In a Parallel Life
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In a Parallel Life
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Summary

Bruce Wayne is unexpectedly summoned to another dimension in the Multiverse, and his four sons are dragged along for the ride. However, the person responsible for the seemingly one-way trip isn't there to meet the Bat Family on the other side, leaving the suddenly homeless and penniless father to take care of his family in a world where Batman never existed.

Mostly focuses on Bruce's relationships with his boys, because we write what we like to read and I love protective daddy!bats. Rated for language.

Notes

This story is meant to be for fun and explore what Bruce Wayne might be like as a father without Batman, Wayne Enterprises, his riches, and especially Alfred to help him. That being said, Bruce Wayne is protective daddy!bats in this story. Except OCC-ness from everyone, and loose compliance with the comic book timeline.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter One

In a Parallel Life

Chapter One

Bruce Wayne set down his flute of champagne and smiled winningly at his current conversation partner. "It's been a joy to discuss the minute details of your newest diet, but unfortunately it's past time for me to get my kids to bed." His expression turned chagrinned, as if keeping his eleven-year-old out past 1:00 am wasn't something he did nightly, and usually much later than that. Fortunately, his somewhat buzzed companion took his charm at face value and smiled sloppily at him.

"Of course, Brucie," she said in what was probably supposed to be a flirtatious manner. "Call me sometime. We'll have fun." Bruce doubted that, but he nodded anyway and then darted away before she could latch onto his suit jacket's sleeve.

It was easy to find his youngest son. Damian tended to emit waves of antisocialness that grew more potent the longer he was made to suffer at these events. Therefore, all Bruce had to do was find the least populated area of the ballroom and he was sure to stumble upon the boy. Damian had commandeered an antique settee in the darkest corner of the lavishly decorated room and was frowning deeply as he stabbed at the screen of his smart phone. To Bruce's surprise, his sons' "bodyguard" was seated at a right angle from Damian, smirking as he played with his own phone. It was easy enough to deduce that Jason and Damian had gotten into a verbal tiff that the older boy was currently winning. In order to rub it in, Jason was staying nearby.

"Father, I demand that you dispose of this useless employee and that we leave this despicable party at once." Damian's dark blue eyes were made all the more intense by his frustration. Bruce struggled not to let his smile show on his face or in his eyes. Jason didn't bother. Damian's glower became all the more heated at the sound of his brother's snickering.

"I can't help you with the first, but I'm in full agreement with you on the second," Bruce replied. Damian eyed him suspiciously when he detected the hint of teasing in his father's voice, but held his peace.

As was his habit, the boy stepped into Bruce's shadow. If asked, Damian would loudly declare that his duties as Robin never ceased and that he was merely watching Batman's six. Bruce and his two older boys figured that Damian's numerous insecurities drove him to the safety of his father's side. His second youngest didn't have an opinion that he shared, likely because he attempted to do the same. Many of Tim's and Damian's fights started when the two tried to occupy the same space.

"So, Mr. Bodyguard," Bruce said quietly. "Where are the rest of your charges?" He knew that Jason didn't take his "job" seriously, which was fine in that the legally alive Wayne boys were more than capable of taking care of themselves. It was more of an excuse for Bruce to drag his lost and found son along to these functions as well, despite his late adopted son Jason Todd still officially being dead.

Jason glanced up for a second before looking back down at his phone. "Goldie is embarrassing himself with a broad way out of his league and the know-it-all hunkered down with his tablet about an hour ago."

"You two go collect Dick and I'll find Tim," Bruce decided. "Meet me at the car in ten minutes."
His fifteen year old adopted son had found a convenient intersection between the heavy curtains and a potted fake plant. Bruce was the only one who could sneak up on the teenager, and it was made easier by the fact that Tim had in earphones and was deeply invested in whatever hack he was running remotely from his next generation Wayne Tech tablet. "Hey kid," Bruce said, just loud enough for the boy to sense him over the noise from his earphones. To his disappointment, Tim didn't jump or otherwise react, save for the very deliberate way he blacked the screen on his computer before slowly tilting his head upward.

"Hey, B."

"We're heading out." He offered a hand to pull Tim to his feet. Once he was free of the plastic plant, Tim scanned the nearby vicinity for Damian. Finding that the youngest Bat wasn't nearby, Tim fell into step next to Bruce. A few of the lingering guests stopped Bruce for a last ditch effort to network, and he kindly turned them away. However, it still put them behind schedule and by the time they reached the car, Dick had already claimed the driver's seat.

"I don't think so," Bruce said, leaning down to peer into the lit interior. Jason fiddled with his lighter in the passenger seat.

"I'm a great driver," Dick protested. "And you owe me for tonight."

