's dying to know what Wintergreen's put them in, but he contains his interest for the moment.

"I think we need to be strategic here," he says. "Things are starting to spread, and if we continue as they are, it's only a matter of time before everyone knows we're here."

"You're probably right," Dick admits. "So who knows?"


"Miguel?" Dick says, confused.


Slade shrugs.

"Jason called him Miguel."

"Five eight or so, heavy accent-"

"That sounds like him," Bruce says. "You know him?"

"He was a Teen Titan with me for a while," Tim says. "I didn't realize he was with Jason now."

"He's helping him at the Iceberg," Bruce says. "He gave us the phone and escorted us out."

"Okay," Dick says. "Who else?"
"Joey," Slade says. "And then the two of you and whoever you told."

"No one," Dick says. "So that's eight from our world. Does Rose know?"

"Not unless Joey has told her," Wintergreen says. "I've kept quiet, at Joey's request."

"So who are we going to tell?" Dick says, eyes flicking between the group.

"Who can we trust with this?" Bruce asks.

"I'd think Damian," Slade says. "But-

"Absolutely not," Tim says. "He's going to go running right back to Bruce if we do. Same with Duke. Their loyalties are clear."

"I could probably convince Damian not to," Dick says, "but I'm not entirely sure it's worth the risk. And I agree on Duke."

"Why is Duke coming up in this context...?" Bruce asks, confused.

"Let me guess," Slade says. "He's Batman's protege?"

"Is he not in your world?" Dick asks.

"He's with you," Slade says. "Aside from the four boys, we have Barbara and Michael as part of the main core, and then Duke and Stephanie as second generation heroes, mentoring under your counterparts."

Tim and Dick exchange a glance.

"Michael?" Dick asks. "We have Booster working with us?"

"I mean, he is in charge of the International."

"Michael isn't Booster," Bruce says. "Whoever that is. We're talking about Azrael."

"Jean-Paul?" Tim asks, confused.

There's a moment of silence.

"Michael Lane," Slade says after a moment. "Who operates as the vigilante Azrael. He's joined the team and is good friends with Jason."

"I have absolutely no idea who that is," Tim says. "We have an Azrael, and I've worked with him a few times, and his name is Jean-Paul."

"Okay," Slade says. "This is a side point. It doesn't really matter who has that mantle."


Slade is of the opinion that Orphan is a silly name for a vigilante, but after a moment of hesitation he shrugs.

"No idea who that is," he says.

Tim and Dick share a genuinely horrified look.
"You know about Damian, but not about Cass?"

"Should we?" Bruce asks.

"Uh," Dick says, "that could be bad. If your... if your world has a Cass you don't know about, that could be really bad."

"Cut to the point," Slade says.

"Cass is the child of David Cain and-"

"He has a kid?" Slade asks. He's familiar enough with Cain that he's having a hard time imagining him raising a child.

"Someone you know?" Bruce asks.

"Another mercenary," Slade says. "He wasn't a part of the League of Assassins, but he worked for them a fair bit."

Dick scowls at them.

"To finish what I was saying," he says, "she's the daughter of David Cain and Lady Shiva. And her dad was... a real scumbag. Like, insane levels of scumbaggery. He basically trained her to be an assassin from birth. She could barely even speak when we first met her. If she exists in your universe..."

"Then we'll find her," Bruce says.

"Shiva and Cain are both still around," Slade says. "My Wintergreen could probably look them up, and we can look into it when we get back. I haven't heard anything about either of them having a kid, but I haven't really been paying attention, either."

Inevitably, it's something they won't be able to deal with until they're home.

Dick lets out a sigh of relief.

"Okay," he says. "So what is the actual plan? Like, what are we aiming for here. Because if we talked about that, I missed it."

"I," Slade says pointedly with a glance towards Bruce, "am going to find my counterpart and make it very clear that he's going to have to do better for his kids."

He doesn't think it's going to work. Not really. But Bruce would be disappointed in him if he didn't at least try. So talking first, and then when he's given himself plausible deniability, everything else after that.

"I want to help Jason," Bruce says. "He's not our Jason, but I still feel responsible for him. He needs help, and it's obvious he's not going to get it. I can only imagine that he's hurting, having been kicked out of the family, and having lost Roy... that just makes it worse for him. So those are the two things that I think are our priorities."

"Good to know you aren't biting off more than you can chew," Wintergreen says with a dry laugh. "Just solving a decades worth of poor parenting in the span of a few days."

"We aren't going to solve them," Slade says, "but hopefully we can push them the right direction."
"Don't mind me," Wintergreen says. "I have no horse in this race, at this point. I'm simply here to see how things play out."

"Okay," Tim says, "can we actually rewind a bit? Because something just occurred to me. You said you had a Barbara, right?"

Slade's sure he's about to guess that they're married.

"But Steph's Batgirl," Tim adds. "So what's Barbara doing?"

Oh. That's uncomfortable. The thought that Barbara might apparently still be Batgirl hadn't occurred to him. As much as some things are different, Slade's only ever known Barbara in her wheelchair. He only came into their lives long after she stopped being Batgirl.

"She's Oracle," Bruce says.

There's a long moment of silence, and Slade wonders if none of that ever happened. If she was never shot by the Joker. If she simply kept being a vigilante.

"Oh," Tim says. "Don't take this the wrong way, but did you not... uh, fix that?"

"You can't really fix that kind of severe nerve damage-" Bruce starts.

"You totally can," Tim says.

"It was an L1 injury," Bruce says. "We looked into it. Technology isn't-"

"Your technology might not be," Tim says, "ours is. Assuming the injury is the same, our Barbara has an implant that bypasses the damaged nerve section."

"She does," Dick says. "And, no offense, but I'm putting that on a pretty high priority. I'll call Barbara and get the schematics for it sent over so you can take them with you."

It's very obvious that that it isn't an if you're okay with that attached. Tim and Dick are going to give them the schematics. It's not optional.

"Alright," Slade says, not interested in arguing. There's no reason to not. There's no telling it will work, but he'd rather leave the door open anyway. "We'll take them back to our Barbara, and see if they help. I'm sure she'd appreciate that."

There's a moment of silence, and Dick clears his throat.

"Uh," he says, "this is going to sound weird if no, but are me and Barbara... you know, together over there?"

It takes every single bit of self control Slade has to keep a perfectly straight face.

"Are you together here?" He asks.

"We're kind of on-again, off-again," Dick admits.

Bruce's self control is clearly strained, the corners of his mouth twitching as he tries to fight back a laugh. It's a moment of levity, and Slade finally lets himself sigh, leaning back in his chair.

"You dated," Slade says, "and then she found another man. One more to her tastes."
Dick stares at him and then ever so slowly rotates his head to look at Tim.

"...You can't be serious."

Tim stares back at Dick, uncomprehending.

"Wait," Tim says, "are you saying that I'm married to Barbara? I'm thirty years old, muscular as all hell, with a shaved head and a kid, and I'm married to Barbara Gordon?"

Dick starts to laugh. He's almost hysterical, clutching at his sides as Tim looks on in absolute horror.

"This is a nightmare," Tim says quietly. "An absolute nightmare. She can never know. Dick, she can't ever know!"

He attempts to extricate an oath of silence from Dick, and Wintergreen, off to the side, rolls his eyes at the display.

"They're so full of energy," he says quietly, and Slade laughs at that as Dick and Tim roll onto the floor, devolving into a miniature brawl as Tim attempts to pull Dick into a headlock.

Slade's used to that kind of roughhousing and doesn't pay them any mind.

"If you could," Wintergreen says to him, "I would recommend speaking to Rose before you go. While I understand your relationship with your Rose is less than ideal, this Rose is... very eager for your approval, much the same way that Joey is."

Slade feels like he's going to need several months to sit down and work through all his feelings about Rose, but he nods anyway. This isn't his Rose. This Rose has never done him any harm. She's never threatened Jason. She's never attacked Gotham.

Or probably hasn't. It's getting increasingly hard to tell.
Chapter 13

Bruce lets Tim and Dick wrestle right up until the point where the bump into one of the couch's side tables, nearly sending it toppling over. It's not a conscious choice, just a reaction, but he scowls immediately.

"Boys," he says, "that's enough."

Tim and Dick go silent, turning in unison to look up at him, and Bruce goes red. He's overstepped, somehow. They're his sons, but they're not his sons, and the instinct to react as if they are is all but overpowering.

"Wow," Dick says. "I know you're literally him, but you still sound just like him when you do the 'I am being serious now' voice."

"Apparently it transcends dimensions," Tim says, releasing his hold on Dick and straightening up. "Not surprised, personally."

"Alright," Dick says, "serious for a moment here. Our Bruce is probably going to be focused on locating Clark, so you have a window of opportunity before he notices you. Personally, I'd go find our Slade—wow it is weird calling him that—and deal with him first. He's the outlier, and finding him is probably going to be harder. By comparison, you know where our Jason and our Bruce can be found at any given time. Like... just walk up to the manor, problem solved."

"I'm hoping to see Damian before we go," Bruce says, "but you're right that he'd likely tell your Bruce if we saw him."

Even if it sounds like Damian is doing just fine, Bruce still wants to see him.

"That said," Dick says, "I do have a job to get to."

"Could I, uh, bum a ride?" Tim asks. "Conner flew me here, and it's going to be suspicious running around in this."

He gestures down to his costume, and Dick rolls his eyes.

Wintergreen provides an oversized sweater that covers the worst of the costume, and Tim peels off his domino.

He just looks so young, and Bruce is still trying to come to terms with it.

But more than that, there's no telling if he's going to get to see them again. They could end up pulled home at any moment, and Bruce can't let them go with things as they are, so he stands as they get ready to go, bracing himself for rejection.

"I'm not sure when we'll be pulled back," Bruce says. "But I was wondering..."

He awkwardly holds his arms out, and Tim and Dick exchange a glance for a long, long moment.

Then Dick heads over, throwing his arms around Bruce's middle, and Tim joins them after a moment.

"Wow," Dick says, "Joey was really not understanding the level of difference here. Not just hugging, but asking for hugs."
He lifts himself onto his toes to peek over Bruce's shoulder.

"You want some too, Good-Guy-Slade?"

Slade looks moderately embarrassed, but he does pick himself up and join the hug.

"Didn't know you had it in you," Dick says. "But this is nice."

There's a click, and Bruce cranes his neck around to see Wintergreen, standing there holding a phone.

"Don't mind me," he says. "Normally I would say that I doubt Slade's particularly sentimental, but I would normally doubt he's likely to get married, so what do I know? I thought you might enjoy pictures."

"We have to show Tim what this Tim looks like," Slade says.

They take a group photo, just the four of them, and when they're done Wintergreen hands over the phone to Slade.

"Keep that with you," he says. "I've already put in the numbers for myself, Joseph, and Rose if needed."

"Hold on," Dick says, plucking the phone out of Slade's hand without getting any sort of protest. "I'll put everyone's numbers in. Better to have them then not."

"This is weird," Tim adds. "Weird, but nice."

"Who knew all it takes to make Slade a good guy is for Bruce to seduce him?" Dick says.

Bruce chokes just hearing it, burying his face in his hand.

"Don't torment your father," Slade says.

"That's not quite how it happened," Bruce says.

Dick grins at him, and it's obvious he knows that wasn't quite how it worked.

They say their goodbyes, leaving the two of them with Wintergreen.

"They've got too much energy," Wintergreen says. "Can't expect me to keep up with them."

"You're doing just fine," Slade says. "Stop playing up that whole old man thing. You're younger than me or Bruce."

Wintergreen laughs at that and settles back down.

"I'll call Joey," Wintergreen says. "And let him know to come over. Normally I'd recommend waiting for the night, but finding Slade during daylight might be smarter."

Joey doesn't arrive for almost another hour. Bruce takes his time getting dressed, changing into the gear Wintergreen has brought them.

It's not particularly stylized. It's practical, almost entirely black, and heavily armored. It's not quite Batman-grade, but it's certainly workable, and more importantly it covers his face, leaving only his eyes exposed.
Slade's suit's almost identical, but the eyepatch gives him away. Wintergreen's obviously thought of that, because he presents a pair of blacked out shooting glasses to wear.

"Shatter proof," he says. "Your hair isn't distinct enough to be an issue. Your eye is."

Joey's in his suit when he shows up, but he pulls the mask down almost immediately when he steps into the room, and it's Wintergreen's phone he speaks through when he does.

"Everything alright?" He asks.

"We're going after your father," Slade says. "You said you knew where he was?"

"I can track him," Joey says, and for a moment Bruce second guesses himself. It seems, just for a second, like Joey's nervous.

Not a good sign.

"I assume you're not coming along?" Slade asks Wintergreen, and he immediately shakes his head.

"I have things to do," he says. "You have my number if you need anything, and the safe house is yours to use while you're here."

"Oh," Bruce says quickly, tapping Slade on the shoulder. "Photo."

"Photo?" Joey asks, glancing between them.

"Slade wants a photo," he says. "We don't know when we're going to get dragged back. It could be at any time. And if we do get hauled back unexpectedly..."

"You want a photo," Joey says, and his expression is so sad that it hurts Bruce to look at.

"Sure," Joey says after a moment, and Slade hands the phone back to Wintergreen.

Bruce catches Slade staring at the photo before he finally tucks the phone away.

"Alright," Bruce says. "Let's go."

They leave early, keeping to the rooftops as they head through Gotham.

But their objective isn't in Gotham. Very quickly they reach the edge of the city, and Joey's directions aren't helping.

"What are we doing now?" Slade asks. "Do you have his coordinates, or just a direction?"

Joey looks nervous.

"Just a direction," he says. "I could ask where he is, but then he'd expect us. I could get a car?"

"A car is fine," Bruce says. "Wintergreen gave us-"

"I can grab one," Joey says. "It's not an issue. I can just rent."

He zips off the roof before they can object, and Bruce glances to Slade.

"You need to be careful," Bruce says quietly. "I'm not sure what he was expecting, but I don't like it."
Slade grunts, staring after him, and then shakes his head. Bruce reaches up, resting a hand on Slade's shoulder, and Slade sighs.

"Talk to me," Bruce says.

"Just hurts a bit," Slade says. "He's known me for less than twenty four hours and he's so desperate for my approval. And it's obvious why: Because he's not going to get it from his own dad."

Bruce waits in silence until a car pulls up just below them, and Joey lays on the horn.

Slade simply hops down. Bruce has to rappel. He lets Slade take the front seat, sliding into the back himself and pulling his mask down, tipping his head back.

"Let's hope it's close," he says. "Because if he's in Europe, that'll be an issue."

"He's not that far," Joey says. "The tracking doesn't have an infinite range. At most, maybe a five or six hour drive?"

The idea of spending five or six hours driving sounds positively miserable.
Chapter 14

Slade spends most of the car ride in silence. He can't stop himself from sneaking peaks at Joey, his focus on the road obvious. Every so often he tilts his head, eyes scanning for something they can't see, and then he readjusts their direction.

After an hour's drive they pull over, and Joey pulls up a map on his phone. Slade leans over to help, gauging the direction and taking a guess.

"New York," he says. "City, that is. If we head there, we can readjust as needed, but going direct is less efficient than just taking the highway."

They adjust accordingly.

They stop for dinner, pulling off the highway to go through a drive through. Bruce wrinkles his nose, and Slade laughs at the reaction, forcing Bruce to try a bit of everything they get before they get back on the road.

"Feels like a road trip," Joey says when they finally pull off the highway. "You used to take Grant and me out camping. I used to hate it, but I guess now I kind of miss those days."

Grant. A son he has no memories of. Who probably doesn't even exist in his own timeline.

"What was he like?"

"Hard to say," Joey says. "I was young when he ran away, and I didn't really see him after that. From what I was told, he idolized Deathstroke and hated you. I'm not sure he realized they were the same person. He was nice when he was around, though."

The idea of it is a sad one. Looking up to someone without realizing they're the thing you hate.

"He'd probably have loved you," Joey says. "You'd probably have been around more."

"I wasn't," Slade says. "I was... probably just as absent as he was."

"Well," Joey says, cautiously optimistic, "you'd probably have been nicer at the time?"

Slade wants to ask. He wants to ask what those trips were like. What being nicer means.

He's also certain that he doesn't want to hear the answer.

"Sorry," Joey says when he doesn't answer. "I shouldn't have brought it up. I know he's not you."

"No," Slade says, Bruce's warning ringing in his ears. "I'm just worried I'm going to break his neck depending on what I hear."

Joey gawks.

"What?"

"He's a shitty person," Slade says. "And the worst parts of me. I'm just being realistic about my ability to keep myself from taking his head off, knowing that he's hurt you guys."

Joey gawks even more, staring at Slade with... something. Surprise? Confusion? Slade's having a
hard time reading him, and he doesn't get a chance to really try as Joey very nearly hits a car in the other lane, too distracted to realize he's veering.

Slade darts over, grabbing the wheel and hauling it towards him. They swerve, and Joey grabs the wheel, pulling them onto the shoulder as he slams onto the brake.

Joey sags against the steering wheel, breaking heavily.

"Everyone alright?" Slade asks, twisting around to check Bruce in the back.

"Fine," Bruce says. "No issues."

Slade's pretty sure he's a bit banged up, but he's also sure Bruce doesn't want to upset Joey more than he already is, and he twists back around, reaching out to rest a hand on Joey's shoulder.

"You alright?"

Joey flinches at the contact, and Slade spends the next few seconds plotting all the ways he's going to hurt his counterpart.

"Fine," he says, sitting up. "I'm fine. Just - that was my - I almost -"

"We're fine," Slade says. "No one was hurt. I know you're freaking out a bit, but you don't need to."

He tries to give Joey space, which is difficult to do sitting on the shoulder of a highway. He contemplates getting out, but decides that would just make things worse.

"Sorry," Joey says. "I just got... caught off guard."

"Should I drive?" Bruce offers from the back. "So you could talk."

"We're not far," Joey says. "Just a few more exits."

Slade's pretty sure that's a no.

"We'll talk when this is over," Slade says. "Promise."

Joey stares at him again, and only then does he finally shift the car back into drive, pulling off the shoulder and back into traffic.

They reach New York City close to eight o'clock, the sun already vanished behind the cities skyline.

"Direction?" Slade prompts.

"I'm following it," he says. "Going to take the road through the city core and work from there."

It takes them an extra half hour to really narrow it down, winding through the city until they finally get close enough.

"That one," Joey says, nodding to a large abandoned building as they drive by. "But down. Definitely underground."

They circle the block to confirm, and then park a few streets down, pulling their masks up as they head back towards it. It's four stories, covered in graffiti, and half the glass windows have been shattered. There's barbed wire along the brick wall around it, and the sign atop the building says Mercy Hall.
"This feels like one of mine," Bruce says. "Doesn't look like it has anything to steal, but too much of a pain to get in for it to be worth squatting in. The size means you could have an entire structure inside without anyone inside. It looks abandoned, but the barbed wire and all the fencing is still perfectly intact."

"How far down?" Slade asks, glancing back to Joseph.

"...Three or four stories," he says. "He's more under the street than the building itself."

"Discrete cameras," Slade says, observing from the opposite side of the street.

Joey shifts.

"I think... I might know where this is," he finally says.

Slade glances back to him.

"Alright," he says. "What is this?"

"I... might have told Robin where pop was a week or so ago," Joey says. "I kind of just thought they'd fight, but when I contacted him, he kind of implied he'd been caught by them."

Slade can't hide the are you kidding me look.

"Shr- Robin isn't going to be able to hold me."

"That's what I thought," Joey says. "I even asked him if he was going to hurt them, and he basically said I should stay out of it. So I did. But that was... four days ago? And I don't think he's moved."

Oh. Well, that's concerning.

"So we think this is Robin's base?" Bruce asks. "Let's hope this works again."

Slade and Joey trail after Bruce as he heads to the back gate, locating an access panel just beside it hidden beneath false brick. There's a retina and handprint scanner, and he peels his glove off, pressing his hand to it and leaning against it.

Recognized, the screen pops up.

"Override," Bruce says. "6552006."

Override successful, the screen reads.

"Loop cameras, twenty four hours," Bruce says. "Disable all alarms and outgoing alerts."

Confirmed.

"We're good to go," Bruce says, pulling the suddenly unlocked gate open. "If anyone's home, they're not going to know about it."

"Do you have that override in everything you built?" Slade asks. "You're lucky it was the same one."

"It was my old school ID," Bruce says. "So I took a chance. The alternative was the alarm going off either way."

"Lets go before someone notices, then," Slade says.
They slip inside.

The outer layer of the building is abandoned, but once Bruce has scanned their way past an inner door it's obvious the building is occupied. They go low and slow, and Slade focuses on what he can hear as they go.

"There's people upstairs," he says. "Second and third floor, most likely. I don't hear anyone down here."

The elevator is in plain sight, but Bruce finds a hidden panel that gives access to an unmarked basement.

"This is almost too easy," Joey says quietly.

"It's only easy because I built this," Bruce says. "All of this is my standard. The building layout, the security, the protocols... The entire building would be on lockdown if we'd just broke in."

"Which wouldn't have stopped us," Slade says, "but it would have stopped most people."

"The three of us are a bit beyond what even I can prepare for at every safehouse," Bruce says, sounding defensive, and Slade snickers.

The elevator drops them down to a long hallway with a vault door at the far end, and Slade glances to Joey, who nods.

"Dead ahead," he says. "More or less exactly."

"Oh boy," Slade says under his breath. "Here we go."

But none of them are quite prepared for what they find when the vault door slides open. The area isn't particularly small, but the first part is simply a long hallway. On either side are prison bars, and on the other side of those bars are prisoners.

Prisoners he recognizes.

Some of them are unfamiliar, but it's hard to mistake Roman Sionis. He's also fairly sure he recognizes the other Black mask in the room from League reports. Serial killer?

But his counterpart isn't in the room, and that doesn't change that the prisoners are very rapidly noticing their presence, heads craning up to stare at them.

Slade has a lot of questions. He's pretty sure Bruce has even more, because even through the mask Slade can see that Bruce's jaw is open slightly.

Joey's face is almost entirely covered, but he hasn't moved an inch since the door opened, staring at... everything.

"Who the hell is that?" Roman asks, craning his neck to get a better view.

Slade has a lot of questions, but at the very least that isn't one of them.
Chapter 15

Of all the things that Bruce has seen since they arrived, he's sure that this is the most insane. Not Tim, a shade over sixteen and maybe a hundred and forty pounds at most. Not Jason running the Iceberg Lounge.

No, it's the fact that Black Mask and what looks like an assortment of criminals are locked up under one of his old bases. One of his old bases that Damian is using.

Whatever plan they had before is dead. It's been taken out back and shot, because there's no way they can simply walk in, get the other Slade, and leave.

No, they're going to have to deal with the secret fucking prison hidden under his old base.

"I know he's probably straight ahead," Bruce says quietly. "But do we have any objections to turning around, going back upstairs, and dealing with that first?"

Bruce watches Slade's jaw clench, his teeth no doubt grinding, and then he exhales.

"No," he says. "Seal it."

They backpedal through the door, and Bruce seals the prison again.

He waits before it's in place before he speaks again.

"Just so we're all on the same page," Bruce says. "That was a prison for supervillains, right?"

"There's no way Nightwing knows about that," Joey says. "Absolutely no way."

"The question is... does Batman?"

Bruce is very interested in finding out.

He strides forward, right back to the elevator without a word, and Slade and Joey climb on with him as he punches the lobby button. It takes them back up to the ground floor, and Bruce moves away, getting clear of it before pulling out his phone.

"Do I want to know who you're calling?" Joey asks.

Bruce pauses, taking a deep breath, and turns to him.

"You don't," he says. "And this is going to get messy. If you want to leave, you absolutely can. If-"

"I'm not leaving," Joey says. "Pops down there. And he's down there because of me."

"He could get out whenever he wants," Slade says. "I don't know what game he's playing, but if he's not able to get out of that he's incompetent."

Joey doesn't hesitate either way.

"I'm staying."

"Good," Bruce says. "We might need you."

He dials the phone, pulls it to his ear, and waits.
It rings four times before they finally answer.

"Hello?" Comes a voice. It sounds alien to him, a voice he associates more with Hush than with himself.

"This is important," Bruce says. "I need your full attention. Superman went missing two days ago, along with his wife, and you're investigating it."

There's silence on the other end, which Bruce knows means he's listening.

"I need to know if you're incarcerating supercriminals," Bruce says. "This is important," he repeats.

There's silence on the other end, and Bruce reaches up, pinching at the bridge of his nose. Wintergreen's phone should be difficult to trace, but he's not sure it's going to be _Batman_ proof. They don't have a ton of time.

"If you'd like I can start listening out personal details, but that would only make you more paranoid. I need to know the answer."

"...No," the voice on the other end says. "Who is this?"

"You'll find that out in a few hours," Bruce says. "I'd be ready to go. New York, downtown."

He's going to give him a head start, and with that he hangs up.

"Did you just call yourself?" Joey says quietly.

"I needed to know if he's behind this," Bruce says. "I wouldn't, but that doesn't mean anything when we're talking about alternate realities."

"And you believe him?" Slade asks.

"I think it's unlikely he's lying," Bruce says. "This doesn't fit with my MO. Which means..."

He looks up.

"Robin," Slade finishes. "Or someone on his team."

"Let's not lie to ourselves," Bruce says. "This is Robin."

Slade exhales, reaching up to pinch at the bridge of his nose.

"Christ," he mutters. "We thought Raptor was bad here. Everyone's a goddamn mess."

"Alright," Bruce says. "Follow my lead on this." Then he falters, glancing to Joey. They don't actually know what he can do, but he's too much of a known quantity. He and Slade could be _anyone_ in their gear. Joey sticks out.

"Stay out of sight," he says. "If it devolves into a fight, we'll need you. Non-lethal only."

"I don't do lethal," Joey says.

"Good," Bruce says. "Let's go."

Joey breaks off, lifting off the ground as Slade and Bruce slip into the elevator.

"How are we playing this?" Slade asks as the doors close.
“Walking right in,” Bruce says. "We have no idea who he has with him. So we're playing by ear.”


"Kids that already took you down once," Bruce says. "So lets be careful. Fighting is a last resort."

The door bings and slides open, revealing what looks like a mostly ordinary living room. From where they stand, Bruce can spot three figures: A white skinned girl standing just behind a couch, a blue-skinned boy sitting on the couch, and dark-skinned boy sitting beside him.

The dark-skinned one is definitely a flash. His costume's almost a mirror to Barry's, only yellow.

The pale girl turns towards the elevator, her expression turning into a grimace.

"...Guys?" she says. "Who the hell's that?"

"We're here to talk to Robin," Bruce says. He uses his normal voice, letting the mask muffle it enough to keep from being immediately recognizable.

He steps off the elevator, and the other two turn to gawk. None of them leap to violence, which is probably a good sign, but Bruce isn't counting on that lasting long.

"...Uh," the blue boy says, "Kid? I think you should probably go get the others."

There's a flash of yellow and the other boy is gone, zipping up the stairs.

They wait, the room almost frozen, and Bruce can hear the sound of someone running down the stairs above them. A girl pops her head around the corner, her face hidden by a domino mask. There's a bow on her back, her costume red, and... well, Bruce can take a guess as to who she is. A Red Arrow, only obviously not Roy. A relative?

Another legacy hero, anyway.

He holds his ground and waits.

Damian hops off the stairs, landing fluidly. His teeth are bared, but even through the brighter than normal (and far less practical) costume and the domino mask, Bruce would recognize him anywhere.

"Where's Djinn?" The pale girl says. "This seems like a situation."

"Here!" Another girl says, popping into existence. Her most obvious feature are strange dark purple markings across her body, and the fact that she just teleported. She looks young. The all look young, but she looks to be around Damian's age.

Too goddamn young to be running a secret prison.

"Who the hell are they?" Red Arrow says, glancing between the two of them and the rest of her team. Bruce weighs out his options and tries to pick the option that gives the lowest chance of someone going out a window.

"Damian," he says, and Damian's reaction is instantaneous. His teammates all look varying shades of alarmed, but no one seems surprised by his identity, just the fact that Bruce knows it.

But Damian?

Damian knows his voice, and he squares up immediately, shoulders tense.
"We're going to talk about this," Bruce says.

"This is my team," Damian protests immediately. "We're doing good work, and just because I didn't tell you-"

Does this world's Bruce not even know about the goddamn team?

"This isn't about the team, Damian," Bruce says. Even if he's speaking as Bruce, every word he says is peak Batman. Using Damian's name to draw the connection. Keeping his face perfectly under control. If this world's Bruce is less expressive than him, he's going to have to play to it.

They need to talk him down before there's a brawl. Damian has five people with him, including a speedster, and Bruce has absolutely no idea what any of them can do.

Even if they are kids.

"Robin," Red Arrow says. "Who is this?"

Damian scowls at them. Bruce can practically hear him shouting You're ruining everything!, but Damian keeps his mouth shut.

"This is no one," Damian says. "We're just going to talk. In private."

"Hold on," the pale girl says. "This isn't a private thing. You just had two guys in masks walk right into our base. What happened to our security?"

The blue boy's already checking his phone.

"Cameras are looping," he says. "It's only Crush and Djinn in here on them."

"Who the HELL just walked through our security, Robin?" The pale girl roars at him.

Damian doesn't flinch.

"Help," Bruce says. "Because this situation needs to get sorted out."

"What situation?" The pale girl says.

"There's no situation," Damian says a shade too quickly, and Slade nudges Bruce's shoulder.

He catches on quickly. Damian, their speedster, and Red Arrow are tense. The other three are confused.

Three of them are afraid of Bruce mentioning the situation in front of the others.

"There is... something wrong with them," Djinn says quietly. "There is something strange about them."

Bruce doesn't know what she's reading, but he doesn't like it. A mage? Some kind of magic?

"I'll make this simple," Bruce says, eager to end the standoff. "You can come sit down and talk in private, Damian, or we can have a group conversation about the issue. Either way, we're talking about it."

Damian doesn't want either, but it's also obvious which option he's going to pick. What matters is whether or not his team are going to let him. Whether they trust him enough to let him go talk to
them in private.

The answer is no.

"Absolutely fucking not," the pale girl yells. "What the hell is going on?"

"I want to know how they got past security," the blue boy says. "We've been staying here because it's supposed to be safe, but these guys just walked right through our security."

"I agree," Djinn says. "I think we deserve some answers, Robin."

The blue boy seems to be the team's tactician or something of the sort, because he pauses, glancing around the room.

"Oh," he says. "You guys already know."

The speedster glances away a bit too quickly, and Red Arrow's jaw clenches.

"We just don't," the blue boy says.

"We don't know who they are," the speedster says, and Bruce can feel the team fraying at the seams. He's driven a wedge right into the crack he spotted, and now he just has to swing the hammer.

He doesn't even have to.

"No," the blue boy says, getting to his feet. "But you know exactly what they're talking about. The situation. And you haven't told us. What happened to being a team?"

"You're ruining things," Damian says. "This is my team, and you're ruining things!"

Damian jumps him.

Or he tries. Bruce gets the impression he's expecting backup, but he doesn't get any. Every member of his team stays perfectly still as their leader charges in. Slade doesn't even have to move, Damian is good, and he'd be able to handle anyone without training and plenty with. But Bruce has been training with him for years, and this Damian uses all the same moves as his Damian. It's all too easy to catch his kick, twisting his ankle and slamming him to the floor. Damian tries to roll to his feet, but Bruce pins him with the sort of ease that only comes with literal years of practice.

"Wrong move," he says. "That means this is now a team discussion."
Chapter 16

Slade spends the entire conversation hoping it's not going to play out exactly the way it does. A fight feels almost preferable to watching Damian blindly charge in alone, getting laid out by someone with decades of experience and more than a hundred pounds of muscle over him.

He keeps his mouth shut. If he talks, there's a good chance someone's going to recognize his voice, and that will blow their cover.

"What's the situation?" The pale girl says. Slade doubts she's human. She's humanoid, but she's paler than the Joker ever was, her skin white as snow, and she has dark black markings around her eyes. Her lips and hair are the same shade of black, and her face seems stuck in a permanent grimace.

He catches sight of Joseph floating just behind the group's backs out a window, and gives him a slight nod. All clear. He doesn't come in, but he does seem to relax.

"Your team is operating above a secret prison," Bruce says. "With all your previous enemies inside."

The reactions are intense and varied. The little girl's eyes water, and she looks to Damian with an expression of shocked outrage. The pale girl clenches her teeth so hard Slade's sure he hears them crack, her hands balling into fists.

"Are you serious?" The blue-skinned boy says. "A secret- really?" He looks not to Damian, but to the team's speedster, who averts his gaze. It's an obvious tell, and his friends seems to recognize it.

"Wow," he says. "All that talk about dog breeds was a hell of a misleading metaphor."

"I was going to tell you," the speedster says. "I was just trying to figure out how."

The archer is silent where she stands, arms folded over her chest.

"I cannot believe this," Djinn says. "I cannot believe you would do this. After everything we have been through. You are keeping prisoners?"

"Hold on," the blue boy says, "are they all down there? Is Deathstroke down there?"

His tone is so alarmed and terrified that Bruce is happy he has the mask on to hide his smile.

"They were just going to escape!" Damian yells. "You know it. We all know it. If we'd turned them over, they'd already have been out of prison. They've all killed dozens of people at least, and they've all escaped over and over again!"

"So you build a better prison," Bruce says. Slade is convinced Bruce has had this conversation before. He remembers Bruce telling him about it. He remembers them talking about it, and he swears the conversation started with Damian said.

"Then they escape," Damian hisses. "And they kill more people. And the blood is on our hands for not having stopped them. If you won't allow them to be stopped in a more permanent manner, than this is the solution: Handling them ourselves."

"If this was right," Bruce says, "you wouldn't have to hide it. You'd be able to talk to your teammates about it. You'd be able to tell them the truth. You should trust them, and either you don't trust them, or you don't believe in what you're saying."
It's a bit of a dirty trick, because both options are bad. Damian has to either admit he doesn't trust his team, or admit that he's ideologically compromised.

"They cannot be saved," Damian says, ignoring the issue entirely. "They cannot be helped. They're all unrepentant murderers. They need to be contained."

"Like animals," the little girl says. She's not crying, but there are tears in her eyes. "Like I was."

"Not like you!" Damian protests. "You were an innocent. None of them are innocent. Black Mask alone has killed a dozen people that we know of, and that's saying nothing of Deathstroke!"

He struggles under Bruce's grip, and Bruce simply shifts his position to kneel on Damian's back, pinning him with his weight as much as with his hand.

"You made a mistake," Bruce says. "You thought this was the best option. But you didn't trust your teammates with the truth. You didn't ask for their opinion. And that was as much of a mistake as what you did."

Damian bares his teeth, but he's silent.

It's good. It's good because Bruce is making it as much about Damian's team as he is about what he's actually done.

He isn't surprised when Bruce abruptly pulls back, shaking out his hand as Damian scrambles up to his feet. He's actually trembling, and Slade thinks it's about equally likely to be from shame or rage.

"I can't believe this," the pale girl says. "A secret prison. And you all knew."

"I agree with Robin," Red Arrow says. "They need to be contained. If legal prisons aren't going to keep them, then we need to."

"And what?" Bruce asks. His tone is clear and even. It's not argumentative. It's almost friendly. "Feed them slop? Hose them down when they make a mess of themselves? It's a perfectly valid plan to start. It's an awful plan every second after that. One day someone—one of your mentors—is going to find out. One day one of them is going to escape."

"The prison cannot be escaped from!" Damian yells. "Even Deathstroke couldn't get out!"

"Our headquarters is supposed to be break-in-proof," the blue boy points out. "And obviously not."

"He cheated," Damian says immediately, and then scowls. He's given too much away.

"Someday," Bruce says, "it's going to happen. Someday someone's going to find out, or someone's going to escape. And then you're ruined. Every bit of credibility you have is gone, because you were running a secret prison. You'll destroy any trust the public has in you, and damage the trust that all heroes share. You turn the police against you. You become as wanted as the people you've captured."

"We didn't know," the blue boy says quickly. "We didn't."

"I know," Bruce says. "Some of you did. Some of you didn't. But this isn't an unwinnable situation. It's just one that needs to be handled carefully, now, before the worst case scenario happens."

"Uhm," the little girl says. "Who are you? Because you... you seem to know a lot."

"He's my mentor," Damian grumbles. He's still trembling, but to Slade there's no longer any question
of what emotion it's from. It's *shame*. He's embarrassed. He's failed, and he's failed in a devastating way. One that could absolutely destroy his team and every bit of trust he's built up.

"Oh shit," the speedster says. "That's Batman?!"

The reaction is one almost universally of horror and fear, and Slade has no doubt that under his mask Bruce is cringing in response. But there's a good reason for it. Even in their world, Batman wouldn't look kindly on a secret prison.

"How do we fix it?" The blue-skinned boy says. "We need to fix this."

He seems panicked, but the fact that Bruce isn't seems to relax him slightly.

"That would depend," Bruce says. "On if you want to."

"If we want to *what*?" Red Arrow says. Her tone is dangerous, and it earns her a glare from the pale girl.

"Three of you had no idea about this prison," Bruce says. "You bare no responsibility for what happened here. You can walk away from this. The other three knew. The three of you who didn't know are free to go."

It's a test. It's a test laid out in front of them, and Slade wonders how many of them realize that. Slade suspects Damian does, but he's silent. Anything he says will just turn them away from him.

The little girl clasps her hands together in front of her, and the pale girl and blue boy both look to her.

"Damian," she says, speaking his real name rather than his codename. "Are you... are you willing to work past this?"

The room is dead silent.

Damian looks away. His shame is obvious in his body language, in the slump of his shoulders.

"I don't know," he says. "It would be... it would be better if it were just me. You shouldn't - this shouldn't impact you."

Bruce reaches down and rests a hand on Damian's shoulder, and Damian jumps, glancing up at him, the confusion obvious.

"I will stand with you," Djinn says, and there's an exchange of glances between the other two before they nod.

"We're a team," the blue boy says. "Or we're supposed to be."

"No," Red Arrow says, and every head turns to her. "I'm leaving. I'm not playing house with you. I'm here because we were going to do what the adults wouldn't. If we're not, then I'm out."

"Red Arrow," Djinn says, and Red cuts her off.

"No," she says. "I'm leaving."

She walks right past them to the elevator, and Slade glances at Bruce who offers only a slight shake of the head. The mood drops, and the elevator clicks closed.

"Hold on," Bruce says, and he turns his back to the kids, facing the window as he does... something.
Slade catches sight of Joey bobbing out of view, and he realizes Bruce must have signed him a message.

Hopefully watch the kid.

Bruce turns back to them.

"Alright," he says. "We're going to need to work this out. Who have the people down below seen?"


"Alright," Bruce says. "We can keep Deathstroke quiet. The others are going to have their own issues."

Slade doesn't have any doubt about that. The other Slade has other things to deal with.

"So," Djinn says, "what do we do? How do we... how do we make this situation better."

"If we just release them," the blue boy says, "they're just going to go back to doing what they did before. And if we turn them over to the cops..."

"I could..." Djinn says, hesitating. "I could take away their memories. I think. I haven't done it in a long time. It seems... it seems abhorrent. But... I do not see another way."

"We need to do introductions," Bruce says. "Before we do any of that. I need to know your names—code names are fine—and what it is you can do."

"Crush," the pale girl says. "I'm strong. That's about it."

"Roundhouse," the blue boy says. "I... turn into a ball. And I'm really fast as a ball. And strong."

"And he's smart," the speedster says. "He's really smart."

"That's not a power," Roundhouse protests. "That's just... me."

"It's still something you can do," the speedster says, before realizing it's his turn. "Kid Flash. Don't think I really need to explain the powers."

"You don't," Bruce says. "Batman is fine."

"And him?" Crush asks, nodding to Slade.

Slade offers a quick wave.

"Ignore him," Bruce says. "He's my bodyguard."

"Batman needs a bodyguard?" Kid Flash asks.

"If he wants to make sure no one gets hurt he does," Bruce says. "And the last thing I want is for anyone here to get hurt."

"That's good," Roundhouse says, swallowing.

"I still... I still think you are strange," Djinn says. "You are... unfocused. To me."

"You didn't introduce yourself," Bruce points out.
"Oh!" She says, cheeks darkening. "I am Djinn. I am a... a djinn. I have strong magic, but as things are my powers are limited."

Oh crap. Slade wonders if the unfocused nature is because they're not supposed to be there. If her magic's recognizing them as dimensional interlopers.

He hopes Bruce is thinking the same thing.

"And you all know Robin," Bruce says when it becomes obvious Damian isn't going to play the introduction game. He gives Damian's shoulder another squeeze, but Damian's too busy staring at the floor.

There's a knock at the window, and Joseph waves from the other side.

"Who's that?" Roundhouse says. "Wait, you brought extra backup?"

"Just in case," Bruce says, gesturing for Joey to come around. He zips to the side, finding a decent sized hole in the outer glass and coming through. The entire group turns to watch him come until he finally settles in, and Bruce pulls out his phone, flipping it open as the screen lights up.

"Followed her three blocks," Joey's voice says. "She cut into a building."

"That's fine," Bruce says.

Damian's not looking at the floor. He's staring at Joey, and Slade realizes he knows who Joey is.

"I know you," Damian says, confirming Slade's suspicion. "You're Jericho."

But there's no you're Deathstroke's son! like he's expecting.

"I am," the phone says, and there's a bit of confused glancing.

"He's mute," Bruce says. "He speaks through the phone."

"Oh," Djinn says, "would telepathy help? I could link all of our minds-"

"No!" Half the room says quickly.

"That won't be necessary," Bruce says, displaying a bit more control than the kids. "Telepathy isn't much of an asset when tensions are high."

"Oh," she says, shoulders sinking. "Of course."

"Why don't we sit down," Bruce says. "All of us. And then we can talk this out and decide what we're going to do."

"Is Batman giving us a teamwork coaching session?" Roundhouse says under his breath to Kid Flash.

"I think he's trying to make sure we don't all end up arrested," Kid Flash says back.

Everyone starts to head to the couch, and Slade hangs back, keeping an eye on things.

This is Bruce's wheelhouse, not his.
Chapter 17

The kids, Bruce realizes, are desperate to be given answers. More or less all of them listen to him when he speaks like he's a preacher dispensing divine wisdom. They hang off his every word, and he has their attention just by simply virtue of being the Batman.

So he walks them through it, step by simple step.

The base has to be abandoned. There's some noises of protest, but he lays it all out and there's no denying it. They've brought too much attention. There's too great a risk. And they can't have people living in a place that villains might come back to.

They don't have much stuff, but they pack it up anyway, mostly with the help of Kid Flash.

Damian says they can fall back to their secondary headquarters, which he admits is smaller... and without an accompanying prison.

The prisoners down below are harder to manage.

"I can take away their memories," Djinn says. "If I have help. It would... it would probably be easier for them if they did not remember their capture. If they-"

"You don't have to justify yourself," Bruce says. "It's obvious that this is difficult for you, but that you're willing to do it to help your friends."

Djinn looks away, embarrassed, and nods.

"So how are we—or you, I guess—actually handing them over? Because I'm not really all that excited by the idea of any of them going free," Kid Flash says, sparing a glance over towards where Slade stands.

"They're not," Bruce says. "They're going to be handed over to the legal authorities. We have a contact."

That seems to answer the question, even though it's barely an answer at all.

The prison, to Bruce's intense distaste, comes with an option to sedate all the prisoners via an odorless gas. He watches through the security as the room gets flooded, knocking out everyone in the main room. There's a small bit of debate between Crush and Djinn behind them, and when Djinn steps forward, her expression is blank and unresponsive.

"Is she alright?" Joey asks from the phone.

"She's fine," Crush says. "Can we get this over with?"

"Jericho is going to carry the prisoners down to a drop point," Bruce says. "They'll be asleep long enough for them to be picked up. Then we can get you all to the new base and call it a night."

It's a group effort. Djinn moves forward, holding her hand in front of each sleeping prisoner as she peels away the memories of everything after their capture. They'll have missing time, she explains in a monotone, but no other side effects.

Roundhouse and Kid Flash help move them up to the lobby, and from there Jericho collects them, hauling them off to the point Bruce selected.
It's quick, efficient work.

When the last one's on their way, Crush glances towards the back room where Bruce knows Deathstroke is waiting.

"What about him?"

"He's staying here," Bruce says. "We can deal with him after."

Kid Flash swallows, averting his eyes, and for the moment they head back up to ground level.

"I need to make a call," Bruce says. "Watch them?"

Slade nods, and the kids mill about as Bruce calls Joey directly.

"Everyone in position?" He asks.

"Just dropping them now," Joey says. "Give me five."

He does, and only then does he call his counterpart. He can't imagine that with all the advanced warning he gave that he isn't already in the city, probably circling nearby in the Batwing or whatever their equivalent is.

He doesn't have any sort of lead-in. He simple rattles off the address to the roof they've dropped their criminals on and hangs up.

Joey arrives back right when he does, settling down beside him, and they head inside together.

"So," Crush says, "Deathstroke."

Djinn looks back to her normal self, but she looks unhappy, wringing her hands as she glances between the group.

"We'll be handling him," Bruce says. "You won't need to worry."

"No offense," Crush says from between gritted teeth, "but half the reason this team exists is because a lot of us got tired of how adults were handling things. What happened to being honest?"

"That was being honest with your team," Bruce says. "You are not my team. You're his."

He nods to Damian, who offers a shrug.

"I only have guesses for what's going to happen to him," he says. "But he'll probably walk free."

"What?" Roundhouse says. "But he's like... he's like the worst of the lot."

"Guys," Kid Flash says, "this is over our heads. They gave us a way out, but this isn't something we want to push."

Crush spins, glaring at him, and Kid Flash inches backwards, obviously expecting her to swing.

"What do you know?" She says. "Because you obviously know something."

"Listen," he says, "this is just-"

"You can tell them," Bruce says. He has no idea what Kid Flash knows, but he's curious to find out. He's also entirely sure Kid Flash is wrong, because This is Slade and his husband from another
"That," Kid Flash says with a nod towards Jericho, "is Deathstroke's son."

Bruce has no idea how he knows that, but he doesn't let the surprise show.

"Sorry for ignoring you," Joey says, holding out his hand for Kid Flash to take. "I just wasn't sure if you had told them about it."

"You two know each other?" Roundhouse asks, eyes flicking between the two of them.

"Jericho and I were on a team together," Kid Flash says. "Along with Deathstroke."

He seems to realize it looks suspicious as all hell, because he gives a nervous glance to the rest of the team.

"I'm not on his side," he says. "It was a one time thing. I was trying to... to help him. But he wasn't capable of being helped. I'm just being realistic about what this is... this is a glorified rescue mission, and they're cleaning up the mess."

Kid Flash gives a lightning fast glance in Slade's direction, and Bruce has a sinking feeling that he knows who's under the mask. He's half wrong, but that won't be easy to explain if Slade's mask goes down.

"So we're handing Deathstroke over to his allies," Crush says.

"No," Joey says immediately. "We're not his allies. He might be my father, but he's not walking free."

"Doubt it," Roundhouse says.

"Jericho's a good guy," Kid Flash says. "Of everyone who was on that team, he was... he's the most well adjusted."

"Which isn't a high bar," Damian mutters to himself.

"It doesn't matter," Bruce says. "We're going to be handling him. What you need to worry about is getting to your new base and settling in there. Put this behind you. Try again, as a team."

Crush eyes Damian.

"And what," she says, "he's just walking away?"

"We're going to talk," Bruce says, "in private, after. I don't mean to leave you out, but there are things we can only talk about one on one."

Or two on one. Or two on two, more realistically.

"I don't like it," Kid Flash says, "just... just tell Miss Kane I don't want any-"

Slade laughs behind him, and Bruce rolls his eyes.

"We're not working for Miss Kane," Bruce says, and Kid Flash looks confused as he glances between them.

"...You're not?"
"Just because they say that doesn't mean it's true," Crush says.

"It is true," Bruce says.

"I have only one question," Djinn says. "Do you know why you are so... why you are unfocused to me?"

Bruce doesn't hesitate to answer.

"Yes," he says. "We know."

"Oh," she says. "Alright. I will trust them."

Crush glances between the two of them, confused.

"What?" She says. "Why would that... what does that...?"

"If they were trying to hide it," Djinn says, "I think they would have said no. But I think I understand now what it is."

"We're probably on a schedule," Bruce says. "It's only a matter of time before they finish collecting the prisoners and someone comes snooping. Kid Flash, can you help the team get over to your new base?"

Kid Flash nods quickly.

"You got it, boss," he says, and then seems to realize what he says and flushes red, turning away.

Great. Now he's boss.

"Alright," Bruce says. "Lets go scrape Deathstroke out of his cell."
Chapter 18

Slade doesn't even pretend to be surprised when Damian comes with them. It's not a choice they make, or an invitation they offer. He simply falls in with them, lingering between them as they descend towards the prison.

"How are we doing this, exactly?" Joey asks from the phone. "Should I-"

"Let us handle it," Bruce says. "But being blunt, we're going to have to put things off. I need to get Damian home and have that talk before we can deal with Deathstroke."

Which is irritating, and a part of Slade wants to say let's split up, but he's not willing to part from Bruce right then. Too many possibilities. Too many risks.

He is dealing with himself after all.

Slade shifts his position a bit so he's behind Damian's field of view, and rapidly signs to Joey.

*Can you take care of Deathstroke while we handle Robin?* Is the gist, and after a moment Joseph nods.

*He's my father,* he signs right back.

Slade feels bile rise in his throat at the idea, but Damian needs to be dealt with first.

Slade's prison turns out to be ridiculous in a way that only something designed by Damian could be. He's been literally strung up off the ground in an elaborate series of suspension restraints, and he appears to be lightly dozing when the door opens, snapping awake immediately.

"Look what the cat dragged in," Other-Slade says, lifting his head up. There's a screen below him, and even as Slade watches it jumps from photo to photo. Each is labelled with a number, and Slade is surprised to realize that his counterpart's kill-count is *much* higher than his.

Fantastic. That's another strike against him.

"Pop," Joey says through the phone, sticking his head into the small room.

Other-Slade scowls immediately, showing his teeth.

"I told you to stay out of this," he says. "Not to come crawling down here on some kind of idiotic rescue mission. I had a plan, and you're ruining it."

Slade sees red, and he digs his fingers into his own upper arm, keeping himself from acting.

"We're removing you from here," Bruce says, and he can see Other-Slade's brain working away as he tries to figure out who he is. But with only his eyes and hair visible, and his hair different from Bruce's own... The connection's hard to make, to be fair. Does he even know who Bruce Wayne is?

"Oh," he says, "so this is one of those sorts of rescues."

Which means yes, yes he *does* know exactly who Bruce is.
"I need to deal with Robin," Bruce says. "And you need to not go anywhere."

"And yet here you are, breaking me out."

"The prison's over and done with," Bruce says. "Are you going to go with Jericho quietly?"

"Don't see why I should."

Slade knows how to get him to shut up. He knows. So he steps forward, sliding up to where Other-Slade is bound, and leans in.

"You go with him now," he says, his voice soft, "and we'll talk later."

Other-Slade knows who he is instantly, his eyes raking up and down him, and then he grins.

"Sure," he says. "Cut me down and we'll see how things go."

Slade suspects Joey is talking to him directly, but it's impossible to say. He's expecting Other-Slade to jump the moment he's down, but when Bruce disconnects the wires, dropping him to the ground, he doesn't. Instead he straightens up, stretching out as he grins down at an absolutely furious looking Damian.

"Have fun with that, kiddo," he says, heading right over to Joey.

It goddamn burns watching how Joey's expression changes, even under the mask. He's happy to see him. His counterpart has treated Joey like shit, and Joey's still happy to see him.

Damian's practically growling.

"If it's alright," Bruce says, "we probably need the car."

"For what?" Damian asks.

"We need to get back to Gotham," Bruce says. "And-"

"We'll take a zeta tube," Damian says. "We don't need a car."

"Fine," Bruce says, and Slade has no idea how that is going to work.

"We'll take the car," Other-Slade says, "and see you boys when you're done."

He gives Slade a wink, and Slade rolls his eye behind the glasses.

They all head out as a group, and Kid Flash is waiting for them as they reach the top. His mouth is set in a grim line, ready to yell, and then he pauses, eyes flicking between Other-Slade and Slade himself.

"Wait," he says, "what?"

Ah. Slade realizes he was right: Kid Flash did recognize him. He just thought he'd already escaped from the basement, and that the cell was empty.

"Guess things weren't what you thought, kid," Other-Slade says, and Slade elbows him in the ribs hard. Hard enough to break ribs if it was anyone but himself.

"I got it," Other-Slade says, raising his hands. "Play nice."
"Sorry about this," Joey says. "I swear it'll make sense eventually."

He looks as apologetic as he can get under his mask.

"They need you back at the base," Damian says. "The team is... the team needs someone to calm them down."

It's a good bit of delegation, and Slade isn't surprised when Bruce's hand automatically goes to Damian's shoulder. He shrugs it off immediately, glancing away.

"...Fine," Kid Flash says. "But you owe us all an explanation when this is over."

He's gone in a streak of yellow.

"I'm going to take pop," Joey says. "I'll call you."

Nothing's stopping Other-Slade from hijacking the car and leaving. Nothing's stopping him from going into hiding. But Slade *knows* he won't. He's eager to confront him. To fight or whatever he can get. So Slade's confident he'll play along as he heads out with Joey.

He hates leaving them alone, and he's sure it shows in the tension of his shoulders.

"Lets go," Bruce says once they're alone. "We need to-"

"I know you're not father," Damian says, and Slade glances to Bruce, waiting for a denial.

"...What gave it away?" Bruce asks instead.

"He would have been more angry," Damian says. "But you sound just like him. And you know too much. I couldn't risk my team getting hurt in whatever sort of scheme this is."

Which means he *knew*. Which means he's known for a while. But he's played along the way he's been taught, doing everything he can to minimize the risk. He probably thinks he's about to get goddamn *murdered*, which explains his silence just as much as embarrassment does.

Slade suddenly wonders if the trembling he saw earlier was from *fear*.

Bruce bends down to be eye level and reaches up, pulling the mask down. Damian's look is pure confusion for a moment, and then it settles into simple scrutiny.

"You're from another dimension," he says, as if it's the simplest thing in the world.

"More or less," Bruce says. "Yeah."

"Which is why you thought we needed the truck," Damian says. "You don't know about zeta tubes."

"No idea what those are," Bruce admits. "But we are going to have to tell your father about this. We need to make sure he scrubs down this base so it can't be traced back to any of you, and I don't have those kinds of resources."

Damian's mouth presses into a thin, unhappy line.

"He didn't even find out," Damian says quietly. "He wouldn't..." He trails off, unable or unwilling to finish what he was saying.

Slade wants to know how the hell he *didn't* find out. How he didn't know that Damian had a *team of*
teenagers working under him. That they'd fought and captured multiple villains.

And he didn't even know where their base was?

Because Slade has no doubt he didn't know. If he did know, he'd have already kicked a goddamn window in.

He would have. Bruce would have. And he can't imagine that Other-Bruce wouldn't have.

"We're all going to go," Bruce says. "We're going to go, sit down with him, and explain what happened."

Damian's eyes slide over to Slade, the question obvious, and Slade reaches up to pull his mask down. Damian looks disgusted.

"Long story," Slade says. "In our timeline me and your dad are friends. And right now he's helping with my kids, and I'm helping with his, and that includes you."

He doesn't think Damian's ready to hear the we're married talk. He's looking like he's struggling to accept the fact that Slade's there, and too much too fast is only going to backfire.

"I can't believe you're friends with Deathstroke," Damian hisses to Bruce.

"Things are different where we're from," Bruce says. "I promise he's not going to hurt you."

"I didn't think he would," Damian says. "We beat him, after all. We captured him."

Slade bites his tongue to keep from contradicting him.

"Can the zeta tubes get us back to the cave?" Bruce asks, and pulls his mask back up. Slade does the same automatically.

"Yes," Damian says. "I assume you have the same retinal scans as my father."

"I do," Bruce confirms. "That'll get us in?"

"Yes," Damian says. "But we should go nearby. Father is unlikely to have been foolish enough to not account for having two identical signatures going at the same time. Going to one of the Gotham ones and heading to the manor would be more efficient."

Slade wonders if he's stalling for time, trying to avoid the inevitable confrontation. He's tense, but it's hard to say how much of that is dread, and how much of it is from the current situation as it stands.

"Let's go then," Bruce says. "We can take the Gotham route."
Chapter 19

It's impossible not to see the similarities between the portal Damian takes them to and the portal that dragged them there in the first place. It's the same light, only less blinding. More controlled.

"Authenticate," Damian says, "and then say 'override, two civilians'."

Bruce does, watching the access panel light up. He goes first, but the sensation of being sucked through a straw is less intense, and he manages to land on his feet back in Gotham.

"So how are we doing this?" Slade asks as they cut across an unfamiliar Gotham, heading towards the cave.

"I think," Bruce says, picking his words carefully, "that Damian needs to talk to his father first."

Damian's shoulder's tense, but he doesn't protest.

Bruce wants to know what he's going to do. He wants to know what he's going to say. He's wary of what Damian said about his father being more angry, and about the differences between the two Slades. Maybe he's paranoid, but Batman was never known for being optimistic.

Damian heads into the cave, bypassing security, and they slip in just behind him, unannounced. Their black outfits hide them in the shadows of the cave, and the layout is familiar enough as they creep in.

Damian doesn't creep. He goes right on ahead, heading towards the center of the cave. Slade and Bruce hang back, keeping their distance.

"I don't like it," Slade says quietly.

Bruce rests a hand on Slade's shoulder, and finds a position in the cave where they can watch from the shadows. They don't have long to wait. Damian's barely reached the computer, standing just to the side when there's an orange glow from the far wall of the cave, and Batman walks out.

He's wearing the cowl, and he makes no move to take it off. Bruce supposes that really sets the tone for the entire conversation, because Batman doesn't even acknowledge that Damian is standing there. He simply acts as if his youngest isn't there, sliding into the command chair in front of the computer and starting to work.

"Father," Damian says quietly. Batman doesn't answer right away, flicking through reports that Bruce can't read, and the silence lasts so long he expects for Damian to have to prompt him again. He doesn't need to. The silence stretches on, but eventually Batman does speak.

"I don't have time, Damian," Batman says. "Superman is still missing. The League is on full alert, and with Superman gone I'm responsible for almost the entire eastern seaboard."

"I know, father," Damian says. "But this is important."

There's another long silence as Batman does whatever it is he's doing on the computer, ignoring his son in favor of work.

Bruce's hands clench into fists, and Slade rests his hand on his shoulder, giving it a squeeze.

"I don't have time," Batman says again. "Jericho dropped off a half dozen off our wanted list and
then flew off. I need to deal with them. You'll have to ask Alfred.”

He's acting like Damian's burst into his office to ask him to sign a permission slip for school. He isn't even looking at him, and Bruce watches Damian's hands ball into fists, clenched at his sides. He's embarrassed. Because of what happened? Or because they're watching him be humiliated and ignored in front of his father? Batman doesn't know they have an audience, but Damian does.

"It is about those villains," Damian says. "My team was the one who fought them."

Batman doesn't look up, but even where they are Bruce can see him shift his attention. The mugshots of several of the villains they just brought in pop up on the screen in rapid succession, followed by a series of videos, playing out what must be their final fights.

Their final fights with the Teen Titans, with Damian bouncing in and out of the shot.

Batman finally turns to face his son. He's hard to read with the cowl on, but his lips are pressed in a thin, angry line.

"What did you do," he says. It is not a question—it's an accusation.

Damian stands his ground, his own jaw clenched in response.

"Your methods weren't working. Some of my team and I-"

"Who," Batman says. "Be specific."

"Red Arrow and myself," Damian says, "felt that the methods being used were not practical. We thought we could do a better job containing them on our own. But-"

"Is that," Batman says, "why some of them have been missing up to four weeks?"

His jaw is clenched, and Damian hesitates.

Batman is doing it all wrong and it is killing Bruce to stay where he is. Only Slade's hand on his arm keeps him in place.

"Yes," Damian says. "We contained them, but it wasn't a viable long term solution. So we released them to-"

"You brought an unrelated hero," Batman says, "who you couldn't trust, in order to do your dirty work."

"He was trying to help," Damian says, sounding less certain by the second.

"I gave you a measure of freedom because I assumed you could handle it," Batman says, turning away. "Apparently I misjudged. You'll spend your nights here, under Alfreds care from now on."

Batman turns back to the computer. Bruce stares in horror as Damian's shoulders slump.

Because that's it. There's no what were you thinking. There's not even a vague, half-hearted attempt to understand what Damian was trying to do. Batman doesn't ask any follow up questions, doesn't ask for clarification. He simply tells him he's misjudged him and grounds him.

And that's it.

Bruce's clenching his fists so hard they hurt, but Damian tries once again.
"Red Arrow left," he says. "But no one else on the team was aware of it. Only Kid Flash, and he only knew because he stumbled upon it by himself, so -"

"It doesn't matter," Batman says. "Right now, finding Clark takes priority."

He can see Damian's frustration, and it's breaking his heart. Is this the person he's had as his father? He doesn't even feel like Bruce Wayne. He feels exclusively like Batman, like he's sawed off whatever made him a person. Whatever made him more than the Bat.

"Stay," Bruce says to Slade as quietly as he can, and stands up, striding out of the shadows.

"We need to talk," he says, and Batman whips around, eyes going wide. Even under the mask, there's no way he could mistake him for anything else, but Bruce reaches up, pulling down the mask anyway.

Batman's eyes narrow, and after a moment they slide over to where Damian stands.

"You had help cleaning up the mess," he says. "More than just Jericho."

"Your son," Bruce says, fighting with every bit of self control he has to keep the anger out of his voice, "needs your attention. He needs your help. He thought it was a good idea to imprison multiple criminals underneath one of your old bases. How did you not even know who he was fighting? How are you paying so little attention to him that you didn't know he'd taken over one of your old bases?"

Whatever attempt he was making to keep it from sound accusatory dies.

"I have responsibilities," Batman says, standing up. "And Superman-"

He falters, eyes narrowing.

"You're the reason Superman's missing."

"I am," Bruce says. No point in hiding it. "We switched places. My people will be doing what they can to switch us back. But you have other things to worry about."

"Superman is a key part of the justice league," Batman fires back "He needs to be priority number one."

"Your family needs to be priority number one," Bruce says. "Your son is right there and trying to do right by you, and you don't even look at him when he's there."

Bruce no longer has to wonder why Damian thought it would be a good idea to confine people. He learned by example.

He wonders how he even thought he was anything like the man in front of him.

"This isn't your place," Batman says. "This isn't your world. I'm taking you to the Justice League, and we'll return you to where you belong."

"Are you listening to yourself?" Bruce says. "Damian came to you, telling you something absolutely horrific, and you brushed it off. You grounded him like he'd snuck an animal into the house. You need to talk with him. You need to help him understand why what he did wasn't the right thing to do."

He regrets calling it horrific in front of Damian, but he's alarmed by how nonchalant Batman is about what he's just heard.
"He could have been killed. If they'd escaped-"

"He's better trained then that," Batman says, and Bruce forces himself to exhale before he snaps and throws a punch. Better trained. Like a goddamn dog.

"It's not about being better trained," Bruce says. "He's a child. A child who was spending his nights in his secret base and you didn't goddamn notice."

Batman seems to falter at that, but only slightly.

"I'll improve my security," he says, "he won't be going anywhere."

"Are you insane?" Bruce says. "You'll improve your security? Your son was running a secret prison filled with some of the worst criminals your world has to offer and you're worried he's going to sneak out at night?"

"He was fine," Batman says. "No one was injured. They've all been moved to another prison-"

"You don't even know that," Bruce spits. "You guessed. You didn't ask him if his team was fine. Take off the goddamn cowl-"

Bruce feels a tug.

It's something from deep inside, and he knows what it is. He knows what it is that he's feeling, and the moment he recognizes it he feels nothing but horror.

"They're pulling me back," he blurts. He has seconds, at best. "Take care of your kids. Be a goddamn father, just take care of-"

The light behind him is blinding, and Bruce whites out as he's pulled into it.
Slade lands on his feet, but only barely. He manages to stay upright for only half a second before he crashes forward.

Strong arms catch him, and he recognizes Jason out of the corner of his eye as Jason hauls him to his feet.

"You're okay?" He says. "Everything intact?"

Slade feels like he just went feet first into a blender. His brain is spinning, and he dimly registers the sound of someone—probably Bruce—puking.

"Fine," Slade says. "I'm fine. We're fine. We're home?"

He glances around, trying to get his bearings.

All the boys are there. Pretty much everyone is there. Everyone even mildly associated with them, including the entire Justice League, Clark, Lois, and Jon.

Clark lets out a sigh of obvious relief as Dick and Tim haul Bruce to his feet.

"Thank god," he says. "We weren't sure if it was going to work."

Every bit of him that comes back to him—every bit of self control he has—screams at him. It's wrong. They've come back to early. Everything's still broken on the other side.

Bruce makes a choked sob, and all the attention turns to him as everyone panics that he's been hurt.

"Just tell me what happened," Slade says. "Now."

"The other Clark and Lois came through into our apartment," Clark says. "We figured out pretty quickly they were from another... timeline or dimension or something along those lines. We had the father box, so we worked with the league to reverse it. Hal brought in some guardians to help with the thing, and we managed to reverse it to flip you back."

Bruce buries his face in his hands, and Slade pulls lose from Jason, stepping over to haul Bruce into his arms, squeezing him tightly.

"Jesus," Jason says quietly. "What... what happened?"

They're both unharmed physically, but that means nothing of anything else.

"Their world is a disaster," Slade says. He doesn't think Bruce has it in him to speak right then. "Things are... things are so rotten I'm not even sure I could explain it."

Clark looks particularly alarmed, and glances towards Lois and Jon.

"What he described sounded fine," Clark says. "Different, but... but fine."

"That's because their Clark doesn't know," Slade says, and he knows it's the truth. There's no way any Clark that theirs would describe as fine could know anything about what's going on. "Damian had a secret prison, and Jason was thrown out of the family for trying to kill Penguin, and I have two sons, and one of them is dead but it's not the same one."

He tries to make himself breath. And then he decides he doesn't care about that and digs out his phone, cutting through the crowd to the computer. They're in the cave, which is the most sensible place for the swap to happen, but it feels that much more jarring considering what he was just watching in the cave.

He drops his phone on the sync panel and watches the phone connect. He flicks his hand across the screen, pulling out photos.

"Dick," he says, tapping Dick's counterpart. "Who lives in Bludhaven. And that..." He taps the other Tim. "Is their Tim."

"What," Tim says, horrified. "That's me?"

"You're younger," Slade says. "I'd have said you two were the most well adjusted, but it's less that you're well adjusted and more that you appear to have simply gotten clear of the blast zone. Their Jason was murdered, came back from the dead, and their Bruce never tried to fix anything with him."

Jason looks horrified. For that matter, everyone looks horrified. Clark's helping prop Bruce up, who's face is still buried in his hand as he tries to process what's just happened.

He pulls up a photo of the three of them—of him and Bruce and Joey, who he's left behind with his bastard of a father—and his heart crashes to the floor.

"That's Joey," he says. "He's alive in their universe. And in their universe I never... I didn't help Jason. So I never joined the family, and everything stayed the mess it was. It got worse, even."

"I had a secret prison?" Damian asks. "What?"

"I know this is going to sound insane," Slade says, "and you just spent all this effort getting us back. But we need to go back. We need to... to go back and help fix things. Things are a disaster there. I can't just abandon them."

He'd thought it was just Jason that needed there help. And then it was Jason and Joey. But there's Damian too, and who knows who else. He hasn't even met Rose. They probably don't even know they were gone.

Slade takes a moment and buries his face in his hands, trying to pull himself together.

"Uh," Hal says, "I mean, I think it's kind of crazy to go around poking at other realities, but it wouldn't be that hard."

"What?" Slade asks, head snapping up.

"The father box," Hal says carefully, "is basically a link between our two dimensions right now. And we still have it."

He knocks on the box to prove his point. "If you hopped through, you'd take it with you. You'd probably swap with your counterparts. With... their Slade and their Bruce. And then to come back, you'd basically do the same thing their Clark did. But that would leave the box with them when you do."

Slade reaches for it, and it's Alfred who swats at his hand.
"Absolutely not," Alfred says. "You have just returned home, you're both exhausted looking, and going back tonight will do no one any good. While I will not begrudge you for attempting to help your sons in another reality, your sons here need to be sure that their fathers are still alive."

Slade makes himself exhale. Makes himself calm down, his racing heart slowing down to something more manageable. Because Alfred's right. There's nothing to be gained from running back in.

It was night there and it's night here, and no one would bat an eye if they slept through the night and returned well rested.

"Fine," he says. "We can go back with supplies in the morning. In proper gear. Well rested."

"And well fed," Alfred says.

"Uh," Barry says, raising a hand. "If you guys are actually going back—which I'm not going to argue against because it sounds like things are a mess over there—being prepared is probably a good idea. But the photos helped a lot, and... maybe we could do that to? Collect up photos to take over. You might only get one shot at this."

"Videos," Bruce says. His voice sounds hoarse, and he looks so exhausted that it hurts Slade to see. 
"You should record videos. For your counterparts. Tell them about your life. And how things are. So we can... so we can show them there's something else."

"You need to sleep," Tim says to Bruce. "Like... wow, you really need to sleep."

It's not even ten PM, but Slade can't argue with that. He doesn't need to sleep, but he absolutely wants to.

"I have things to do-" Bruce says, but Damian cuts him off.

"This is what we're here for, father," he says. "We're here to handle things like this. Go rest. We will prepare your gear and supplies for the trip, and you can leave in the morning."

"That counts you too," Jason says, eyeing Slade. "And don't give me that 'I don't need to sleep' shit."

"Wasn't going to," he says. "Now come here."

He pulls Jason and Tim into a hug, and Damian and Dick rapidly join in, hauling Bruce along with them. It's almost crushing, but Slade's never wanted it more.

"Go to bed," Clark says. "We'll handle this."

Slade guesses that's the biggest difference: That they trust the people close to them to handle things, and that the other world doesn't.
Chapter 21

Bruce wakes in the night with tears in his eyes and Slade lingering above him. He presses a kiss to his forehead, telling him it's alright, and without meaning to Bruce slips back to sleep.

He wakes before dawn, his mouth dry. Slade's already up, and he can hear the sound of the shower. He lies in bed until he hears the water turn off, and only then gets up, dragging himself up.

"Slade?" He says, leaning in the bathroom, and Slade pulls a towel off the rack.

"Figured we'd probably want to get ready to go early," he says, and then pauses, looking to Bruce.

"I didn't ask," he says. "I should have asked. But you...?"

"I'm coming," Bruce says. There's no question for him. The image of Damian's sagging shoulders, of him being ignored by his own father while he's trying to tell him something important feels burned into his retinas. That's not even getting started on Jason.

"Thought you would," Slade says, and he leans over, pressing a kiss to Bruce's temple. "Get showered."

Bruce does just that, pulling on a loose sweater as he heads to the kitchen.

He isn't prepared for what he gets.

The kitchen is absolutely packed with people. Even exempting his own family, the entire Justice League is in and out, doing so many things Bruce is having a hard time keeping up. Barry zips over, stopping just in front of him, a breakfast danish held in his mouth as he scarfs it down.

"Morning Bruce," he says quickly. "Everyone's just taking food down to the cave, one of the boys set up a table."

"Are you - have you all been awake this whole time?" He asks.

"Well, some of us have," Barry says. "Some of us have been napping in between jobs."

Barry goes back to ferrying food downstairs. He's not the only one, and it's a strange mix of costumes and street clothes as Bruce heads down into the cave, its door hanging open.

There are three chairs pulled up to the computer, the auxiliary keyboards popped out to allow multiple users on different screens, and each chair is occupied by one of his boys. Jason's the only one not at the computer, apparently busy outfitting what looks like an updated version of the batsuit, with Lucius Fox providing assistance.

Slade's got his feet kicked up on the table, working his way through what looks like a breakfast burrito.

"Well," Bruce says, "this is something."

"You should see the schedule Barbara whipped up," Slade says. "She's got us down to the minute."

"Everyone but you," Barbara says. "Because I know you won't stick to it."

Slade grins at her.
"So what's actually happening?" Bruce asks as Barry pushes a breakfast burrito into his hands. He doesn't think about it, just starts eating it automatically.

"We're leaving at seven-thirty," Slade says, "which is when everything is scheduled to be done. We're going in our suits to minimize risk to the other Bruce's identity, which might put the boys over there at risk. Hal and Clark have figured out how to get us over there, and the boys are just finishing up the data packet we're going over with."

"The videos?" Bruce asks. He's having a hard time remembering if he even suggested that, or if he just dreamed he suggested that.

"The videos," Slade confirms. "Everyone's made one, more or less."

"I made one," Barry volunteers. "Slade says you met like... another Flash?"

"Kid Flash," Bruce confirms. "I'm not sure how the two of you are connected. We didn't get names."

"Well anyway," Barry says. "I thought it'd be neat so I made one anyway."

"We'll pass it on," Slade says, "assuming we're on good terms with them by the end of it."

Hal stops by the table, settling down, with Clark hovering just over his shoulder. He looks no worse for the wear despite the encounter with his doppleganger.

Some people have all the luck.

"Alright," Hal says, "this is your briefing. Keep eating while I talk."

He produces the father box, setting it down on the table, and starts to gesture.

"We had to pull in some help from the corps to get this figured out, but I think we have a pretty good handle on it. This thing is a father box," Hal says, before pausing.

"Well, it's not a father box," he quickly clarifies, "but it's based on the same technology. It might be a prototype or it might be someone messing with a real one, but either way we've been calling it a father box. Apparently their world has a ton of them and they use them all the time for teleportation. Nega-Clark seemed surprised we didn't have any."

"We ran into one of their portals while we were there," Slade says.

"So you know what I'm talking about," Hal says. "That's good. So getting to the point, the way this works is that there's two modes. The first mode is swap mode. Basically, you activate the box, and everyone in the immediate vicinity of said box gets pulled in. Then, the box generates portals where their alternate-universe counterparts are, and swaps places with them. So if we used swap mode while Damian was holding it, our Damian would swap with their Damian. That's what happened with you guys, from what we can tell. The box activated, Clark and Lois were the nearest to it, and it sucked them in before trying to swap."

"But it didn't get our Clark and Lois," Bruce points out.

"No," Hal says. "Swap mode just makes the portal based on where they are, takes in the first thing it catches, and replaces it with the person who activated the portal. It's always a one-for-one swap, but it's not necessarily going to be your counterpart."

"Because Clark pulled away from his portal, and I was the next closest thing," Bruce says.
"And Slade pushed Lois away and was the next closest to her portal," Clark confirms. "If you'd been even a few feet farther away, they'd most likely have taken us instead. It was only chance they didn't."

"And a fast response time," Barry adds, dropping some more food onto the table.

"So when you go over there, it's going to be just you two. You'll both hold it, you'll activate swap mode, and then you should, in theory, swap with the other Bruce and the other Slade."

"In theory," Bruce says. "But not necessarily in practice."

"The portal might get someone else," Hal says. "It's an unavoidable risk. We'll have to deal with it as it comes."

"Which means they'll be over here," Slade says, "which I'm not particularly pleased with."

"Deathstroke's going to be dangerous," Bruce says. "He hasn't-"

"That's why we're staying," Clark says. "Until this is handled, someone's always going to be nearby to help. Especially when they first come through. From what Slade's said, their Deathstroke probably isn't going to take too kindly to getting pulled through dimensions."

"He can deal," Slade says. "And he can consider himself lucky he doesn't have to deal with me."

His expression makes it very clear the kind of misery he'd like to inflict upon his counterpart.

"Okay," Hal says, "you guys need to listen because this part is very important. It's like... life or death."

Bruce pauses for a moment, and then gives Hal his full attention.

"Alright," he says. "Let's go."

"So that's how you get there," Hal says, "but it's not how you get back. Swap mode loads it, but you can't do two swaps in a row. Or, realistically, you shouldn't. If you swap twice in a row... bad things might happen."

"What kind of bad things," Slade says.

Hal shrugs.

"No idea," he says. "This is totally uncharted territory for us. But there's a lot of things that could go wrong, and they're all varying shades of bad. Like, you could get lost in other dimensions. And that's really bad."

"You don't say," Bruce says under his breath.

"The big thing," Hal says, "is that right now we're ninety five percent certain this will take you back to the last dimension. It seems to be... locked on, I guess. But if you swap again, there's a good chance that might reset, and then you won't be able to find your way back."

"We're not going to swap twice," Slade says. "So how do we get back?"

"Once you've swapped," Hal says, "you can make a portal to come back. You can only make a portal once you've swapped once. One swap, one portal. When you activate the portal, it immediately pulls everyone who was swapped over back, and you get a nice big portal to walk
through. Portal lasts around thirty seconds—"

"Twenty seven," Barry says. "That might be important."

"Portal lasts twenty seven seconds," Hal corrects. "And you need to get through it."

"And the box gets left behind after you portal," Bruce says. "That's why we still have it."

"Exactly," Hal says. "But here's the thing, and this is really important."

He pauses, glancing between the two of them.

"Really important," he says. "I cannot stress enough how important this is."

"Just say it," Slade says.

"You get one portal per swap. One. And you both have to go through that portal. If Bruce activates the portal and Slade doesn't get through it, Slade's going to end up back at square one."

"But the box would still be there," Slade says. "So I could swap."

"Here's the thing," Hal says. "Swap with what? Realistically speaking, we have no idea if this will even work if there's nothing on the other side to swap to. If your counterpart is dead, you'd probably like... swap with their body. But if you don't have anything to swap with? No idea. And you might not be able to."

"So come back together," Bruce says. "Or one of us could end up trapped there."

"That's the idea," Hal says. "Like I said, of all the different possible risks associated with this whole venture, this is the one you should be most concerned about. Getting stuck on the other world, unable to get back."

"Just show us both how to work it," Slade says. "For coming and going."

Hal does. He leans over, explaining the correct button order and how it all is supposed to work, and impresses upon them the importance of being together before going through the portal no less than three more times.

"We get it," Slade says. "Seriously, Hal."

"He's just worried," Barry says, "because if anything goes wrong, people are probably going to look at the person who said this would work."

"You two," Jason says as he approaches the table, "need to get suited up."

"Yes boss," Slade says with a grin, and heads over to his suit.

Bruce's suit is similar enough to his old one, but with a few modifications. Some of them have likely been sitting in Lucius's office, waiting for an excuse to use them, but some are more recent.

"Whiteout lenses?" Bruce asks, inspecting the cowl.

"Their Clark mentioned that," Tim says. "He was surprised he could see our eyes. Apparently everyone uses these sorts of lenses to hide their eyes."

Slade's suit is entirely unique. It's not the Gotham Knight's armor, thick and bulky. Instead, it's closer
to what Tim or Dick wears than anything Slade's ever worn.

"Gotham Knight's armor would stick out too much," Dick says. "We had a whole conversation about technology differences, and he was surprised by the Knight armors. Apparently they're using higher tech material than we are, and it's all a lot more slimmed down for mobility. Technologically, they're ahead of us for sure."

Bruce pulls on the suit. It feels strange slipping the cowl on, and he's wary of the lenses, but they're functionally not that different once he takes a bit to get used to it.

"We debated whether to black one out," Dick adds to Slade, "but decided you might not want to give that away."

"Probably a good idea," he says.

"Alright," Jason says. "Everyone circle up."

Jason, more than anyone, seems to be taking charge of things. He's perfectly at ease ordering around not just the rest of the family, but the various gathered members of the Justice League as well.

"So," he says, "in a few minutes we're going to be sending Bruce and Slade through. We've debated sending others, but smaller is probably better. They already know the territory, and it minimizes complications. That means, most likely, we're going to have a pissed off Deathstroke and a pissed off Batman in the cave. The biggest issue is going to be us tripping over each other, so..."

"I'm handling Deathstroke," Clark says. "I can handle him."

"I'll take Batman," Diana volunteers.

"I will remain nearby," J'onn says, "and should either attempt to escape, force them into unconsciousness."

It's something J'onn's done exactly once, just to prove he can, and Bruce is happy they're not going to be around to see it. It's an anti-Clark countermeasure in case he's ever mind controlled, and there's no reason it won't work on Deathstroke.

"You guys need these," Tim says, passing them each a phone. "And these." They've each got small bags. Bruce doesn't bother going through it. He trusts the boys to pack the essentials.

"They've all got everything you can hope for inside," Dick says. "All the videos, the photos... all that stuff. There's also a portable hard drive in the bag you could leave behind if you want."

"And we've copied over all the numbers you had on the phones you brought back," Damian says. "And we cloned the phone's data so they should be able to make calls just like your old ones. And--"

Bruce leans down and hugs his youngest.

There's a hasty dog pile of all the boys, and only when they retreat does Bruce make a point to give Alfred a hug. He's been quiet, and Bruce suspects he's worrying over the possibility that they might not come back.

He feels confident, but that doesn't mean that Alfred does.

"We'll be fine," he says. "And I'll say hello to their Alfred as well."

He's having a hard time imagining any Alfred that isn't the exact same theirs is.
"Assuming that the boys are correct and that they are, in a strange way, set backwards in time, please tell them to check the copy of *Lady Antoinette* in the library."

Bruce raises an eyebrow, but Alfred provides no answers.


Everyone moves back, and Bruce pulls his bag onto his back as he grabs the box, heading back to the side of the cave, well clear of anyone else.

"You want to do the honors?" Bruce asks, holding the box out for Slade.

He keeps a tight grip on it as Slade presses the correct sequence of buttons, the tiny box starting to pulse in their hands. It's the same sensation as before, the same tug, and Bruce wonders if he's going to vomit again when he comes out on the other side.

He sure hopes not.
Chapter 22

Slade manages to stay conscious through the entire trip, which is an absolutely miserable experience, even if it only lasts a few seconds. When the light fades, he finds himself standing in what is unmistakably a very shitty motel, the TV on and turned to the news, and the room empty.

Thankfully, what looks like almost all of Slade's gear is there, including his sword, which Slade grabs before he can start thinking about how much Bruce would disapprove.

The bathroom door pops open, and Joey's confused face pops out.

"...Pop?" He signs, staring at the stranger who's appeared in place of his father.

Slade reaches up, pulling the mask off his head to show his face.

Joey's face lights up in realization, and Slade holds up his phone. The screen lights up, and Joey's voice is there again, already so familiar.

"You're the one from yesterday, right?" Joey asks.

"Same one," Slade says. "I'm guessing you haven't heard anything?"

Joey looks confused, and then shrugs.

"We left New York," he says. "I thought you'd probably want us back in Gotham, so we headed that way. But I didn't want to drive all night without hearing from you, so we stopped at a motel."

"Did he ask you who we were?"

"No," Joey says with a shake of his head. "He said he didn't want..."

He makes a face.

"...Any spoilers."

Slade snorts.

"Sounds like me," he says. "We were dealing with the bats when our home dimension jerked us back."

"Wait," he says. "You went back?"

"I did," he says. "We did. Both of us back home, all at once. Which means Superman should be back now too."

"Hasn't been on the news," Joey says, "but then neither was the fact that he was missing. I think they're keeping it quiet."

He stares at Slade in a way that makes it obvious he's working up the courage to say something, and Slade settles down on the bed.

"You can just ask," he says. "Not going to bite your head off."

Joey winces.
"Why... why'd you come back? Didn't you want to go home...?"

"I've got the boys at home," Slade says. "Friends and family. But there were things I hadn't finished here. I couldn't go home with them half finished."

Joey wants to ask. He can see how desperately he wants to ask. But it's just as obvious he's afraid of the answer, so Slade doesn't make him ask.

"You were part of that," he says. "Didn't like the idea of leaving you with him, even if he is your pop. Didn't want to leave you hanging."

"Oh," Joey says, and Slade knows that if he could speak—if it were his own voice—it would have come out soft and quiet. It's in his body language, and he stands there awkwardly, eyes dropping to the floor.

"Wish he'd been better to you," Slade says. "Would be a lot easier if he was. Wouldn't have to worry about what'll happen when I go home."

Joey glances around as if just realizing that there's only one Slade in the room.

"Is he...?"

"Back in my dimension," Slade says. "We switched places. So he's going to have a nice heart to heart with my boys, and hopefully that'll straighten him out a bit."

"Oh," Joey says. "Could I... could we just talk? For a bit? Or do you need to-"

"I don't need to go anywhere right now," Slade says. "I should probably get around to seeing your sister, but right now the only person I need to talk to is you."

"Oh," Joey says again, and finally sits down on the bed beside him. "Could I ask you about... uhm, Batman?"

"Bruce," Slade says, "you might as well call him that."

"Bruce," Joey corrects. "How did you two meet...?"

"Well," Slade says, "I'd say it's a love story as old as time. Man sees man. Man tries to kill man. Man performs completely ridiculous stunt that lays other man out. Man is smitten, because what kind of perfectly ordinary human being just laid him out like it was nothing?"

He grins, and Joey grins back.

"That's - wow," he says.

"I ended up helping one of his sons," Slade says. "Helped him realize that maybe revenge wasn't the best option for him, and that his dad did love him, and brought him back to the family. Then I stuck around. And kept sticking around. And eventually I was a part of the family."

"And then you got..." Joey's eyes drift down to Slade's hand. The ring's hidden behind a thick glove, but they both know it's there.

"He found out I had feelings for him," Slade says, "and said he was willing to try. Things went well, and here we are."

"Wow," Joey says again. "That was... a whole set of words I never expected to ever hear you say."
"If it helps, if you went back in time a decade and told me I was going to settle down and get married to Batman, I'd have told you that you were crazy."

Without the mask, Joey feels so easy to read. He practically broadcasts his feelings the way he broadcasts his voice, and there's comfort in realizing when he's happy.

"I guess that's one difference," he says. "You - you went back. So did you look for Grant...?"

"I asked them to," Slade says. "But I don't think he's going to be there. I think... Adeline and I didn't do much that would involve us having a second kid. She-"

Slade pauses.

"Hold on," he says. "What happened to your mom?"

Joey stares at him for a moment, confusion written all over his face.

"What do you mean?"

"Like, in my world, we divorced. And she's been out of my life since then. But if you're still around..."

"Oh no," Joey says, "she's still around. You two keep... interacting, I guess? She lead the team we were both on a little while back, the place where I met Wallace."

"Wallace? Is that Kid Flash?"

Joey nods.

"That is a hell of a team lineup," Slade says, dragging his hand through his hair. "Can't imagine working with my world's Adeline. Saying we fight like cats and dogs doesn't begin to cover it."

"It's the same here," Joey says. "It always has been. That's just... how you two were."

"A mess in any universe," he says.

Joey scratches at the back of his head, folding his hands together in his lap.

"I think Grant would have liked you," he says. "I think... you were the kind of father he was hoping for. Someone he could talk to."

Considering what he knows about Grant, and more specifically about their ages, Slade suspects that Joey has a rosy view of Grant. But that doesn't change anything, and he loops an arm around Joey's shoulders.