"I don't owe you this," Bruce argued. He should have been able to resist a twenty-two-year-old turning puppy eyes on him for longer than ten seconds. In his defense, Tim was tugging on his arm, urging him to give in so that they could go home. Dick grinned victoriously and turned up the radio as Bruce suffered to scoot to the middle of the backseat. Considering that it was usually his eldest's duty to sit between his youngest brothers, he could see why Dick would fight him for the driver's seat.

Dick steered the car into the light traffic and started toward home. It was peaceful until a particularly grating song came on the radio, which prompted Dick to start singing along. Tim popped back in his own earphones and Damian's expression started to look constipated.

"What kind of terrible shit is this?" Jason asked, reaching for the radio dial. Dick batted his hand away, to which Jason retaliated by lightly shoving his older brother's shoulder.

"You wouldn't know good music if it bit you in the ass," Dick retorted, slapping his hand over the controls to the radio.

"You are tone death," Jason accused him. "Right, demon brat?"

"Both of you have atrocious taste in music," Damian snapped. "And don't call me demon brat!"

"Quit it," Bruce scolded. He pressed Damian back against his seat and sent Jason a look through the rear-view mirror, which was inexplicably turned toward Jason instead of Dick. "Richard, both hands on the wheel."

Dick complied, but not without getting in one last dig at Jason. "Don't touch the tunes, little brother."

"Little?" Jason puffed out his chest. "I'm a good two inches taller than you and easily outweigh you by fifty pounds."

"Probably because you should lay off of the chili dogs," Dick rejoined.

"All right, that's it," Jason decided. He shot his hand out before Dick could react and changed the radio station. He intercepted Dick's attempts to change it back.

"No, it's not," Jason argued. He changed the channel again. Dick remembered the controls on the steering wheel and fought his brother that way, though at first he hit the volume button instead. Bruce felt a headache coming on and suddenly wished that he didn't live so far out of town.

"Boys…" His warning went unheeded as the two in front continued to bicker. When the disagreement turned physical, Bruce cleared his throat loudly. Next to him, Tim tapped out a short sequence on his tablet and then the radio turned off completely. Dick gaped at the dash while Jason sniggered.

"Baby bird," Dick said mournfully. He twisted the rear-view mirror back into place so he could see his brother in the backseat. Tim merely smiled innocently at him before dropping his head back down as he flipped to what he'd been working on.

Jason turned around to look at Bruce face on. "You let smarty-pants hack the computer on the Bentley, old man?"

Bruce frowned in annoyance at the eighteen-year-old. "Yes, that's exactly it. I let him do it." Jason broke into hearty laughter while Dick continued to stare pitifully at Tim through the mirror.

Damian scowled and leaned forward so he could see his biggest rival around the large form of his father. "Drake, I demand that you give me that program so that I may also make use of it."

"Um, no," Tim replied.

Bruce leaned forward himself just in case Damian really did develop the ability to maim people with the force of his glare. "Damian, ask you brothers for things you want; do not demand them," he repeated for what felt like the hundredth time. "Dick, keep your eyes on the road."

"Relax, B," Dick countered. "I could make this drive with my eyes closed. In fact, I have."

"What?" Bruce growled out the question to disguise the brief stutter of his heart.

"What?" Ice blue eyes met ocean blue in the mirror. Unfortunately, all of his boys were immune to his glares by now. Dick had the gall to wink at him and Bruce considered forcing him to pull over so that he could drive. He didn't know how Tim, Damian, and Jason could seem so unfazed by Dick's reckless driving. Bruce was seriously going to reconsider letting his eldest borrow any of the Batmobiles again.

Jason turned in his seat again and smacked Tim's knee. "You can turn over the controls now, runt." Tim merely shot his brother a disparaging look and did not turn the radio back on. Jason eagerly accepted the challenge and stretched further, trying to steal the tablet. He was practically in Bruce's lap to get to Tim who sat behind Dick. The weary father pushed his second son back into the front seat.

"Stop messing around," he ordered. He didn't have to look to know that Tim was very maturely sticking his tongue out at his irritated brother. "Timothy." Damian smirked as Tim huffed and hugged his computer possessively against his chest.

The car jerked as something scraped the undercarriage loudly. A moment later, Dick swerved to avoid a gaping pothole that had suddenly appeared in the middle of the downtown Gotham City roadway. "What the fuck?" Jason demanded, forgetting about the radio and scooting forward as far as his seatbelt would allow so he could see the rapidly appearing obstacles. "Left. Left!"
"Shut up!" Dick had slipped seamlessly into his Nightwing persona and was doing a rather remarkable job dodging the worst of the heaving asphalt in the sometimes boaty luxury sedan. Still it was a rough ride.