"I'd hope he would," he says. "I'd have liked to have met him."

Joey leans into the touch automatically, his eyes drifting closed. He reminds Slade of Jason, back when he was first recovering, desperate for any sort of affection that didn't lead to physical pain. Joey's the same way, which strikes Slade as impossibly sad.

He lets himself sit there, resting against the son he never had the chance to know, and lets himself simply enjoy it.
Chapter 23

Bruce is expecting the trip, and he's pretty sure that only thing that keeps him conscious. It's still an absolutely awful feeling that takes a few moments to get over, but he does manage to keep himself from vomiting up the food he was given earlier.

Not that it matters. Something hard jerks around his throat, hauling him forward, and a hard grip—far harder than Slade—grabs his arm.

"Woah!" Clark yells, and there's no question that it's Clark, which could be either very good or very bad.

He's been shoved down against a table, a familiar golden lasso at his throat, and when he lifts his head he realizes he's ringed by several familiar faces. Clark is there, and J'onn stands nearby. He recognizes Diana (holding the lasso) and Barry, but several he recognizes only in general terms. One of them men at the table is a Green Lantern, but they're definitely not Hal. He has to double take, but one of the women—with a green outfit and bright red hair—he's fairly sure is Mera, Arthur's wife. There's also a woman with giant wings and a bizarre helmet staring down at him, twisting his arm behind his back, and a younger looking man who seems to be half-machine on her other side.

It doesn't take a genius to figure out what he's looking at.

"The Justice League," he says. It doesn't come across quite as self assured as he'd like, because beyond his arm being twisted back by someone far stronger than him, the golden cord is still around his throat.

"Hawkgirl," Clark says, "you can release him. Diana..." He glances towards Diana, who huffs and jerks the lasso up, freeing his throat. Bruce straightens up, reaching up to rub at his throat. Even through the armor, it still aches, and he wonders if he's going to bruise.

"It happened again?" Clark says. He sounds distressed. "You're the one who swapped before."

"Yes," Bruce says. He doesn't plan to beat around the bush. "But intentionally this time."

"You-" The Green Lantern says, his eyebrows pressed together, has face a look of intense concentration. "We only just got Clark back, and you intentionally took Batman away?"

"It was important," Bruce says. "Things needed to be dealt with, and they weren't going to be dealt with if I didn't return."

"Things like what?" Mera says. "The Justice League here does have business to attend to, things that could have used our own Batman."

"Your world seems to be at peace," Bruce says, "with no massive, world-ending invasions to be seen. So I doubt any of them are as important to handle as the secret prison."

Clark's expression darkens. It is a very, very big gamble he's taking, but it's taking every single bit of knowledge he's gained in order to put it together. If he's standing there, that means his counterpart was standing there, talking with the League. Briefing them, hopefully.

"I was told your world is peaceful," Clark says, "that the crime rates were good. I wasn't told of any secret prisons."
"It wasn't in my world," Bruce says. "It was in yours. And your Batman didn't tell you."

There's a stunned silence. In a way, it's just as he hoped.

In another, he'd desperately wished he was wrong. He'd wished that their Batman had told them. That he'd worried for nothing. But the silence makes it obvious that it's the first they've heard of it.

"...Would you hold the lasso?" Diana says, and Bruce holds out his hand. She's gentler than she was, and the lasso glows the golden color he's become so familiar with as he feels it take effect.

"What I just said is true," Bruce says. "I became aware of a secret prison in New York City yesterday, and took action to stop it. I told your world's Batman, and found his response lacking." He wants to stop there, but the lasso's hold is too strong. He makes an attempt to fight it, but the lasso's glow only brightens as he clenches his fist. "I am afraid he has let his focus on being Batman cloud his judgement."

Every single member of the Justice League looks some degree of absolutely horrified. Clark seems to have it the worst—he's gone pale, his lips pressed together, jaw set.

"The lasso does not allow lies," Diana says, almost as if to make sure that no one doubts what he's said. "Who was behind the prison?"

He regrets letting her lasso him so easily. He regrets his eagerness to prove he was telling the truth. He could have denied it and said he wasn't comfortable, and they'd all probably have bought it without complaint. He's Batman. Any Batman is paranoid.

And now the lasso feels like it's burning his hand as he tries to fight it. The actual struggle doesn't take more than a few seconds, but it feels like hours as he clenches his jaw, his fingers squeezing into a fist around the lasso as he tries to fight it. To not say it.

"A child," is the best he can manage, gasping it out. It's the most he can do, and even that isn't enough. "Robin."

Diana looks shocked. Clark looks horrified.

"Damian?" He says. "Damian had a secret prison?"

There can't be any question about if he's lying. Not with the lasso still wrapped around his palm.

"He's a child," Bruce says, the words spilling out. He didn't want this. He intended to imply without saying. He'd intended to shield him. But he should have known they would have asked. He let himself get cocky and overeager. "He's a child who didn't know better, whose father should have helped him rather than ignoring him."

"This is a disaster," Mera says, her voice quiet. "Who knows about this?"

Things are spiraling out of control. Fighting the lasso isn't doing anything to help him. It's only making things worse. But not fighting it feels like a betrayal of everything he stands for, spilling his secrets to ease the strain of the lasso.


"Slade?" Barry asks. "Slade Wilson? Deathstroke?"

"Diana," Clark says. "Let him go. The strain-"
Diana releases the lasso, and Bruce sags against the table. There's no physical damage to speak of, but he feels like he's just been wrung out.

"You're trying to help," Clark says. "I spoke with your family quite a bit while I was there, and they seemed like good people. So... tell me what's happening."

"We're going to try and fix it," he says. "That's why we came back. To try and... fix things with my family here. With Red Hood and Robin and everyone."

"We," the lantern says, "meaning who?"

He's free of the lasso, but not of the eyes of the Justice League. Their attention is obvious, and their concern understandable. He doesn't know all of them, but he knows enough. Enough to want to believe that they wouldn't turn against him.

"Slade," he says. "In my world he's a friend."

Clark's face twitches, and Bruce realizes he knows. The only question is if he's going to say anything.

"That's hard to believe," Barry says. "He's not exactly a nice guy."

"Your Deathstroke is in my world," Bruce says, "being contained by my people."

"As is our Batman," Mera says. "Which I have concerns about."

"He won't be harmed," Bruce says. He's recovered just a bit, and does what he can to stand up. He feels... wobbly.

"This is an interdimensional intervention," the machine-man says. "You've hopped across an entire universe to set them straight. That sound about right?"

Bruce almost says no before he realizes the answer is yes. He nods.

"I think the most pressing concern," Diana says, "is that our Batman knew about this and didn't report it. He stood right in front of us, reporting on what he knew, and said that with Clark back the issue was over and done with and that he had nothing of importance to report."

"He might have been shielding his son," J'onn says. "That seems likely."

"It still shows poor judgement," Clark says. "And puts the league at risk."

"You said you took action to stop it," the winged woman says. "What does that entail?"

Bruce sinks down into his seat. Things are, however slightly, somewhat better. It feels less like he's moments away from being tossed in a cell while they figure it out, and more like they're willing to work with him. Some of them obviously have their concerns, but he'd have been disappointed if they didn't.

"Not all of the Teen Titans were aware of what was happening. I made them aware of it. I asked them what they wanted to do about it. I walked them through why it was a poor idea, and why, while initially appealing, it would only put more people at risk."

"You coached them," Diana says.
"Yes," Bruce says. "That's what they needed. They don't have a mentor to help them, and they need one."

There's an exchange of glances, and a very obvious sense of we are going to have to deal with this.

"Who's on the team?" The machine man asks. "They'll be more likely to take the advice from someone they know."

"Exempting Robin," he says, "Crush, Djinn, Kid Flash-"

"Which one?" Barry asks.

"Wallace," he says. "Roundhouse is the last member of the team. Red Arrow-"

"Which one?" Barry asks.

"A girl," he says. "Very angry."

"Ohhh," Barry says, "I know the one."

"Do we have any ideas?" The metal man says.

"Sorry," Bruce says, "can we do introductions? Because I only know half of you."

"Sorry," Clark says, "you're right. Sound off?"

They go around the table in a neat, orderly fashion. The winged woman is Hawkgirl, the metal man is Cyborg, the Lantern introduces himself as John Stewart, and it turns out that he was right on the money about Mera.

"Nightwing is an option," Clark says. "I can talk to him. Or I guess... this Bruce can. He's close to Robin, and might be willing to mentor them."

"Why should we allow this team to continue at all?" Hawkgirl asks. "What they did would be a criminal offense for anyone else."

"Because they were unmonitored, unwatched children," Diana says, "who were allowed to be that way thanks to the failing of one of our members."

"Children make mistakes," Mera says. "This was a particularly extreme option, but..."

"If Nightwing won't take it," Barry says, "I could maybe help. Or maybe I'll check in either way. It takes a village and all that."

Bruce has a pretty strong suspicion that whatever Barry's connection to Kid Flash, he's feeling guilty about it.

"What about this Batman?" Stewart asks. "Are we going to just let him go?"

"Being honest?" Clark says, "I say yes. He has family business to deal with. I trust his judgement on this matter, because he's shown better judgement then our own Batman."

Bruce wonders if he should feel bad about the fact that he's just tossed this universe's Batman under the wheels of a bus driven by the entire Justice League, but he can't bring himself to feel actually bad about it.
He brought this on himself.
"I'd like to take a vote," Diana says. "All in favor of allowing this Batman to operate at his discretion?"

"I'd like him to stay in touch with us," Stewart says. "If he knows Superman best, it can be Superman."

"I'm fine with that," Clark says. "I'm generally familiar with his world after spending two days there."

"Alright," Cyborg says. "Show of hands?"

To Bruce's immense surprise, every single hand in the room goes up. Not all of them are immediate—some still seem wary—but in the end everyone supports the idea.

"If it keeps the bats from imploding," Stewart says when he lifts his hand, "I'd prefer that."

"Just stay in contact," Mera says. "That's all I'm asking, considering the circumstances."

"I'm just relieved we found out about this secret prison thing now," Cyborg says. "I'll keep an eye out for information."

"I'll speak to Nightwing," Bruce says. "And keep in contact."

"Then," Diana says, "unless you object, Clark, could you maybe escort Batman back to Gotham?"

"Of course," Clark says. "I'm going to give him one of the emergency communicators. If needed, I'd prefer if he were able to contact us."

"No objections," Cyborg says. "I'll have one ready at the equipment room when you get there."

Bruce pushes himself to his feet.

"Thank you for hearing me out," he says, and there's a stunned silence.

"...Did Batman just thank us?" Barry says. "Wow. Things are different over there."
Slade doesn't want to stop. He likes what he has right then, a soft, quiet conversation with Joey. They talk about things that don't matter. He learns Joey's favorite foods. What he does for a living. He learns he lives on the west coast, but that he's been travelling a lot lately.

"Should I be expecting to meet a girl?" Slade says with a grin, and Joey turns an alarming shade of red.

"No," he says. "I mean - not right now."

Slade pats him on the back, and Joey clears his throat.

"I - I have a boyfriend right now."

Oh. Oh! All of a sudden a lot of the reactions make sense. He'd thought he had a sort of weird reaction to finding out about Bruce.

"Apple didn't fall far from the tree," he says. "I guess-"

"No!" Joey blurts out. "I - I'm not gay."

Slade's eyebrows go up and then down and then up again.

"Oh," he says, "Like Bruce?"

Joey looks both alarmed and helpless.

"I... don't know?" He says. "I just... don't care what someone is. I've never cared. I don't think about that."

"Like Bruce," Slade confirms. "He's been with both. Likes both."

"Oh," Joey says. "And you're-"


"Wow," Joey says quietly. "This... went... pretty okay."

"I'm guessing your pop didn't exactly take it well."

"No," Joey says. "Well - it wasn't - I don't think it was just because I was... coming out."

He goes silent for a moment, and Slade frowns.

"You can tell me anything," he says. "I'm not exactly in a position to judge after all the stuff I've done."

"This is kind of different," Joey says. "Pop just got angry because I was dating one of his friends."

The list of people Slade knew and would have considered friends is a very short one. It's almost laughably easy to rifle through what he knows and come up with the right answer.

"Isherwood?"
Joey chokes.

"What?" He says. "You - what?"

"Confessed he liked sucking dick to me once," Slade says. "Back before he died in my universe. Don't think anyone else on the team was interested in men."

He wrinkles his nose.

"Don't know what kind of relationship you had with him here, but I can sort of understand why he might not approve of that."

He tries to imagine the reaction he'd have if Jason started dating someone his age. Probably not happy.

So he wasn't going to hold that one against his counterpart too much.

"He was at least..." Joey says. He doesn't sound nervous through the phone, but he looks it. "He didn't mind that I liked both. Some people have trouble with that."

"Some do," Slade says, and then looks Joey up and down. "Do you want to just sign? Not sure which is more comfortable to you."

"You can talk," Joey says. "Talking is fine. But-

He seems nervous as he lifts his hands, starting to sign. It's obvious he's used to it, and Slade suspects he's been signing for a lot longer than he's been talking with the subvocal mic.

_Isherwood made the suit I use, Joey signs. Pop had one too. I think he was wearing it when you swapped._

"Unfortunate," Slade says with a laugh. "I'd have happily stolen it."

_Isherwood wasn't bad, Joey signs. He was kind to me. But he didn't take the breakup well._

Slade frowns at that.

"You're alright now?" He says.

_I'm fine, Joey signs. I... made a mistake with him._

He seems nervous, even if the signing helps.

"Dating him?"

_I pursued him, Joey signs. I shouldn't have. But I also... tried to hurt him. I made a mistake._

There's something going on that Slade has only a very, very vague idea about.

_I'm not a good person, Joey signs. I'm not._

Joey buries his face in his hands. It's a confession, and Slade's confident that it's the first time Joey's ever said it. It's written all over his features.

The question is why. This isn't his area. This isn't what he knows. This is Bruce's area. Bruce would be able to tell him why Joey's confessing to something horrible to him.
Slade's got no goddamn idea.

"Joey," he says. "You're talking to a man who's killed more people than most people can count."

He doesn't move, and Slade exhales, grabbing his phone and setting it on the bed between them. Just because Joey's more confident with his hands doesn't mean there aren't advantages.

"That's different," Joey says. "That's business. This wasn't business. Everyone thinks I'm the... the white sheep. That I'm the good one in this family. But I'm... I'm just as bad."

Slade doesn't think that's possible, but he settles for wrapping his arms around Joey's shoulders, pulling him against him.

"So was I," he says. "I was a big mess. I didn't care about anything. I was hurting a lot of people."

"And then you found Bruce?" Joey says. He's impossible to read, his face buried against Slade's shoulder.

"And then I found Jason," he says. "And I realized he needed my help. I thought... I thought it was sad that Bruce had buried an empty casket. That he thought his son was dead. It was me being selfish. I didn't want to be reminded of losing you. And helping him helped me. Helped me become better. Helped me give things a chance."

He lets out a small, short laugh.

"Bruce helped later," he says, "but it was Jason who started me off."

Joey doesn't say anything, staying where he is. He stays there as the minutes tick by, and Slade lets himself stop focusing on the minor details. It's still Joey. He's still there.

None of that has changed, no matter what he's confessed.
Chapter 25

The equipment room is extremely high tech, and seems to run entirely on its own. There's a communicator waiting for him when they get there which Clark hands over, but he doesn't get much of a chance to look around before Clark's ushering him out.

"We're in DC right now," he says. "But we can take a zeta tube to Gotham. I'll drop you off at the mansion. You have a phone?"

Bruce holds his up, and then writes down Clark's number when he's given it.

"I'm hoping that whatever you're doing works," Clark says, "but please keep us up to date. This is... an expression of our thanks for telling us the truth."

"He'll be heading to the manor," Bruce says. "That was the plan. And it's still the plan."

"Bruce," Clark says, his voice dropping as he stops them in the middle of a hallway. His expression is serious, and Bruce already doesn't like where this is going. "I don't know how important this might be, but I think I should tell you anyway."

He definitely doesn't like where this is going.

"Bruce—our Bruce—confided in me a little while ago that he thought someone was watching him. That he was being stalked."

That's... information. Bruce doesn't know what to make of it.

"Alright," he says. "I'll keep an eye out. Do you... think it's something I should be concerned about?"

"I don't know," Clark says. "He hasn't been himself since the wedding."

The wedding. Which Jason mentioned. Alright, he can process that.

"I'll look into it," Bruce says. "See what I can find out."

Clark nods, and then nudges him back down the hallway. Bruce's second trip via boom tube isn't much more pleasant than the first, but he's at least a bit more prepared for it. They come out directly into the batcave, and Bruce lets out a sigh of relief.

It's not his batcave, but it's still a batcave.

"Anyone can just teleport into here?" He asks, and Clark shakes his head.

"Only Diana and myself," he says. "And your family, I would guess."

"Hopefully," Bruce says. "But the cave should recognize me as him, so we'll see what I can do."

Clark nods, and then heads back through the boom tube before it snaps shut.

Bruce is alone for the first time in ages, but he knows exactly where he's going. He heads straight up the stairs, pressing open the cave entrance, and pulls back his cowl.

He needs to find Damian, if he's home. And he needs to find Alfred period.
The house is mostly the same. The layout's still more or less identical, but things are in slightly different places. There's different decorations. The doors have been updated to be more sturdy.

And it's quiet. The entire house is almost dead silent. The house isn't even this quiet when everyone's asleep. The only sign of life he spots is the flick of a cat's tail as it vanishes around the corner.

Bruce finds Alfred first. He's in the kitchen, preparing a rather meager dinner, and he glances up when Bruce steps in.

"...You are not Master Bruce," is the first thing he says, and Bruce nods.

"No," he says, "I'm not your Master Bruce."

Alfred doesn't go for the shotgun, which is nice. He knows Alfred has it in him, and this Alfred looks almost identical to his Alfred. He doesn't look quite the same though. With the cowl down the grey of his hair shows, and he knows he looks older than the Bruce this Alfred is used to.

"I..." Alfred says carefully. "I do not understand what this is. Are you from the future...?"

"Another dimension," Bruce says. "I'm afraid I've exchanged places with your Bruce. It's a long story."

But there's a sinking feeling in his gut.

"Has Damian not spoken to you about this...?" For that matter, did the other Batman not tell Alfred?

Alfred looks confused, and after a moment he turns off the stove, turning away.

"I think perhaps we should sit down."

They end up standing in the library. Neither of them actually sits, just stands among the books, facing each other, and it's then that Bruce realizes he was wrong: This Alfred might be the same age as his, but this one seems... tired. Exhausted in a way that the one he's familiar with isn't.

Something is so, so wrong with this world.

"Who knows at this point?" Alfred asks.

"The Justice League," he says. "Clark in particular. He spent two days in my world before returning, and he's given me his... blessing to do what I need."

"Which is?"

"Things are broken here, Alfred," he says. "If you're anything like the man I know, then you must recognize that. That this... this family is broken. Jason was kicked out of the family. Damian... how can Damian not even be home? He lives here. And that's just what I know about. How much more is there?"

Alfred looks broken down, he realizes. He's worn down by years of dealing with the mess that's hurting Bruce after only two days with it.

"Yes," Alfred says. "Do the boys know...?"

"All four of them now," Bruce says. "They knew I was here, but not that your Bruce is gone. Dick and Tim were supportive. Jason was... less so."
"Damian?"

"Hard to say," Bruce says. "I still need to talk to him. We were interrupted. Do you know where he is...?"

"Master Damian was forbidden to leave the manor as of last night," Alfred says. "But I would imagine you could find him in New York."

Bruce isn't sure which is more horrifying: That Damian's been sneaking out so regularly that Alfred doesn't expect to find him at home, or that even after their Bruce swore to lock him down, he snuck out anyway.

"You let him?" Bruce says. "You just... let him leave?"

Alfred frowns and shakes his head.

"I... believe he would be better off in the company of people his own age," he says. "The alternative is sitting in the manor by himself, with only me for company. I am many things, but I cannot be the only emotional support that Master Damian has."

Bruce pauses and then steps forward, pulling Alfred into a hug.

"Help me fix this," he says quietly. Alfred doesn't return the hug, but he doesn't reject this either. "My world is... happy. We're a family. Coming here by chance and finding all this, I can't... I need to fix it."

It's overwhelming, and he pulls back.

"I don't know if you can," Alfred says. "I think the only way to fix things would be for our Master Bruce to take the steps needed, and he... he refuses to. He has not... he has not been himself."

"Since when?"

He's expecting since the wedding.

"For a long time," Alfred says. "Maybe he was never himself. The man I thought he was."

"Tell me."

"If I told you everything," Alfred says, "we would be here for days. Days of... of issues. Of problems. But as of late? The wedding. The wedding felt... wrong. Desperate. To marry a criminal, even one like Miss Kyle is one thing. To have a wedding at the spur of the moment, in the middle of the night? To do so without even inviting the boys?"

He shakes his head.

"He told us Master Dick was dead. He let us mourn. And he knew the entire time he was alive. He's pushed Master Jason out of the family over and over again. He tells Master Damian he must stay home, but he leaves him with nothing. He's too busy. I could go on for days."

"What matters to him?"

"I could have answered that once upon a time," Alfred says. "But not now. The only thing I can say is being Batman. It consumes him. Even more now after the wedding. She broke his heart, and since then..."
"He hasn't been the same."

Alfred nods, his expression grim.

"He had jury duty," Alfred says. "As Bruce Wayne. It was good for PR that he go, that he prove he was a citizen of Gotham as much as anyone else. Mr. Freeze had killed three women. Batman had investigated. He had gotten Freeze to confess. There was evidence. But... he bribed his way onto the jury. To convince the others to vote not guilty. Because he believed he was wrong."

Bruce feels... unease. He's not sure what he expected coming here. He's not sure what to feel about things.

He's failing his children. The Bruce he's come to take the place of is falling apart.

"Master Dick came to comfort him," Alfred says. "After what happened. He played the part of Batman while Master Bruce sat on trial. And he said he would stay around for as long as he was needed. And Master Bruce told him he didn't need him."

The unease only deepens.

"He is... not himself. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that he is no longer Bruce Wayne. He is only Batman. I think... because Batman does not suffer. Batman does not feel bad. So he is only Batman."

"He's breaking," Bruce says quietly.

"I am afraid he's already broken," Alfred says.

There's silence in the library for a long, long while.

"My Alfred had a message," Bruce says. "He says to... to check the copy of Lady Antoinette in here. He didn't say why."

Alfred looks confused, but turns away, walking along the shelves as he searches.

"I can't imagine why," he says. "I believe we have a copy, but I doubt it has been touched in a long while."

Bruce joins the search, but Alfred's the one who finds it, pulling the slim volume from the shelf. The moment he opens it, it's obvious why his Alfred sent the message, because pressed between the page are a stack of old photos.

"Ah," he says. "I had wondered where they went. I believe these were missing from the family album, but I was never able to locate them. It would seem that your Alfred encountered the same dilemma, but found a solution far quicker."

He holds out the photos for Bruce to see. They're older than him, photos of his parents when they were young, and several include photos of his grandparents as well.

"I'll return them to the album," Alfred says. "Please pass on my thanks."

"Of course," he says. "I'm going to go find Damian. I'll check in New York."

"Master Bruce?" Alfred calls just as he reaches the library doorway, and Bruce falters, glancing over his shoulder.
It feels wrong being called that by him.

"A few months ago," Alfred says, his voice quiet, "Master Bruce came home late. That was the night that Master Jason shot the Penguin. The night he was removed from the family. But Master Bruce..."

Bruce's heart is in his throat, and standing in the library doorway he feels genuine fear for what he's about to hear.

"His hands were bloody," Alfred says, his voice so quiet Bruce can barely hear. "I am afraid I have done Master Jason and all the boys a... a great disservice by putting my trust in Master Bruce. In letting it blind me to what is happening."

Bruce lets himself sit on the information, standing in the doorway. It feels almost physically painful to watch Alfred, to see him so broken down. So tired.

"I'll fix things," Bruce says. "I'll make things better."

It feels like a promise as he leaves the library behind.
Chapter 26

He's been there two hours when Bruce calls. It's not entirely unexpected, and while the plan was to meet at the manor, more communication is better than none.

*Bruce,* Slade signs to Joey as he picks up.

"Slade," Bruce says, and Slade feels himself relax from pure instinct. "Everything alright on your end?"

"Fine," he says. "I'm here with Joey."

"Where would here be?"

"About halfway between New York City and Gotham. They stopped at a motel, which is when I was dropped in."

"No complications?"

"None," Slade confirms. "You?"

"I met the League," Bruce says. "Things went well with them. But I also spoke with Alfred, and he... shared some disturbing information."

"How disturbing?" Slade asks. The fact that Bruce isn't just saying it is alarming.

"I don't want to say until I know," Bruce says. "I need to investigate down here. Alfred thinks Damian's gone back to the Titans."

"Wasn't he... you know, grounded?"

"Apparently he's less grounded then one would think."

*Everything alright?* Joey signs to him, and Slade nods in response.

"Are we still meeting at the manor?" Slade asks.

"Not right now," Bruce says. "Would you be able to go back to the Titans and pick up Damian?"

"Assuming he'll come with me," Slade says.

"He should," Bruce says. "He knows you were with me. Tell him we came back, and that you need him for family business. He can go back to his team when he's done."

Hopefully. In theory. There's a lot of hypotheticals about the whole situation.

"Alright," Slade says. "We can do that. Road trip back to New York."

Joey sighs and mimes laughter.

"Let his team know that the League know about what happened," Bruce adds, "but that they're not in trouble. I'm looking into getting them a mentor figure who can help them out. Give them proper training. It'd be nice if you could sell them on it."

"God it," Slade says. "Convince them it's worth their while."
"Thank you," Bruce says with a heavy sigh. "I'm going to... to look into things. When you have Damian, call me and we'll see where things are."


"Love you too," Bruce says.

Joey is very obviously trying not to gawk as Slade hands up, the screen immediately lighting back up.

"Well," he says, "you heard the man. We need to go pick up Robin."

Road trip, Joey signs. Breakfast?

They leave the motel behind. Slade drives, letting Joey navigate through the phone pinned to the dash. He resists the urge to make a GPS joke, but pulls into the first half decent diner he finds.

"Love diners," he says. "Every diner has their own specialty for eggs, so there's a lot of variety. Good for you. And every city has a diner. No need to search out for a specific chan or store."

"Eggs?" Joey says. "Really?"

"I'm on the road a lot," Slade says. "I can't fly, and planes have a lot of complications. Hard to smuggle weapons onto them. So if I can't get what I need at my destination, I need to drive."

"So eggs," Joey says. "And diners."

Slade asks the waitress what she recommends, gets one of that, and tells Joey to get what he wants. And then he processes that his money's probably not actually any good.

"Oh," he says, "just realized I don't have any-"

I got it, Joey says. Really. My job pays well. I can manage a few eggs.

Slade laughs at that.

They end up making it back to New York City a bit after eleven, and Slade lets Joey navigate him towards Damian's new base. He knows the way because Bruce told him, but Joey doesn't know that, and he seems happy to help.

The second base isn't as impressive as the first. It's much smaller, an abandoned old two story motel, and a sign on the front warns that the entire place is a hazard zone. Some kind of chemical spill. Slade knows it's bullshit, so he parks on the street.

"Hold on," Joey says. "I'll just fly in and get them to open the gate."

He's already got his suit on, so he simply pulls the mask up over his face.

"Damian should know ASL," Slade says. "Not sure about the others."

"They'll have phones," Joey says as he lifts off from the car.

To Slade's immense surprise, Joey keeps talking. He's not sure what the range is on his implant, but Joey keeps chatting away through the phone, narrating what's happening.
"Oh, there's Roundhouse. He seems happy to see me, so that's good," Joey says.

"Can you actually hear me?" Slade asks, glancing out the window.

"He definitely doesn't know ASL," Joey says, which confirms Slade's suspicions that the answer is no.

"Oh, here's Damian, hold on."

He doesn't say anything else until a few minutes later, when the gate swings open. Damian's there, along with Joey, and Slade hops out. He's happy for the mask hiding his face, but the way Damian's wrinkling his nose makes it obvious that he knows who he is.

"So much for being grounded," Slade says with a snort. The mask hides his whole head, but it doesn't do shit for his voice.

Damian tsks and closes the gate behind them.

"I was going to ask you to confirm that you are the Slade from the other dimension," Damian says, "but I suppose that this would confirm it."

"Sure does," he says. "You already tell your team?"

He wrinkles his nose.

"We were going to speak of it over lunch. Djinn suggested that we take some time to calm down."

"Smart kid."

So what are we...? Joey signs, his confusion evident.

"Keep your mask up," he says. "I'm going to give these kids the gist, and then we're hauling Damian back with us.

"What?" Damian protests. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Things are happening back in Gotham," Slade says pointedly, "which require your attention. Things with your father, and with your brothers."

Damian looks like he's about to protest, but shuts his mouth at the last minute.

"...Fine," he says.

The main area is a lot less nice than the last one. There's a TV, but it looks hastily set up, and a movie's playing while Crush and Djinn sit and watch.

Roundhouse is standing in the corner nervously.

"Where's Kid Flash?" Damian asks, and Roundhouse nods and heads up the stairs to where the bedrooms must be. Kid Flash is down in a blink, and then then it takes Roundhouse a bit longer to come back downstairs.

"Who's that?" Crush asks, pointing a finger to Slade.

"Hopefully one of the guys from last night and not like... a third guy," Roundhouse says.
"Well," Kid Flash says, "that's definitely not Batman."

"You said you wanted an explanation," Damian says, "and this is it. After removing Deathstroke from the area, I am apparently needed back in Gotham, so they've come to fetch me."

"That's not suspicious at all," Crush mutters under her breath.

Slade reaches up, pulling the mask off his head. There's a few seconds of obvious panic, and then-

"I knew it!" Kid Flash yells. "I knew it was you!"

"Well you were only half right," Slade says. "I'm not the Deathstroke you caught, and I'm not the one who knows you. Sorry kid."

Djinn's the only one of the four that seems totally unalarmed, her face lighting up in joy.

"My senses were correct!" She says. "You are from elsewhere?"

"Elsewhere...?" Crush asks, glancing between Djinn and Slade.

"Other dimension," Slade says. "Probably hard to believe with everything your Deathstroke did, but in my universe I work with Batman."

There's a round of doubtful noises, but at the very least no one's running for it, even if Roundhouse looks like he's still considering it.


"Wait," Roundhouse says, "does that mean the other guy last night wasn't the real Batman...?"

"That was my Batman," Slade says. "But your Batman was briefed on the situation."

Roundhouse sags, his hopes obviously crushed.

"So what are you doing here, exactly?" Crush asks.

"Here to get the kid," Slade says with a nod to Damian. "And tell you guys that the League knows about what happened."

That gets more of a reaction than revealing his face did. There's a moment of pure, absolute panic to varying degrees. Roundhouse looks like he's considering bolting. Kid Flash freezes in place. Crush's eyes go wide in something between fear and rage, and Djinn seems to shrink in her seat.

"Calm down," Slade snaps. "If you were all being hauled in, the League would be here to do that themselves, not sending me. But they do want you to have at least one adult as a... mentor figure."

"Who?" Roundhouse says.

"No idea," Slade says. "Batman's handling that, and-"

"We're getting Batman?" Roundhouse says. He seems excited.

"No," Slade says, maybe a bit too quickly. "I don't know who you're getting, but it's not going to be Batman."

Batman has his own shit to deal with.
"Oh," Roundhouse says. "Okay."

"I'm going to go with him," Damian says, "we have family business to discuss. I will stay in touch, and return as soon as I am able."

"You will be alright?" Djinn asks.

Joey holds out his own phone, speaking to the room.

"You recognized that he was from another world, Djinn," he says. "But is that going to hurt them?"

"No," Djinn says with a shake of her head. "I do not think so. It is just... a different thing about them. I don't think many people could tell. It is just like... one person having green eyes, and another brown. A difference."

Joey seems to relax, nodding his head to her.

Slade knows how he wants things to go. He wants Damian to say goodbye to his teammates. Maybe hug them as they send him off to deal with the nebulous concept of family issues.

He doesn't. Damian simply gives a curt note to his team, turns on his heel, and starts to leave.

"See you kids," Slade says as he pulls his mask back on. "I'd say don't do anything I wouldn't do, but considering who I am that has a much different context."

He laughs and follows Damian out, Joey at his side.
Chapter 27

Bruce is many things, but right then? Patient isn't one of them.

It's the early morning, and the last thing he should be doing is going out in the batsuit, but that's the exact thing he does. Batman almost never appears in daylight, but he has before, and going out without it risks being incriminating. He doesn't need to ask Alfred if this world's Bruce had obligations, because he already knows the answer is no. He's buried himself in his work. He's Batman and nothing more.

There's no way he'd waste his time playing at being CEO.

He takes a low profile car, blacked out and intended to be subtle, and heads into downtown Gotham. He calls Slade as he drives, paying little attention to Gotham itself. The street layout is different, but the car has a built in GPS that guides him into a discrete parking lot. He grapple hooks up onto the roof, and then takes the quick hop up onto the roof of GCPD headquarters.

The bat signal stands, unlit and insane looking in the daylight. Even to him, it doesn't feel real, and he remembers why he rarely comes out to this roof in daylight.

But things need to be done.

His skin crawls, and he gives a quick glance over his shoulder. There's no one there, but the impression of being watched sticks. He keeps an eye out, but chalks it up to paranoia as he calls Alfred, who gives him the number to Jim's office. He calls, listening for the sound of a phone ringing, and then rappels off the roof to Jim's window, knocking once.

Jim's just about to pick up the phone when he hears, head jerking to look at him as he jumps.

"Jesus," he says. "In broad daylight?"

He opens the window anyway, and Bruce slides in.

"Things are happening," Bruce says in his very best bat-growl. "It couldn't wait."

"Apparently not," Jim says, "considering you're knocking on my window before lunch."

He's already thought about how to play it, and he doesn't think the truth is going to help. He's not sure Jim would trust him, and there's the distinct possibility that he'd consider what is effectively a Batman impersonator a threat.

"I need to see what you have on the Penguin shooting," he says.

"I was wondering when you'd come for that," Jim says, and Bruce's heart falls through the floor. Only years of training keeps his face from showing what a crushing disappointment it is. How could his counterpart not check in? How could he not investigate?

Every time he thinks he understands the scope of what's happened here, it gets even worse.

"Hold on," Jim says. He steps away, heading to a filing cabinet in the corner he unlocks, rifling through the contents. "Figured you'd come to check it out, but I guess things have been busy."

So busy he didn't get a chance to investigate this?
Jim holds out the folder to him, and he takes it carefully, reading it then and there. The details are clear enough. Penguin was opening a patch of waterfront property. Probably a front for his operations, but that isn't public knowledge. Someone bombed one of the buildings, causing a panic during Penguin's speech. Smoke bomb obscured the proceedings.

Jim's notes indicate there's a video, and Bruce considers how to angle it.

"Did you get the master tape from the news station?" Bruce asks.

"Got a copy," Jim says. "Same as everyone else."

"This would be significantly easier if it hadn't been live."

"You're telling me," Jim says. "Listen, Batman, I know he was one of yours. But my hands are tied on this. If we see him, we have to arrest him. Our hands are tied."

"I won't object to that," Batman says, turning back to the file. He can check the video online, but the report gives a clear enough summary of it. Red Hood. Point blank shot to the head. Live broadcast.

Which doesn't add up. All the unease he had when he first heard about the situation comes flooding back as he flips over the details of Cobblepots recovery.

Because it doesn't make sense.

How could Jason— and version of Jason—shoot a man at point blank range and not kill him? Even if this one isn't trained by Deathstroke himself, he uses guns on a daily basis. He should know them in and out.

There's no explanation for how he could fail to kill Cobblepot, and he flips through the pages, finding nothing.

And then he realizes what he's missing. Then he realizes the nothing, the thing he doesn't find anywhere in the reports.

"Where's the bullet?" Bruce says, furiously flipping between pages. He's sure he looks agitated, but no amount of training can keep his emotions completely tamped down. "Did you not recover a bullet?"

Jim looks confused, and Bruce realizes he's made a mistake. But when Jim speaks, it's obvious his confusion is from other things.

"No," he says. "It was a blank. Was this—?"

Jim falters, the question unspoken.

It was not a plan. If it was a plan by Batman and Red Hood, Batman hasn't bothered to tell anyone about it. And with how Red Hood reacted? Bruce doesn't even believe it's that. Batman didn't realize it was a plan. He didn't realize there was a scheme here. He just assumed Red Hood shot him point blank.

But Jim Gordon. Jim fucking Gordon, commissioner of Gotham's police force, looked at the evidence and realized that someone who spent years working with guns wouldn't have failed such a simple task. Jim fucking Gordon looked at what they collected and realized there was no bullet, just a blank. Jim fucking Gordon, thought there was a plan and gave Red Hood the benefit of a doubt.
And Batman didn't.

"Fuck!" Bruce yells, throwing the file against the wall, and Jim looks alarmed.

"Batman," Jim says, in a tone of voice that makes it very clear he wanted to say Bruce. "You have been - are you alright?"

Bruce buries his face in his hand.

"Just give me a moment," he says, happy for the first time that the cowl hides his eyes.

Jim does, but he looks shaken by everything he's just seen.
There is a fight almost from the word go. They've barely started driving (Joey takes the drivers seat before Slade can) when Damian looks out the window, realizes they're heading to the highway, and groans.

"Why are we not taking a boom tube?" He says. "It would be far more efficient-"

"Because the car is a rental," Slade says. "And I think the drive will be nice."

"There's nothing nice about a multi-hour drive in a car with strangers," Damian protests.

"There can be," Slade says. "I'm hoping by the end of it, we won't be strangers as much as we are."

Damian growls at him, and Slade rolls his eyes. He reminds Slade a lot of how his Damian was when he first arrived. Angry at the world. A chip in his shoulder that might as well have been made with a chainsaw. Only this Damian's been around people who weren't assassins long enough he should be better.

If he is, it's only barely.

When they reach the highway, Slade digs into his phone, flipping around until he finds the right thing, and then turns around, holding it out.

"Earbuds are there," he says. "I won't listen in. You might as well watch it."

Damian frowns at the phone but does take it, popping in an earbud as he hits play.

Slade doesn't know what he's hearing. He could hear if he tries, but he doesn't want to. He wants to give Damian—both Damians—their privacy. He's already loaded up the video, and he knows how long it runs, so he sits and watches the road for the five minutes it takes before he turns around.

Damian looks... well, he looks a lot of things right then. His eyebrows are furrowed together, his expression intense, but his eyes are cast down, the phone resting in his lap.

"Is all that-" He starts to say, and then shakes his head. Slade suspects he was going to ask if it was real.

"Sure is," he says. "Not sure what he told you, but I imagine he gave you the gist of how things are different."

"You're really married?" Damian says. "To my dad?"

Slade's happy he let Joey drive, because it lets him keep an eye on Damian.

Slade peels off the glove on his left hand, holding up his hand to let the ring show.

"I am," he says. "And I adopted you and Jason. Tim and Dick were a bit old for that, even if I offered."

"I don't know how I'm supposed to believe that," Damian says, but it's obvious in his body language that he does believe that. Or maybe just that he wants to.

"Have to admit it's kind of hard seeing you like this," Slade says. "Because you're not the Damian I
know, but you're also... really similar to him."

"You should just tell me the plan," Damian says, turning to stare out the window as Slade slips his glove back on.

"Depends on what Bruce says. There are a lot of ways this could play out. Speaking of which..."

He retrieves his phone from Damian's lap before he can protest, sending Bruce a quick text.

**Slade:** Got Damian. Plan?

Bruce's response is not immediate. It takes a few minutes before his phone vibrates.

**Bruce:** I'm busy right now. Can you contact Tim and Dick, and get all of them to the manor later today? We need a family meeting.

**Slade:** Got it.

He's been expecting a family meeting. It was only a matter of time.

**Slade:** Need to see Rose.

**Bruce:** Bring her if you want. I trust your discretion on this.

"Alright," Slade says as he tucks the phone away. "Bruce wants us to gather the family up. So that would be..."

Damian wrinkles his nose.

"Grayson," he says. "Drake, I would guess."

"And?"

"Thomas."

Slade rubs at the bridge of his nose.

"Rephasing," he says. "Who are the people who operate as vigilantes, or our immediate support, who have been in the cave and know about Bruce's identity?"

"There are a lot," Damian says. "Spoiler, Orphan-"

"Make a list," Slade says. "I need to call Dick."

He does. Dick seems like an obvious first choice, because he's likely to be able to make a list as well.

"Hello?" Dick says. "Bruce?"

"Slade," he clarifies. "The one you met recently."

"You didn't need to clarify," Dick says. "The other Slade wouldn't be calling this number, I wouldn't think."

"Hopefully not," Slade says. "We're having a meeting at the manor. Can you round up everyone who works as part of the... Batfamily or whatever it is you call it. Everyone who knows who Bruce is, everyone who needs to be briefed."
"That's a lot."

"So I was told. Can they all fit in the cave?"

"Of course-"

"Then it's not an issue. It's a lot easier to brief everyone at once."

"I have my list," Damian announces.

"I'll make some calls," Dick says. "When are we meeting?"

"Just after dinner," Slade says, deciding on the spot. "If you'd like to come early, that'd be nice. And for the record, I have Robin with me."

"I'll scratch him off the list then."

"Thanks Dick," he says, and there's a confused noise on the other end.

"...Never going to get used to that. Especially not from you," Dick says, and finishes the call.

The next step feels far more nebulous. Momentous, even.

"I need to meet Rose," Slade says. "Dropping Damian off might be ideal-"

"I'm not staying around the manor by myself," Damian says.

"Dick will be there soon-"

"I am not staying around the manor by myself," Damian repeats.

"Your father isn't there," Slade says. "He's in our dimension at this point."

"What!" Damian says. "You stole father?"

"We borrowed him," Slade says. "For his own good."

Or maybe just for everyone else's good. It's hard to tell.

"I can give you her number," Joey says. He seems... distracted. Probably not a great thing.

"I'll call then," Slade says, and he clears his throat. "Maybe we should pull over for this?"

Joey finds a donut shop just off the highway.

"I'll get some for the car," he says. It's a blatant attempt to get Damian out, and Damian clearly knows it, but allows himself to be lured away by Joey just the same.

Slade's phone lights up to a text from Joey, a phone number included.

He's not sure he's ready.
He doesn't tell Jim the truth. Instead he says he needs to go, and that he'll explain later. He suspects that probably tips Jim off, because he doubts that this world's Bruce did much coming back to explain later. He slips out the window and heads back to the roof.

There are a lot of things he could investigate. He could watch the video. He could go and find Penguin. He could look into other things, things that were mentioned but not elaborated on.

He doesn't.

Instead he heads back to the car, ignoring the ever-growing feeling of dread, and drives down to the waterfront. He needs to take a moment to catch his breath, to process, but he quickly realizes that he's going to need a lot more than a few minutes for that.

He doesn't have that kind of time. He could spend days sitting there and feel no better.

Slade texts him, and he stares at the message for a while. Formulating a plan feels like a momentous task. Like an impossible one. But he tries anyway, responding after a few minutes. He tells himself that when the conversation is over, he'll get out of the car.

The conversation is over too quickly. He has to get out. He has to face the truth.

He stays Batman. He's had years of therapy to help him accept it, to recognize it for what it is. He is wearing the mask of Batman to keep himself together. He has to keep wearing that mask until it's safe.

But he doesn't have that opportunity. He's going to have to peel the mask off whether he wants it or not. Jason doesn't need Batman. Jason needs Bruce Wayne.

The casino's head of security is a tall, broad-shouldered man with dark hair. He seems familiar, but only in a very general sense, and Bruce suspects he's one of the many people he's punched as Batman over the years. A reformed mook, perhaps?

It doesn't matter. He's easy enough to avoid, even in the daylight, as Bruce heads along the far side of the building. He knows what he's looking for, he just can't find it.

He finds something else. When he checks one window he finds the very man who kicked them out when they were first there standing in a suite, going over a checklist.

Miguel Barragan.

Bruce simply knocks on the window. Miguel jumps, swinging his head around, and his eyes go wide when he spots, of all possible things, Batman perched on his windowsill.

His mouth makes a little o, but he approaches just the same, pulling open the window.

"...Batman?"

Bruce eases himself inside.

"Yes," he says. "I understand you know Red Robin."

Miguel looks like he can't figure out how to react. Surprise that Batman knows him? Confusion as to
"why Batman is there?"

"I need... I need to tell Jason."

"Of course," Bruce says. "Please tell him I'm here. We need to... to speak in private."

Miguel looks deeply uncertain as he leaves the room, closing the door behind them.

Bruce tries to keep his breathing even. He uses every technique therapy has ever taught him. It's still not enough.

Jason lets himself in, still in his suit, and shoots an angry glare towards Bruce.

"Great," he says. "Do I even need to ask which you are?"

Jason is alone, so Bruce reaches up, pulling the cowl back. The grey on his temples and the lines on his face make it clear just who he is.

"Fantastic," Jason says. "One Bruce wasn't enough, so now I have to deal with two. Did you forget that I kicked you out? That I told you to get the hell out?"

"I need to talk to you," Bruce says. Jason's playing it cool, like he isn't bothered, but Bruce knows Jason better than that. He can see the signs of stress. The hints that he's so much more bothered than he's letting on.

"Oh, and what would that be about, fake Bruce?"

He's not fake, but he's learned long ago not to get caught up in Jason's jabs. If he rises to it, it'll just devolve into an argument. They'll miss the point.

"I need to ask you about what happened on the night that Penguin was shot."

Jason's expression darkens, and he throws up his hands.

"Great," he says. "Just what I need. One Bruce shoving his nose in my fucking business wasn't enough. Now I have Bruce's from all over the multiverse kicking my door in to tell me what a big fucking disappointment I am."

Bruce takes a deep breath in through his nose, trying to keep himself even.

"No," he says. "You're not a disappointment, and that's not why I'm here."

"You don't even fucking know me," Jason snaps. "So forgive me if I don't roll over and beg for your approval."

Bruce wants to cry at the sight of it. At a version of his son so alienated from his family that he thinks he's a disappointment. That he thinks he's alone.

"No," Bruce says, "I don't. I want to."

"One is enough," Jason snaps. "Get out of my casino before I have security throw you out, cowl or no."

He has a lot of questions. Important questions. He doesn't think he's going to get to ask all of them.

"Just answer me one question-"
"Let me guess," he says. "Why'd I betray your trust? Because that's where I'm putting my money."

"I want to know what he did to you."

Jason goes suddenly silent, his expression visibly darkening. There's anger there, but there's also something else. Concern, maybe. Nerves.

"Penguin? He-"

"Not him," Bruce says. "I want to know what Bruce did to you."

Jason's face becomes a mask in a moment. He stops showing anything other than what he wants. It feels fake. It feels controlled. It feels like what Bruce does every time he pulls the cowl on, only from the outside.

"Fuck you," Jason says. His tone is flat. There's no emotion to it.

He doesn't know why Jason says it, but it doesn't really matter in the end.

"I know it was a blank," he says. "I know you weren't trying to kill the Penguin. I don't know why you did it. But I do know that he didn't ask why either. I know he didn't investigate. That he didn't ask questions. I know that he... that he went after you. And then he told your family, the people who you should have been able to go to for help, that you were being kicked out of the family."

They're silent for a moment.

"I can't undo what he did," Bruce says. "But I want to know. I want to know why he came home from bringing you in with bloody hands."

"You want to know what you did?" Jason says. "There was a ship floating above gotham. A ship that was breaking up. That was going to crash into the ground and kill everyone below it. And I went to help, and you stopped me."

Bruce feels like he's burning every time Jason says you. It's not him, he tells himself. It doesn't feel true. It was him. Another Bruce Wayne.

"You dragged me back to the roof and you kicked me in the head so hard it shattered my mask. Then you told me you were a fool for ever believing in me, and you hit me so hard you broke off the rest of my mask."

The way he says you were a fool makes it so, so clear to Bruce that it's almost word for word. That Bruce—the other Bruce—said those exact words and they've been burned into Jason's brain ever since.

"And then I got rescued by a friend of mine before you could beat me any more. So I got to help. I got to stand on the ship and try and stop it from killing twelve thousand people. And then I got thrown away from the ship as it tore itself inside out. I got to stand on a roof and watch two of the people I care about most in the world die."

Bruce knows that's not the end. He knows there's more. Jason seems almost excited, his face lighting up as he leans in. They're less than a foot apart as Jason watches his face. Watches the horror there. He can't hide it. He's not sure he wants to.

"Then you hit me so hard I couldn't even stand up. Shattered my arm. You tore my symbol right off my chest, and then you grabbed me by the helmet and dragged me across the roof and told me about
how it was all my fault."

He's enjoying it. He's enjoying being as graphic as he possibly can, sparing no detail.

"Someone saved me. A friend. I spent weeks healing. Weeks with my eye swollen shut. Weeks with
my arm in a sling."

Bruce doesn't want to hear, but he can't make him stop either. If he tells Jason to stop—if he rejects
him—he'll never be able to fix it. He'll never be able to help him.

He's not sure he can anyway.

His mouth fills with words he wants to say, but he lets them die on his tongue. It was a mistake. But
it wasn't a mistake. The mistake was not doing due diligence checking for bullet casings. Beating
Jason wasn't a mistake.

Bruce doesn't know what it was. He doesn't know what to say.

"He should never have touched you," Bruce says, and Jason laughs.

"Oh?" He says. "You think? You think maybe hitting someone so hard that it shatters their
motorcycle helmet isn't a great idea? You think maybe breaking someone's arm isn't a nice thing to
do?"

"He should have trusted you."

Jason laughs again, eyes squeezing shut. There's nothing threatening about him in that moment. It's
just sad. Sad and miserable in the worst way he can imagine. He's laughing, but it's a cruel, awful
laughter. A how fucking sad is that laugh.

Bruce realizes then what he's been missing. The why. Or part of the why. Because nothing about the
situation's made sense. Why shoot Penguin? And then: Why shoot Penguin with a blank?

He knows, and he feels heart crack in half with the realization.

"It was a test," he says. The words are like ash on his tongue, bitter and awful. "You needed Penguin
out of the way for some reason. You were going to kill off the Red Hood name. But you wanted to
know if Bruce would trust you. So you made it look like an attempted murder. To see if he would
ask. To see if he would trust you."

Jason claps. Not just once, but a full on applause.

"Wow," he says. "Amazing. You're a whole different Bruce from a whole different goddamn
dimension, and you still managed to figure it out. He didn't, you know. When he came all the way
out to make up and let me know that Roy died he sat right down beside me and said that it was fine
because I technically didn't break the deal... but not for lack of trying. Because the world's greatest
detective was so sure I was a murderous fuck-up that he didn't even bother to check with the police."

Bruce feels nothing. He's empty inside, hollowed out. He wants to go home, to hug his own Jason.
To tell him how important he is, how proud of him he is. He doesn't think he'll ever be able to say it
enough.

"I'm not him," Bruce says. "I can't make that better. I can't... undo what he's done. I can't make up
for the things he's done."
"Then what good are you?" Jason says. His good mood is gone in a moment, replaced with something bitter and rotten. Not just anger, but anger that's been left to fester.

"I want to make things better," Bruce says. "I went home. But I came back because I wanted to help. Because this... this family is destroying itself. So I wanted to help."

"You should have stayed there."

Bruce digs for his phone, pulling it out. He doesn't know what to do. He doesn't know what to say. So he has to put his faith not in himself, but in his Jason. That his Jason will know the right words to say. That he'll know the right message to pass on.

"My Jason," Bruce says, "sent a message for you."

He's not even sure if he's going to take it, but Jason finally does snatch the phone out of his hand. He heads over to the TV, plugging the phone in so it broadcasts full screen. Bruce watches as he flips through videos, finding the one labelled JASON before selecting it.

Bruce doesn't want to watch. The videos feel personal. They're private messages. But he can't deafen himself, and he can't just leave. So he has to sit and watch as his Jason leaps to life on the screen.

He's sitting in the command chair in front of the computer down in the cave, dressed in casual clothes. He's got a Batman hoodie on that Bruce knows was a gift from Tim. He looks serious.

"Hey," his Jason says. "If you're watching this message, then I guess Bruce and Slade got through. That's good, and I hope you treat them right."

He pauses, glancing over his shoulder towards someone, and then turns his focus back to the camera.

"Everyone else is doing one of those... sweet little videos. Talking about their lives here and how great things are. And I could. I could tell you about what Roy's up to or the people I've met or the great job I have. But... Clark—your Clark—spent his entire time with us making things sound great. He talked about all the crazy technology you guys have, and the aliens you've met, and things like that. And then when we pulled Bruce and Slade back, they were so... they were so horrified. We were so happy to have them back but they were just horrified. We thought something was wrong. We thought someone had died. And when they came through Bruce cried because of how bad things were. Because of all the things he'd learned. And one of the things he said was that you'd been thrown out of the family for trying to kill the Penguin."

Jason—not his Jason, but the one watching—twitches at that. He's staring at the screen, distracted by the image of his older and hopefully wiser self. He doesn't even seem to remember that Bruce is there.

"I don't know why you did. I can't say I didn't think about killing him myself before, but I'm not you. You've got a different life and all that. Slade said that in your world, he was never part of the family. His counterpart never found you and helped you get back from things. So I tried to figure out how things might have gone if he didn't. If I'd just... kept doing things the way I was. If I kept being angry."

It feels so raw and personal that Bruce looks away, but he can't stop himself from hearing.

"Bruce can't help you," Jason says. "But he's probably going to try. He's a bleeding heart who thinks he can solve anyone's problems if he tries hard enough. But he's a good guy, and his heart's in the right place. The best thing he could do for you is give you this, so he's at least given you that much. But that's just my Bruce. And if you've been kicked out, that means it was Bruce. There's no one else
who could kick you out of the family but him.

"And they're going to want you to reconcile. They're going to want you to forgive him. That's how this stuff works. He'll make a halfhearted apology and everyone's going to look at you and expect you to roll over. You'll probably want to. Because it's hard being the difficult one. But—and this is just me—fuck him. If things are so bad he's thrown you out then you don't owe him anything. I don't know what kind of falling out you had, or how bad what you did was, but family's supposed to be family. They're supposed to stand with you. And if Bruce didn't? Then he doesn't deserve your forgiveness, and you sure as hell don't owe him it.

"I used to be so afraid of getting kicked out of the family. From the moment I became a Robin I was terrified Bruce was going to throw me out. But... it's been years now, and I realized the truth. I don't know if they told you, but if they didn't..

There's the sound of creaking and ruffling, and Bruce spares a glance over. Jason's pulling his hoodie off. Every inch that comes up reveals something unexpected: His armor. The armor he wore as Batman, not what he wears as Raptor.

He leans forward, retrieving the cowl, and pulls it on.

"I'm Batman. I'm Batman as much as Bruce ever was. I'm Batman because my Bruce chose me to be Batman. Because he trusted me, and he put his faith in me. And I... I'd like to say I did him proud. Gotham loves me. I almost died a while back, and they... they held a vigil for me. People left flowers and cards and messages. It took up a whole wall at Gotham Central. Someone took a picture of it, and I have it on my wall. Reminding me why I do this. And I wish... I hope that you get that chance. That you get a chance to understand what it's like to have someone put their faith in you the way Bruce did for me."

Bruce realizes that the Jason watching the video is crying. He's not sobbing, but there's tears rolling down his cheeks, and Bruce looks away again.

"But I can't make that happen. I can't come over there and shake everyone down until they realize how good you are. How they should be proud of you. So I can only give you one piece of advice."

Bruce holds his breath.

"Bruce isn't the family. Bruce is one person. He might be the center of the family, but he can't kick you out. You can only be kicked out if every single person turns their back on you. Even when I was angry with Bruce, even when I wanted to kill him, I still cared about the others. I still wanted Dick to recognize me. I still wanted to talk with Barbara. I still wanted to cook with Alfred. I still wanted to protect them. And Bruce can't kick you out of that. They're still your family. Even if he's not."

Jason pulls his cowl off, leaning back in his seat.

"That's what you have to remember, Jay. Family is everyone. It's not just Bruce. And I hope you realize that."

The video ends, and Bruce is left alone with a quietly sobbing Jason.
Slade sags back against the passenger seat, staring at his phone. His relationship with Rose is... complicated. This isn't his Rose, but it's a Rose, and he's having a hard time grappling with that.

He calls.

"Hello?" Comes a voice on the other end. She sounds different. Younger, maybe. It's hard to say how much is her voice and how much is just the phone she has.

"Hi," he says.

There's a confused noise on the other end.

"Dad?"

"No," Slade says. "Sorry, this is a bit complex. You haven't talked to Joey, have you?"

"Uh," she says, "no? Should I have? Is everything-"

"Everything's fine," he says, eager to stop that train of thought before it pulls out of the station. "I just wanted to know before I tried to explain something. This is... not your father."

"...You sure sound like him," she says. He can hear the suspicion in her voice.

"I'm the Slade from another dimension," he says. "It's a long story."

"You're the what?"

"The - I'm your father from another dimension," he says.

There's silence on the other end.

"How long have you been here?" She asks.

"This is my third day," he says. "Joey gave me your number."

Rose exhales on the other end.

"Wow," she says. "I've heard a lot of weird stories, and yet I think this one might be the weirdest. I've heard about all the alternate dimension stuff, but I didn't think it was ever going to happen to me."

"You should have," Slade says, "considering who your father is."

Rose laughs at that. It's light and happy, and he feels himself relax. She's not the angry girl who tried to take away everything he loved. She's... different.

Maybe she's what might have been. A world where he found her early. Got a chance to be in her life.

Or maybe she's just like that despite his parenting, rather than because of it.

"Probably," she says. "So, you..."
"I'm around for a little while," he says. "I'm kind of... hoping to meet you while I'm here. If that's alright with you."

"I'll have to talk to Joey," she says, which Slade is pretty sure means make sure you're not holding him hostage. "Where are you guys?"

"On our way to Gotham," Slade says.

"Gotham?" Rose asks. "Why?"

"Are you sitting down?"

Slade's going to make absolutely sure that Rose isn't driving before he drops that bomb.

"I am now," she says. "Is the world ending?"

"I'm married to Batman."

There's a thunk. Slade is pretty sure she dropped the phone. A few seconds later Rose's voice comes back.

"You what? You're married to Batman?"

"I know," Slade says. "Every single person we've told has the exact same I literally cannot believe it reaction."

"I mean - this is a what the hell on like... two or three dozen levels."

"I get that," Slade says. "I really do. I've had a lot of what the hell moments myself."

God, has he.

"So this is... what, a courtesy call?"

"It's... I'm not sure," he says. "This is... it's complicated."

"I mean, did you come here with a purpose?"

She's being surprisingly casual about the whole thing. Like it's no big deal. Everyone else has panicked, and Rose is just... alright.

"No," he says. "Not right away. We came here accidentally."

"You said not right away."

"We got pulled back," Slade says. "And we came back."

"For?"

The whole conversation feels... completely at odds with how he expected it. There's no arguing. She's polite, probably even friendly.

"Another long story," he says. "Batman's family here needs help. And I..."

He reaches up, rubbing at the bridge of his nose.

"My world doesn't have... this. My Joey died when he was young. I don't have a Grant at all."
"And me?"

He doesn't even know where to start, but he tries anyway.

"I didn't come to get you when you were young," he says. "I didn't know you existed until you were almost thirty, when you tried to murder everyone I cared about."

"Oh," Rose says. There's a pause. "Sounds like something I'd do."

He can't help himself: He laughs at that.

"You weren't... You were mislead. You were fed a lot of lies about who I was and the things I'd said, and a lot of people took advantage of your anger."

Rose doesn't answer that, and Slade sighs.

"How's Joey taking all this?"

He glances out the window. From where he sits, he can spot the two of them up by the counter, picking treats from the front cabinet.

"He's... taking it pretty well, I think. He's been helping us out."

"With the whole Batman family thing?"

"Yeah," he says.

"That include Dick?"

Slade blinks, staring down at the phone.

"What?"

"Richard," she says. "Not, you know, genitalia. Is Dick involved?"

Right. Dick had said he'd helped train her.

"He's involved," he says. "But it's a family thing."

"Oh wait," she says. "Is this about Jason?"

"How many of the kids do you know?" He asks. The longer he's here, the more he realizes that the two families, in theory separate, are very interconnected.

Rose makes what sounds like an innocent whistle.

"Either way," she says, "are you staying?"

"No," Slade says. "We're not sure how long we'll be here, but we're going to go back home sooner rather than later."

"Then..." She trails off, pausing. "I think it might be better if we don't meet."

It catches him off guard. Maybe it shouldn't, because the entire conversation feels supremely casual in a way that a conversation with your father from another dimension probably shouldn't.

"I get you probably want some... big... reconciliation thing with your long lost daughter who didn't
try and kill you and everyone you love, but I have a lot of stuff going on already. I've already got one crazy dad with a ton of issues, and I... probably don't really need two."

Slade's struggling to wrap his head around it. She's caught him completely off guard by the whole thing.

"No," he says. "That's fine. You aren't... you aren't the Rose I know."

"Exactly," she says. "Wait, does dad know you're here?"

"He's in my world right now," he says. "We swapped places."

Rose's voice becomes suddenly distant, and he hears a curse. As best he can tell, she's pulled the phone away from her face.

"You realize how bad that is, right? Like, you're you, so you should know, but I figure since you're with Batman you're probably not..."

"Working?"

"Exactly. Unless this is evil Batman."

"He's not evil Batman."

"So you know-"

"We had the entire Justice League waiting for him," Slade says. "Our side will be just fine."

"Oh," she says. "That's good. Is he coming back?"

"When I go," he says.

"Alright."

They're silent for a moment, and Slade sighs. Things are... he isn't even sure what he was expecting, but it was definitely not this.

"I'm going to call Joey," she says. "But I'm going to just make this clear. Joey is... he wants our dad's approval. Your approval. And if you take advantage of that, we will meet, and you will not like it."

It's a threat. A definite threat. And she's deadly serious about it, so Slade tries not to laugh. He's pretty confident he can handle her. But the idea of it is loud and clear.

"I won't," he says. "I'm just happy I have a chance to meet him."

Rose makes a little hmmmm on the other end.

"You don't act much like him," she says. "We probably could have gotten along, if you were staying."

"Maybe," he says.

"I'm going to call Joey," she says. "Bye."

She hangs up before he can even say goodbye, and Slade stares down at the phone, completely bewildered.
Definitely not what he expected.
Chapter 31

He gives Jason space. If he pushes too hard, or too fast, he's going to shut down. So he doesn't approach. He just lets Jason cry himself out.

When Jason's finally together, he doesn't speak right away. Instead he makes a copy of the video, deletes it from Bruce's phone, and hands it back.

"He's smart," Jason says. "And seems to like you. So I'll put... some faith in you. Not as Bruce Wayne, or Batman, but as his father."

It's probably the best he can hope for. Neutrality. A willingness to work together.

"Who's Slade to you?" Jason asks, and Bruce pauses before pulling his glove off, holding up his hand. He expects to have to explain, but he doesn't get to open his mouth before Jason seems to catch on.

"Your husband?" He says, squinting at the ring. "Not Selina?"

"You assumed," Bruce says. "I didn't get a chance to explain. Slade retired from his work in my world."

"I got that," Jason says. "He helped find my counterpart, joined the family, and then... hooked up with you?"

"More or less," Bruce says. "We went from... co-parenting to something more than that."

Jason grunts and pulls away. Bruce pulls his glove back on.

"So what's the next step here?" He says.

"We need to have a family meeting," he says. "With everyone. Dick, Tim, and Damian know about Slade and I, but we haven't spoken to them about... this. About our concerns with Bruce. Not like this."

"Probably better that way," Jason says.

"No," Bruce says. "I think... they need to know. About this. Everything I've seen since I got here tells me that this isn't just you. You being... being kicked out of the family for this isn't the only thing he's done."

Jason cocks his head, and Bruce realizes he's waiting for examples.

"I spoke to Alfred," he says. "He says that Bruce told the family that Dick was dead. That they let everyone mourn. And he knew the truth the whole time. And he... neglects Damian."

He sighs. He's going to have to tell him eventually.

"Damian has been operating with the Teen Titans," he says. "A new team. And he's been using that team to keep criminals in a secret prison."

Jason feigns surprise, but Bruce knows him well enough to know that it's not genuine.

"You knew," he says.
"More or less," he says. "Surprised he didn't snitch on me, honestly."

Bruce tries very hard not to be angry. It isn't his place. It isn't his right. But he's still angry.

"You should have told someone."

"Told who?" Jason says. "Our Bruce? The man who doesn't seem to have noticed that his own son is out sweeping the streets with a team?"

"Even if he can't be approached, there are others."

"And then you're going behind his back," Jason says. "None of them are going to listen to me anyway."

Bruce isn't even sure he's wrong.

"What did you know?"

"I fed him information," Jason says. "He thought I'd approve of his mission. I kind of do. And he needed someone on his side, and it sure as hell wasn't going to be Bruce."

"You put him in danger."

"He put himself in danger," Jason says. "And I gave him targets his team could handle, so that they wouldn't go digging into people they couldn't."

"Deathstroke."

"Was not one of my targets," Jason says. "I sent them after people who were weakened. Who were within their scope. Damian alone could take care of someone like Black Mask. If it keeps him from going after people like Deathstroke."

"Then why didn't you keep him from doing just that?"

"We had a falling out," Jason says. "One of his targets went bad. His team almost got killed. And since he couldn't go after the real culprit, he decided to blame me. Thought I'd made him do it."

"And then he went after Deathstroke."

Bruce sighs, reaching up to rub at his eyes.

"We emptied the prison," Bruce says. "And put them back where they were supposed to be. I made him tell his father."

Jason snorts.

"Let me guess," he says, "didn't go like you planned?"

"He... grounded Damian. He didn't even seem angry. He didn't tell the League, either."

"Wait," Jason says, "did you tell the League?"

"I had to," Bruce says. "I had to impress upon them how serious it was. They were... very willing to put their trust in Batman."

It's a mistake he's seeing a lot. People putting their trust in Batman, even when he fails. Even when
"Your Bruce is in my dimension now," Bruce says. "Hopefully learning something from my family. But all I can do now is try and fix what's here while I can."

"You're not him," Jason says, and Bruce isn't sure how he means it.

"I am," Bruce says. "And I think that might be the only chance I have of actually fixing things."

Jason squints at him, and Bruce gives him a small smile.

"Will you come?" He says. "I want to speak to them. To the whole family. I want to speak to them about Bruce, and about what's been happening, and about what's been happening with you. About... what happened with the Penguin."

He pauses for a moment, and then clears his throat.

"With your permission, of course."

Jason laughs.

"With your permission, of course," Jason mimics. "Of course. As if Batman always asks for permission before doing things."

"I try to," Bruce points out. "It's something I'm trying to be better at."

"Go right on ahead," he says. "They already know I was kicked out. Half of them probably watched me shoot the Penguin live, even if none of them have mentioned it to me."

It's not exactly an easy thing to discuss.

"But you're going to want to give them some time," Jason says, "family meetings are hard to pull together."

"I have it handled," Bruce says. "We'll be meeting at the manor around seven."

"Working fast," Jason says. "What were you going to do if I said no to your little plan?"

"Figure something else out," he says. "I'm handling things as they come up."

"Never would have guessed," Jason says with a grin. "You've got, what, two hours?"

"I need to eat before that," Bruce says. "And I don't want to burden Alfred with it. I'll get food and-"

"Why don't we eat?" He says. "I know a place on the way to manor. Makes good burgers."

It is an invitation to... something. To something nice. An opportunity to talk about things that aren't so grim, and Bruce takes it without question.

"I only have the suit," Bruce says.

"They won't be tailored to your expectations," Jason says, "but I can manage a civilian disguise."

Bruce smiles back at him.

"I'll manage," he says. "Somehow. Even if it isn't a perfect fit."
Joey presents him with a donut emblazoned with the bat symbol when he returns to the car. Half the box has already been eaten, and Slade suspects they've been sitting inside, waiting for his call to finish before they returned.

"Delicious," he says after he takes a bite. "Did Rose call you yet?"

_Not yet_, Joey signs.

"Then maybe I should drive. I'd rather not have you taking a call while driving."

"I can dri-" Damian starts.

"No," Slade says. "I don't let my Damian drive, and I'm certainly not letting _you_ drive. We're trying to stay low profile."

Rose calls a short while after they hit the road. He tries _very_ hard not to listen, but it's hard to miss the gist. She covers what they talked about, mentions her decision not to meet Slade, and then _very_ loudly demands to know if he's listening.

"I can't not when you talk so loud," Slade grumbles to himself. The entire phone call is strange, because he's only hearing Rose. Joey's communications are entirely subvocal, completely inaudible on their side of the call.

"I'll call you back later, Joey," she says. "Or you can call me when you get some privacy?"

He hears them say goodbye, and Joey hangs up.

"Not exactly ideal for privacy," Slade mutters to himself.

They reach Gotham around five. They're not long past the city limits when Slade gets a call from Dick.

"Slade," he answers, the phone pinched between his shoulder and the side of his head.

"Who do you have with you?" Dick asks.

"Joey and Damian," he says.

"No Bruce?"

"He's busy," Slade says. He still hasn't seen Bruce since they arrived, and he's starting to feel antsy.

"I was going to ask if you wanted to get dinner," Dick says. "It could just be the four of us."

"Is that Grayson?" Damian says, leaning up between the seats.

_Don't distract the driver_, Joey signs, but Damian isn't looking at him.

Joey rolls his eyes and looks away.

"Sure," Slade says. "Send us the address."

He doesn't have any plans, and Damian seems particularly eager to spend time with his eldest
brother. The moment Dick's off the phone, however...

"You can't tell him about the prison," Damian says. "You're forbidden from doing so."

"He's going to find out eventually," Slade says.

"Then let your worlds Batman be the one to tell him."

Slade grumbles to himself.

"Fine," he says. "But you know it's going to happen eventually."

Joey navigates them into the parking lot of a family restaurant that advertises all you can eat ribs on the menu, and Slade parks before turning around in his seat.

They're in suits. Actual vigilante gear. And he's not entirely sure how to deal with that.

He sighs, eyeing the stores across the parking lot, and glances to Joey.

"Does everyone have civilian clothes?"

"In the trunk," Joey says.

Damian holds up a small bag.

"Alright," Slade says. "Just me."

"Hold on," Joey says. "I'll go grab you something."

He climbs out, pulling his stuff out of the trunk, and hastily assembles a civilian outfit that fits over his current suit. Slade watches him cut across the parking lot, turning back to Damian.

"That's Grayson," he says, nodding towards a car that's just pulling in.

It does in fact turn out to be Grayson, who very nearly walks past them before abruptly slamming to stop, backpedaling quickly to walk over to the car when he spots Slade.

"Fancy meeting you here," he says with a grin when Slade rolls down the window. He leans right on in, waving at Damian, who's in the process of pulling a sweater on over his Robin gear. "And look what you've got hiding in the back."

"Joey's gone to get me something to pull on," he says. "I stick out too much."

"You don't say," he says. "Nice getup."

"I needed something that was going to stand up to a beating before anyone in the house would let us come back."

Dick looks confused, and Slade realizes he's been left out of the loop.

"We got pulled back," he says. "But we came back temporarily. Your world's Bruce and Slade have been relocated temporarily."

"Wow," Dick says. "Does the Justice League know?"

Slade shrugs.
"Guess we'll find out. I haven't gotten to talk to Bruce since we arrived this morning, outside of a few quick check ins. As far as I know, that's probably going to be part of what the meeting is about."

About them being there, about Bruce not being there, and... maybe what Damian's been up to.

And maybe whatever disturbing information he mentioned earlier.

Joey arrives with some clothes, and Slade steps out of the car, pulling them on. They're overly bulky, but in a city like Gotham no one is paying too close attention to what anyone else is doing.

"Joey!" Dick says, pulling Joey into a hug, and Slade glances between them.

"I shouldn't be surprised you two know each other so well," Slade grunts, "and yet I am."

"The vigilante community is one big messy family," Dick says. "Everyone knows everyone else. Hell, everyone's dated everyone else."

"Please tell me you two haven't dated," Slade says. He doesn't think he'll be able to handle it.

"Scout's honor," Dick says. "But I wouldn't ask Jason that question if you're sensitive to your kids dating."

"He didn't-

Not me, Joey signs quickly.

"...Rose?"

I don't know if I'd count those two as dating, Joey signs, wiggling his eyebrows at Dick.

Slade groans. Damian makes a horrified noise.

"I am right here!" Damian protests. "I don't want to listen to this."

"Then we'll sign it," Dick says with an even wider grin, and Damian storms off towards the restaurant door.

Probably shouldn't torture him so much, Joey signs, but the grin doesn't go away.

"This feels like a conspiracy," Dick says once they're settled. "The entire second generation pretty much knows, and the JL might have no idea."

"Possibly," Slade says, "but let's not go running off to tell them before we know any better."

This Damian turns out to be vegetarian, and mentions that fact no less than three times.

"Is your Damian not?" He asks Slade pointedly. "Did he not meet Batcow?"

"Please tell me that's not a real thing," he says.

"That is a real thing," Dick confirms.

Slade groans and wonders how he's going to get through dinner.
Chapter 33

Not a perfect fit turns out to mean so big it looks like he could fit a second person in there with him. The clothes hang off him, making him look alarmingly scruffy as they head into the place Jason's picked out.

It's not exactly fine dining. The place is fairly dirty, but Jason swears by their burgers as they slide into a booth.

"Tell me about your Jason," he says. "He said he had a good job?"

"He runs Wayne Outreach," he says. "Which exists to provide help in the community. Soup kitchen, free clinics, shelters."

"Runs, or runs?" Jason asks, and Bruce has no idea what he means.

"He's in charge," Bruce says, which seems to answer Jason's question.

"So he's the big man in town," Jason says. "He in the League?"

He seems to be making an effort to keep his voice down, and cuts the conversation when the waitress shows up to take their order. To Bruce's annoyance, Jason goes right on ahead and orders for both of them, giving Bruce a grin as the waitress leaves.

"Let me guess," he says, "you don't have cash."

Bruce pauses and realizes that no, he does not have cash, and grunts in response.

"So," Jason says. "He in the League?"

"He declined," Bruce says. "Roy is still trying to convince him though."

He winces the moment he says it. It has to be a sore spot. But Jason doesn't react.

"So that Jay can bother Ollie, I guess?"

"Oliver isn't part of it," Bruce says. "Roy is."

Jason looks surprised.

"You're telling me Roy is part of the league?"

"Oliver didn't want to be part of it," Bruce says. "He was of the opinion that Batman was, ahem, 'a desperate lower class citizen being taken advantage of by Gotham's corrupt upper class'."

"Wooooooow," Jason says with a snort. "How'd that go for him?"

"Roy was angry he wasn't willing to play ball. He visited us for a while, joined the League, and has been rubbing Oliver's nose in it ever since."

"Sounds like Roy," he says. "How'd Oliver take it when he found out? Or has he?"

"I think I gave him a brain aneurysm when I dropped into the voice," he says. "I sent the tape of it to Roy as a birthday gift."
"I'm just saying," Jason says, "if you have a copy of the tape, I would personally not mind seeing it."

Bruce pulls out his phone to check. He doesn't think should have it, but to his immense surprise there's a folder named FUNNY SHIT which has, among other things, the exact tape they just discussed.

He cues it up and hands the phone over to Jason, who cracks up at Oliver's reaction.

"Oh man," he says. "That's good. Roy would have... he'd have loved that."

Bruce's face falls.

"I'm sorry," Bruce says, "I heard about... I heard he was gone."

"For now," Jason says, which is a bizarre reaction to have.

"For... now?"

"Most of us have-"

Jason pauses as the food is delivered, and doesn't resume until the waitress has left.

"Most of us have died at least once," Jason says. "It's a thing that happens. I might have been the first, but I'm obviously not the last."

"Is this... common?" Bruce says carefully.

"It's a thing," Jason says with a shrug. "You get used to it. Roy's too stubborn to stay gone for long. He'll be back."

Jason's relationship with death is... complex. Confusing. And not something Bruce is entirely comfortable with, if he's being honest.

"Do I not make death jokes at home?" Jason asks, squinting across the table at him. "Because I have like, fifty crowbar jokes."

"No," Bruce says. "You didn't-"

He knows, but Jason doesn't, and he cringes.

"You didn't die where I'm from. You were kidnapped. It's not exactly... it isn't table talk."

It's not any talk. He doesn't want to talk about it. He doesn't want to discuss it with anyone, let alone Jason. Better if he never knows.

"Wild," Jason says. "Not going to tell me about it?" He asks, popping a fry into his mouth.

"I'd prefer not to," Bruce says. "It is... a touchy subject."

Jason looks him over like he's considering whether to push, but finally relents as Bruce gets to work on his burger.

"So why'd you choose him?" He asks. "For the cowl, I mean."

"Because he was the best fit for it," Bruce says. It's not hard to guess why he's asking. "Jason has a wide skillset, and had experience leading a group that no one else did. He was proficient in a wide
variety of skills, and he had training none of the others had."

"Thanks to Slade."

"In part," Bruce says.

"Don't know why you gave it up, honestly," Jason says. "You seem fit enough to manage it."

"I was infected," Bruce says. "The Joker-"

"Please don't tell me you were turning into the Joker."

He looks pained.

"I was," he says. "We stopped it, but we couldn't figure out how to revert it, and I couldn't risk it getting worse while I was in the field. I'm better now."

"Jesus," Jason says. "Don't mention that to anyone, alright? Everyone's a bit... sensitive about that stuff. If they find out that happened they're going to flip."

"Do I want to know why?"

"You really don't," Jason says.

Bruce finishes off his burger, settling back in his seat.

"It wasn't bad," he says. "I think I prefer Alfred-"

"Everyone prefers Alfred's cooking," Jason says.

"And maybe you'll get a chance to eat it again," Bruce says, offering him a small smile. "If everything goes well."

"We should probably get over there," Jason says with a sigh. "Can't say I'm looking forward to it, but..."

Bruce takes a moment to center himself. To put things in perspective.

Then he nods.

"I... know how I'm going to do things. And it might be hard when I do it. But I swear there's a plan, if you'll trust me."

"I trust him," Jason says. "Your Jason. So you've got as much trust as that gives you."

Bruce nods.

"Then hopefully things go well."

He really hopes they do. He wants that not just for Jason, but for the whole family.
Chapter 34

Dinner goes well. There's a fair bit of teasing from Dick and Joey towards Damian, but it tends to be fairly light and good natured, and Damian fires back at the older boys readily. It's nice. It's something just... nice, and he lets himself enjoy it, hoping Bruce is doing alright.

"Oh," Dick says as they head back to the cars, "someone's getting all doe-eyed."

Slade rolls his eye, and then realizes that Dick can't even see it under the sunglasses.

So he takes the sunglasses off, rolling his eye again to make a point.

"Never thought I'd say that about you, but here we are," Dick says

"He is quite different," Damian says. "Nothing at all like this world's Deathstroke."

He wrinkles his nose, and Dick glances towards Joey, well aware that Damian is effectively trash talking his father. Joey doesn't seem all that bothered though, offering only a quick shrug towards the glances.

We're going to the manor? Joey signs.

He seems to enjoy the fact that all three of them are fluent, and he hasn't said a word through the phone since they first went inside.

"That's the idea," Slade says.

I should probably-, Joey starts to sign, and Slade reaches out, ghosting his hand across Joey's own, halting the signs.

"You're coming," Slade says. "We'll have stuff to talk about with you, and even if you're not part of the whole bat family thing, you're a friend of the family and important to this whole situation."

"You can always sit tight for the first part of the meeting, and then someone can come get you. Big meetings like this tend to be in costume anyway, so identities aren't an issue," Dick adds. "Plus you already know about half of us."

Slade pulls his hand away, and Joey nods.

Alright, he signs.

Damian rides with Dick on the way back to the manor. It looks similar enough to the one Slade knows, but a lot of the details are different. The security on the entrance looks different, and Slade sits and waits while Damian hops out of Dick's car, jogging up to press his own hand to the scanner, opening the gate for him.

It's strange not being able to let himself into his own house.

Slade made a point of parking around back, climbing out and grabbing his things as he went. Joey did the same, sticking close to him.

Guess I should call Rose, he signed when Slade glanced over.

"Probably," Slade says. "Maybe once we're inside?"
He knocks on the back door. The last thing they want is anyone seeing them going in, even if the front isn't visible from the road anyway.

They have to wait several minutes before Dick appears, pulling the door open with a huff.

"Could have just come in through the front," he says, waving them in.

They find Alfred near the kitchen, and when he spots Slade he very nearly drops the tray in his hand, only *just* managing to catch it. He seems to be clued in by the fact that neither Damian nor Dick is attempting to disable him, but he *also* very obviously didn't know Slade was coming.

"...Should I ask?" He asks quietly.

It's strange to have Alfred be so unfamiliar with him. He obviously recognizes who he is, but he doesn't *know* him.

It hurts a little bit, if Slade is being honest with himself.

"Maybe after," Slade says. "Bruce shown up yet?"

"He's on his way," Dick says. "Or should be. Is anyone else...?"

He glances to Alfred, who nods.

"Several guests have already begun to arrive. Of those, a bit less than half have asked me if I knew what the meeting was about, and I told him, as honestly as I could, that they would have to wait and find out."

"I'm going to go down and see who's there," Dick says.

"I'll come," Damian volunteers immediately.

"Listen," Slade says, "don't mention me, and don't tell anyone what's going on yet. Let Bruce be the one to handle it, because the last thing I want is to have to wade my way through an army of bats trying to take me down because they got confused."

"We'll keep it to ourselves," Dick says. "And I'll let Tim know if he's already down there."

Dick peels off his outer layer, revealing his Nightwing costume, and Alfred collects up the civilian clothes as he does. Damian, Slade, and even Joey end up doing the same, and Alfred collects them up into a pile without complaint.

"Thanks," Slade says. "We only brought over a bit."

His bag had a few supplies that might be immediately useful, but with the box stored safely inside he didn't have room for civilian clothes.

*I need to call Rose before she gets angry with me for not calling,* Joey signs. *Is there a spare room...?*

"Oh, yeah," Dick says. "This way."

He leads Joey out, and Damian follows them out automatically.

Alfred looks him over.
"I must say," he says, "considering your demeanor, I suppose I should assume that you are from the same place as this version of Master Bruce...?"

"He's my husband," Slade says.

Alfred takes it better than most, but he still looks surprised, looking over Slade once more before giving a small nod.

"How unusual," he says. "But then many things about the last day have been."

There's a small beep, and Alfred turns away, checking with the manor's security system.

"I believe that is Master Bruce," he says. "Shall we meet them at the entrance way?"

Slade wants to see him. He feels almost desperate to see him, and the moment Bruce—his Bruce—crosses the threshold, Slade pulls him into a tight hug, burying his face in Bruce's shoulder.

"You're alright?" He asks quickly.

"More or less," Bruce says, winding his arms around Slade's waist to pull him closer. "You?"

"Fine," Slade says. "I had dinner with Dick and-"

He falters, eyes flicking up as he notices Jason coming inside.

"Master Jason," Alfred says, and he sounds so genuinely relieved to see him that Slade makes himself stay quiet, letting Alfred and Jason have their reunion as Alfred closes the door. They hug, even if it's only for a moment, and Alfred smiles up at the young man he helped raise.

"I wasn't sure if you'd be coming," Alfred says. "But it's good that you're here."

"Sure," Jason says, sounding less than convinced as his eyes slide over to where Bruce and Slade stand.

Slade clears his throat and releases Bruce as Jason squints at them.

"...Yep," he says. "Never going to get used to that."

"I actually need to speak to Alfred," Bruce says. "Is everyone already-"

"Downstairs? Yeah. Joey's calling Rose up here, but we said we'd come get him when it's time. You know how you're doing this? Because it's going to have to come from you."

Bruce is still a Bruce, even if he's not their Bruce, and there's absolutely no doubt in Slade's mind that things will go over better if it comes from him.

"Yes," Bruce says, and there's something awful and grim about the way he says it. He knows something Slade doesn't, something painful, and Slade doesn't like that at all.

"Just tell us what we need to do," Slade says.

"Go downstairs," Bruce says. "In costume. And... hold strong. Don't answer questions. Ignore everyone. Just wait. Don't tell anyone who you are. And let me... let me do what I need to."

What Bruce needs to is not going to be good. It's going to hurt, and Slade knows it. They both know it.
Even Jason seems to know it, his mouth set in a grim line.

"Alright," Slade says, leaning down to kiss Bruce. He wants the physical contact, even if he doesn't let himself linger for Alfred and Jason's sake.

As they break away, Bruce glances to Jason.

"Could you stay up here?" He asks. "Just for now. I want to go down together."

"If you think I'd be going down there on my own," Jason says, "you'd be dead wrong."

Bruce pulls away, and Slade lets him go. Alfred excuses himself to go with Bruce, leaving Jason and Slade alone.

"So you really do love him," Jason says, squinting at him even as Slade pulls his mask on, hiding his face.

"I do," Slade says, doing what he can to not be flippant about it. He's aware that their relationship seems impossible to the boys, and the last thing he wants is to imply that it's some kind of joke.

"He's already started to burn himself at both ends," Jason says. "And he's either playing a really, really elaborate game, or he's not up to his usual standards."

The former isn't news. Slade can see it in the way Bruce talks, in his body language. He's exhausted, burning himself out as he puts on a straight face and tries to be brave. They need to sit down and talk, but there's too much to do and Bruce won't let himself stop.

After the meeting, though. After the meeting Slade will make him if he has to.

The latter, however, might be.

"What do you mean?" Slade asks, squinting even if Jason can't see it.

"Someone was watching us while we ate," Jason says. "I'm not sure if Bruce noticed. Think he might have been too distracted."

"What kind of someone?" Slade asks. It's the first he's heard of it, and he doesn't like it at all.

Jason shrugs, pulling on his own mask. His costume is... impractical, to say the least. There's too much bare skin. Too many places with no armor. Why are his arms exposed like that?

"No idea," he says. "Someone up on a roof, watching us. Only caught a glimpse. Whoever they were, they were good."

Slade can think of any number of people who might be possibilities. The Justice League might have caught wind. It could be a member of the family themselves, making sure Bruce is good to his word. Or it could be danger.

"I'll keep an eye out," Slade says. He's not going to let Bruce go off alone if he's got some kind of stalker. The mansion should be secure, but elsewhere? "But tell him before you go downstairs. He needs to know."

Jason hesitates, then nods.

"We'll talk more after," Slade says. He can hear Alfred and Bruce returning, their footsteps loud in
the quiet manor. "And I'll see you down there."

Slade heads down to the cave, not sure that he's ready for whatever is about to happen.
"Is Alfred coming?" Jason asks as Bruce returns to the kitchen, and Bruce nods.

"He'll be coming down with us," he says. "He's as much a part of this as anyone else.

They're at the entrance to the batcave when Jason speaks up, turning to Bruce.

"Did you know we were being watched during dinner?"