"Pull over," Bruce demanded. Around them, car alarms sounded and screeching tires echoed as the other drivers tried to get off the dangerous road.

"No, don't!" Tim had twisted around in the seat to stare out the back of the car. Bruce turned as well to see the earth looking as though it was being unzipped, right along the center of the road, and the crack was quickly catching up to the car.

"Right. Left!" The car thumped heavily. "I said left!"

"I told you to shut up!"

"For fuck's sake--!"

"Grayson, stop!" Damian's choked shout caused Bruce to snap his head around, just in time to see the brightly glowing portal that had opened directly in their path, just before the car sped into it. It was blinding, causing Bruce to throw his arms up to shield his eyes. Dick floored the brake, drawing the smell of burning rubber from beneath the car, but it didn't stop the vehicle from careening over the edge of the road and coming to a jarring halt. Where once there was overwhelming white light, now there was blackness.

_to be continued..._
Bruce awoke to a splitting headache and a deep chill that he usually only developed after extended exposure to cold temperatures. His memory quickly rebooted and he recalled the car accident that had directly followed the appearance of a wormhole in the middle of downtown Gotham City. Worry helped him ignore the pounding in his head and he swallowed back nausea as he opened his eyes. It had been dark when they left the party. Now the sun was peeking over the horizon in the early dawn hour.

Tim, to his left, was leaning against the door, perfectly still. Bruce's eyes zeroed in on the smear of blood on the foggy glass. He didn't even realize that he was holding his breath as he carefully inspected the boy, until he was assured that Tim was merely unconscious. The cut on his forehead had already stopped bleeding.

Damian was slouched against his right side. The eleven-year-old also had not awoken yet, despite not having any clearly visible injuries. The persistent seasick feeling that nagged Bruce made the patriarch think that their journey through the wormhole, while short, had been a rough one. He figured that's what was keeping his boys under.

In the front of the car, Jason and Dick had fared worse. The airbags had exploded outward, coating the pair with talcum powder. Bruce didn't doubt that they'd be sore and bruised, but he'd rather that than a cracked face against the steering wheel. As it was, Dick's upper lip was stained by the thin trickle of dry blood from his nose and Jason had acquired a few shallow cuts from the broken glass of the windshield.

He checked Dick's pulse first, and then Jason's. The younger of the two groaned and slowly blinked awake. It took him a second to focus on Bruce's concerned expression. "The fuck…?"

"Look at me, Jay," Bruce encouraged, trying to push himself as far forward between the seats as he could so that Jason wouldn't have to move much to see him. He pushed on the inflated airbag, trying to keep it out of his son's face. When Jason finally looked in Bruce's direction, the teenager's blue-green eyes were clouded with pain and illness from the wormhole. When Bruce was relatively sure that Jason had a lock on him, he asked, "Is anything broken or dislocated?"

Jason paused for a second as he took stock of his body. "No. Just feels like I went a round with a mountain of fire ants." He sucked in a short breath. "I am never riding with Goldie again."

"The accident wasn't Grayson's fault."

Bruce shifted back and sought out his youngest. Damian looked like he felt just as well as Jason, sans the burns from the airbag. "Are you hale, Damian?"

"I'm fine," Damian said shortly. "It takes more than a car crash to disable me."

"What about a trip through a wormhole?" Jason asked, followed by another low groan. "Fuck, my head."

Bruce pressed the back of his hand against Damian's forehead, which was cooler than normal thanks to the exposure to the cool exterior. At least he wasn't sporting a fever to explain the pallor beneath his natural tan. "Can you open your door?" Damian did so. The ground was a bit lower than it
should have been, but that was to be expected as they teetered nose first in the deep ditch.

The deep ditch. Grass. The shadows of large trees looming like ghosts through the fog. None of these things should have been in the middle of a steel and stone metropolis. Where had the portal dumped them? Bruce shifted and strained to retrieve his cell phone from his pocket. The device had survived the crash, unlike Tim's tablet, but he had no cell phone reception. He couldn't even get a roaming signal.

Damian slipped out of the car before Bruce could warn him to stay put or be careful. Since the boy was already without, Bruce prompted him to try to get Jason free from his seat if it seemed safe enough. Damian opened the front passenger door and impatiently helped Jason extract himself from his seatbelt and the airbag while Bruce slid into Damian's unoccupied seat. It didn't look so bad outside, save for the damp grass that was going to ruin his leather shoes.

He took the opportunity to survey the damage to the car as he circled around the front end. Cosmetically, it was ruined, but it might be drivable for a short distance if they could push it out of the ditch. Except for being their only mode of transportation from this eerily calm and quiet forest road, he cared much less about the car than he did about his still unconscious sons.