The answer is no. Bruce didn't know. But thinking on it, it makes sense that he would be. He's known someone was watching him for a while. The only reason he didn't notice was his focus on Jason himself.

"No," he admits. "But it's alright. I think I know who it is."

Or more accurately he knows who it might be. There's two completely different possible groups it might be, and he's sure it won't be long before he finds out just which of his two guesses are correct.

It might be the Justice League. In their position, he can't say he wouldn't do the same thing. Having someone keep an eye on him is the smart answer, and it would be easy for someone like J'onn to spy without being caught.

The other very real option feels less plausible: That it's Bruce himself. They don't know for sure how the swapping works, and it's possible that Bruce found some way to avoid it, or that someone else went into the portal in his place. It doesn't quite make sense, but everything the stalker's been doing fits perfectly with how Bruce would handle things in his place.

Keep their distance. Keep an eye out. Wait and see what happens.

But neither of those answers explains Clark's ominous *Bruce thought someone was watching him* warning, and that leaves him feeling unsettled.

He turns his attention back to Jason. He doesn't have time to think about other things, only about the matter at hand. If the stalker means him harm, they've had plenty of opportunities. More likely they're a friendly observer, or neutral at worst.

Jason looks unhappy. Even if most of Jason's face is hidden behind his mask, Bruce can still see the stress written onto his features.

Bruce has already asked for his trust. He's already gotten the best he can hope for. So he does what he can to prepare Jason.

"Please don't speak up," Bruce says, "until it's time."

Jason has never been willing to accept instructions without explanation, and for a moment he's silent.

"Until it's time?" He asks, cocking his head.

"You'll know."

Jason doesn't agree. He doesn't nod. But he's silent, and that's more than enough of an answer as they descend into the cave. Slade is there, mask on, leaning against the wall by the computer. Everyone else is gathered around the large table in the center of the cave, likely pulled out of a
storage room in preparation for the meeting.

Everyone has come in costumes, and while many of their costumes are quite different, he still recognizes more than half of them.

Damian and Dick sit side by side at the table, obvious and immediately recognizable. To their right is Tim, sitting with a blond girl in a dark purple outfit that he identifies as Stephanie. There's a young woman dressed all in black, gold accents on her costume her only distinguishing feature. Beside her is Duke, whose costume is a neon yellow, and then Barbara. Not the Barbara he knows, but a much younger Barbara, still filled with the same youthful enthusiasm that his Barbara once had. Beside her is a woman who might be in her late twenties, her fiery red hair obvious but also completely unrecognizable to him. Beside her is another young woman, a bit younger, with dark hair and a no-nonsense look. He doesn't recognize her either.

There is also someone else in the cave. Bruce doesn't know who, but he knows there is. Someone's up near the ceiling, crouched just out of sight. He's having a hard time pinning down how exactly he knows, but he knows out of something close to pure instinct. At best, he can see a vague outline, but Jason's warning has put him on high alert.

But it doesn't matter. Whether they're there or not doesn't change what's going to happen. Alfred comes down the stairs just behind them, and takes a position just beside Slade, his hands clasped together as he prepares to watch the proceedings.

But it's not Alfred or Bruce or even Slade who has the group's attention. It's Jason. The moment they seem him, the room goes quiet, all conversation dying away. The reactions are mixed, but the overwhelming sentiment is a poor one: Jason should not be there.

He'd say it breaks his heart, but it doesn't. His heart's already broken, snapped in half the moment he understood what had happened. The moment he understood how bad things were. All he has left is the hope he can put things back together. That he can fix this family that is not his own.

"Batman," Damian says, because he's not father, "why is Todd here? He was kicked out of the family."

As if he doesn't know. As if he's somehow forgotten.

"He is," Bruce says, offering a silent apology to Jason for what he's about to do. Jason has already been hurt, and Bruce is going to do something monstrous to him.

But that's alright. If this Jason hates him, that's alright. Because if he hates him but gets his family back, then things will be better.

Bruce is only temporary. In a few days, maybe a week, he'll be gone. He'll go home to his own Jason. And in the end, this Jason is going to be left behind.

This Jason needs people who will support him. Bruce has done everything he can to prepare him for it, but even so Bruce feels like it's not enough.

At the same time, he feels like it's too much. Jason's already ready for it. He was ready for it before he knew there was a plan. He knew that he was being thrown out of the family. That they were turning their backs on him.

"But we should make it official before we deal with family business," Bruce says.

Batman does not make things official. Batman simply does and lets everyone else follow along.
"I want a vote," he says. "So there can be no question about where we all stand."

"What - what _exactly_ are we voting on?" Tim asks, wary. He glances to Dick, who offers him only a small shrug.

"To remove Red Hood from the family entirely. I want a vote."

The cave is silent. There is a clear sense of unease. They don't know what's happening, and they obviously don't like it. Some of them know he is not the real Bruce, but that doesn't really change what's happening. He's leading the family in their Bruce's stead just the same, and they've let him slide into that position without a word of complaint.

He still has control, even if he isn't the real thing.

"Vote," Bruce says.

Damian raises his hand.

The order the hands go up in makes it clear how things stand. It gives Bruce a clear lay of the land, even if he doesn't even know everyone's names. He knows who trusts, and who doesn't. It makes things easier.

He's going to destroy all of them, but it's the only option he sees. They need to understand.

The order of the hands doesn't really matter. It doesn't matter that Dick's the second last to do so, and that he does so with an apologetic look towards Dick. What matters is that, in the end, almost all of them _do_ raise their hands.

Jason stands just to the side, arms folded over his chest, not reacting. Bruce wants to believe that his response is because of Bruce's warnings, but he knows deep down that it isn't. Jason was always prepared for this. Jason always knew this was going to happen.

Only one hand stays down, unmoving.

He turns to her, the red headed woman, and lets the cowl and cape do the brooding for him. He's mastered intense looks. He knows how to use them.

"You vote no," he says. It is not a question.

"He shouldn't be kicked out of the family for this," she says, "when I did the same thing and wasn't."

"You didn't do it on live TV," Duke says quietly. "That's kind of different."

"I still vote no," she says.

It gives Bruce a glimmer of hope, and he moves on.

"Majority rules," he says. "Red Hood will be expelled from the family."

He doesn't let himself look at Jason. Jason's mask will hide his mouth, but it won't hide his eyes, and he can't let himself see them right then. He has to stay focused. He doesn't know if he'll be able to do what he needs to if he can see the hurt there.

"Spoiler," he says, watching as Stephanie perks up. "Why is he being expelled from the family? Because it's public?"
"Because he killed," she says carefully. "It being public doesn't matter."

Tim clears his throat.

"It wasn't murder," he says. "Just... attempted." He's trying to be careful, Bruce realizes. Trying not to out that Bruce might not know because he wasn't there. But it doesn't matter anyway. He's already ready for this.

"Attempted still counts," Bruce says. "Because it was only attempted through Red Hood's mistake. If Red Hood had his way, there would have been nothing attempted about it."

Out of the corner of his eye he sees Jason's arms fold tighter across his chest.

"Nightwing and others, have been out of the area. Let's make sure we're all on the same page."

He turns to the red haired woman, his gaze obvious despite the white lenses of his cowl hiding his eyes.

"What did he do?"

"Attempted murder," she says.

"Of who?"

"The Penguin."

"Full names."

"Oswald Cobblepot."

She doesn't like it. No one does. Everyone in the room understands something is going on, but they don't understand what. Even those who have more information than the others don't really know.

"Is there a possibility that the victim wasn't Oswald Cobblepot, Signal?"

Duke shifts nervously in his chair.

"No," he says. "It was definitely him. I was on patrol when he was taken to the hospital, and he was there a while. He only got out recently, and now he's missing."

"Is there a possibility that the culprit wasn't Red Hood, Batgirl?"

He makes a point of passing the questions around. Of making different people answer. Of making everyone involved in the trial.

Because that's what it is: The Trial of Red Hood.

"No," she says. "There's a ton of footage of him doing it, but even if it was someone else in the suit... That was his motorcycle, and his riding skills. It was definitely him."

"Is there any question about when it occurred, or where, Robin?"

"No," he says. "Multiple sources record it. They all corroborate each other."

The who is done. The when is done. Even though some of them know he isn't their Batman, they still answer immediately as if he is. It's ingrained. It's the default response. Batman asks, and they
"The weapon?" He asks, turning to Dick.

"His... his dual pistols. Although he only used one."

Bruce doesn't know where the guns are. In the cave, maybe, retrieved from the scene and stored until later. It doesn't really matter.

Behind the lenses, he lets his eyes flick up. The figure perched on a walkway near the ceiling at the far end of the cave hasn't moved. They're probably watching, and Bruce lets himself go back to ignoring them.

A part of him hopes that he's wrong. That it is this world's Bruce Wayne. That he's seeing what's happening here.

He wishes he could see it. He wishes he could understand.

"And?" He asks.

Dick is silent, confusion written on his face.

"And what? Listen- I don't... I don't like this. This trial. Can we-"

"No," Bruce says, and Dick immediately goes quiet. "We're detectives. So we do this properly. He used his pistols. But with what?"

"A bullet," the dark haired woman volunteers. "Obviously."

"Was it retrieved at the scene, or did they pull it out of Penguin?"

He's happy Jason has the mask. He's not sure this Jason has the kind of self control required to keep a straight face through this.

"Uh," Barbara says quietly. "Penguin?"

"That's a guess," Bruce says. "We don't guess. We're better than that."

The room is silent. No one knows the answer.

Bruce changes course.

"Who watched the shooting live?"

Dick, Tim, Barbara, and the dark haired woman put their hands up.

"What went through your mind when you watched?" He asks to the dark haired woman. "What did you think?"

"That it was going to be trouble for us," she says, her arms folding across her chest.

Bruce turns to Barbara, repeating his question.

"I..." She hesitates, uncertain. "I thought it was strange."

"Strange how?"
"Jason has... he's been-

"Red Hood," Bruce corrects.

"Red Hood has been working with us," Barbara says. "I thought maybe it was a plan you had with him."

There's another flicker of hope. Another chance. He turns to Dick.

"What did you think when you saw?"

Dick doesn't want to say it in front of Jason. It's obvious in the way he turns away, eyes refusing to look at him.

"What did you think when you saw?" Bruce repeats.

"That you were going to be angry with him." Dick says, his voice quiet.

Dick, who would know better than anyone. There's a quiet murmur in the room, like Dick has crossed a line. Like he's said something he shouldn't. Bruce ignores it and turns to Tim. Tim doesn't make him ask.

"That something else had to be going on," he says. "That Jason-"

"Red Hood," he corrects.

"That Jason," Tim says, his tone harsh, "wouldn't kill someone for no reason."

"You wanted to know why."

Tim's mouth is set in a firm line. He's unhappy. They're all unhappy.

That's good.

"Did you follow up?" Bruce asks, already knowing the answer.

"No," Tim says. "It didn't matter."

"Because he'd already been kicked out."

"Because it doesn't matter if he had a good reason or not. He still killed someone."

What he's doing is cruel. It's vicious. But Bruce tells himself it's necessary. Because sometime soon he's going to go home, and all they're going to have is each other.

They need to have each other.

"How do you know?" Bruce asks, and the room is so quiet that he can hear his own heart beat.

"How do you know he killed someone?" Bruce asks. "You're detectives. Act like it."

"He... he did it on live TV," Duke offers. He does not sound certain. "Everyone saw it. We know it was him, and we know the Penguin was shot. There's easily a half dozen videos from different sources. Case closed."

"Red Robin," Bruce says. "You're a detective. Would you close that case?"
Tim shifts in his seat, glancing towards Jason for just a moment.

"...No," he finally says, his eyes sliding back to Bruce.

"What would you do instead?"

"I would... check the evidence," he says. "You could match bullet casings from the scene against Jason's guns. That would confirm he was the shooter, or at the very least that someone in his suit with his guns with his driving skills was."

"Did you?"

More silence. But the silence is good. The silence means they're thinking. It means they're turning things over in their heads, examining the situation and trying to understand.

"No," Tim admits.

"Did anyone?"

No one answers.

"Is that what this is?" Stephanie asks. She sounds defensive. "You're admonishing us for poor detective work?"

"No," Bruce says, "but I went to Gordon today."

Barbara in particular seems nervous at the mention of her father.

"I asked for the case file. And I asked for the evidence," Bruce says.

"For the bullet casings," Dick says. "And the slug itself, assuming it's not still inside Cobblepot."

"Yes," Bruce says.

He lets the silence linger. It feels like a weight, weighing down everyone in the room, and the anxiety they're all feeling is almost palpable.

Bruce is happy his back is to Slade. He doesn't want to see his reaction to all this.

The girl all in black leans forward slightly.

"And?" She says. Her voice is quiet and raspy, like she's not used to speaking.

"There isn't one."

"What?" Steph asks immediately. "They didn't find any?"

"No," Bruce says. "There wasn't one."

"We saw it," Tim says. "I saw it. Are you saying someone... what, hijacked three live broadcasts and edited who knows how many videos?"

"No," Bruce says. "There was no bullet."

"Oh fuck," Dick says. He gets it. He understands, and he looks horrified. "It was a blank."

Bruce doesn't let the muted horror and confusion take over. Instead he pushes onward, pressing the
point before they can have time to think about it.

"What I want to know," he says, "is how you all failed to find this. How not one single one of you went and checked the evidence. If any of you had gone to the hospital to check on Cobblepot, you'd have found that his injuries were inconsistent with being shot at point blank range with a bullet, and perfectly consistent with being shot at point blank range by a blank. If any of you had gone to the station to check evidence with Gordon or any of our other police resources, you'd have found that no casings were discovered at the scene.

He's silent for a moment. The horror is there. The shock. The confusion. They do not understand what is happening.

"If any of you had asked Jason, you'd have known this."

The dark haired woman bares her teeth.

"What about you?" She says. "You're not innocent in this. You're the one who told us all he was being kicked out of the family."

"I did," Bruce says, "and every single one of you accepted it without a word."

"Was this a test?" Duke says. He sounds panicked. "Did we just fail it?"

"No," Bruce says. "It wasn't a test. You don't make tests with people's lives."

He's almost there. He can see the light at the end of the tunnel. It's killing him inside, but he knows that if he pushes just a little bit further, it will work. He can make them understand.

"There are nine of you," Bruce says. "Nine people in front of me. And eight of you voted to throw your brother out of the family because he shot Oswald Cobblepot in the head. The ninth only voted no because they also are guilty of the same crime."

"I change my vote," Barbara says, desperate. "I changed my mind."

"The votes cannot be changed," Bruce says. His voice is rising, and he knows it. He's doing what he can not to shout. They don't need shouting. But there's a panic building in the room, and he has to maintain control. "The vote is already finished, because none of you stopped and asked."

"Because we trusted you!" The red haired woman says. She's on her feet, leaning over the table. Her anger is obvious. "You told us you were going after him. We trusted that you would do your due diligence. We all assumed you would check these things when you said you were going to handle it! You can't blame us for your mistake!"

Dick won't take his eyes off Jason. The horror he feels is obvious, written all over his face. He looks like he's going to be sick.

"Because you trusted Batman," Bruce says. "Because Batman cannot be wrong. Because when Batman says jump, you jump, and then you ask if it was good enough."

"How dare you!" The red haired woman roars, and Tim reaches up, touching her shoulder to try and pull her back.

"Kate," he pleads. "Please, just-"

Bruce slams his hand onto the table, and everyone jumps.
"You have all seen that he is making mistakes. Every single one of you. Every single one of you has been working with him, watching him. Every single one of you has seen him work. Has seen Batman do something that Batman should not do. And every single one of you has thought to yourself I must be wrong, because Batman isn't."

There's silence in the room.

"Am I wrong?" Bruce says. "Am I wrong? If I am wrong, then tell me. Tell me that you've gone to the others in your family. That you've spoken to Dick or Tim or Barbara or anyone. Tell me that you've expressed your concerns that Batman has gone out of line to each other. That you are preparing to take action."

There's more silence.

"Tell me that I'm wrong."

The cave is dead silent. No one speaks. No one moves. There is nothing but horror and regret as every single person before him thinks back to situations where they've thought that exact thing and made the wrong choice.

No one says a word.

He lets the silence stay. He lets the horror sink in. He lets them regret. And only then, once it's done, does he speak.

"Batman is a man. He makes mistakes. And over the years he has built a belief in him that is unparalleled. You all trust him. You all believe in him. And you have let that belief blind you. You have let that belief destroy this family. He has hurt so many people here, and has gone completely unchecked for far too long. He's kept terrible secrets from you. He's ignored people who need his attention. And he has let all of you believe that this family is him first, and everyone else second."

They know. They know because he's not talking about himself. He's not saying I. He's talking about someone else.

So he reaches up and pulls back the cowl.

"I'm not your Bruce Wayne, but I am a Bruce Wayne. I should know better than anyone the kind of sway that he has over things. But what has happened here shouldn't be happening. You should be a family. You should trust each other."

He worries he's broken them. That he's gone too far and too fast. But they don't even know. They don't even know how bad it is. They only know the part they've each played. They don't know what anyone else has suffered.

He worries he's broken himself as much as he's broken them.
Slade doesn't know everything. He knows what Bruce has told everyone, and what he can guess. He
knows that someone's watching them, but not why.

Most of all he knows that Bruce is breaking.

Even from behind, seeing only his back, he can see it. Can see the slump of his shoulders. Can hear
the rasp of his voice.

He steps forward and rests a hand on Bruce's shoulder, feeling him ease into it automatically. Bruce
needs to know he's there. That he isn't alone.

He needs to share the burden, so Slade takes it from him.

He reaches up, pulling his mask off.

There's panic in the cave, but it's the right amount of panic. It's the panic that comes from finding out
that Deathstroke the Terminator has snuck his way into your secret base. People are on their feet.
People go for weapons. And it's only Dick and Tim's desperate cries that keep thins from going to
blows.

"Woah!" Dick yells. "No weapons, he's fine!"

"That-" Steph says, "that's Deathstroke, Dick!"

"Their Deathstroke," Damian says. "Not ours."

Barbara looks Damian over, and then glances to Dick and Tim, realization hitting her.

"You knew," she says.

"They knew who we were," Slade says. Things are too on edge right then. Someone has to keep the
conversation from veering too hard, and it's obvious to him that Bruce needs a moment to recover, so
it falls to him. "Not what this talk was about. A lots been happening, and we wanted to talk to all of
you at once."

"So who are you, exactly?" The red haired woman says. She looks less than pleased, but she does
put a batarang away, sitting back in her seat.

"Slade Wilson," he says. "My counterpart in this universe is Deathstroke, but I've retired from that
position. Both Bruce and I are from an alternate reality. There, I'm part of this family. I sit on the
Justice League. I operate as the Gotham Knight."

They don't believe him. It's obvious, and he can't entirely blame them. From what he's seen, the idea
of him being a good person is as alien to them as any of the literal aliens they deal with regularly.

"And he's married to father," Damian adds, which creates another explosion of noise.

If they were struggling to believe him before, they sure as hell don't believe that.

"Quiet," Bruce says, and it cuts through the noise like a knife as everyone goes silent. Even after
everything he's just said, Bruce still commands the room.
But the silence doesn't last.

"Listen," Dick says, and he sounds almost desperate. "I know we have a lot to talk about, but... but can Jason just join us now?"

Jason's still standing just off to the side. He's just watched the entire family vote him out, and now he's watched the entire family come to realize that they're wrong.

"You voted him out," Bruce says.

It's like he just kicked a goddamn dog, because almost everyone winces. Most avert their eyes. There's shame there.

"And we're bringing him back," Dick says. "Because we... we made a mistake. We trusted Bruce, and we didn't trust him, and that was our mistake."

"That's for Jason to decide," Slade says.

Slade likes to think that Bruce is proud of him right then, because it's a move straight from Bruce's playbook. They both know that Jason wants back into the family. This Jason, just like their Jason, is desperate for that reconciliation. He wants to be part of the family. He's willing to make sacrifices for it, and he has.

Maybe he shouldn't be. Maybe he'd be better if he was away from all of them. If he was with people who had never doubted him. But that isn't what he wants.

So Slade's put it on his plate. He's offered up their forgiveness. And when Jason says yes—because Slade doesn't believe for a moment that he won't—they'll be thankful to him that they gave him a second chance.

Jason doesn't say yes.

"Tell me what he did," Jason says.

The room is silent in response, and Slade gives Bruce's shoulder another squeeze.

"If you want me back," Jason says, "if you're actually serious about this? Then you need to give something back. You need to tell me something he did to you. You need to tell me that I'm not the only one."

He's not speaking to any one person. He's speaking to the group. Slade doubts every single one of them has been personally hurt. But they've seen things and heard them, and some of them have been hurt.

That's what he needs. That's what he wants. To hear it.

"He made me lie," Dick says.

Every set of eyes in the room turns to Dick. His emotions are laid bare, raw and painful. It hurts to talk about, but he's saying it anyway, because Jason's asked him to.

"When I died—when everyone thought I died—I understood why I had to pretend to be dead. I understood that. I knew it was important. But I... I didn't want to lie to you guys. I didn't want to lie to the family. I knew it was wrong, but I... I accepted it, in the end. I let him tell you I was dead. I let you all believe that. I should have gone to you separately, no matter what he said. I shouldn't have let
you mourn."

He blames himself. He blames himself for accepting something that the other Bruce made him do.

Slade is very, very happy that he doesn't have to look at the other Bruce. He's not sure he could hold himself back. He's not sure he has that kind of self control as he watches Dick sag into his seat, refusing to make eye contact with anyone.

"That was him?" Tim asks quietly. "I thought...

He trails off, what he thought obvious.

Slade wonders how many other things have happened because of Batman.

"He used me," Tim says. "Maybe it's not—no, it's definitely not as bad as what happened to anyone else—but when I came back I believed in the knight protocol. I believed we needed a team. I still do. And I went to him and I gave him all my ideas, and I poured my heart out, and he said yes. He said yes, that was what we'd do. He backed me and that felt so, so good, and then it was..."

He trails off.

"It was a sham," Barbara says. "Like I said at the trial."

"The trial?" Duke says. "What trial?"

Another secret. Slade suspects they could be here for days, just peeling back all the layers. Just watching it all come out.

"We had a trial," Dick says, "after what happened with Kate."

There's a not of names being thrown around, and Slade subtly double checks the spy in the room. Still perfectly still. Still watching. He's struggling to imagine that Bruce didn't notice, but Bruce hasn't said anything. Maybe he's being foolish, trusting that Bruce will notice without enhanced senses, but there's no way to bring it up.

He just has to trust him.

"You had a trial," the red haired woman—Kate, apparently—says. "For me. Without me there."

"You had a trial without even inviting me?" Duke says. "Who was even there?"

"The same people it always is," Barbara says. "The people who were in the family before Bruce started closing himself off."

They all seem to know exactly who that entails. It gives a clear line in the sand, a marker. A before and an after.

"He's been wrong for a long time," Dick says. "And we've all... we've all been in denial. We've all let him keep doing these things because we trust him. Because we didn't trust each other. That's what this is about."

"That and the fact that we have a second Bruce around," Stephanie mutters under her breath.

"Just the one," Slade says, letting his hand finally drop. "Your Bruce is currently in our world, along with your Slade. We're in their places until we go home."
"Can you do that at any time?" Kate asks.

"Yes," Slade says. No point in hiding it. "We want to stabilize the situation before we do so."

"Can you just-" Dick says, and then he falters for a moment. Finally he stands up, circling around the table to approach Jason.

"Please," he says, and he sounds so desperate. "Please come sit down with us so we can talk this out."

Jason stares at his eldest brother—if he even considers him that—and then finally cocks his head.

"Well," he says, "I suppose if you're going to ask so nicely."

Jason joins the table, and Slade lets out a small sigh of relief.

"I do want to know what happened," Barbara says. "Because this Bruce was right. He-"

"This is confusing," Duke mutters.

"This is Bruce," Slade says. "Your is Batman."

"Which makes you Slade," Tim says.

"You should sit too," the dark haired woman says. "If part of this is that Batman shouldn't be over us, then the same should go for Bruce."

"We'll sit," Bruce says, "but so should Alfred."

He glances over his shoulder, and Alfred nods politely before stepping up.

They all sit.

"We don't know..." He pauses, then nods towards the person he thinks is Cassandra, the red haired woman, and the dark haired woman beside her.

"That's Cass," Dick says, gesturing to the woman in the full-face mask. "We told you about her."

"Cassandra," she says with a nod. Slade gets the impression she has something going on, because she's barely said a word since they got there, but she's not mute either.

"My name is Katherine Kane," the red haired woman says, and Bruce's head immediately jerks up.

"Wait," he says, "Kate? My cousin Kate? I thought it was a coincidence."

"It was," Kate says. "I began operating as Batwoman before I knew who you were. It runs in the family, you could say."

"Helena," the last woman says. "I go by Huntress."

"You know everyone else?" Duke asks. He sounds hopeful.

"We know you," Slade says. "All of you exist in some world as part of our family. Either directly, or as the protege of someone who is."

Duke seems happy with that. Happy that he isn't forgotten.
"Back to the point," Barbara says. "Bruce is right. We didn't do... any sort of detective work. We let ourselves trust that Bruce was doing everything, and didn't check anything. But even taking every single thing we just heard as the truth-"

"I'm going to check," Tim mutters under his breath. "You can bet on that."

"Even if it is the truth, Jason still shot the Penguin with a blank, and I don't get why. Why... why do any of that? Why do this?"

She looks to Jason, waiting for an explanation.

"I had a lot of reasons," he says. "It would take all day to explain them all. Penguin did a lot of stuff you guys don't know about. He... ruined my father's life. He's pretty much the reason I was on the streets so young. And he was getting away with it. So I decided to take him down."

"Lots of ways to do that without shooting a man," Tim points out. "Or fake shooting a man."

"There was a plan," Jason says. "A whole... a whole big plan. Bruce thought it was because I was killing off the Red Hood identity, but it was the opposite. Killing off Penguin like that gives Red Hood a level of infamy that he had lost. It would get me into places I couldn't. But every part of that plan collapsed when Artemis and Bizarro were killed."

Jason's lost so much, and it kills him to hear that.

"But you could have told... someone," Dick says. He sounds cautious. Wary.

"I could have," Jason says, "but I didn't. Because Batman said he trusted me. When I tried to kill the mayor..." He makes air quotes around the word kill. "I was operating as fast as I possibly could. I had minutes to get the antidote to him, and I didn't have minutes to explain all of that to Batman. So I acted as fast as I could, the best way I could. It worked. It got me in with Black Mask, let me keep him from having his own personal Superman at his beck and call. It was a good plan, and it worked, and Batman almost stopped me."

Dick understands.

"So you did the same thing," Dick says. "The exact same thing. You attacked someone during a speech they were making in public, on live TV, in front of everyone. And you made it look like you shot them at point blank range. So that he'd recognize it. So that he'd know."

"To see if he would assume the worst," Steph says quietly.

"And he did," Kate finishes.

"Fuck," Dick says under his breath.

"You do not know the half of it, Dickiebird," Jason says, leaning back in his seat. He's not quite back to normal (or what Slade thinks is normal for him), but he's no longer all tension and anxiety. Slade thinks he's enjoying what's happening, in a big fucked up way. He has, in a very real way, been vindicated. He's been proven right.

"How can there be more?" Duke asks. "Isn't that enough?"

"It isn't enough until you reach the bottom," Slade says. "Until there's no more secrets."

"It's not enough until he's thrown out of his own family," Jason says, and his voice is bitter. "It isn't
enough until everyone knows what kind of a person he is."

"What does that mean?" Dick asks. "Didn't we just establish what kind of a person he is? He's making stupid, rash judgements. He's making us keep secrets from each other. He's putting being Batman first and everything else a distant second. And that's not even touching the wedding."

Jason looks to Bruce, and Bruce clears his throat.

"I won't tell you what you should or shouldn't do, Jason," Bruce says. "If you want to keep it to yourself, you can. But if you want to-

"I want to," Jason says. "I want them to know."

Bruce sighs, reaching up to rub at his temples. He looks tired, and Slade fights the urge to simply pull him against him right there at the table.

Probably not the best time, and those who didn't already know keep sneaking him looks as it is.

"Then tell them," Bruce says. "But please not as badly as you told me. I don't think-

He falters, eyes flipping to Damian.

"I don't think that's appropriate."

Slade is not often afraid. Not really. He's almost never afraid for himself, and he's confident enough in his family and their skills that he's rarely afraid for them either.

But right then? Right then he's afraid. He's afraid because Bruce won't meet his eyes. It tells him that whatever he's about to hear is going to hurt him as much as everyone else.

"Ask me," Jason says to the table, "what happened that night. After I shot the Penguin."

Everyone looks at everyone else. No one wants to be the one to ask.

So Slade does it.

"What happened after you shot the Penguin?" Slade asks, leaning forward slightly.

"There was a ship in Gotham. You all saw it on the news, afterwards. It was going to crash and kill ten thousand people. My friends were on that ship. So I slipped away from the cops and went to help them. Batman stopped me. He dragged me away from that fight to make me fight him, and before he so much as asked me what I was thinking, he punched me so hard it shattered my helmet."

Tim makes a noise. He's the only one. Everyone else is silent.

"That's not-" Tim says, faltering before he tries again. "That isn't even possible. Your helmet is as durable as a motorcycle helmet. Batman would have to... he'd have to be finding at full strength to crack it. That kind of blow could have killed you. He doesn't..."

Tim trails off. He doesn't want it to be true. He doesn't want to believe that Batman would do it.

"He told me he was a fool for ever believing in me," Jason says, ignoring Tim's protest. "And then he hit me again and broke the other half of my helmet. He told me that I broke the deal, and that Red Hood was done. I got rescued by Bizarro. By my friend. But when it was all over and done with, they died on the ship and I was thrown free."
Slade does not have words for the emotion he's feeling. He can't move. He's frozen perfectly still.

"And then, as I watched my friends die in front of me, Batman decided that then would be the perfect time to arrest me. To lay me out right there on the roof. To tear the symbol off my shirt and drag me by the helmet off to Arkham. To tell me this was my fault. And the only reason I didn't end up there was because Roy showed up to save me. Roy, who nursed me back to health. Who stitched up all my injuries. Who put my arm in a cast. I couldn't open my right eye for three weeks."

Slade struggles to put words to it. To understand what he is feeling. It is one of the hardest things he's ever done.

"That was... that wasn't an arrest," Dick says. "That was anger. He was angry, so he..."

He can't make himself finish.

"He beat you," Kate says. Her voice is hard. There's no emotion to it. "He was angry because he thought you'd betrayed him, so he beat you. It wasn't to arrest you. It wasn't any of that. He did it because he was angry."

Rage. Or something like it. Something even more extreme. Rage might be a fire. This is something else: A laser, aimed at this world's Batman. At this world's Bruce.

If he ever sees him again, Slade knows he'll kill him. There's no if. He'll kill him.

He'll kill him for touching Jason. For hurting him. But for everything else, too. For destroying the family that Slade values so much. For making them turn on each other.

He'll destroy him.

Maybe it's better if they never meet.
Chapter 37

It isn't any easier to hear the second time around. Even if Jason is kinder with it, even if he's less explicit and doesn't give them every single detail, it still hurts hearing it. The reactions are what he expects: Despair. They're horrified by what Batman's done, and their parts in it. None of them were there on the roof. None of them knew. But they knew about other things. They've allowed things to keep going. They didn't speak up, and now things have crashed and burned in the most horrific way imaginable.

Damian slides into Dick's lap and curls against him, and Dick wraps an arm around him.

"I think," Alfred says carefully, "that we might wish to take a short break. I will... I will collect drinks and snacks for everyone, while we all take a moment to... to digest what we have learned."

Bruce is fairly sure Alfred's going upstairs to cry in private. He doesn't want to be seen when he does it, and snacks are a convenient excuse to be away from the cave for a while.

"Alright," Bruce says, because no one else is willing to speak. "We can continue in a little bit."

He doesn't put a time to it. They'll come back when he's ready.

The moment he's said it, people begin to break off. They cluster in pairs and small groups, whispering quietly to themselves. Sharing their shock and pain with one another.

Bruce turns his attention to Slade. Slade hasn't moved an inch since Jason told his story, and Bruce is careful as he reaches out, resting a hand on Slade's forearm.

"Slade," he says quietly. "Talk to me."

Slade is silent for a moment, and then turns his eye away.

"I can't," he says. "You'll hate it."

"You want to kill him," Bruce says. It isn't a hard jump to make. Slade is a different person than he was, and he's never struck Bruce as someone interested in revenge, but after what he heard...

It turns Bruce's stomach just thinking about it.

"Yes," Slade says. "He's not you. He's... he's something rotten. He's a monster."

Bruce leans over, resting his head on Slade's shoulder.

"I need you here," he says quietly. "I need you with me. This is... this is better. It's out in the open. But I still need to help them be better. I need to help them move past this, and for that I need you. It can't be me."

He knows it can't be him. Even if he's not their Bruce, the similarities are still there. He struggles to understand how Jason can even stand to be in the same room as him when he has the same face as the man who hurt him so badly.

Slade kisses the top of his head, pulling him closer, and lets himself exhale.

"You're not him," Slade says quietly. "Just... please remember that. You're not him. You'd never have done any of the things he did. You're telling yourself that I'm wrong." And Bruce is, but he
"I'd have let him kill me," Bruce says quietly, and he buries himself against Slade. He needs it, odd looks be damned. He needs the physical reminder that Slade is there for him, that he isn't alone.

"You would have," Slade says.

They curl against each other until Slade's voice finally drops, whisper quiet.

"Do you know someone's watching?" He asks.

Bruce lets his eyes drift up. A part of him was starting to wonder if he was imagining it. If the watcher was really just a piece of equipment, rather than a person. They're still there, still perfectly still, but if Slade's spotted it then it's not just him.

"Yes," Bruce says quietly.

"You know who it is?"

"I have some ideas," he says. "But no."

"I'll keep an eye out," Slade says, pressing a kiss to his temple. "And take them down if they try anything."

The mood is miserable, but it gives Bruce some hope to watch the way things change. It's not just people pairing off and staying with that pair. There's drifting. Jason starts by talking with Kate in a quiet, harsh whisper. They're interrupted by Cassandra, who latches onto Jason's side, making an attempt to apologize despite her clear difficulties communicating. Dick starts with Damian, comforting him, and when Barbara comes over Damian allows himself to be handed off. Jason talks with Tim quietly, and then drifts to Kate as Tim heads to Stephanie.

He watches Jason and Dick hug after a short conversation, and lets himself relax a tiny bit.

Alfred returns with food, showing no signs of any discomfort. If he's been crying, he's done an excellent job of hiding it as he drops trays of snacks onto the table, luring people in with the offer of home cooking.

"Never going to get used to seeing the two of you pretzeled together," Jason says to them as he pops a bit of pastry into his mouth.

"Oh thank god," Tim says. "I thought it was just me."

"How do you think I feel?" Dick protests.

"Let's not pretend it's not weird for all of us," Duke says.

"It's not weird for me," Helena says with a shrug.

"Weird," Cassandra says quietly.

"The young master Wilson is still upstairs," Alfred points out. "And now might be an ideal time to invite him down, assuming you still plan to do so."

"Wait, who?" Stephanie says.

Stephanie turns to Slade, and Dick quickly corrects himself.

"Deathstroke's son," he says. "He's been helping out with things with this Slade."

"Who's vouching for him?" Kate asks.

"I will," Dick says immediately, which doesn't surprise anyone.

"I will," Damian says, which seems to surprise everyone.

"What?" Tim says. "How do you even know him?"

Damian grumbles to himself, seeming suddenly aware of just how many people are listening.

"You want me to tell them?" Jason says, and Damian scowls at him even harder.

"It is my responsibility," Damian says. "So I should be the one to tell them."

"Joey already knows," Slade says, "so if we're going to bring him down, it might as well be before Damian does his thing."

"I'm fine with it," Stephanie says. "If two of us vouch for him..."

Bruce doesn't make them vote. The consensus is clear enough, and Alfred gives a little nod.

"I'll go invite him down, then," he says. "Excuse me for just a moment."

Bruce recognizes he should probably pull away from Slade, but he can't make himself do it. It feels soft and comfortable and safe, and right then he needs that.
The only thing keeping Slade from finding a way to tear a hole in reality to go after Batman himself is the weight of *his* Bruce against him.

When Joey joins them, there's two things.

He seems to recognize almost all of them, giving a round of nods and handshakes, and then pulls out his own phone, setting it on the table.

"Sorry," he says, and several people startle at the displaced voice. "Talking like this is probably the most efficient."

"Everyone here knows ASL, I think," Dick says, giving a quick glance around.

"But not everyone is going to spend all their time looking at me," Joey points out. "This is easier. It's fine."

"Well," Dick says, "you missed a mess. Without getting into all the details..."

"Hold on," Barbara says. "Not that I don't like Joey and all, but how much are we sharing?"

"He has as much right to it as Slade does," Jason points out. Slade can't decide if that's a *we should* tell him or a *we shouldn't* tell him.

"Slade's going home, though," Tim says. "When this is over and done with, he's going to swap back. So whatever he learns isn't going to hurt us any, and the other world apparently doesn't have these issues."

"Maybe it's better," Stephanie says carefully. "Maybe it's better if more than just us know how bad it is."

The room's quiet at that.

"I agree," Slade says, "as much as I get a say in this. Part of the reason this was able to go on for so long was because everyone *thinks* Batman knows everything. His triumphs are shouted from the rooftops, and his failures are buried."

"He's got a lot of those," Jason mutters under his breath.

Damian looks uncomfortable, and Bruce clears his throat before addressing him.

"I know what you're thinking, Damian," he says. "And the League already knows."

Damian looks absolutely horrified. It's not hard to guess why.

"You told?!"

"I didn't have an option," Bruce says. "They took it... better than I thought."

"Hey!" Tim protests. "What happened to no secrets?"

Damian scowls at Tim immediately, but he doesn't appear to be in any hurry to actually talk. It's not until Bruce gives him a pointed look that he lets out an exaggerated sigh, pushing himself to his feet.
"I made a serious error of judgement," he says. "I used my team-

"Who call themselves the Teen Titans," Joey clarifies.

"I used my team to take down villains who I believed were working for a force known as the Other."

"The what?" Steph asks.

Damian rolls his eyes, and Slade registers that at some point, he's taken the mask off. He's so used to seeing him without it that he didn't even realize it, and when he glances around he realizes he's not the only one. Several masks have been discarded on the table, and Joey's done the same.

His is already off, so he leaves it.

"The other," Jason says. "They're one of those behind the scenes manipulators. It's probably a code name for someone else, but I haven't figured out who."

Damian clicks his tongue, annoyed at being interrupted.

"What matters," Damian says, "is that I did not trust the appropriate authorities to contain them. When my team took them down, I took it upon myself to imprison them."

"Hold on," Tim says, "to imprison them? Are you saying you kept a secret villain prison? Who knew about this?"

Jason raises his hand.

"And you can save your righteous indignation," Jason says before anyone else can protest. "I already talked this out with Bruce over there. Damian approached me with the plan. I told him there were issues. He said he was going to do it anyway. I offered to help so that he'd have someone on his team, and then I fed him targets he could actually handle so he wouldn't go after anyone actually dangerous."

"You could have told someone-" Barbara says.

"No," Jason says, interrupting her. "I couldn't. In case you forgot in the last sixty seconds, I'm the black sheep of the family. No, I'm more like... the void sheep. The sheep so dark that no light can escape its grasp."

Jason can certainly be dramatic.

"You still-" Barbara tries again.

"Tell who?" Jason says, raising an eyebrow. "Batman? You think I should have come in here and told Batman all about it? Hey squirt, you told him, right? How'd that work for you?"

He turns his head to Damian, who squirms in his seat.

"I am not squirt, Todd," he says. "After things were handled, they made me confess what I had done to father. He... grounded me."

"He... grounded you," Dick says very, very carefully.

"Yes."

"You ran a super secret prison for criminals-" Dick says.
"Including Deathstroke," Joey adds.

Dick chokes on his drink.

"Deathstroke? You gave them Deathstroke as a soft target?" Dick asks Jason, absolutely horrified.

"That one is not on me," Jason says. "The brat got his panties in a twist and made a bunch of assumptions and tried to kill me, so he stopped getting information. Then he went after Deathstroke."

Damian splutters with indignation, and Kate straightens in her seat. When she speaks, she's using the same sort of commanding voice that Bruce so often uses.

"Alright," Kate says, "we're all getting a bit heated, so let's all calm down."

It's a good sign, Slade thinks, because they all quiet down. It's someone who isn't Bruce taking control of the situation. That's what they need.

Jason grumbles.

"And the League knows now?" Helena asks. "About this... secret prison thing?"

"They're aware," Bruce says. "The prisoners have all been transferred elsewhere. None of them remember what happened, or know anything incriminating."

"Are they talking action?" Dick asks.

"The suggestion was made that what the team needs is a mentor. Someone who can... keep an eye on them. Keep them out of trouble and provide clear leadership."

Slade isn't surprised when Jason and Dick both raise their hands. Everyone else, save for Bruce, seem surprised by Jason's raised hand.

"You?" Damian asks, confused. "Why would you want anything to do with us? I... I made an attempt to take you down."

He seems embarrassed, which Slade takes as a good thing.

"In case you forgot," Jason says, "I'm the only one who knows anything about the threat the Other faces. None of you had even heard of them."

"Teen Titans used to be my team," Dick says. "I wouldn't mind mentoring for a while."


Jason and Dick squint at one another. Slade's seen it a million times, like they're playing chicken with one another and waiting to see who backs down first.

But neither of them does.

"Sounds like that's resolved, then," Tim says. "The Teen Titans keep being a thing, and Jason and Dick collaborate to keep them from doing anything too crazy."

"Who says I will accept them as my mentors?" Damian asks. He's looking at Jason as he says it, and Jason ever so casually pops a mini quiche into his mouth in response.

"Are you not going to?" He says.
Damian growls a bit and then settles back in his seat.

"Fine," he says. "I suppose it would be acceptable to have the two of you providing assistance."

The conversation falls into a lull, and it's obvious what needs to be spoken about. But Slade doesn't want to lead the conversation, and it's obvious Bruce doesn't want to either. They need to solve things themselves.

But he can at least prompt.

"I think you need to talk about what's going to happen next," Slade says. "When we decide to go back, wherever we decide to go back from is going to have Deathstroke and Batman dropped on them."

"Deathstroke should go to prison," Damian says immediately.

"We could get Superman to help with that," Dick says. "The League in general, really. To... contain him."

He glances towards Joey, as if expecting him to protest, but Joey doesn't object. If anything, Slade gets the impression that Joey feels out of place, but Slade can't blame him for that. It's not his fight. It's not even Slade's fight. Hell, it's not even Bruce's fight.

"Which leaves Batman," Helena says. "And us, to decide how we'll deal with him."

The figure near the top of the cave moves. It's a tiny, miniscule movement, no more than a shift of their leg, but it lights up every one of Slade's senses like a fire. They're definitely a person, and the fact that they just needed to shift like that—probably to stop their leg from going numb—narrows the suspect pool considerably.

He has half a mind to ask them to come down and talk.

"We should learn from our mistakes," Kate says, tone stiff. "You had a trial for me without me. And if we're going to have a trial for Batman, he needs to be here."

"She's right," Tim says. "It's not right. He should have the ability to speak in his own defense."

Jason growls a little bit.

"Does he?" Steph says. "Because unless Jason and Dick and Damian all just made up every single thing they said, that's some pretty damning evidence."

"We got into this mess because we didn't do things properly," Dick says. "We need to this time. We need to do it properly. A family meeting, with everyone here, and-"

He falters, his eyes sliding over to Bruce.

"I guess not everyone here," Dick says.

"And not me," Joey says. "I'm only involved in very general terms. Not my circus, not my monkeys, as they say."

Dick sighs and shakes his head.

"Can't believe you're using circus jokes against me, Joey. Harsh."
"You're right," Slade says. "Bruce and I will be gone when you get a chance to do this. By the very nature of our presence here, we have to go before he comes back."

Joey shifts quietly in his seat.

So does their uninvited guest. Slade is getting really irritated by the fact that they haven't done anything, even if he's aware it probably means they're not dangerous. Someone dangerous would have taken advantage of Jason's story and the way it effectively shut everyone down. There was no better time to act, and they didn't.

But the thought of someone listening in sure does piss him off.

"Then I don't think there's much discussion to have," Helena says. "I think we all need to... to think over our interactions with Batman. Take time to digest. And when its time for him for the trial, call us."

"All of us, this time," Duke says.

"We will," Dick says. "I'll take responsibility for that."

"We'll both take responsibility," Kane says. Her eyes flick over to Bruce. "How long are you staying?"

"We'll probably discuss that after," Bruce says. "We have family to get back to."

"Before you go," Slade says, "there was something else."

He digs out his portable hard drive, holding it out for Tim to take. He looks confused, looking it over.

"There's videos on there," he says. "From our world to yours. Not everyone's going to have one, but they wanted you to have them. Maybe watch them in private."

Jason snorts at that.

"Should we make some?" Barbara asks, and there's a pause.

"Don't see why not," Slade finally says. "Watch your video. Make a video back. Send it to..." He glances around. "Tim, I guess. And we'll take them back when we go."

"Like interdimensional pen-pals."

"Me?" Cass asks.

"Record one too," Bruce says. "No, record two, if you can. One for... one for if we find a Cassandra in our world. One for everyone else if we don't."

She nods her head.

"We'll all do one," Steph says. "Neat."

"I'll send some documents back too," Tim says. "Some papers on the technology we're using, and things like the boom tubes."

Tim's already plugged the drive in the computer, and is in the process of loading up USB sticks with individual videos. When each one is copied over, he deletes it off the drive, and Slade doesn't have
the heart to point out those are hardly the only copies.

Neither he nor Bruce is going to take advantage of that.

Tim distributes the videos as he goes, and then pauses.

"There's a WATCH THIS FIRST video," he says. "Along with several marked funny."

"I'll sort through the funny ones to make sure they're not too incriminating," Slade says with a grunt. "But we might as well watch the other one."

Tim puts it up on the screen, and everyone looks up.

The video is almost every member of the immediate family. They're gathered in the living room, sitting on the couch, only there's too many people to fit, and they seem to be having a hard time keeping everyone in frame. Slade's pretty sure he sees the top of Titus's head at the bottom of the screen, and Portia's in Damian's lap.

It's dark, and Slade's pretty sure that the video was shot not long before they woke up.

"Hey," Jason says on the video. He feels so different from the Jason sitting in the room with them, older and wiser. He knows himself. He's been given a chance to move on from his mistakes and become a better person. He hasn't been trapped in an awful cycle with the man he so desperately wants to be his father. "So if you're watching this, that means everything went well. And that's good. We've all got individual videos from all of us, and from the other people we worked with. We kind of debated having them all here, but this was kind of short notice, so we decided to make do."

"Either way," Dick says on the video, elbowing Jason in the side for taking too long, "we figured we should record something nice, before you get into the whole... nitty gritty serious video thing. We've heard some messed up stuff from your side and it's not exactly great sounding."

"Who's the guy beside Dick?" Stephanie asks quietly, eyeballing Tim.

The Dick in the room snickers. The Tim with them looks like he's about to die of embarrassment.

"So I guess before you watch the videos," Jason says. "Watch this, like you are. And... good luck. Good luck on making things better. And we hope you take care of Slade and Bruce, because sometimes they can not take care of themselves."

"Don't tell them that!" Barbara protests on screen, elbowing Jason in his other side, "they'll think it's true. I swear they're totally self sufficient but also completely useless without one another."

"Just take care of them," Damian says, annoyed. "Why are we doing this video?"

"Because it'll be nice for them to see everyone," Tim says. "Especially me."

He makes a point of flexing, and the much smaller Tim in the room sinks so far into his seat he's actually out of Slade's view entirely.

"This is Jackson," Barbara says. Jackson's dead asleep, his head resting on her shoulder, and she has to twist around and show him off. "I think he could probably sleep through a nuclear strike right now, but I thought you guys might like to see the first Wayne grandchild."

"Which is probably weird for you," Jason says, "but you'll have to deal, because things are weird for us too."
"Either way," Dick says, "watch the videos, hopefully take them to heart, and send our dads back in one piece, alright?"

"Grim," Damian says quietly, and then Alfred steps up, turning off the camera.

"Oh my god," Barbara says. "Was that Tim? Little Tim Drake?"

"It was," Dick confirms. "He's big over there."

"Tim is thirty and ripped and we're MARRIED?" Barbara yells.

There is absolutely no doubt in Slade's mind that Tim is never going to hear the end of it.
Chapter 39

One by one, people trickle out of the room. There's a lot of conversation, a lot of short talks and promises to keep in touch. Bruce expects them to talk about patrol, but no one does, and he eventually learns that there's no patrol schedule. Everyone more or less handles things entirely on their own.

Bruce is going to need to call his cousin when he gets home. He hasn't talked to them in years, and now he wonders if they haven't gotten into the family business without him realizing. It's entirely possible, and it's not as if they're the only vigilantes in their own world.

Barbara's one of the last to leave, leaning up to give Bruce a small peck on the cheek.

"Thank you," she says, "for helping."

And then she's off, hopping on her bike and pulling out of the cave.

In the end, it's just the immediate family. Dick and Jason are talking with Joey, while Tim and Damian talk with Alfred. Everyone else has gone, left the cave, and that means it's time.

He leans over, tapping Slade on the shoulder.

"Everyone else is out," he says under his breath. "So lets flush our guest out of hiding."

"Thank god," Slade says. "I've been dying to hear you say the word."

All two-hundred-and-change pounds of Slade hops right up onto the table. It's sturdy enough to hold his weight, but it gets an immediate reaction from the boys, who all turn to gawk.

Slade lifts his fingers to his mouth and whistles, a hard, sharp sound that echoes around the cave.

"Batcow has sensitive hearing!" Damian protests.

"So do I," Tim says, covering his ears and wincing at the sound.

Slade pays them no mind.

"You can come out on your own, or I can come get you, but you are not going to like that option," Slade yells.

"Holy shit," Dick says quietly. "Is there someone else here?"

Jason pulls a gun he absolutely should not have in the cave, and almost everyone else readies up, pulling weapons. Joey falls back, and Bruce realizes he's doing so to put himself close to Alfred, just in case someone tries to jump him.

The seconds tick by.

"If you make me come up there-" Slade starts.

The figure stands up. The movement is obvious, and every set of eyes in the cave flicks up at once, finding the figure standing up near the ceiling. They're nearly invisible, dressed in dark colors, and it's only the movement that lets anyone see him.
"Who the fuck is that," Jason says quietly.

"Someone's been watching," Bruce says, "since I got here. Maybe before that."

"Were you not going to mention that?" Tim hisses.

Bruce doesn't get a chance to answer. The figure steps forward, dropping down from the platform they were perched on, and lands on the floor, sinking into a crouch before finally straightening up.

Bruce realizes very quickly that he was completely wrong.

Because it's not a member of the Justice League. It's not Michael, stalking this world's Batman the way he stalked Bruce himself.

It's Batman.

But it's not the Batman.

It's the same general look, the same cowl. But rather than a yellow belt this one has red. There's thigh holsters attached, complete with guns, and his shoulders have added peaks, changing his silhouette.

Where there should be white lenses there are instead red, giving him an eerie, alarming look.

"Alright," Slade says as he hops off the table, "I'll be the first to admit this isn't what I expected."

The not-Batman snorts at that.

"So," Jason says, "are we all as lost as I am? Because I'm pretty lost."

"I don't know who this is," Damian says.

"He's... another Bruce," Bruce says. "From another dimension. Not ours, but another one."

"No," the not-Batman says. "I'm not."

He pauses for a moment, and then reaches up, pulling off the cowl.

Bruce stops being able to think.

It's not him under the cowl, but it's a face he knows. It's a man whose portrait hangs on the wall back in his home dimension, and no doubt this one as well.

Even if he's older, even if his hair's gone white with age, there's no doubt in Bruce's mind that the man in front of him is Thomas Wayne.

His father.

He can't think. He can't process what's happening. Every guess he had is completely and horribly wrong and he can't think.

"Bruce," Slade says, and there's suddenly a hand on his shoulder, grounding him in reality. "We need you here."

They do. They need him there, in the moment. They need him to be present. So he takes a deep breath and lets himself think, lets himself move past the initial moment of surprise and panic.

"You're Thomas Wayne," he says. "But not the one from this world."
Thomas is inspecting them, but especially him. He's heard everything they said in the meeting, and he knows that they're not from this world at all.

"Yes," he says.

Bruce feels like his head is spinning as he tries to wrap his head around it all.

"You came here... and you were following him. The Batman from this universe."

"The world I'm from should not have existed," Thomas says. "It wasn't meant to. A man from this timeline found his way there, and we worked to restore things to their proper order. I thought we'd succeeded. But something kept that world around. I met... you. The you from this universe."

"Wait," Damian says, "you met my father?"

"Yes," Thomas says. "I met your father."

His expression darkens.

"I survived. Even now, I do not know how. I woke here, in this universe, and that should have been the end of it. It should have been a cause for celebration."

"It wasn't," Dick says.

"No," Thomas says. "When I arrived I became aware that Bruce had ignored my advice. That my wish had gone... unanswered."

"Your wish?" Slade asks. "And what would that be?"

Bruce knows. He knows. He feels like it's burning a hole in him, the knowledge.

"You wanted him to stop," he says. It's written all over Thomas's face. "You wanted him to retire."

"Family is the most important thing," Thomas says. "Batman was revenge. Batman was... anger. Striking out to protect others, but still striking out. I asked him to stop being Batman. To be with his family."

His eyes flick down to Damian only briefly, and then come back up to look straight at Bruce.

"I've been here for a long time," Thomas says. "Months trying to find a solution. And I found one. I spent months setting plans in motion to force Bruce to accept the truth. To force him to realize that being Batman was destroying him."

And they've ruined everything, Bruce realizes. Whatever plan Thomas had, it's been shattered. Everything is different. They've changed the dynamic too greatly. There's no plan that could have survived this amount of change.

They've destroyed whatever chance there was of Thomas's plan saving this world's Bruce from himself.

"You've saved him," Thomas says.

Bruce's brain catches.

"I don't understand," he says. "I-"
"Of everyone in this world, Bruce," Thomas says, "I would think the two of us would understand him the best. He can't get better as things are. He can't keep going down the path he's walking. He's destroying himself. And he's already so badly damaged his family that I wasn't sure they could recover."

"I didn't fix it," Bruce says. He can't think, not really, and Thomas is quite intent on getting his message across. "I-

"You have," Thomas says. "You have done in two days what I haven't managed in months. To... to fix things. For this family. To help them."

"No," Bruce says. "They fixed themselves. All I did was push them the right way."

Thomas tips his head back and laughs, and some of the tension eases out of the room.

"Might I recommend," Alfred says politely, "that if none of us are going to come to blows that we all sit down?"

"That might be better," Dick says. He's eyeing Thomas warily, but he does finally sit down. Everyone else moves to join him, with varying degrees of obvious hesitance.

"So he's... our grandfather?" Damian asks. "Or is he the grandfather of your Damian?"

He glances up to Bruce, and Bruce shrugs.

"Both," Slade says. "It's all alternate dimensions. He's as much the father of your Bruce as my Bruce."

"Technically it was an alternate timeline," Thomas says. "Or was."

"I think... technically he's ours?" Tim says. "But I'm not sure."

"I don't think it particularly matters," Alfred says. "Although I am quite curious as to why Mister Wayne thought it was appropriate to stalk his son, as opposed to simply speaking with him."

"Because he doesn't listen to people," Thomas says. "He had a heartfelt note from his father about the importance of family and he didn't change. Then he had a heartfelt conversation with his father where I explicitly told him he should stop being Batman so he could be there for his children, and he still didn't change."

"Hmm," Alfred says. "How stubborn of him. He reminds me of someone."

The way he's eyeing Thomas makes it obvious just who he's thinking of.

"I was never that bad," Thomas says.

"Now I can't decide which is weirder," Dick says. "The fact that we're having a sit down conversation with our dead grandfather or the fact that Slade and Bruce are holding hands under the table."

They aren't when Dick says it, but just to spite him Slade takes his hand anyway, and Bruce flushes. It feels... weird doing anything in front of his father.

His father. Who's alive.

His brain's still a bit stuck on that.
"So who was the guy?" Jason asks. "The 'man from this timeline'."


Huh.

"I'll have to get the story from you," Bruce says, "at some point before we go."

Thomas nods.

"Might I instead recommend we head to bed? It is quite late," Alfred says.

"We're used to being up later," Dick says, who doesn't look tired at all.

"You forget we've got the elderly among us," Jason says. Despite the fact that Alfred and Thomas are right there, he instead grins at Slade and Bruce.

"I will prepare rooms for our guests," Alfred says. "All of our guests."

His eyes flick between Thomas and Joey, who's been quiet almost the entire time, his phone still on the table but otherwise untouched.

"That might not be a bad idea," Bruce says. "I think some... private conversations might be in order."

"AKA," Dick says, "Bruce wants to give everyone a one on one sit down talk."

Tim presses his palms to his eyes, groaning.

"I'm not ready for a sit down talk with Stephanie, let alone Barbara. And we still have videos to watch."

Damian looks smug.

"I've already watched mine," he says. "The other me is quite wise."

"Watched mine," Jason says.

"Even the second ones?" Tim says, raising an eyebrow.

"The - the second?" Jason asks, squinting.

"There was a second video for you," Tim says. "And for Damian."

"Why didn't I notice that?" Jason asks.

"Because it was in my folder, labelled REALLY REALLY IMPORTANT, and then there were two extra videos for you two. They're on your thumb drives."

Jason looks embarrassed.

"...Did you get rid of it?"

"I already had a copy!" Jason protests.

"Jason, I deleted-"

"It's fine," Slade says, pulling out his phone. "We're not idiots. We brought backups."
Tim huffs as he takes Slade's phone, going to copy over the files.

"I'm going to watch mine," Damian says. "In my room. I will see you in the morning."

He darts up the stairs before anyone can stop him, and Dick sighs, pushing himself to his feet.

"I'm going to give him some time and then go check on him," he says. "Make sure he's alright with all the... secret prison stuff."

He glances around the table, hesitating when he reaches Thomas, and then nods.

"Night," he says, turning and heading up the stairs.

"I'm not going to pretend to be doing anything else," Tim says, "I just want to see my video."

"See ya Timbo," Jason says.

Tim gives them a nod and then heads upstairs.

"I'll show..." Alfred starts, glancing between Thomas and Bruce. "...Both of you to some guest rooms. I assume Mister Wilson-"

Alfred makes an agitated sigh, clearly unclear on how he's supposed to address anyone with two Mister Wilson's and two Mister Wayne's in the room.

"You will be sharing a room?" He asks, simply turning to Bruce directly rather than trying to sort if out.

"Yes please," Bruce says. "If that's alright."

"Of course," Alfred says.

"I'll join you in a bit," Slade says, and it's obvious to Bruce he wants to talk to Joey for a moment.

"I'll see you in a bit," Bruce says.

Slade leans down, pressing a kiss to the top of Bruce's head, and Bruce can tell he's looking at Thomas as he does it, as if daring Thomas to object.

Thomas doesn't. If anything, he looks happy.

"If you'll come this way," Alfred says. "I'm sure we can find room for a few guests."

There is something unbelievably surreal about walking up the stairs of the cave side by side with his father, and yet that's exactly what happens.
Slade waits for everyone to be gone before he turns his attention to Joey. He's been quiet for most of the conversation, and while Slade can't blame him for it, he's worried anyway.

*Check in with people you are worried about rather than letting them suffer in silence* was one of the few helpful pieces of advice he got from the three therapy sessions he actually attended before he started finding other things to do.

"How are you feeling?" He asks, and Joey startles at that, turning towards him as if surprised by the question.

Slade realizes almost immediately that he is surprised by the question. Everything he knows about his counterpart tells him that *how are you feeling* wouldn't be on the list of questions he might have asked.

*I'm fine,* Joey signs after a moment, and Slade knows it's bullshit. Joey's not exactly easy to read, but compared to someone like Jason he might as well be an open book.

"You're not fine," Slade says, not bothering to beat around the bush. "And you can talk to me if you want."

Joey averts his eyes.

It's the most obvious tell in the world of his discomfort, but Slade's wary of trying to push too hard. People tend to snap when he does that, and he has enough experience with Jason lashing out to know to avoid it.

"Alright," Slade says. He's already said that Joey can talk to him if he wants, and in the end he simply sighs, dragging his fingers through his hair.

He's saved from the awkwardness by the sound of feet on the stairs, and he's surprised to see Damian appear.

"Forget something?" He says, and is surprised when Damian produces the USB stick that Tim gave him earlier.

"No," Damian says, "but I am required to give this to you."

He drops the USB stick in front of Joey, and then heads right back upstairs. He's not even through the door when there's a second set of footsteps, and Jason appears, looking irritated.

He makes it halfway down the stairs before he tosses his own USB stick to Slade, who snatches it out of the air.

"That's for him," Jason says, nodding towards Joey. "I'm going to bed."

He vanishes upstairs, and Slade turns to Joey, holding the USB stick out for him.

*Any idea what these are?* Joey signs.

"Considering who they came from? Pretty sure they're videos from Damian and Jason's counterparts.
You should watch them."

The fact that it's specifically Damian and Jason—his boys—who delivered the messages feels telling.

Joey gets up, heading for the computer, and Slade stands to go upstairs, only for Joey to glance over his shoulder, squinting at him.

Where are you going? Joey signs.

"Upstairs," Slade says. "Pretty sure this is... private stuff."

He's pretty sure the videos are intended for Joey and Joey alone, but Joey gestures for him to come sit down with him anyway, and Slade lets out a little huff before sitting back down.

It feels deeply personal as Joey pulls up the first video.

"So," Jason-on-the-screen says, "if you're watching this, good. Means the family's together enough to pass around the message. I wasn't sure if this was a good idea, so I figured filtering it through more than one person would help. Before you worry, they didn't see this video. I had Tim set it up so that there was like a..." He pauses, wrapping one hand in another. "Video within a video. Your Tim got the first one, and watched my message to him. Then he passed it on to Jason, who watched that one, before passing it on to you. So if you're watching this, that means either they've both passed it on, or it means one of you watched a video you shouldn't, in which case... way to go, asshole."

Joey's attention is undivided, focused entirely on the screen. Jason's clearly recognizable, both from the for-everyone video and from his similarities to the Jason Joey knows, but he's so much more... casual.

"Assuming you're not," Jason continues, "then... this is a hello. A hi, I guess? To Joey. Honestly, I'm not one hundred percent sure what I even want to say, but I figured... I probably should say something. Because everyone else is getting a video, and you haven't, because you don't have a counterpart."

It's a grim subject, but Jason waves it off easily.

"But I guess I wanted to say that you kind of do have a counterpart. That it's me and Damian."

Slade reaches up, resting a hand on Joey's shoulder, and Joey pauses the video, glancing up at him.

"I'm going to duck out," he says. "This sounds like it's getting personal, and you should... you should have your privacy. I'll be upstairs when you're done."

He makes himself not listen as he heads up the stairs. It's painfully obvious that Jason's message is supposed to be for Joey and Joey alone, and he doesn't want to violate that trust by listening in.

Despite the fact that he's supposed to have gone to bed, he finds Alfred in the kitchen when he goes to get a glass of water. Alfred looks him over with a clinical sort of detachment, and then fetches a glass and some water almost automatically.

"Hopefully you were looking for this," Alfred says, "and not anything harder."

Slade grins at that, half expecting the usual banter, but his face falls when he doesn't get it.

Right then he really misses home. He misses the Alfred he knows, the one who knows him.
"If you are looking for..." Alfred pauses mid-sentence, clearly unsure how he wants to refer to a Bruce that isn't *his* Bruce. "...For Master Bruce, I believe that both of the elder Wayne's are in the library."

Slade considers, and then shakes his head.

"Better to leave them," he says. "I'm just waiting for Joey."

"Of course," Alfred says. "Should I show you to your room while we wait...?"

Slade considers, and then simply nods.

"That sounds fine," he says. "Thank you."

Alfred gives him another hard look—as if he's still somewhat surprised by all the *thank yous* he's getting out of them—and then finally turns away, gesturing for Slade to follow.

Slade just hopes Joey isn't going to be too long.
Chapter 41

There is never really any question about whether or not they're going to go to bed. Even Alfred, after he finishes showing them to their rooms, doesn't wait for them to actually go to bed. He simply says goodnight and then goes to go and do his own thing, leaving them standing in the hallway.

"...Library?" Thomas says, and Bruce nods.

He's already been in the library before, but returning to it still dredges up the same old feelings. The same level of familiarity, but also the same level of wrongness. This is his own library, but it's also not, and as he looks around he wonders what Thomas's own library looked like. Was it like this? Did the Alfred in Thomas's world take care of things as well?

He has so many questions, but every time he tries to think about them his brain gets caught on Thomas Wayne is alive and he can't think of anything past it.

"This is strange," he says, almost entirely to himself. He makes himself take a seat, because he's not sure if he's going to be able to stay upright otherwise, and watches Thomas do the same, settling down into an armchair that Bruce has always left empty because it was his father's armchair.

The guns strapped to Thomas's thighs keep drawing his attention, and Bruce makes himself look away.

"Tell me about your world," he says, because it feels like as good a place to start as any. "You know plenty about mine."

"Not as much as I'd like," Thomas says before hhumming and steepling his fingers together. "Similar enough to yours. To this one. In my world, you died in the alley, rather than your mother and I. I decided that Gotham was too far gone for traditional methods to work, and created the mantle of Batman in order to fight back against the criminals that were plaguing us."

It's so similar, and yet so different. It's the same paths, but with wildly different outcomes.

"You said your world shouldn't have existed," Bruce says. It seems... dramatic. Overly grim.

Thomas shakes his head.

"My world was awful, but that isn't what I meant. From what I've gathered, my world was created by accident when Barry Allen went back to try and save his mother's life. The change rippled outwards, creating other changes as a result. People took different paths. The war..."

Thomas shakes his head again, and Bruce sits up a bit straighter.

"The war?"

"The Atlanteans and the Amazons were at war," Thomas says. "They sunk western Europe."

Whatever self control Bruce had regained goes flying out the window.

"They... sunk Europe?"

"Sixty million people died," Thomas says. "The world as you know it barely exists. The United Kingdom became New Themyscira, and the entire of Europe became a warzone between the two factions. Alaska's been taken by the undead, Black Adam's taken the middle east..."
Thomas waves his hand.

"It doesn't matter," he says. "They're all gone. The timeline was corrected."

"And you're the only one left," Bruce says. The only person who remembers the world that might have been.

"Yes," Thomas says, "so it doesn't matter."

Bruce is very much of the opinion that it does matter. Things were hard enough for him arriving in a world that's so like his own, let alone one so completely alien. He supposes that Thomas has had time to adjust, at the very least. He's not coming in completely blind.

"You have sons?" Thomas says, which seems like an absolutely bizarre question. Thomas has heard plenty of things that should make that very clear, and Bruce catches himself squinting at him before he makes himself stop.

"Yes," he says.

"What are their names?"

Bruce supposes that it's possible he's just making sure they're on the same page, so he tries not to drag it out.

"There are four," he says. "Joey is... Joey is very nice, but I never knew my world's Joey, and Rose is too estranged from Slade to be considered part of the family properly. Maybe one day. So it's Dick, Jason, Tim, and Damian. Barbara is my daughter in law."

Thomas nods along, and Bruce realizes he has absolutely no idea what he's thinking. He's normally good at reading people, but Thomas is a mystery. He's stoic in the same way that Bruce himself is, but he has none of the same tells.

And even if he's his father, the fact is that Bruce doesn't know him well at all. He was only a boy when his father died, and those memories feel like stories he was told as a child more than they feel like an actual part of his life.

Bruce doesn't often drink, but right then he feels like he could use one.

"You said you had plans?" Bruce says, because it seems like the right thing to ask. He's truly not even sure what to say. He's not sure what you're supposed to discuss with your supposed-to-be-dead father from another reality. Realistically speaking, there's nothing that they need to talk about. Inevitably, everything that's happening is out of their hands. The family will deal with it on their own, and they... well, won't.

"For Bruce," Thomas says, "the one from here."

"Just call him Batman," Bruce says before second guessing himself, because he's in a Batman costume and Thomas is in a Batman costume, and the only person who probably isn't the man they're talking about.

"Batman, then," Thomas says. "Yes. I planned to force him to retire, one way or another."

"I can't imagine that going very well," Bruce says. He's pretty sure any version of him would fight tooth and nail to avoid being forced to retire.
"No," Thomas says. "Probably not. But talking wasn't going to work, so drastic measures were needed."

Drastic measures. Bruce feels a flicker of unease in his gut, but makes himself keep a straight face.

"Like what?" He asks, as casual as he can manage. It's not quite casual enough, because Thomas tips his head, looking Bruce over as if peering into his head.

"Bruce wouldn't step down," Thomas says. "It was going to have to be taken from him forcibly. Once I had the lay of the land, I collaborated with one of his enemies who also wished to see an end of the Batman."

He's not exactly volunteering details. If he says Joker...

"Who?"

"Bane."

Despite himself, Bruce lets out a sigh of relief. Bane isn't so bad. He's had his own issues, but he's doing just fine in Santa Prisca. Of all the people he's fought as Batman, Bane is one of the most inoffensive.

But the feeling of unease won't go away.

"You worked with one of his enemies," Bruce says. He tries to stay clinical about things, detached. As if they're talking about a stranger, and not someone who might as well be him. "You were trying to break him."

"I lied to you earlier," Thomas says, and Bruce falters, just a for a moment.

"About what, exactly?"

"When I said that my wish was for him to stop being Batman and be there for his children. That I'd asked him to do that. I never did."

It feels... strange. Out of place. Because without that bit of information, none of the other stuff makes sense, and Thomas seems to recognize his hesitance.

"When I came here I planned to find him. To... be with him. As a family should be. But when I discovered he was still Batman, I faltered. I wondered if I'd misunderstood. I didn't yet understand the scale of it, nor how broken he already was. When I met him the first time, do you know what he told me? Do you know what message he passed along, that he said was the one thing he wanted to tell me more than anything else?"

Bruce doesn't know. He can't even guess. But the unease that's been boiling over is rapidly threatening to overflow.

"No," he says.

"He told me that he had a son," Thomas says. "I didn't ask him to be a father to his children. I asked him to be a father to his son, because that was the only one I knew about."

"But he-" Bruce says before he falters.

A son. Bruce had a son.
There's silence for a long moment.

"Just one?" He says.

He feels like his heart is breaking all over again. Just one. A son.

"Just one," Thomas says. He's silent for a long moment, and Bruce has to look away. It hurts in a way it shouldn't. These aren't his children. This isn't his world. But the idea that Bruce doesn't consider them his sons stings.

"Do they know?" Bruce asks.

"If they do," Thomas says, "it wasn't from me. I was... caught off guard when I discovered the rest of his family. Any doubts I had about the fact that he needed to stop being Batman vanished when I learned about them."

Bruce wants to go home. He wants to pack up everything he has and go home. He wants to be with his own family, wants to tell them that he loves them and make absolutely sure they know that.

"I made a deal with Bane to keep Damian safe," Thomas says, "but I didn't know about the others. I would have had to change the dynamic to keep the others safe—probably stay on as an enforcer for him. The plan was broken before it had even started thanks to faulty information."

Bruce feels sick. He sags back in his seat, forcing himself to inhale. To take nice, deep breaths and remind himself that the person they're talking about isn't him, just someone who is in many ways like him.

"What are you going to do?" Bruce makes himself say.

"About Bane?" Thomas says. "Destroy his plan before it can start, the same way mine was destroyed. Easy enough. I know enough details to do major damage to things."

"You should tell Superman," Bruce says. "You can't - we can't trust that Batman will be able to handle things. Not after what's going to happen."

"I plan to tell Barry," he says. "I have no experience with Superman outside of what I've seen at a distance. On the other hand, I can vouch for Barry's character. I'd like to say he'd trust what I tell him as well."

"Hopefully," Bruce says. He's already been making plans on how to make sure things are alright. How to hedge his bets. He doesn't want to believe Batman would actually fight his kids when they stand against him, but he also doesn't want to believe he'd ever have beat Jason into the ground.

But he did.

Bruce makes himself take another deep breath. He needs to talk to Slade. He needs to figure out what he's going to tell Clark. But he knows—absolutely knows, no question about it—that he's not going to tell the boys. They can't know. They can't know that this Bruce talked about his son like he only had one. It would kill them the way it's killing him.

"I want to come to your world," Thomas says, and Bruce's brain slams on the breaks.

"What?" He says. He isn't even thinking, just reacting, because how is he supposed to react to that? "What?"
"My own world is dead," Thomas says. "You're as much my son as this world's Bruce is. Your children have as much connection to me as the ones here."

He is, in so many words, inviting himself home.

"I need to-" Bruce starts, cutting himself off as he tries to process it. It's a lot. It was a lot when he first learned the truth from Jason, and every successive thing has felt like another block stacked on top of a very shaky tower that threatens to fall over at any moment. "I need to talk to Slade."

"Of course," Thomas says. "I thought it would be better to make my intentions known before things got too far. I didn't want to... spring things on you at the last moment."

Bruce wishes he'd been notified six years ago, but he supposes it's better he heard it then rather than right before they went home, so he offers a small nod.

His throat feels dry, and he makes himself ask anyway.

"Why?" He says. "These are... this is the world you know."

It's his father. It's his father and he wants to come back with him but Bruce feels sick anyway. It's too much all at once and he needs to talk to a half dozen people but right then all he wants to do is curl up in bed beside Slade and sleep.

No, that isn't right: All he wants to do is go home and hug his sons, and then curl up beside Slade and sleep.

Thomas doesn't respond right away. He's quiet, stoic, and even more impossible to read than before. There's a crease in his forehead that Bruce thinks is probably a sign of intense thought, but that's all he can really get out of it.

"I don't trust myself," Thomas says finally. He doesn't elaborate.

But Bruce needs him to elaborate. He needs to know what the hell that means.

"You don't trust yourself?"

Thomas's eyes flick over to him, his gaze intense and unshakable.

"He beat his son," Thomas says. "He beat his son so badly that he broke his arm. That he couldn't open one eye for weeks. He made one of his sons pretend he was dead. He's neglected the boy he actually considers his son so badly he had no idea what he was up to, and hardly cared when he was told. I could go on. I could go on about all the things he's done, but I think I've made my point. I don't trust myself to deal with him, knowing what I know. Knowing that it was so much worse than I thought."

Bruce doesn't know what Thomas is afraid of. He's afraid of the answer. Afraid he'll yell at him? That he'd hurt him?

That he'd kill him for what he's done to his sons?

"I'll talk to Slade," is all Bruce can manage, because he doesn't trust himself to say anything more.

"Of course," Thomas says, and he's already pushing himself to his feet. "I'll speak to you tomorrow."

And then he's leaving, heading right out of the library, leaving Bruce behind to attempt to process what he just heard.
After he's shown to his room, Slade finds his way back towards the cave, lingering near the entrance as he waits for Joey to show up. He has to admit to himself that he's dying to know what Jason (and Damian, he supposes) said on their videos, but he's also trying to convince himself not to ask. If Joey wants to keep it a secret, then so be it.

He just really hopes he doesn't want to.

Joey doesn't make him wait, appearing in the still-open entrance before spotting Slade, cocking his heat to the side.

*Were you waiting?* He signs.

"I wanted to make sure you were alright," Slade says, and Joey looks pained for a moment before he nods. "Everything fine...?"

*I'm alright,* Joey signs. *They just wanted to tell me about their lives. They felt bad I didn't have a counterpart, and everyone else was hearing stories. They both...* Joey's signs falter, and not for the first time Slade gets the impression that he's torn up about it, even if he's describing something that should be happy.

*They both love you a lot,* Joey finishes.

Slade isn't sure how to respond to that. To say he loves them to? It feels almost cruel, considering Joey's own pained relationship with his *actual* father. Everything about the situation feels temporary.

*I'm going to find Jason and Damian,* Joey adds. *To thank them for passing the videos on.*

Maybe at least that much good will come out of it. It would be nice, Slade thinks, if Joey were able to lean on them... and they to lean on him.

They're going to need it.

"Of course," he says. "I'm going to see if I can't find Bruce."

He gives Joey a quick pat on the shoulder and then heads to the library, but it's empty when it gets there. He doubles back, checking his room, and he's surprised to find Bruce not just there, but already curled up in bed.

That's not a good sign.

He closes the door behind him, pulls off his suit, and then slips into bed beside him, pulling Bruce up against him.

"Tell me how bad it is," he says quietly. He's still not over everything else he's learned (he's not sure he's ever *going* to be over it), but right then Bruce needs him more than anything.

"Fa- Thomas wants to come back with us," Bruce says.

Slade has to admit it's not as if it comes entirely out of nowhere. He won't deny to anyone (least of all Bruce) that he's thought about it. That he's thought about just bundling the whole goddamn family up and pushing them through the portal to take them home.
But it's not realistic. They have lives here. Friends. Even if this world's Bruce is a goddamn monster, there's still everyone else. He can't just take everyone.

Thomas, though.

That's something else.

"Kind of thought you'd be happy with that," Slade says.

He's not sure how he feels about Thomas—not really—but there wasn't any doubt in his mind that Bruce would be happy about it right until he walked into the room and found Bruce curled up in bed.

"I am," Bruce says. "I don't know. He's my father. But he..."

Bruce trails off, and Slade pulls him a bit closer, letting Bruce bury his face against his chest.

"He's not what you expect," Slade says. "He's not the man you imagined."

Really, Slade suspects that the problem is that he's a man. Bruce's grown up hearing stories, but the nature of those stories and the way people talk about the dead means he's only hearing the good ones. The stories that build Thomas Wayne up into a myth, rather than a person with his own thoughts and feelings. With his own flaws.

Part of it, Slade decides, is probably the guns. Whether Bruce is willing to admit it or not, his reaction to guns is far from rational, and seeing his father, a man murdered by guns in his own world, with two pistols strapped to him like they belong there has to feel like a brick to the head.

Even still, he feels like Bruce is taking it harder than he would have expected, and he presses a kiss to the top of Bruce's forehead, feeling him nuzzle in.

"Is there something else?" He says.

And of course there is, because Bruce goes stiff against him, refusing to move.

"Yes," Bruce finally says, but he doesn't elaborate. It takes a little while before Slade steels his nerve, showering Bruce with affection until he relaxes enough to explain. "He told Thomas he had a son."

Slade doesn't get it.

"...and?" He says carefully.

"Just the one."

Then he understands, and Slade sucks in a sharp breath, forcing himself not to respond right away. Just the one. Just the one son.

"Son of a bitch," is all he manages to say, because if he says anything else he's going to say something that'll hurt Bruce, because no matter how much he tells him that they're not the same, he knows that his Bruce is still internalizing everything he hears about the Bruce.

He settles for pulling him against him, holding Bruce against him until he trusts himself to speak.

"You're not him," he says, because Bruce needs to be reminded of that fact over and over. "The choices he makes aren't your choices. You'd never have done any of the things he did."

Bruce thankfully doesn't argue, and Slade rubs slow circles into his back.
"Go to sleep, Bruce," he says. "We'll sort it all out in the morning."

Bruce doesn't fall asleep right away. His eyes are closed, but Slade knows he's still asleep, and he doesn't let him go until he's asleep himself, curled up against him.
Chapter 43

Bruce wakes tangled in Slade's arms, and even if he has a million things to do he refuses to let himself actually get out of bed. Instead he curls against him, refusing to move. Slade wakes before too long, pulling him a bit closer, but neither of them speaks, content to let the minutes they have pass in a comfortable silence.

But it can't last for too long. Eventually there's a knock at the door, and Alfred calls them to breakfast. Slade yells a quick let me just get dressed and then finally drags himself out of bed.

"Let's talk logistics," Slade says. "Before we even talk about this seriously, is it even possible?"

"You know as much as I do," Bruce says as he showers off. They only have their suits, but a quick rinse makes things a hell of a lot more pleasant. "And only one of us has a supercharged brain."

"We're in uncharted territory. Swapping may or may not work differently from... portalling, I guess if you want to call it that. I'm not sure he could swap with us, because there's no Thomas on the other end, but portalin..."

Slade wiggles his hand to indicate a firm maybe before slipping into the shower as Bruce climbs out to towel off.

"It might work," Slade says. "I think it's possible he could come along for the same reason that it's possible for one of us to be left behind. Going through the portal seems to care who's going through the portal, not just who they're swapping with. Because it's entirely possible to swap two of them back and only have one of us leave, so it's obvious they're not swapping with us directly when we use a portal."

There's what Jason would refer to as a metric assload of 'in theory' accompanying everything Slade says, and Bruce grunts unhappily. He doesn't like not knowing. He doesn't like the fact that he has to many decisions based on a ton of in theory without any sort of actual answers.

"We're going to need to ask someone," Bruce says. "The League?"

"They'd be the experts," Slade says. "But it does mean trusting them with the knowledge we can just... go back at any time."

"Clark wouldn't force us back," Bruce says.

"Clark's not the only one on the League."

Bruce thinks of all the other unfamiliar faces and sighs, dragging a hand through his hair.

"They're still our best option. And... even if we're forced back now..."

"We've already done the bulk of what we needed to," Slade says. They've delivered the videos. They've talked with the family. It would be awful to swap unexpectedly, but it wouldn't be the nightmare it was when they were first pulled back.

"Then we'll talk to them," Bruce says. "Who else?"

"I want to talk to Jason," Slade says.

"I need to talk to Dick."
Bruce tries to think of who else. Everyone, really, but they can't exactly sit down and talk with every single person.

"We need to get to breakfast," Bruce says, "before Alfred decides we're a bad influence."

Slade snorts at that, and they head to breakfast. It's a random assortment of people. Damian's there, along with Tim and Dick, but Jason's gone. Alfred's serving food, and both Thomas and Joey are noticeably absent as they grab seats, well away from the head of the table they remains empty.

"This is so weird," Dick mutters under his breath as he serves his food. "Everything about this is weird."

"Having this many people at the table is weird," Tim says. "Nevermind all the rest of it."

"May I ask what you plan to do today?" Alfred asks the two of them, making no attempt to hide his interest.

"We're going to speak to the League," Bruce says. "We have some matters to discuss before we can do anything else."

Dick looks up, his mouth full of food, and then swallows it all down.

"The League?" He says. "I'll come. I have some business to handle anyway."

"Do you work with them often?" Slade asks, and Dick nods immediately.

"I guess your Dick doesn't...?"

"Only rarely," Slade says. "He mostly keeps to Bludhaven."

"So do I, but when things get crazy down here I tend to come visit."

"Do you know where everyone else is...?" Bruce asks Alfred, confident that if he's anything like their Alfred he'll know.

"The young Mister Wilson is currently in his room. He said he slept poorly, and needed a bit more rest, asking not to be disturbed."

Bruce exchanges a quick glance with Slade, who shares his worried expression.

"Master Jason has returned to work," Alfred continues.

"He said, and this is an exact quote," Dick says, "some of us have real jobs, assholes."

Slade snorts at that.

"Thomas?" Bruce asks.

"He has been up for several hours," Alfred says, "and has already cooked for himself and left. He said he had some things to do, and would be back after lunch."

Bruce exchanges another look with Slade, but this one isn't worried. It feels wrong to be paranoid about his father, but his behaviors throwing up enough red flags to outfit the Chinese navy.

"We'll have to catch up with them after," Bruce finally says, finishing off his food. "Speaking to the League takes priority."
"Of course," Alfred says. "Mister Wilson has been nothing but polite, and he's been a lovely guest. He's welcome to stay around."

"I'll keep him busy if he comes out," Tim says. "We can catch up."

Damian, on the other hand, is completely silent. He's been sulking since they first mentioned the league, and Bruce can't entirely blame him.

"I plan to let the League know that Jason and Dick have both volunteered to handle the Titans," Bruce says. "So hopefully that can get their approval."

"We don't need it," Damian mumbles to himself. "We did just fine without any adults."

Dick squeezes Damian's shoulder, and Damian seems to perk up a bit at that. It's strange for Bruce how obvious Damian's favoritism is, and just where it's directed, because he responds to Dick so easily compared to anyone else.

"It'll be fun," Dick says. "Trust me."

Damian obviously does trust Dick, because he doesn't protest any further beyond sulking at him a bit as they suit up and head down into the cave. Bruce is worried about leaving Thomas alone with anyone (even if he's not even in the house), but he can't exactly babysit him, so he's forced to concede the point as Dick demonstrates how the boom tubes work in a bit more detail than Damian had.

They get announced as Nightwing, Batman, and Potential Threat by the computer system on arrival, which amuses Slade.

"I wonder if they've overridden my security clearances temporarily," Bruce wonders aloud as they wait for someone to arrive. It's the Green Lantern, Stewart, and Cyborg that show up, and both look extremely unhappy to see Slade. Dick immediately puts his hands up, which emphasizes that he's unarmed, but does nothing to make the sword strapped across Slade's back stop existing.

Hm. Bruce might be getting a little bit too used to them going wherever they want without worrying about people thinking they're a threat.

"He's harmless," Dick says, which might be the biggest lie Bruce has ever heard spoken aloud.

"Doubtful," Stewart says. "We're going to have to ask him to disarm at an absolute minimum."

Slade hnns until Bruce stares at him, at which point he finally pulls the sword off his back, holding it out handle first.

"I'm going to want that back," he says.

"We'll get it back," Dick says when neither League member says anything of the sort.

Slade hnns again.

"Should I assume you want a meeting?" Cyborg asks, raising an eyebrow. Dick glances to Bruce, who gives a small nod.

"If you could," Bruce says. "I don't think we need everyone, but I would like to keep the league aware of things as you asked."

Stewart isn't taking his eyes off Slade, which Bruce supposes is an entirely justified reaction.
"I've let them know," Cyborg says. "This way."

Even if Bruce doesn't know, it's a safe bet that Cyborg's connected into the headquarter's system, and Bruce doesn't ask questions as they head back to the very same conference room Bruce first appeared in.

They catch Clark in the hallway, who smiles when he sees Bruce before immediately turning serious when he spots Slade.

"You're not very popular," Dick says quietly to Slade.

"You don't say," Slade says.

They get the majority of the league in before too long. There's a few people missing, with a standard slate of excuses, and Bruce waves them off. He doesn't need the whole League, and the only people who actually need to be there are Barry and Clark, both of which are in attendance.

"Good to see you back," Clark says once they've settled in.

"Of course," Bruce says. "I said I'd keep you all informed."

Mera lets out a small laugh.

"I like this one," she says. "Can we keep him?"

"I think his world might object to that," Clark says.

Bruce keeps his mouth shut. Someone on the League needs to know, but Bruce isn't going to tell everyone.

"To touch on what we discussed last time, I spoke with the group as a whole. Both Nightwing and Red Hood volunteered to help manage the Teen Titans. Working together would be ideal, and they seem amenable to the idea."

He doesn't get the excited response he was hoping for.

"Isn't Red Hood wanted for attempted murder?" Clark asks.

"We're dealing with that," Dick says. "There was a... miscommunication."

"In other words," Slade says, "it's a Gotham issue, not a League issue. I imagine he'll be taking a different name for his work with the Teen Titans."

"I'll make sure he does," Dick says.

No one looks terribly happy, so Bruce pushes onward.

"While in Gotham I discovered that we aren't the only two from another dimension," Bruce says. "Without getting overly complicated, there is a second Batman, only this one is Tho-"

"Thomas?!" Barry asks, standing up immediately. "Is it the same-"

"Flash," Bruce says, tone stern. He's so like the Barry he knows that it's easy to fall into the same patterns. "If you'll let me finish, I was going to say that it's the one both you and this world's Batman encountered before. His home dimension is now gone, and he's been operating in and around Gotham in secret. He has also asked to come with us when we go."
Dick looks shocked.

"What?" Dick says. "Really?"

Bruce nods.

"I bring this up primarily because we're not sure if it's even possible," he says, and Slade produces the box from his bag, setting it on the table. "Exactly how the technology works or doesn't work is something we're only guessing at."

Cyborg eyes the box, and then holds out his hand.

"If you'll allow me?"

"Go ahead," Bruce says, but Slade's shoulders stiffen, his nerves obvious.

Tiny wires extend out of Cyborg's hand, hooking into the box, and Bruce expects it to take a long time. Instead, it doesn't last more than thirty seconds before they disconnect and retract, with Cyborg giving a quick nod.

"To explain it in simple terms," Cyborg says, "I'm pretty sure this was intended for abducting people from other realities. I'm also fairly sure it's a prototype, because there's a lot of unused and unfinished fragments."

"Dangerous?" Stewart says.

"Not particularly," Cyborg says. "Whoever made it probably wasn't originally from our reality, because when you use it to get back to your own, it gets left behind. Our only concern should be the fact that it might accidentally activate."

"Like it did for me," Clark says.

"I can deactivate it," Cyborg says. "Or render it inert unless someone actively chooses to enable it. That, combined with proper storage should render it no particular risk."

"So can it bring someone back with us?" Bruce asks. That's the most important detail to him right then.

"It should be able to," Cyborg says. "As long as they got through the portal in time. Like I said, probably intended for abduction, based on how it seems to work."

"That's an alarming idea," Stewart says. "Are you implying someone was... abducted from our reality with this?"

"Possibly," Cyborg says. "There's no way to know. It might have only been a test run that left it here."

"Something to keep an eye on either way," Mera says.

Bruce isn't sure he feels much better about things. As awful as it is, he almost wishes that Cyborg had said no. It would simplify things. He wouldn't even have to think about it if it weren't an option.

"I think that's everything," Bruce says, "but I did want to speak to Flash and Superman in private, if that's alright."

"Do you need me?" Dick asks. "I wanted to check in with Green Arrow if he's around about the
team's missing member."

That works out just fine for Bruce's purposes, so he shakes his head.

"Go ahead," he says. "I'll meet you back at the manor."

Dick nods and heads off as the rest of the members filter out.

"Thomas?" Barry says. "He's really - he's fine?"

"He's fine," Bruce says. "He's been here for a while."

Barry frowns at that, and reaches up to scratch at the back of his neck, obviously out of instinct.

"Kind of thought he'd at least check in," he admits.

"What I want to tell you, I'm telling you in confidence," Bruce says. "If you could cut the security, that would be appreciated."

Clark and Barry exchange a glance, and Barry abruptly zips to a security panel, punching in a code at lightning speed.

"Done," he says, zipping back. Clark's still keeping an eye on Slade, obviously wondering if they're about to get attacked.

Bruce sits down on the edge of the table, letting out a sigh.

"A lot happened," he says. "To make things as short and impersonal as possible, this world's Batman has been... behaving poorly."

"Bruce," Slade says, "I know it's hard, but we can't be mincing words with this. If we're telling them, they need to know."

Clark's eyes are glancing between the two of them now, concern written all over his face. Barry doesn't look much better.

"Know what?" Barry asks. "And what does this have to do with Thomas."

Bruce can't quite make himself say it. He can't push past that last hurdle and say the words, so Slade has to.

"Batman's been behaving abusively towards people in his family," Slade says. "He's been neglecting Robin to the point where he didn't seem aware that he was with the Titans, and considered the prison a non-issue. He forced Nightwing to conceal that he wasn't dead from his family. He physically assaulted Red Hood, breaking his arm among other major damage. I could go on."

Clark's jaw is set, his teeth clenched. Barry looks horrified, but Clark's eyebrows are pressed together.

"Those are very serious accusations," he says.

"Which we are not sharing with the League," Bruce says. "Only you. It's obvious you're a family friend here the same way that you are home, which is why we're trusting you with it."

"Do you have proof?" Clark says, and Bruce feels, just for a moment, a pang of sympathy. He's just been told something awful about someone he considers a close friend, and he doesn't want to just
He wants to believe in Bruce Wayne, the man he's fought alongside for years.

"No," Bruce says. "And I didn't tell the boys I was telling you. I imagine they'll want to keep things private, but considering how he reacted to what happened with Red Hood, I'm prioritizing their safety over their privacy."

"What exactly is happening with him?" Barry says.

"The family spoke about it," Bruce says. "They've shared their stories. And now it's up to them what happens."

"They're going to hold an informal trial," Slade says. "Just family members. What happens after that is up to them."

"You're talking about kicking him out," Clark says. "About them rejecting him entirely."

"And I don't know how he'll react to that," Bruce says. "Clark, Jason didn't shoot Penguin. He used a blank, and he hoped that Batman would trust him. Instead, he beat him nearly to death."

"He hit him hard enough to shatter Red Hood's helmet," Slade says.

Clark looks away and buries his face in his hand.

"I don't want to believe this," he says. "I don't want to believe any of this."

But he does. It's not that he doesn't believe it. It's that he doesn't want to.

"Neither do I," Bruce says. "But it's the truth. Batman's been allowed to run wild and do what he pleases because he's put on a pedestal by those he works with. Someone on the League has to know the truth, so that they can back them."

"I'm telling Dick you told me," Clark says. "He needs to know someone's in their corner, ready to help if they want."

Bruce nods after a moment, and then Barry clears his throat.

"Where do I come in, exactly? Because as much as I like the family, I'm not like... Superman close with them."

"You come in with Thomas," Bruce says. "What do you know about him?"

"That would have cut his own throat if it meant saving his son," Barry says. "He'd have done anything for you. For Bruce." He frowns, then waves off the strangeness of it. "He's a good guy. He's just... shaped by the world he was in."

A world where almost every person in Europe was killed overnight. Where entire parts of the globe were ruled by monsters, both literally and figuratively.

It's a fairly damning description, even if Barry might not mean it that way.

"He said he's been working with Bane."

"With Bane?" Barry asks. "Why?"
"He wanted Batman to retire," Bruce says. "And knew he wouldn't listen to reason. He says he sided
with Bane to enforce that, and made a deal with Bane to protect Robin and the others."

"Bane is..." Clark says, glancing towards Barry, "not a good person."

"Understatement," Barry says. "He's killed a lot of people. He's dangerous."

It's Bruce's turn to exchange a glance with Slade, who offers a small grunt, arms folding across his
chest.

"He's turned over a new leaf in our world," Slade says. "He's been cleaning up Santa Prisca."

"He rules parts of Santa Prisca," Clark says. "Do we know what Bane has planned?"

"He said he was going to tell you, Barry," Bruce says with a nod to him. "He seems to like you."

"Well, that's something," Barry says. "Can't say I'd object to putting Bane back in prison."

"Sorry," Clark says, "but I'm going to go find Dick before he goes."

"Of course," Bruce says, and Clark heads out almost immediately, obviously eager to speak to Dick.

Barry watches him go, his expression pained.

"This is a lot," he says. "Like... a lot. I guess I should talk to Thomas. Who I didn't even know was...
you know, not dead."

"Neither did I," Bruce says, and Barry double takes at him.

"Oh! He - yeah - uh, sorry," he sputters out. "Didn't really think about that."

"It's fine," Bruce says. "It's an adjustment for everyone."

"Guess I should come down for lunch?" Barry says. "Can't say I'd object to lunch if Alfred's making
it."

"Lunch is fine," Bruce says. "I'll talk to Alfred."

"Then I'll stop by," Barry says. "And, uh... not mention this stuff. The whole... Batman stuff. We can
just say we talked about Thomas."

Bruce nods, and Barry lets out a sigh, hanging his head.

"Alright, let's get you guys back to the tube and get you home," he says.

"I want my sword," Slade says pointedly.

Barry perks up a bit at that, grinning.

"I'll get it for you," he says. "Although I kind of think some people were hoping you'd forget it."

They head back to the boom tubes, and Slade does get his sword back.
Bruce looks exhausted when they get back to the cave, but Slade's eager to *get things done*. There's too much to do to let himself sit around, and he's energized by the previous night's relaxation.

Well, that and he simply doesn't need as much sleep as anyone else.

He makes a mental checklist of who they still need to talk to, but things derail when Alfred greets them at the top of the steps. He doesn't look particularly surprised to see Barry there, but he does nod to the two of them.

"Dick back yet yet?" Slade asks, and Alfred shakes his head.

"Not yet, I'm afraid," Alfred says. "Should I let you know when he does?"

"Please," Bruce says. "I need to speak with him when he does."

"Of course."

Slade's personally more concerned about someone else, and he makes a point of asking about them next.

"Jericho up yet?"

"He has been out and about," Alfred says. "He asked after the two of you, and said he would see you when you got back."

"Thomas?" Bruce asks. Slade can't help but feel odd about the fact that he's calling his *own father* by his first name, but it feels like a conscious choice to separate the man he's dealing with from the memory in his head.

"On the grounds," Alfred says. "I believe he was taking a walk, earlier."

"I can find him," Barry volunteers. "Then come back and get you?"

"Or we could check manor security," Bruce says, and Barry lets out a little huff.

Alfred's way ahead of them, already tapping through security feeds.

"Mister Wayne is out on the north side," Alfred says, "and it appears that Mister Wilson is currently speaking to Master Timothy in the library."

Slade grinds his teeth a bit. He wants to talk to Joey, but he doesn't want to interrupt, so in the end he simply sighs.

"We should all go talk to Thomas then," he says.

He doesn't particularly want to talk to Thomas. The man's rubbing him the wrong way in almost *every* way. He's upsetting Bruce and Slade's having a hard time putting all those thoughts in order. Really, he's having a hard time even explaining what he dislikes about Thomas. He *should* be happy with him. He seems to care for Bruce. He likes the boys.

But Thomas is slotting himself too easily into the same position that Batman was. He's taking *charge*. He's making decisions for other people and not goddamn *asking*. 
Maybe Slade's making a lot of assumptions about him, but nothing about Thomas feels particularly pleasant to him.

They find Thomas out back, walking the grounds like he owns the damn place. Barry doesn't wait up for them when they finally spot him, zipping on ahead and more or less tackling Thomas where he stands.

Slade's expecting some kind of violence in return. He's expecting Thomas to toss Barry. Instead, even at a distance, it's obvious that he pulls the younger man into a hug. When Bruce and Slade catch up to them, Thomas has a relaxed smile on his face, and he's happily catching up with Barry. They only catch the tail end of the conversation, but it's obvious what's happening even just from that.

"I had told me you were here," Barry says. "We could have had lunch, or caught up or something."

"I had things to do," Thomas says. "I was given an opportunity, and I didn't plan to waste it. Everything else came secondary to that."

Barry's face darkens, and he glances over to Slade and Bruce, no doubt thinking of everything they shared with him.

"I heard," he says. "What can I do to help?"

"Help deal with Bane," Thomas says. "He's a danger to Gotham, and to the boys."

"Bruce doesn't-" Barry starts, before glancing over to the Bruce right by them and correcting himself. "Batman doesn't like me operating in Gotham, but with him out of the picture, even temporarily, it gives me a reason to. I can step in, sweep up Bane, and call it a day by nightfall."

"I doubt it will be that fast," Thomas says. "Bane has a large number of allies that need to be dealt with, some of which will require more caution than others."

"And yet you were working with them," Slade says pointedly. It's still rubbing him the wrong way.

"It was necessary," Thomas says immediately. "Bane would have carried out his plan with or without me. I simply eased the way for it."

"You were his enforcer," Slade says, and Barry glances between them nervously.

"I did what was necessary to protect the people around me," Thomas says. "Some sacrifice was necessary. If putting myself in league with one of Bruce's enemies was what it took to make him realize he was destroying his family, then that's a step I'm willing to take."

"Sacrifice," Slade says, "and yet you're not the one making it."

"Can we relax?" Barry says, slipping in between them, hands held up. "I know you're both tense, but Thomas is trying to help us right now. He's going to tell us all about it, and then Bane won't be able to do anything. No harm, no foul."

"Give us just a moment," Bruce says, pressing a hand to Slade's shoulder and pushing him away. He looks agitated, and Slade tries to calm himself down as Bruce guides him away from where Barry and Thomas stand, getting them some privacy.

"I know this sort of thing hits close to home-" Bruce starts, and Slade snorts.
"Close to home?" He says. "Just because I used to be one of your villains doesn't mean I'm anything like this."

Bruce gives him a look, and Slade wilts slightly, taking a moment to turn things over in his head. Bruce doesn't give him the courtesy of figuring it out on his own, either.

"Both you and Thomas have been involved in large scale plans which would have, if enacted, killed hundreds of people and reshaped Gotham City as we know it. Every word against Thomas's plan is a word against yourself, and while I understand that this is frustrating for you, you need to be a bit more self aware about how you're reacting."

Slade grinds his teeth. He hadn't thought of things that way, because the plan feels so long ago that it might as well have been a whole other lifetime.

"I was a different person back then," Slade says. "And that's not what's frustrating me about him."

Bruce folds his arms across his chest, tipping his chin down as he waits for Slade to continue. Slade let out a pained sigh, reaching up to drag his fingers through his hair in a bid to stall for time that doesn't get him more than a few seconds.

"I feel like he... is making the wrong choice," Slade finally says. "Right now he has two sons. One of them is... amazing, and well adjusted, and just absolutely outstanding, and the other one is a giant fuck up who is hurting everyone he loves and doesn't even seem to have the self awareness to realize it."

It's easier to think of it that way. That this world's Bruce isn't Bruce, but something closer to his brother than anything else. A brother he didn't know he had, but a brother just the same.

"And he's abandoning him," Slade says. "He's looking at the two options and he's picking the favorite son without thinking about which of those sons needs him. And I know it has to bother you too."

It obviously does, because Bruce looks increasingly pained with every word out of Slade's mouth.

"Yes," he finally says, "it does. But just saying no, he needs you more isn't going to change things. I'm worried about leaving an elder Wayne with control issues around this family. They need stability, and he feels like a bowling ball into the middle of the support structure that they've built."

"You're worried he's going to take Bruce's place," Slade says.

Bruce simply nods, glancing towards where Barry and Thomas are talking.

"Whether intentionally or not, yes," Bruce finally says. "He's the... the Wayne Patriarch. The Batman. He's used to being in charge and he's never not been in charge, not really, and he is... he is definitely a mess."

"Not sure he realizes that," Slade mutters. Thomas looks as casual as can be as he talks to Barry, seeming to have forgotten that they're there at all.

"I don't think he does," Bruce says. "The way Batman hasn't. And dropping two of them on the family is... risky."

"You're worried he's going to make things worse."

"Yes," Bruce says. "Maybe that's an awful thing to say about my father, but... yes. He thought this
entire plan with Bane was a better option than talking to the family. We just had an entire conversation with everyone about how they should have trusted and supported each other, but Thomas didn't either."

"Bruce," Slade says, and Bruce tears his eyes away from Thomas and Barry just long enough to look at him. "Tell me straight: Do you want him to come home with us?"

Bruce's face looks pained, his eyes drifting back, and his shoulders sag.

"Yes," he says, his voice dropping. "Maybe I shouldn't. There's a million different reasons to not bring him back. But he... He's still my father. I've thought so many times about what I'd say to him. About introducing him to the family, and what he'd think. About what Jason's done with Wayne Outreach and about his great grandson and... everything."

Bruce wants his father. It's an emotion that feels entirely alien to Slade, but he nods just the same.

"Then we'll figure it out," he says. "He has as much a place on our world as this one, but we'll figure something out."

Bruce leans over, pressing a kiss to his cheek, and Slade huffs, wrapping an arm around Bruce's side almost automatically.

"Thank you," Bruce says. "We'll figure this out."

Thomas is already going over the details of Bane's plans when they return, and he doesn't ask what the conversation was about. In the end, they retire to one of Batman's many offices, pulling out maps and sheets and letting Barry take notes about everything Thomas is telling him. It's a lot. The plan is significantly more complex than either of them had thought, and it feels like every time they're close to finished there's some new minor villain who Bane's working with who Thomas needs to explain.

The office isn't soundproofed as well as the bedrooms in their own dimension, and Sladecatches the sound of someone coming in the front door, glancing to Bruce.

"I think Jason's back," he says. "Do you want to go talk to him? I can handle this."

Bruce straightens up, stretching out after more than an hour bent over an increasingly large series of maps, and then nods.

"I'll talk to him," Bruce says. "And I'll have Alfred get you all for lunch."
Chapter 45

Jason's pulling off his jacket in the entranceway when Bruce finds him, and he gives Bruce a wary look.

"Here it comes," Jason says. "The speech."

Bruce falters. He absolutely had a conversation in mind, but he really didn't want it to be a speech.

"No," he says carefully, "I just wanted to see if you wanted to talk. There was... a lot happened, yesterday, and I thought you might want to talk it out."

"Nope," Jason says, "you'd have to find the boy wonder if you want one of those sit down talks."

Dick probably is around somewhere, but that's beside the point.

"Are you sure?" Bruce says. "I understand that I-"

"I'm not spilling my guts to anyone," Jason says, "least of all you. I'm playing nice because good-twin-Jason likes you, but-"

"What?" Bruce says. "Good twin Jason?"

"Obviously if we were twins, he'd be the good twin and I'd be the evil twin," Jason says as casual as can be. "One of us is running a casino and secretly ran Gotham's criminal underworld for several years, and the other one is helping the homeless and running around as Batman."

Bruce takes a few seconds to wrap his head around it, because that is a lot.

"Neither of you is a good twin or an evil twin," Bruce says. "You're both your own people. That's something that is... that is very important to remember."

For Jason and for him, and Jason seems to catch the implications, eyeing him warily.

"Either way," he finally says, "no, we are not having a sit down talk about my feelings. You can tell Slade to fuck off with that shit too."

"...Alright," Bruce says. He can't force him to talk, even if he thinks it would be good for him, so he's forced to simply fold, and Jason stares at him warily.

"Just like that?" Jason says.

"Just like that," Bruce confirms. "I can't make you talk, and I don't have any right to anyway."

"Hn," Jason says, "maybe pass on that message to the rest of the family."

Jason leaves for the kitchen without a goodbye.

Bruce finds Dick without too much trouble. He's sitting in the living room, watching the news, but he doesn't seem to be paying it any actual attention. He's unfocused, staring into space, and only seems to notice Bruce when Bruce finally clears his throat.

"Dick?" He says. "A word?"
Dick sits up a little bit straighter and pats the seat beside him, so Bruce finally settles down into it.

"I just wanted to make sure that you were... alright with Clark knowing," Bruce says, picking his words as carefully as he can manage. "I thought it was important that someone on the League know what's happening. So they can... support you as needed."

"It's fine," Dick says. "A part of me wishes he'd never found out, but... that isn't really realistic, is it? And if you hadn't told him, I would have had to, and..."

And he wouldn't have wanted to. That much is clear, and Bruce nods, watching the way Dick folds his hands together in his lap. Watching the way Dick, normally so sure of himself, seems to be struggling to find the words.

"I guess I thought it was just me," Dick says after a while. "That it was just me he was doing it to. Lots of reasons for it to be me. Because I left him. Because he was closer to the others. Because I could handle it, and they couldn't. But instead he was..."

Bruce is very, very tentative as he reaches out, but Dick doesn't pull away when Bruce rests a hand on his shoulder. He's not crying, but it's plain to see how broke up about it Dick is.

"I should have been watching out for them," Dick says. "I should have realized how bad things had gotten."

"You couldn't be everywhere," Bruce says. "When the plane you're in gets damaged and you need to use a mask, the most important thing to remember is to secure your own mask first. That's what you were doing. And now you're doing everything you can to be there for your family."

"Too little, too late," Dick says.

"Everyone's alive," Bruce says. "No one's died." He falters for a moment, then corrects. "No one's died permanently. There's still time to fix things."

"It doesn't feel like it," Dick says. "It feels like it's over already. You know what they're going to do when we sit down. You know they're going to vote him out. What are we going to do if Bruce isn't there? We - hell, we define ourselves by him. Batman. Batgirl. The whole damned Batfamily. It's a miracle I wasn't batboy."

"You're still a family," Bruce says, pulling Dick into a hug. "You still have all of them. You're still a family, even without the person who pulled you together. And maybe one day, when he's better, he can be a part of it again. Just not right now, because the most vulnerable among us need to come first."

"Damian," Dick says. "That's his father and he's been ignoring him, and-"

"Dick," Bruce interrupts. "Damian is stronger than you think. What matters is that he has family to lean on. It's more than he had before."

Dick buries his face against Bruce's shoulder, pulling him into a hug, and Bruce lets it happen before loosely wrapping his arms around... around what? His oldest son?

Something like that.

"I wish you could stay," Dick says, his voice muffled against Bruce. "I wish you could stay here with us. But I know you... you have your own family."
"I do," Bruce says. "And I love them a lot. And I... I wish you could feel the same way."

He wishes Dick could share that sentiment. That he could love the man he thinks of as his father without feeling guilty. That he could know for sure that Bruce loves him back. And Bruce wants it to be true. He wants to believe that this world's Bruce loves his children the way he does, but he doesn't know it. They've said only a few words to each other, had only a single conversation.

But he must. Bruce can't imagine a world where he doesn't love his children. He wants to keep believing that.

"You need to stay with your family," Bruce says. "You need to support them, but you need to let them support you, too."

Dick can't be the only pillar holding things up. He has to let other people help. He has to put himself on the same level.

"I know," Dick says. "Are you really taking Thomas?"

"I don't know," Bruce says. "We still have to talk about it. But... don't mention it to anyone, alright? If he ends up staying, I don't want people thinking..." He doesn't want them thinking the truth. It's a mess, and Bruce is tired all over again at the realization.

"You need to take care of yourself too," Dick says as he pulls back. "You're trying to help us, but you can't just... do the Bruce thing and burn yourself out trying to help others."

"I can and will," Bruce says. "That's what I have Slade for, to keep me in line."

He cracks a smile at that, and Dick returns it with one of his own.

There's a knock on the wall, and Bruce turns to find Joey standing in the entrance way, looking them over.

Am I interrupting? He signs, and Bruce shakes his head, glancing to Dick.

"We were just finishing," Dick says. "I need to go find Damian, anyway."

"Take care of yourself, alright?" Bruce says. He's careful not to say take care of the family. Dick has enough pressure as it is, and the last thing he needs is something more.

Dick nods, pushing himself upright, and heads out, leaving Bruce with Joey.
Chapter 46

There's only so much scheming Slade can take, and by the time they're winding down he's god and done with listening to all the details. He doesn't know the places they're talking about, barely knows the people, and both Barry and Thomas are a little bit too friendly, making references to experiences he doesn't share with them. By the time Barry says he's going to go deal with things, Slade is so happy to get going.

Thomas heads out onto the grounds, and Slade goes to find the boys. His first priority is Joey, but he doesn't have security access to figure out where he's hiding, which means he has to take a guess.

He finds Jason first, digging through one of the pantries like he owns the place. Which he sort of does, Slade decides, even if he doesn't live there.

Jason glances up when he hears Slade coming, fixing him with a withering glare, and then turns back to the pantry.

"No," Jason says.

"...No what?" Slade says. He has no idea what it's in response to, but Jason obviously thinks he does.

"I'm not down for a serious conversation with a guy who isn't my dad in any sense of the word about my feelings."

Ah.

"Did Bruce already try?"

Jason turns, glaring at him, and goes back to digging.

"Yes," he says. "As if you didn't know."

"We don't discuss that sort of thing," Slade says. "We trust whatever the other decides to say."

"Mhm," Jason says, pulling out a box of pancake mix and heading into the kitchen with Slade trailing behind him. "Touching. Really."

"You seem like you should probably do the talking thing with someone," Slade says pointedly.

"And how did that work out for your Jason?" He asks. His tone of voice makes it very obvious that he's expecting a not very well.

"He goes to therapy once a week," Slade says. "He has a greater understanding of-"  

"Alright alright," Jason says, scowling at him as he starts pulling more ingredients out of the fridge.  
"I get it. Talking good, bottling bad. I'm not an idiot."

"Then talk," Slade says.

"What's to talk about?" Jason says. "I'm not holding my breath. Right now everyone's on a big family is the only thing that matters and Bruce can go fuck himself streak, but I doubt that'll hold up when he shows back up in the cave. He'll do his growl and they'll all fold at the first sign of his displeasure."
Oh.

Truthfully, Slade should have seen this coming. He should have known that Jason had been—and still was, if he was being honest—firmly on the pessimistic side of things. And this was... well, he was only following everything he'd seen before.

He was, in Slade's own opinion, accepting what he thought of as the harsh reality rather than letting himself get caught off guard.

"Jason," Slade says.

Jason glares at him again.

"You're not my dad," Jason says. "At this point, no one's my dad."

"Jason," Slade says again, and Jason growls at him like a dog.

Slade simply rolls his eye.

"You are stronger than you know," Slade says pointedly. "Your self in my world is Batman. He has to fend off Wonder Woman trying to recruit him to the League every time they interact. He-"

"I don't need to hear you gush about this alternate Jason and how amazing he is," Jason says pointedly.

"You do," Slade says. "You need to hear it because you two are exactly alike."

"We are nothing alike."

"As the person who had to fish your alternate self out of the bowels of Arkham, train him back into fighting shape, and then help him through his anger issues, yes, you two are exactly alike. The only difference is that he had someone in his corner, and you feel like you don't."

"I've had people in my corner," Jason says. "And they're gone."

It hurts to hear. It hurts because Roy's dead and every other friend Jason's ever mentioned also comes with the also dead signifier.

"You have your family," Slade says. "And they'll stand by you if you stand by them. They all realize they've made a mistake. That they've done you a disservice."

"And they're still going to stand by Bruce."

"You need to have some faith in them," Slade says. "Even if they might not have done much to deserve it. They've all been caught in the same web."

"Some more than others," Jason says.

"Yes," Slade says, and Jason seems surprised he's agreeing with him. "You've taken the brunt of it. But you aren't the only one, and I think everyone else is feeling poorly for how things turned out. I think if you talk with them, they'll be more than willing to open up. If you're worried that they're going to just forgive Batman for the things he's done, then talk to them."

"And tell them what? That I'm expecting them to go crawling back to him the moment he shows that he's angry?"
"That you're worried they'll be too willing to look past what he's done," Slade says. "And that you need their support to stand up to him."

Jason stares up at him, eyes narrowed, and Slade doesn't flinch. He's dealt with Jasons before. He just needs to stand his ground with this particular Jason to make sure things stick.

"Sounds like a pain," Jason finally says.

"Family can be," Slade says, "but it's worth it in the end. Trust your family. Trust your friends."

Jason looks away from him, busying himself in the pancake batter he's been slowly working on, and Slade fights the urge to rest a hand on his shoulder. He doubts it would go over well.

"Just talk with them," Slade finally says. "Express your concerns. Have you considered starting with Kate?"

Slade hardly knows Kate. He's never met her counterpart. But it's impossible for him to miss the fact that she was the one person who voted not to kick Jason out. That Bruce had tried to kick her out of the family the same way he'd effectively kicked Jason out.

Jason grunts.

"Try it," Slade says. "People will surprise you if you give them a chance."

"People like you," Jason says. "Your counterpart isn't exactly a nice guy."

"I get that," Slade says. "He is... a lot like me, I think. Like I was."

"Before your Bruce got his claws into you and made you give up guns."

"Before you got your claws into me and reminded me that it was nice to care about someone again."

Jason gives him a look like he doesn't quite believe that, and Slade raises his hands.

"I'll swear on whatever you want, it's the truth. I've moved past that enough to recognize it, but all I did was work back then. Having your counterpart there was what helped me get off that path. Made me realize that all that no man is an island shit had some truth to it."

Jason's still giving him the look, so Slade continues. It feels weird being so blunt about it, but if saying it right then will help his son's counterpart... then he supposes he's going to have to say it.

"All he cared about was revenge," Slade says. He's sure parts of the story are things Jason's already heard, but he has no idea what his Jason said in the video, so he's forced to guess. "Joker had convinced him that Bruce had replaced him. Bruce had brought in Tim to help search for him, and then Bruce thought he was dead. Jason thought Bruce knew the whole time. That he'd forgotten him. And he was... angry. Even angrier than you are right now, with all this stuff happening. That idea just kind of made me sad, even back then. The idea that all he had was that anger, and that he was going to get his revenge by any means necessary, and then... what?"

"Take the cowl for himself?"

"He might have said that was what was going to happen," Slade says, "but that wasn't how things were going to play out. The only thing he had was his revenge. When he was done with it, he might as well have stopped existing."

Jason looks away, and Slade gets the impression that everything he's just said feels very familiar to
"So I wanted to show him there was something else. That he could still have relationships. He cared a lot about Barbara, for one," Slade says. "Dick too. They were his family, and that helped him come to terms with things. Realize that he'd been tricked, but also that there were more important things to live for than ruining Bruce's life."

It feels personal and raw just saying it out loud, but Jason's reaction makes it worth it. He seems... surprised. But he doesn't reject it, either. He doesn't try and deny it. He just accepts it and turns away, taking the time to process what he's heard.

Slade decides to give him some space.

"I'll be expecting some pancakes," Slade says. "When you're done. Should I go get people?"

"Might be a good idea," Jason says, not quite looking at him.

This Jason is just like his Jason: He needs some time to process, and Slade is happy to give him space.
Chapter 47

Going to put in some content warnings which effect... more or less only this chapter. I know not everyone's read Priest's Deathstroke run, so warnings for the following:

Drug addiction, Implications of Suicidal Thoughts, Extremely Unhealthy Relationships, etc.

Joey doesn't settle in for a conversation. Instead he signs, asking if Bruce wants to go for a walk, and Bruce realizes he's probably eager to get out of the house. A house that isn't his own, surrounded by family that isn't his.

Even if he can understand her reasons, Bruce wishes Rose had been there for Joey. The two seemed to be close from what little he's heard and seen, and it feels painfully obvious that Joey is out of his element.

Joey's there for Slade and very little else. Part of Bruce wonders if they're making a mistake having him there at all. It might very well be better for his mental health if he wasn't. If he was at home, doing whatever it is he'd normally be doing.

It's a mess on all accounts.

*Please hear me out*, Joey signs as they head across the grounds, and Bruce catches him smiling when he seems to realize the irony of asking Bruce to hear him out. *I know I have a lot to say, but it's important that I say it all.*

Which means he's expecting Bruce to protest. It's not a good sign.

"Alright," Bruce says. "I'll hear what you have to say."

*I want to go with you*, Joey signs, and Bruce chokes. He feels like someone just kicked him in the chest, and even if he *just* said he'd hear Joey out, he can't stop himself from speaking out.

"Joey," Bruce says. "Joseph." Because Joey is Slade's son and this is Joseph, someone entirely different. He tries to draw the line in his head. He *needs* that line. "You have-"

Bruce cuts himself off as Joey starts furiously signing at him. Joey can't speak *over* him, but he's doing the closest possible thing he can manage without syncing to Bruce's phone and cranking the volume.

*Let me finish*, Joey furiously signs, and Bruce forces himself to exhale and stop talking.

The whole thing is a bad idea. It's a bad idea and he *knows* it, but he can't walk around telling everyone they need to talk about their problems and then refuse to even let Joey say his piece.

*I know you're thinking that this is about Slade*, Joey signs. *And part of it is. But that's only a small part. I know you are thinking that I have people here, and I do. I love mom. I love pop. I love Rose. I have friends here. But this world is killing me.*
There's a fury in his signs, and the way he manages to be *expressive* with them only further emphasizes to Bruce the differences in the way they sign: Bruce signs for direct communication, but Joey signs to *express* himself.

*I tried to kill someone*, Joey signs. *Not a criminal who I almost killed while saving others, but a friend. Someone I loved. I was afraid he was going to tell pop about our relationship, and I tried to kill him to stop him.*

It's hard for Bruce to follow Joey's hands and his face at the same time, but it's obvious enough how much it hurts him to share it. It's all new information, but at the same time...

Maybe a long time ago he'd have been upset. Maybe a long time ago he'd been horrified. But now there's only one person living in his house who *hasn't* taken a life, and that's him.

What matters is how people react to it, and it's obvious how much Joey hates himself for what happened.

*I ruined his life,* Joey signs. *He isn't the only one. I loved my fiance. She meant so much to me. But she was only with me so she could spy on pop. She was using me to get to him. And while she was at it, she was sleeping with pop behind my back.*

Bruce already knew about her sleeping with this world's Deathstroke, but the rest is new to him, and he cringes in response. Being used like that... it's like something out of his own nightmares.

*She died,* Joey signs. *Rose killed her. To protect me or because she was possessed or something. I'll never know why.*

His frustration is bleeding into the way he signs, and Bruce has to fight the urge to respond. He said he'd let him finish, but it's a fight to hold himself to that.

*I keep trying to start over. To get away from things. The job I have is because of my mother. My fiance was with me because of pop. The team I was a part of was created by both of them for me. Everything I have is because of my parents. Everything I do ties back to them. No matter what I do, I can't escape that. I can't get away from the things I did. I can't get away from their influence.*

Joseph's making an argument, but it doesn't hold up. Not to Bruce. He can't imagine wanting to throw away every connection you had just to go off and... what, start over in a new world? With Thomas, the connections he has are shallow and tenuous. But this is Joseph's own world. These are the people he knows.

"Joseph," Bruce says, careful to wait for a lull in Joseph's signs. "Your father is... your father is a walking disaster of a man. What he did shouldn't have been done. And everything else..." There's a lot. A lot to process.

*I started taking medication,* Joseph signs frantically, *to help me sleep. To help with the anxiety. But it didn't help, because it didn't change that I'd tried to kill someone I cared about. In the end I was popping twenty pills a day and I was out of control. I nearly killed Rose while trying to kill pop.*

Bruce can't stop himself from reaching out, resting a hand on Joseph's shoulder. Joseph glances towards it, swallowing hard, and then looks away.

*I went to rehab,* Joseph signs. It's slower, more subdued as he does. *Rose was in the hospital. Pop never visited. My mother visited once to make sure the facilities were up to standard, and then had to go chase after pop. Wintergreen was more supportive than any of them.*
"They love you," Bruce says, praying that it's true, "they're just bad at showing it."

*They love me,* Joseph sighs, *but they love other things more. Pop loves his work more than he's ever loved any of his kids, and I've always come second to Mom's desire to destroy pop for what happened to me.*

It hurts. It hurts to hear it, and he has to stop, pulling Joseph into a hug.

It *hurts.* It stops Joseph from communicating, his hands unable to sign in the hug, but he can't stop himself from doing it anyway, because Joseph looks so *tired.* He's so very, very tired.

"I'm sorry," Bruce says. "No one should have to go through all that."

No one should have to feel half as alone as Joseph so obviously does.

He holds him for a little while, and when it feels like it's gone too long he pulls back, muttering an apology for effectively silencing him.

*It's fine,* Joseph signs. *It's more affection than I've gotten from pop in pretty much my entire life.*

That hurts too.

*I know you think this is about me wanting to follow Slade. To be with the better version of pop. But it's not. It's about a second chance. Every time I try and break away from this life, I get dragged back. Every bit of good gets buried under more bad. All I want is a way out. If you'll take me I'll never bother you again. You won't have to deal with me. I'll go to the far side of the country and start over. You'll never even have to see me.*

It's hard not to read into his signs and catch implications there. He wonders if he's reading *too* much into it, and then thinks about everything he's said. About Deathstroke being *worse* before. About everything that happened with his fiance, the woman he loved. About the addiction. About getting more support from Wintergreen than his own family.

"I have to talk with him," Bruce says. He can't make that decision by himself. "But you know he wouldn't want that. You know he wouldn't want you to just be alone."

That, at least, isn't a question. He *knows* Slade wouldn't abandon him. He *knows* he'd want to be there for him. He knows his husband, maybe even better than he knows himself.

"I'll talk to him," Bruce says again, the promise obvious. "Just give me some time."

He has no idea how the *hell* he's going to talk to Slade about this, but he's going to have to.

*I just need some time,* Joseph says. *I'll see you back at the house.*

He turns away before Bruce can respond, and Bruce knows by the hunch of his shoulders that Joseph is crying as he walks away, trying to get himself some space.
Finding everyone to call them for lunch turns out to be a lot harder than it is at home. For one thing, there's no clear this time is when we're going to eat. For another, he catches Alfred and Thomas in the library in some kind of deep, serious discussion and decides to leave them. He finds almost everyone else, sending them towards the kitchen, but Bruce and Joey elude him.

Not a great sign.

He's on his second path through the house when he spots Bruce walking up the back path, and he heads for the door, catching him as he comes in.

"Is Joey out there?" He says. "Alfred's busy, but Jason's making pancakes."

"He is," Bruce says. "But we need to talk before that."

Oh no.

"Libraries occupied," Slade says. "Our room?"

Bruce doesn't say a word as they head back to the guest room they share, sliding inside and closing the door behind them. He's not sure what to expect, but Bruce throwing his arms around him and burying his face in Slade's chest isn't anywhere near the top of his list.

"Hell, Bruce," Slade says quietly, pulling him into a hug on pure instinct. "How bad?"

"Bad," Bruce says. "I talked to Dick. That went fine. Then I talked to Joey."

Slade sweeps his fingers through Bruce's hair, pulling him over to the bed and getting him to sit down, still curled against him. It's not the first time Bruce's explained something while curled against him, and he doubts it'll be the last. Bruce does well with physical comfort, and Slade's all too happy to provide.

"He wants to come with us."

Slade's pretty sure that his heart stops. Joey wants to come with them. Even if it's just six simple words, Slade feels like there's a mountain of implications that come along with that. Joey wants to come with me. Joey wants to be a family. Joey wants to stay with us. Joey to have all the pleasant experiences that his Joey never had the chance to.

"I know you're against it," Slade says, "but I think we should-"

"I'm not against it," Bruce says, and Slade stops abruptly. Everything in his brain says that Bruce should be against it. That he's the neutral party, the one looking at things sensibly. He's the one who should be breaking out a spreadsheet of the hundred casual relationships that Joey's disrupting by leaving. About the difficulties of jumping cross-universe.

And then it settles in that Bruce is curled against him, upset, and that it's not because Joey asked to come with them.

"What did he say?" Slade asks. His mouth feels dry.
"Did you know his fiance is dead?" He asks, and Slade hesitates.

"We knew she was a spy," Slade says carefully, "and that she was cheating on him." He'd assumed she was still around somewhere, just obviously not still his fiance.

"She died," Bruce says. "Rose killed her. Joey isn't even sure why."

"Rose?" Slade asks, and he doesn't try to stop himself from growling, low and deep in his throat. Murdering her brother's fiance...

"She was only with Joey to spy on Deathstroke," Bruce says. "She was sleeping with him to that end. But he still loved her, and then she died. Joey almost killed Rose and Deathstroke because of it."

It's a whole lot coming out at once, and Bruce isn't even done.

"He tried to kill someone, Slade."

Slade rifles back through what he knows, flipping through each relevant bit of information like they're index cards in his brain. Joey's confession that he wasn't a good person. The proceeding conversation.

"Isherwood?"

"I don't know," he says. "He said it was an ex, and that he was going to tell Deathstroke about them, and he panicked. He's... mortified by it. He started popping pills, he ended up in rehab-

"Jesus, Bruce," Slade says, hands resting on each of Bruce's shoulders as he pulls him up a bit straighter to look at him. "Just... take a deep breath, alright?"

Bruce does, and then goes right back to burying his face against Slade, leaning on him for support.

"His life is... his life is all screwed up, Slade. He says he'll come with us. He said if we wanted, he'd go to the far side of the country and start over there. But every time he tries to get away here, something happens and drags him back."

Slade can't help but think that it sounds like something he'd do. He sighs, reaching up with his hand to rub at the bridge of his nose.

"He needs help," Slade says.

"If he stays here, he might get it. Or he might not. But right now I think he's on the edge of doing something he can't take back, and if he's going to do that I want it to be moved to another dimension with a supportive family waiting for him and not anything else."

The implication is clear, and Slade makes himself take a deep breath.

"Alright," he says. "He comes. We can hash out the details later."

"We need to tell the others," Bruce says. "And at least... at least give them the option."

Slade doesn't know if he wants them to come or not. A part of him does. A part of him absolutely does. Deep down he wants nothing more than to bundle up each and every member of both of their families and take them home with him.

But it's not realistic. There's a million issues, and cutting someone off from everything they care
about and taking them to a world that's foreign to them isn't something that can be done lightly.

"Thomas?" Slade says.

That's a harder proposition. Slade was willing to take Joey back with them at a drop of a hat, and Bruce seems to have come around with convincing. Thomas, on the other hand, seems to be a maybe for both of them.

"I don't know," Bruce says. He sounds sad, but at least less exhausted than he was before. "Maybe it would be better to leave him here. He likes Barry. Maybe we could get the League to watch him."

"To babysit your father," Slade says. "I'm sure that would go over well with him."

"There's pros and cons on each side," Bruce says. It's obvious he's going through some sort of therapy-guided-exercise, because he's pulled away from Slade's chest, tracing his finger across the bedspread as he writes it out in his head. "The situation here is already precarious, and he might very well make things worse. He's probably already burned most of his bridges here, because he worked against them, and because he's already made it clear he plans to come back with us. He only knows one person here, really, but that's one more than he does in our world."

"And the other side?"

"He has a fresh start," Bruce says. "I'm just worried about exposing the boys to him. He strikes me as... volatile."

"I think the question to ask yourself is how much of that is who he is, and how much of that is where he is. The world he's from is far worse than the ones we're used to. A world like that, surrounded by the worst parts of humanity can make a man do things they might not have otherwise done in peacetime."

"He's been in peacetime here," Bruce points out. "And yet he still chose this."

"He walked out of a warzone and into this world," Slade says. "He hasn't adjusted."

He doesn't even particularly like Thomas, but he's feeling a little bit defensive right then.

"We're going to have to talk to him," Bruce says, turning back to Slade. "We're going to have to... to ask questions. To make sure he understands what this is."

"Bruce," Slade says carefully. "I think we both know that in the end it's going to be you who has the final call on this. He's your father."

He feels almost cruel putting that on Bruce's shoulders, but it's the only way. Bruce is the one who wants him to come. He's Bruce's father. And Slade would shed no tears if they left Thomas right where he is.

"I'll take the lead," Bruce says, seeming well aware of all those details and more. "And... talk to him. And we can decide, and then... Tell the family, I guess."

Slade leans forward, pressing a small kiss to Bruce's mouth. It's a small, tender moment, but it's obviously something that both of them need so badly.

"I miss the kids," Slade says quietly. "Think they're doing okay?"

"They're probably having fun tormenting our counterparts," Bruce says.
"If we're lucky," Slade says with a small laugh. He leans in for a second kiss, and then pushes himself to his feet. "We should get going. Jason's going to be pissed you're not eating his pancakes."

"Mm," Bruce says. "Hopefully he's a better cook than our Jason is."

Slade sure as hell hopes so.
This world's Jason does turn out to be a hell of a lot better at cooking. It's not exactly a high bar to pass, but the pancakes he serves up (complete with a dirty look for taking so long) are genuinely good.

Alfred and Thomas join them before they're finished, and Alfred seems genuinely touched (and more than a bit surprised) someone's thought to cook. It's obvious that people are starting to come and go more freely, and Tim lets them know he's starting to put together the videos for everyone.

"I think we're going to need a family meeting tonight," Bruce says. "To... finalize our plans."

"To decide when you're going home," Jason says as he grabs a seat to eat.

"Yes," Bruce says.

"Well, Kate's coming over tonight," Jason says, and Bruce catches Slade smiling out of the corner of his eye. "So that's a thing."

"I don't believe that will be an issue," Alfred says. "Miss Kane can join us for dinner."

There's a quick round of no objections as everyone digs in. Slade makes a point of complimenting Jason's cooking, and everyone else piles on, leaving Jason looking embarrassed.

Bruce waits until they're done eating before he approaches Thomas, tapping him on the shoulder as he finishes up. Bruce is sure other people notice what's going on, but every moment since they arrived has been a rotating set of private conversations and no one is terribly surprised.

They retire to the library, and Bruce wonders for a moment what it was that Thomas and Alfred spoke about.

Maybe he'll never know.

"So I get both of you this time," Thomas says, settling down into his armchair.

"We're a team," Bruce says, taking a seat himself, "and it's a group decision."

Slade doesn't seem interested in sitting until Bruce gestures for him to do so, and even then only does so reluctantly. He's content to stay on the edges of the conversation, letting Bruce do the heavy lifting.

Bruce gets the impression that Slade doesn't like Thomas even more, and it hurts a bit to think about. Whatever fantasy he might have had when he first realized who Thomas was is ever so slowly trickling away: That happy fantasy life where Thomas slides perfectly into their pre-existing family doesn't exist.

"We wanted to ask you some questions," Bruce says, "because it's not as easy as just saying yes. Taking you away from here because you're worried you'll be violent towards Batman doesn't sit well with us." It doesn't sit right with him for that matter. How could it, knowing what he does? "The boys come first. Their safety is our first concern, and bringing you into our world—into our home—can't put them at risk."

"I'm not a danger to them," Thomas says pointedly. "I'm their grandfather. I'd never hurt them."
"But you'd hurt your son."

Thomas shifts his eyes away, not meeting Bruce's right then.

"I don't even know if I want to call him my son," Thomas says. "The things he's done..."

Maybe it shouldn't bother Bruce as much as it does, but it does bother him. Hasn't he done the same thing? Hasn't Slade? They've walled Rose off from the rest of the family, cutting her out of what should have been hers. All because of her mistakes. All because she hurt people. And now Batman's done the same thing, but the idea of Thomas disowning him makes him feel ill.

"He needs help," Bruce says. "The people here need help first, because they're victims, but he needs help too. It's not as simple as right and wrong. Maybe he can still see reason."

Slade doesn't look like he agrees, but he doesn't say a word. Bruce isn't sure Thomas would even notice, but he's gotten good at reading the little twitches in Slade's face. This is a point they'll always disagree on: How much forgiveness it too much. How far someone has to go before it's too far.

It feels self-hating to Bruce to know that Slade would say without hesitation that someone who's done the things he's done doesn't deserve forgiveness

Maybe he should be forcing the you need therapy point with Slade when they get back.

"Maybe," Thomas says, but he's still not looking at Bruce. He's lost in thought, thinking about who-knows-what.

"What are you going to do if we say no?" Slade asks, and Thomas glances over to him, his eyebrows furrowing together.

"Is that what this is?" He asks. "A no?"

"It's an interview," Bruce says. "We'd interview anyone who came into our house for work reasons, and this is no different."

"I'm family," Thomas says, narrowing his eyes. "I'm not a dogsitter."

Bruce grinds his teeth. He feels like they're getting nowhere, and they've only just begun to talk.

"You can't throw Batman out of your family for what he did in one breath and insist you have a right to come back with us because you're blood in the next," Bruce says. "It's hypocritical."

"He beat his children. He abused them. I haven't done a damned thing."

The way Thomas says it, he sounds absolutely convinced.

"You plotted with a mass-murderer to take over Gotham," Bruce says, and just for a second he sees Thomas's confidence falter. "Hundreds of people would have died at a minimum. And that's not even starting on the danger it would have put this family in."

"None of that happened," Thomas says, and it's obvious to Bruce that he's backpedalling. "They were just plans."

"Would you not have carried them out?" Slade asks. "If we'd never come and disrupted them, would you not have gone ahead with them?"

"There wasn't another option-"
"There was absolutely another option," Bruce says. "But you picked that one, and now you want to be around my sons."

Thomas is silent, and Bruce realizes that his fingers are digging into the arms of the chair, his knuckles white. He looks like a caged animal in that moment, ready to bolt. Panicked, even.

"You are acting like you have the right to come into our family," Bruce says, "but you don't. There can't be any question there: If we think that you're a danger to our sons, then you stay here. You know people here, and you can get along just fine here."

Bruce doesn't like the possibility of deciding that Thomas can't be trusted around his sons and then following up by forcing someone else's to deal with him, but at least the ones here know about him. At least there's Barry and Clark.

"I would never harm them," Thomas says. "Never. When I found out that you were still alive in other worlds, that you were meant to be alive, that was... it gave me hope. I would never harm them."

It isn't the answer Bruce wants. It feels fake, like Thomas is telling him what he wants to hear. But as he sits there, watching Thomas, watching his posture and the way he won't meet Bruce's eyes, he realizes that Thomas isn't lying to him.

He's lying to himself.

The question is if he can recognize that. If he can't, then he won't be any better than this world's Batman. He'll just be another angry man who can't recognize the damage he's doing to those around him.

"Can you really say that?" Bruce says. "Can you really say you'd never harm your son, or any of his children?"

Slade realizes what he's doing the moment the words are out of his mouth, and Slade gives him the faintest of nods. Understanding. Approval. He's putting his trust in Bruce to let him get to the bottom of things, and Bruce knows that Slade also sees the same thing he does.

"I-" Thomas starts, and then he falters.

It's good. The faltering is good, because if he says I never would then it means he can't even recognize that much.

"I wouldn't harm them for no reason," Thomas finally says, reconciling everything he's said into one simple sentence.

"No," Bruce says. "You can't harm them at all. Even with a good reason."

"Jesus Christ, Bruce," Thomas says, his frustration showing. "What do you want from me? I tell you that I won't harm them and you say it's not true. I tell them I wouldn't without a reason and you say that's not good enough. Are you just going to keep asking until I tell them that all I've ever wanted is to assault my own grandchild?"

"I think you came from a place that was very different from this," Bruce says. "A world at war with itself. I think you hurt a lot of people there, and I think that's eaten at you. You act like a general in charge of soldiers. You don't act like the grandfather you want to be. I think you need help."

This is it. Do or die. Because if Thomas rejects it—if he says he doesn't need help and refuses to see
reason—then Bruce can't make him. He can't *force* a grown man to get help.

And that means leaving him behind.

Thomas's reaction is pained before anything else. He looks hurt, like Bruce has just stabbed him in the side and is dragging the dagger around to cause more damage.

"I don't need help," he says. "I just need... time to adjust."

"You need help," Bruce says.

He can see the doubts flickering across Thomas's face, and when Thomas folds his hands together in his lap, squeezing them as if to support himself, Bruce knows they've brushed at something that Thomas doesn't even want to look at.

If he was being fair—completely and utterly fair—he'd say nothing and see where things go. But Thomas is his *father*, and even if the boys come first, he still wants him to come with them. He still wants to give him a chance at a new start. So he tries.

"You've been alone," Bruce says. "For a long time." It hasn't escaped his notice that Thomas has never mentioned his mother, save for one single time to acknowledge that she hadn't died in the alley. The lack of mention is obvious, painted in neon colors in Bruce's mind. "You've been alone, without anyone to lean on, suffering through things with no one to rely on. You don't need time. You need help and support."

Thomas won't have had an Alfred. He'll have had, at best, a loose ring of support staff. But with how he acts and the way he carries himself, he's been alone for a long time. He won't have had sons, or a family. He never had a Robin, or a Batgirl, or anyone else.

It's just been Batman, alone, growing increasingly violent to meet the needs of an increasingly violent world.

Thomas won't look at him, and he's silent for a long while. Bruce makes himself stay with that silence, refusing to break it. It has to be Thomas. Thomas *has* to be the one.

"I just... I just want to see my grandchildren," Thomas finally says. "I want to see a world where my son is happy. Where my son's children are happy. Where everything isn't rotten."

He sounds defeated, like Bruce has just beat him into the dirt, and he looks so small in his chair.

His father isn't nearly as old as he should be—he has to be almost a decade younger than his own father should have been—but right then he seems so old. Exhausted from a life at war all by himself.

"Then you just need to say it," Bruce coaxes. "The real reason you want to go with us."

Not *I'll hurt Batman if you leave me, so you have to take me.*

"I want to go," he says. "I want to see them."

It's easy then to close the distance. To stand from his seat and move to Thomas's side in a movement so fluid it feels like it was only a single step. To pull his father into a hug and feel it be returned.

He's wanted this since the moment he saw Thomas and finally getting to do it makes the misery of the past few days a little bit better.
Slade lets them hug in privacy, averting his gaze to give them what little he can with him still in the room. There's a pang of hurt he doesn't want to think about, something cold and dark and buried deep, and Slade pushes it back down. He doesn't need it. He's never needed it, and there's never going to be a happy reunion for him.

He has other things. A husband who loves him. A small army of children. Family.

He waits for Bruce to pull back, breaking the hug and straightening up, and then clears his throat. Thomas startles like he'd genuinely forgotten Slade was there, and Slade tries not to let that irritate him.

It's all too easy for him to let himself get irritated by Thomas monopolizing Bruce's time. He simply can't let him.

"There are terms," Slade says. They haven't discussed this, but they both know it anyway. Joey is one thing—he's young and easy to work with, the sort of person no one has anything bad to say about. Thomas is something else entirely.

"I expected as much," Thomas says.

"You're coming back as a member of the family," Slade says, "but you're not in charge. Bruce is still the head of the family." It's not up for debate, and if Thomas tries to claim seniority, he's got another thing coming.

"I wasn't planning to," Thomas says. "I doubt I'd do a good job of it."

At least he recognizes that much, and Slade softens a bit even if he tries not to show it.

"You getting help is non-negotiable. You need help, and we're not professionals."

"Do you really expect me to just... what, work my way around all this? How am I supposed to explain-"

"We know good therapists," Bruce says. "People you can trust. Even with the stuff that is... unusual."

God help whoever he has to do therapy with.

"You listen to Bruce," Slade says, "and me. And Alfred, for that matter. He has as much say in the house as either of us. He's part of the family."

That doesn't go down as easily, and Thomas grunts as Slade tries to figure out what other promises he might need to extract from him.

He doesn't think it needs to be said, but he decides it's probably better to be safe than sorry. Probably better to be clear.

"You aren't to raise your hand to any of the boys-"

"Anyone," Bruce corrects. "Even if you were Batman at home, your brand of... vigilante justice wouldn't work in our world. There's no need for violence period. And no guns."
Slade snorts at that at the exact moment that Thomas snorts at that, and they share a quick glance.

"I mean it," Bruce says. "I made Slade give up his. I'm not going to give you a free pass."

"Fine," Thomas says. "I accept. Anything else?"

"I'll think of something later," Slade says. "For now, this will do."

"You should tell Joey," Bruce says. Slade suspects he wants at least a moment alone with Thomas, but Slade won't begrudge him that. He wants to tell Joey himself.

"Of course," Slade says. "I'll see you at dinner."

He leaves Bruce and Thomas behind in the library and goes to find his first son. This world's Alfred seems just as knowledgeable as their Alfred, because Slade's barely opened his mouth when Alfred informs him that Joey is in his room.

He knocks once and hears a stomp that he takes to mean come in.

Joey won't look at him when he enters. His eyes are firmly on the floor, his anxiety written all over him. There's no question in Slade's mind that he's terrified, dreading a no, you need to stay.

Slade doesn't bother to drag it out, sitting beside Joey and pulling him into a hug.

"We talked," he says. "You can come with us. You can stay with us at the manor."

He won't let there be any question about whether or not he was going to tolerate Joey's stupid I'll move across country and you'll never see me again plan.

Joey breaks down. He can't sob, but there's no question that he's crying, and the choking noises he makes as he does kill Slade to hear. He wraps his arms a bit tighter around him, pulling Joey against him.

It's not the first time it's happened, but it's the first time it doesn't feel temporary. It's the first time it doesn't feel like a dream he's having that he'll wake up from. He combs his fingers through Joey's hair, holding him until he stops trembling and finally pulls back. Only then does he let him go, glancing down to Joey's hand.

I'm sorry, he signs, and Slade reaches up, touching his hands softly to silence him.

"Don't," he says. "You don't need to apologize for that."

I do, Joey signs.

"You absolutely do not," Slade says. "You've been through a hell of a lot, and you haven't had nearly as much support as you should have."

I need to tell them, Joey signs. It wouldn't be right to leave without talking to them.

Slade is of the opinion that Joey should be leaving without a goddamn word after everything that they've put him through, but Joey seems unwilling to let that happen.

"What about your stuff?" Slade says. "You could probably bring a bag or something." Not everything, but just a small suitcase.

Too far, Joey signs. I live in LA, I wouldn't want to make you guys wait.
Slade almost says that Joey doesn't need to worry, and they'll wait as long as he needs, but... god. He can't imagine waiting the extra thirty-six-ish hours that would take. Could they take one of Batman's planes? Or...

Oh right.

"We'll talk to Dick," Slade says. "He seems to have access to the League's teleportation technology, and we can use that."

*Seems like a misuse of a major resource,* Joey signs, but he's smiling as he does.

"You can go after dinner," he says. "And we can leave in the morning. So that you have time to pack everything, even if you might be a bit low on sleep."

Slade's willing to give up the chance to spend the night in his bed to let Joey move more easily. He's pretty sure Bruce is too. And if he's being realistic, the morning makes more sense. Announce their arrival over dinner. Let information circulate. Have everything ready to go.

*I'll try and get some sleep before dinner,* Joey signs. *And start figuring out who I need to call.*

"We're going to tell everyone over dinner," Slade says. "Thomas is going to come too."

Joey startles at that, head turning, eyes wide.

*Thomas?* He signs. *I thought he would stay.*

"He asked to come," Slade says. "We discussed it and decided he needed a chance. A place... away from this world. A new start."

Joey hesitates for a moment, and then nods.

Slade pulls him for another hug—he's not sure he's ever going to get tired of it—before letting him go.

"Guess I should let you nap, then. But I'll see you at dinner, alright?"

Joey nods, already getting ready to sleep.

Kate arrives not long before dinner, vanishing down to the cave with Jason, and Slade tries not to stress himself over things. Bruce checks in with him when he's done talking with Thomas, and ends up curled against him on the couch, watching the news.

He lets Bruce fall asleep against his side mid-afternoon, letting him rest until Alfred arrives just behind them, clearing his throat.

"Bruce," Slade says, gently nudging him awake. "Dinner."

Bruce's eyes crack open with almost painful slowness as he comes back to himself, and then he shifts, sitting up and stretching out.

"How long was I out...?"

"Two hours," Alfred says. "Everyone has more or less prepared themselves for dinner, but the boys were of the opinion you should be allowed to sleep until waking you was necessary."

Slade is sure he would have *also* been of that opinion, so he shoots Alfred a grin behind Bruce's
"Just give me a moment and I'll be out," Bruce says, heading to the bathroom to splash water onto his face, waking himself up as he goes. "What did I miss?" Bruce adds as he does.

"The League just arrested Bane and a bunch of escaped criminals," Slade says. "Which has set off a media storm about the fact that Batman wasn't anywhere near a Gotham crime bust. Apparently Batman's even more territorial about Gotham than you ever were."

"Not surprising," Bruce says, "he seems more insular."

"As far as they know he's been missing for a day and the media is already convinced that he's dead. They can't even fathom any possible reason why he wouldn't be the one handling Bane."

"Mhm," Bruce grunts. "That'll have to change now."

"One can hope."

Everyone's already seated by the time they arrive, grabbing seats halfway along rather than their usual spots on either end of the table. Kate gives them polite nods, and everyone waits for Alfred to settle in with them before they eat.

Bruce waits until the meal's almost over before he makes the announcement, clearing his throat and killing the conversation more or less immediately. They've all been waiting for one of them to say something, but for Slade there was never any sort of question who'd be handling it.

The people at the table might be both of their family in their own world, but here Slade's nothing more than a stranger.

"I'm sure you've all been waiting to hear it," Bruce says, "but our current plan is to leave tomorrow morning."

There is a collective sigh of relief. Even if they all seem to like him and Bruce, they're also eager for the next steps. For things to be over. It's impossible to move on until things are resolved, after all.

"So trial tomorrow evening," Kate says.

"Realistically, trial tomorrow morning," Jason says. "Because you know he's going to try and kick me out the moment he gets back."

"So everyone's calling in a simultaneous emergency," Tim says. "Not great timing with the media going crazy over Batman missing the Bane arrest."

"We'll have to make do," Kate says. "Jason is right, we can't put it off any longer."

"And," Bruce says, "both Thomas and Joey have asked to go with us."

That sets the table off. There's a variety of reactions, but they all tend towards surprise more than anything else.

"Dick, do you have access to the League's teleportation?" Slade asks amid the hubbub.

"No," Dick says, "but I can request permission. What do we - oh, for Joey?" He spins his head around to look at Joey, who nods in response. "Yeah, I can get permission. Joey was on the team before, so the League should be fine giving him a temporary pass."
After dinner would be best, Joey signs. Everyone will be awake then.

"Joey's going to clean up what he can before he goes. Break leases and all that," Slade adds. He glances to Bruce, who clears his throat again.

"We wanted to extend the invitation," Bruce says, "to anyone who would want to come. But it's a one way trip—there's no coming back."

Apparently he and Bruce aren't the only people thinking Jason might accept, because almost everyone in the table subtly or not so subtly turns to look at him.

"No," Jason says. "I've got a job here and people here, and someone has to make sure that Batman's held accountable for all the shit he's pulled. Red Hood might be a dead persona, but Jason Todd isn't."

He scowls at the lot of them.

"And someone has to be here for Roy when he gets back," he adds.

Slade desperately hopes that he does.

"I think that's going to be a no from all of us," Tim says. "We've all got people here, and giving all that up... Don't get me wrong, I think you guys are great, but-

"We understand," Slade says. "We just wanted to make sure everyone knows they have the option."

Dick seems distracted by Joey, watching him, the surprise still written on his face.

"It would seem we all have things to do," Alfred says.

"I'm going to get all those videos and files put together for you," Tim says. "Including the stuff for Barbara."

"Gotta look out for your wife," Jason adds, and Tim goes so red that Slade wasn't sure a person could go that red.

"I will contact the rest of the family," Damian says. "And ensure they are aware that attendance is mandatory."

"I'll... help Damian," Kate says with a pointed glance towards the young boy that makes it clear she's downgrading things to very important rather than do it or die.

"I'll help Joey move his stuff," Dick says.

"Whatever you want me to do, too bad," Jason says. "I need to handle the casino and make sure I won't be needed tomorrow."

"I was hoping," Alfred says to Jason, "that you might assist me in preparing breakfast tomorrow."

It feels almost like revenge on Tim's behalf, because Jason goes red all the way to his ears at the idea of being invited to help Alfred.

"I guess I could help," he adds, suddenly very focused on his food.

"We'll talk to the League," Bruce says. "And make sure they're aware of what's going on."
Thomas shrugs. 

"I have nothing to retrieve," he says. "So moving won't be an issue."

"You should come with me," Tim says. "Leave a message for... for other Bruce."

Thomas grunts, but does finally nod.

Slade would pay a lot of money to know what's going to be on that tape, but he doubts he's ever going to get to find out.

"Alright," Bruce says as they finish dinner. "Tomorrow morning. Everyone should try and get some sleep tonight, if they can."

"If they can," Tim says. "Some of us have things to do."

"If moving some videos is going to take you all night," Dick says, "then maybe you're not the whiz I thought you were."

Tim huffs, sparking a small argument about exactly how long it should take to properly encrypt a file for transmission over the internet, and Bruce gives Slade a small smile.

They have things to do too.
Chapter 51

After dinner, they suit up and head down into the cave. Dick punches in his access code, but they have to sit and wait for authentication. Slade and Bruce are known quantities, while Joey—who Dick identifies as Jericho—takes a bit to clear.

Cyborg's waiting for them on the other side, along with Diana.

"Hopefully this is good news?" Diana asks.

"I'm helping Jericho get his things," Dick says. "He'll be going with them. Can I get him a day pass for the tubes?"

Diana looks Jericho over, and then turns back to the security panel, authenticating and doing exactly that.

"We'll see you back at the manor," Dick says. "I'll keep an eye on Jericho for you."

Bruce waits for the two of them to be gone before he turns back to Diana. She's a lot like her counterpart, if a bit more no-nonsense. Maybe she's just that way because he is, in essence, a stranger to her.

"Do I need to call a meeting?" She asks.

"No," Bruce says. "I don't think it's necessary. We'll be leaving tomorrow morning, and you'll get your own Batman back. I'm going to speak to Superman about capturing Deathstroke when he comes through."

She seems surprised by that, her eyes drifting over to Slade.

"Unexpected," she finally says.

"He's a criminal," Bruce says. "Mine isn't. And whatever help he needs he'll get as well in prison. Giving him time to... process things might be easier for him."

"We're putting him in time out," Slade says. "For his own good."

"So Clark," she says. "Anyone else?"

"If Barry is here, we did have a message to pass on," Bruce says.

"One of the many nice thing about Barry," Diana says, "is that he can get here very quickly. Hold on." Bruce watches her step over to the terminal, punching in a number of commands that feel familiar to him, even if they're not quite the same.

Barry arrives less than a minute later.

"Bats!" He says. "Things alright?"

"They are," he says. "We're going to be leaving tomorrow morning."

"Don't suppose we can trade you out permanently...?" Barry asks, but he's clearly kidding, even if Diana seems to disapprove. She doesn't know how bad it is, and to her it probably seems like a particularly awful comment.
"Afraid not," Bruce says. "Thomas asked to come with us, as did Jericho."

Barry seems surprised by that, but after a moment he nods.

"If it's alright with you," he says, "I'll stop by and say goodbye."

"Of course," Bruce says. "He seems fond of you."

"You know what they say about bonds forged by nearly dying."

Slade snorts at that, and the boom tube activates beside them, depositing Clark in full costume.

"Hopefully I'm not late?" He asks, glancing between the group.

"No," Diana says. "Barry only just arrived. Our interdimensional guests are going to be leaving tomorrow morning. I don't think we need a full meeting, but they asked to speak with you."

"Of course," Clark says, his expression darkening. "Maybe back in the cave...?"

Bruce says his goodbyes to Diana and Cyborg, asking that they pass on his goodbyes to the team as a whole before turning back to the boom tube. Clark's expression looks sour as they arrive in the cave, and Bruce settles in at the computer, authenticating himself and getting to work.

"What are you doing?" Clark asks, stepping up behind him.

"Stopping the recordings," he says. "I'm going to delete the recordings of what happened while we were here, but he'll have secure backups that I might not have access to. Stopping the recording will prevent that from being an issue."

Clark waits until Bruce finishes, turning around in his chair to face the two of them, and then speaks.

"What are we talking about that needs to be hidden from Batman...?" He asks. "I already know they're going to have a... a hearing about him."

"We were hoping you'd be able to contain Deathstroke when he arrives," Bruce says.

"Of course," Clark says. "I've contained him before, and he should be caught off guard. I'll make sure there's a place to put him when we're done."

Clark pauses for a moment, looking the two of them over.

"...But that's not why you brought me here," he says.

"No," Slade says. "It's not. I wanted to ask you for a favor."

Clark tenses, his jaw set. He's no doubt guessing at what they're going to ask, but he's also almost certainly wrong.

"If things go well," Slade says, "Batman is going to be kicked out of his own family. That's what the boys need to have happen. They need for him to face consequences for the things he's done. They need the ability to pull together as a group without him interfering."

"I already told Dick I would have their back," Clark says. "In the unlikely event that he tries something, I told Dick how to draw my attention. I'll be nearby, just in case."

"That isn't what we're asking," Bruce says. "I know you'll do a good job of that. I know you'll look
after the family."

Clark raises an eyebrow, but he doesn’t ask, waiting instead for Bruce to clarify.

"I want you to look out for Batman," Bruce says. "Your Bruce. Even with everything he's done, I don't think he's evil. I think he's... lost."

"He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And if you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you," Slade says pointedly.

"...Since when have you been reading Nietzsche?" Bruce asks, squinting at Slade.

"It was one of Jason's books," Slade says. "Retirement has given me plenty of time to read."

Hm. Bruce drags his attention back to Clark, who looks lost in his own head.

"He's lost," Bruce says. "And he's going to be more lost before the week is out. If there's any justice, they'll band together, and then he won't have any of them for support."

"You're asking me to support a man who beat his son."

"We're asking you to support a man who lost himself to his anger," Slade says. "Who obviously doesn't know who he is anymore. Thomas wanted him to retire. That would probably be better for him, but I'm not of the opinion that forcing him would help. He still needs at least one person he can talk to, and we don't know who else to ask."

He'd thought about Alfred, but he's also of the opinion that the boys need Alfred.

"I... will do what I can," Clark says, "to help him. It wouldn't be right for me to spend so much time trying to rehabilitate villains and then be unwilling to try and rehabilitate heroes."

"I think he can be helped," Bruce says, "but I think he's going to have to fall to be willing to accept it."

"We're going to make a video," Slade says. "We were hoping you would take it. I'm not sure he'll take it from the boys. Jason is of the opinion that Batman will throw a fit the moment he sees Jason in the cave."

"I'll make sure he sees it," Clark says. "And... thank you for everything you've done. It's good seeing the boys together again. It's good seeing them acting like a family again. I just wish I'd realized what was happening before it got this far."

"You can't blame yourself," Bruce says. "That's how these things work."

"I'll watch for the video," Clark says. "And I'll arrive early tomorrow to be on hand."

There's a quick round of thank yous and half-hearted goodbyes, knowing that they'll be seeing Clark before long as he leaves via the cave's exit, heading back to Metropolis.

Bruce turns back to Slade, and Slade sighs.

"Guess it's time for videos?" He asks. "Bruce first or last?"

"Family first," Bruce says. "Bruce last."

They settle in before the computer, setting up the camera. Everything's already set up and ready to
go, and it's easy enough to get started.

"If you're watching this," Slade starts when the red light flicks on, "hopefully it means you're watching it together as a family, after everything else is said and done. Hopefully you're together. The last few days have been stressful, but it's been... it's been hopeful, I guess, watching you come together. Watching you become a family again."

"We're hoping it sticks," Bruce says. "We're hoping that you all remember how important you are to each other. That you have each other's backs. We've learned a lot being here, and we hope, if you have a chance, that you'll stay in touch. We're rooting for you, and you've all got your own videos."

Bruce turns off the recording, and they rotate out, making videos for everyone they can think of. The boys are obvious, and they share several. Slade does one for Rose, just in case. Some of the videos, Bruce imagines, will probably never get watched, but they make them anyway.

"We didn't do one for Deathstroke," Bruce points out, and Slade growls.

"Not sure he deserves it," Slade says.

"We're making one for Batman," Bruce says. "So he should get one."

"Fine," Slade says, settling into the seat as Bruce steps out of the way. When the red light blinks on, he doesn't even make an attempt to look happy or approachable at all.

"You're me," Slade says, "so I'm not going to mince words. You ruined your chance. You almost ruined your kids. Joey's a good kid despite you, not because of you. And the only thing I can hope is that having him literally flee to a whole other dimension to get away from you is the kick to the head you need to start treating your last one properly. If I met you, we'd end up killing each other, so it's probably better that we don't."

Slade leans forward, looking downright dangerous even if he's only speaking to a camera.

"I'm taking Joey," he says. "And I'm going to take care of him. I'm going to make sure he knows he has two parents who love him, and I'm going to make sure he's happy. And I hope you live the rest of your life knowing that you could have had that chance and you fucked it up."

Slade slaps the stop button and slaps back in his chair, scowling. Bruce reaches down, combing his fingers through Slade's hair, and Slade growls again.

"Better I didn't meet him," he says. "And I'm taking his sword."

"You can take his sword," Bruce says with a laugh. "He doesn't need it."

"Your turn," Slade says, pushing himself out of the seat. "So get to it."

He steps out of frame, letting Bruce settle into the seat as he thinks about what he wants to say. It's hard. He's never been good (and still isn't) with expressing his emotions, and it's hard to say what will get through to him. To his angry, miserable self. To the self that would hurt his children.

He reaches forward and turns on the camera, sinking back into the seat.

"Bruce," he says. "I'm going to tell you something you don't want to hear. But you need to hear it. You're destroying your children's lives. You very nearly destroyed your own family. What you did to them is... is not something I could normally forgive, and I don't think you've even realized how bad you've gotten. So hopefully, if you won't take it from anyone else, you'll take it from me. You
need to stop. You need to move past what happened to you and focus on the future. To focus on what you have. You can't spend the rest of your life obsessed over a murder that happened decades ago. You have to move on.

"If I was going to pick one thing to tell you, one thing to make you better... stop being Batman. You've heard it over and over again, but you never listen. But you need to. I'm not Batman anymore. I handed the cowl off. I started a new life without it. The cowl is destroying everything you're supposed to care about. And if you can't—if you won't give it up—then you need to leave the family entirely. You need to stay away from them, before you hurt them more than you already have.

"But god, I hope you do. I hope you realize what it's already done to your family. I hope you give it up. I hope you can find a way to be happy the way I'm happy. That's my wish for you. I'm going to take care of my family... and you need to do better so you can be a part of yours."

He reaches forward, turning off the camera, and then sags back into the seat.

"Why is this so exhausting," Bruce mutters to himself, and Slade bends down, pressing a kiss to his forehead.

"Hopefully it helps," Slade says.

"I hope so," Bruce says, and gets back to work.
Chapter 52

Slade watches Bruce do his work on the computer, and goes to get Tim when it's time. The videos are all backed up, and Tim takes a copy, promising to make sure everyone gets theirs. Then, he makes sure that some of the videos make their way to Clark.

"Take those ones," Slade says, gesturing to the screen. "They're just... funny family videos."

"Not the bottom one," Bruce says. "Get rid of that one. Damian doesn't need to see his alternate self slam headfirst into a glass door."

"I need to see that," Tim says, and Bruce commandeers the mouse to make sure it gets deleted.

There's still no sign of Joey, and Slade makes a point of ensuring that Bruce gets to bed.

"Long day tomorrow," he says. "So get your rest where you can."

It's their last night there, and neither of them sleeps very well. They're too eager to move on, and both of them are up by five.

"I want my own bed," Bruce complains. "I want my own life."

"You've got a few more hours," Slade says, giving him a peck on the cheek. "You can make it."

Bruce groans and drags himself out of bed.

The only person up that early is Thomas, settled in at the dining room table with a cup of coffee.

"Packed?" Slade asks.

"Nothing much to pack," he says. "I stuck to the suit. Whatever civilian clothes I had were lost when the League raided Bane's headquarters."

"We'll get you new ones," Bruce says. "I know a good tailor."

"Joey'll probably need the same," Slade says. "One suitcase isn't going to carry much."

Joey himself shows up around a half hour later, peeking into the dining room before coming in fully when he sees who's there.

_I stripped my bed_, he signs, _and tried to clean up._

Thomas glances over to them, and Slade realizes he has no idea what's being said.

_That was considerate of you_, Slade signs back just to annoy him. _I'm sure Alfred will appreciate it._

"Slade," Bruce says with a note of warning in his voice.

Alfred appears moments later, as if summoned by Slade simply signing his name. He looks scandalized that people are up before him, and gets to work immediately, starting breakfast.

"How'd things go?" Slade asks Joey, turning his attention away from Thomas entirely.

_So-so, Joey signs. I called Wintergreen first, and explained everything. I gave him a video for him to give to pop when he next saw him, and made sure he knew what was happening._
"How'd he take it?"

Joey offers a shrug in response.

*He was sad,* Joey signs. *But I think he understood how... unhealthy things are for me. He said he'd look out for pop.*

Slade's of the opinion that it's more than he deserves, but then he's not exactly unbiased.

"Rose?"

*Third,* Joey signs. *She was upset. But... she accepted it when I explained. She apologized for what happened with my fiance again. She asked me to be nice to her counterpart, if we met.*

Slade doesn't know if that will ever happen, but he nods anyway. Even so, he's a little bit surprised to hear that Rose went third. He'd assumed Joey would put off calling his mother until the last possible second.

*I broke my lease,* Joey signs. *I didn't resign, but I told them I'd need the week off so they aren't caught totally off guard. I contacted a few people to tell them I was... moving abroad and probably wouldn't be in contact again. But it's a short list.*

It occurs to Slade that Joey had mentioned a boyfriend, which leaves a great big question mark in his head. Isn't that important?

"Did you talk to..." Slade starts, before giving a brief glance to Thomas and swapping to sign. *Did you talk to your boyfriend?*

Joey winces, and his reaction says it all. Whatever happened, it went terribly.

"He was upset?" Slade asks even though the answer is obvious. Of course he was upset. He was being dumped, and he wasn't ever going to see Joey again.

*He proposed.*

Slade's eye widens in confusion.

"What?" He says. He can't stop his eye from flicking down, just to make sure Joey isn't secretly wearing a ring and about to confess that he's decided to stay. But his finger's bare.

*When I told him he said I couldn't,* Joey signs. *He said he'd been waiting for the right time to propose. He had a ring and everything.*

"You said no?"

*I told him he was crazy,* Joey signs, his face pinched into a frown. *We haven't been together that long. After what happened to my last fiance... the last thing I would have wanted was another engagement so soon. He was right about letting me let my family run my life, but letting him run it wouldn't have been any better.*

"So you broke up," Slade says with a scowl. Probably better he never met Joey's now-ex.

Joey nods in response.

"Your mom?"
Joey's wince says it all. If the boyfriend was number two, then the wince makes it very clear that Adeline is *pending*.

*I'm going to call her right before we go, Joey signs. I know she won't take it well. I gave Wintergreen a video for her too, just in case she hangs up.*

A part of him wants to feel bad for her, but it's not as if she's innocent in things. He knows how vindictive she can get, and he can't imagine how bad she must have gotten with Joey.

"Anyone else you need to talk to?"

*I need to ask Dick to pass on my love to the old Titans, he signs. They're scattered all over, and I haven't seen many of them in years. But he'll be able to contact them.*

"Don't think he's up yet," Slade says. "But you'll see him before we go."

Alfred starts delivering food, and he's gone all out for their last day. It's clear he's trying to leave a good impression, which Slade thinks is a little bit silly, all things considered.

"I have included a copy of my recipes in the package Master Timothy has prepared," Alfred says. "Hopefully those that are not duplicates will be helpful to my counterpart."

"We'll make sure that he gets them, Alfred," Bruce says.

The boys arrive throughout breakfast. Tim doesn't look like he's slept a wink, while Jason looks perfectly well rested and maybe a shade too eager for what is to come. Damian insists on showing Bruce his *cow*, and Slade heads back to the room to make sure all of their stuff has been securely packed before stripping the sheets off the bed the way Joey did.

He makes sure the guest room is empty before he checks in with Joey, who's got a rolling suitcase with him. Slade drops his stuff—and the sword—on top, and drops it by the top of the cave.

Alfred lets them know that both Clark and Barry have arrived to help detain Deathstroke, and then it's perilously close to time to go.

*I guess I'm going to have to do it, Joey signs. Will you wait outside?*

For a moment Slade thinks that Joey means to kick him out, and then he realizes it's the opposite: He wants some amount of privacy, but he also wants Slade near enough for emotional support.

The conversation lasts less than three minutes, and Joey comes out with his face wet with tears. Slade wraps an arm around him, pulling him in for a hug, and doesn't ask. He knows how it likely went. He knows how angry Adeline must have been.

*Lets go, Joey signs. Everyone else is waiting.*

Slade wipes at Joey's face to clear away the tears, and then grabs the bags and heads down the stairs.
When Bruce heads down the stairs, he thinks everyone is there. The only people left in the manor above are Slade and Joey, finishing up some last minute business.

When he looks around, he realizes that more than everyone is there. There's a white haired girl speaking with Dick off to one side that he recognizes as a significantly younger Rose. He's relieved to see that she still has two eyes, and less than relieved to see that her and Jason keep glaring at each other across the cave.

Clark heads for him the moment he reaches the bottom of the stairs, looking as concerned as Clark so often does.

"Everything ready?" He asks.

"As it can be," Bruce says. "Anything like this always has... a certain level of anxiety that comes with it."

"...It's weird to hear you admit that," Clark says, "but yes, it does. Every time we've had to do anything with dimensions it has been... tense. The multiverse is unpredictable."

"Hopefully we end up where we need to," Bruce says. "I'm trying not to think about it."

"Have faith," Clark says, resting a hand on his shoulder. He seems surprised when Bruce doesn't smack it away.

"Trying," he says with a grunt.

Slade and Joey arrive not long after, with Joey's bag and Slade's slightly ridiculous sword in tow.

"You're stealing his sword?" Dick asks. "Wow, he is going to be pissed."

Slade mutters something that sounds a lot like stealing his son, too, but it gets lost in the sound of Joey rushing over to Rose, throwing his arms around her.

"Idiot," she says in response to signs Bruce can't see. "Did you really think I was going to let you hop dimensions without saying goodbye?"

Tim delivers a bag to them with all the solemnity he can manage, and Bruce slides it onto his back.

"I put everything I could think of in there," he says, "and hard copies of some documents. Assuming everything goes well, it would probably be a good idea to destroy the paper copies. But I wanted to make sure that you'd still have them even if the hard drive fried or something. There's videos from basically everyone, and a bunch of papers on stuff... Superman brought along some League files on major threats that might pop up in your universe."

"Your Superman shared a few with me," Clark says, "but we'd already handled most of them, or were at least aware of the danger. I thought I'd return the favor."

"We appreciate it," Bruce says. "I'll be sure they get the information."
"Superman also included a bunch of videos from his family," Tim adds, and Clark looks embarrassed.

"So did I!" Barry volunteers, seemingly to ease Clark's embarrassment, "and a few other League members. There's probably some kind of rule about messing with universes like this, but honestly this sort of thing happens pretty regularly, and as long as you think things through, there's not too much risk as far as we can tell."

"So we're all on the same page?" Dick says as he steps forward. "Everyone's going to back up and get well clear. They open the portal. The four of them go through as fast as they can. Deathstroke and Batman pop out as the portal closes, and everyone else stays clear so that Superman and Flash can deal with Deathstroke. Then they, uh, leave with him."

He exchanges a quick glance with the rest of the family.

"I'll go with them," Rose says. "It might be better if he hears about Joey from me."

Dick relaxation a little bit, then clears his throat, glancing between Jason and Kate.

"Then we deal with things as they happen," Jason says. "Whatever that might be."

Which means they've got everything in order, and it's time to say goodbyes. Bruce is surprised when the first to do anything at all is Rose, who plants herself directly in front of them.

"I'm letting you take him because I think it would be better for him to be away from the mess that is our family," she says. "But if you don't take care of him, I will know, and I will come after you."

She does not elaborate how she might know, but Bruce can't help but be convinced. It's not a joke for her: She seems actually quite convinced that she'll somehow know, across dimensions, that her brother is in peril. She turns away from them to say goodbye to Joey properly, and then a procession begins. Most of the goodbyes are impossibly brief to Slade (he gets a handshake from most of the family) and only a tiny bit better for Bruce himself. He can't blame them: In many ways, he's a stranger to them who they've known only for a few days. In many others, he's a copy of the father they're about to take to task for the things he's done.

Damian gives him a hug, as does Dick, but both Tim and Jason settle for handshakes.

The rest of the bats give a mix of polite nods and handshakes to Bruce, and the occasional nod to Slade, who they know barely at all. Clark and Barry give both of them handshakes, while Thomas gets an almost uniform round of polite nods of acknowledgement, with only Barry breaking the pattern to give him a hug and exchange some quick words of support.

Joey gets the most attention. He's the one most familiar to the lot of them, and they all seem fairly upset to see him go. He might not be a close friend, but he's been an ally for many of them. He's also the only one that's actually native to their dimension.

They're almost ready to go when Joey, chewing on his lip, quickly signs that he has one last call to make and bolts up the stairs. Bruce exchanges a quick shrug with Slade, and then turns his attention to the family that's gathered there.

"I know you're all going to be just fine," Bruce says. "You're an amazing group, and you have... so, so many people on your side that it's amazing to me. I know you'll pull through, and I know you'll pull together."
What else can he say that he hasn't already?

"And if you're ever in the neighborhood," Slade says with a grin, "look us up."

That gets a muted laugh from the group.

Joey returns after a few minutes, apologizing profusely in sign to the group.

"It's not an issue," Bruce says as Slade pulls out the box, settling it down on the cave floor.
"Everything finished?"

Joey nods quickly, and Rose pulls him in for one more hug.

"We'll make sure the box is secured," Clark says. "Cyborg wants to take another look at it and make sure it's not going to steal anyone else away."

Slade's already bending down when Jason clears his throat, and Slade stops, glancing back to him.

"Just-" Jason starts, faltering when everyone turns to him. "...Thanks. Before you go, I thought I should say it. To both of you."

Bruce smiles at him. He hopes that things turn out alright for him. He hopes that this Jason ends up as happy as his son is.

"Of course," he says. "You're family, even if you are from another dimension entirely."

"Ready to go?" Slade asks.

Bruce is. He's ready to go home. He's ready to see his sons, and his family, and his life. He misses all of them. And even if they're bringing new faces along with them, he wants to put what happened in this world behind them.

There's a round of nods, and Slade activates the box. The portal's just as disorienting and loud as it was the first few times, but this time they're ready for it. To minimize the risk, they link together, with Joey going in first. He holds onto Slade as he goes, who holds onto Thomas, who holds onto Bruce. Each of them carries some of their possessions with them, taking everything they think they might need.

Bruce takes just long enough to wave behind him, and then vanishes into the portal.

They're going home.

Chapter End Notes

And here we come at last to the end. Originally I had planned to carry on into the aftermath, but as it became more obvious who was going, I realized that it would pretty much be a whole other story. More importantly, this 'arc' is closed: It was always about how the Canon!Batfam would be effected by the other perspective, and I think I've mostly finalized that.

That said, I do absolutely plan a next part. I have a few things to work on over this weekend, but you can expect the next part to start Monday or sooner. The next part will
absolutely get into 'how Fic!fam dealt with Deathstroke and Bruce', as well as getting some closure on how things went with canon!Batfam down the line (although that won't be anywhere near the start).

That said, I am undecided on who will be the POV character for the next part. I do plan to stick to one, because I find it tends to flow a little bit better. If anyone wants to weigh in with a preference, that would be great. Realistically speaking, options are Bruce, Slade, Jason, or Joey. All have their own pros and cons, with Joey providing a newcomer perspective, Bruce and Slade providing a more clear understanding of the family dynamics involved, and Jason providing a younger perspective that hasn't been touched on as much.

Once again, thank you to everyone who's read along, and to everyone who read later. I'm honestly amazed by the outpouring of support I've received, as well as several amazing pieces of fanart! I plan to put together a little collection at the start of part seven to share with everyone, which... I swear will be the final part. I swear. Please ignore that every part since part one has been planned as the final part.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!