Bruce was able to revive Dick with a few shoulder nudges. His eldest sucked in some shallow breaths to overcome his discomforts without feeling the need to swear about it. "Are you badly hurt, chum?" Bruce asked.

"My pride is shattered," Dick muttered. He took over pushing irritably at the airbag. "What happened? Where are we?"

"We seem to have driven though a portal, which caused us to wreck in a ditch. I do not know yet where the ditch is located geographically." Bruce caught Dick's chin in one hand so he could tilt the young man's face to get a better look at his nose. It didn't appear to be broken.

"A ditch in downtown Gotham?" Dick pulled his face out of Bruce's hold and rubbed at his forehead.

"We're not in Gotham City anymore, Toto," Jason said. He'd stiffly walked around the car to join his father.

Together, Bruce and Jason were able to help Dick out of the vehicle. Dick pressed his hand against the side of the car for a few seconds as he struggled for balance. Soon enough, he was able to stand unaided. He whistled lowly as he examined the wrecked car. "Shit, B, I'm sorry--"

"Stop. It's fine. It wasn't your fault."

"I told you to let me drive," Jason reminded the older youth.

"Like you would have done any better," Dick groused. His bright blue eyes tracked his father as Bruce moved to the rear driver's side door.

Bruce carefully opened the door just wide enough that he could reach through and push Tim's limp body away from the opening. He could feel Jason and Dick crowding in behind him as he started trying to wake up the last of his sons. When prodding Tim didn't work, Bruce sent Jason to the hidden compartment in the trunk for some bat-smelling salts.

"Gods, Timmy," Dick said, trying to squeeze in next to his father. "Wake up, baby bird."

The salts did the trick and Tim cracked open his eye that wasn't crusted shut by the blood that had
dried in his eyelashes. The only warning they got seconds before he was sick was the sudden green hue of his face. "Hang on, kid," Bruce soothed. Tim was not a fan of Bruce pulling him out of his suit jacket in order to remove his now soiled vest. Bruce used the crumpled material to wipe at the teenager's face and the few spots that had landed on Tim's dress pants before tossing the fabric into the dewy grass. Tim shivered even after Bruce helped him back into his jacket and lifted him out of the car.

Dick produced a packet of wet wipes and started working on further cleaning the illness and blood from his little brother's face while Bruce held him securely. No matter how much the family pestered the teenager about eating regularly, he still ran on the side of underweight, especially considering the amount of muscle mass he'd developed during his training. Therefore, it took little effort for Bruce to carry him, even with the lingering shakiness he felt from going through the wormhole.

"Leave it to Drake to become incapacitated from a simple auto wreck," Damian sneered.

Jason swatted at the youngest Wayne, but Damian nimbly dodged the blow. "Shut up, demon brat."

"I am not--!"

"Do not start," Bruce cut in sharply. "If you need something to do, walk five minutes up the road and see if you can figure out where we are. Come back immediately after that." Jason and Damian exchanged disgruntled looks but did as they were ordered.

Dick was able to wipe away enough of the dried blood that Tim could open both eyes. The teenager wouldn't keep them open for more than a few seconds, but it was enough for Dick to get a sense of his brother's well-being. "Uneven dilation and inability to follow simple instructions - I'd say he's concussed."

It wasn't good news, but it could have been much worse. "You heard the man, kid," Bruce said, jostling his son slightly. "You need to stay awake for me."

"Bruce?"

"Mnhm," Bruce hummed. "List the fifty states for me," he suggested.

At first he thought Tim was too disoriented to do as he was told, but then he picked up on the faint, slurred recitation from his boy. "Alabama… Alaska… Arizona…"

Together, he and Dick traversed the ditch and climbed to the narrow shoulder of the two-lane road. To his left, Bruce spotted Jason and Damian returning. The two were pointedly ignoring each other, but at least they weren't fighting.

"Delaware… Florida…"

"I wish we were in Florida," Jason grumbled as he reached Bruce's side. He shed his aloof, devil-may-care attitude for a moment to lean in close to Tim's pale face. "You in there, Croc-bait?"

"'M not," Tim huffed. "Idaho… Illinois…"

Jason peered up at Bruce. "Is this process of elimination or has he finally cracked?"

"He probably has a concussion," Bruce reported. He ignored Damian's snort of disdain. "Listing the states is keeping him awake."

"Ah. Well, besides being pretty sure we're not anywhere warm like Florida, I haven't a fucking clue
as to where Dickie-bird's driving landed us."

"Language," Bruce reprimanded.

"If we'd headed south like I suggested, we likely would have found a road marker," Damian stated. He crossed his arms over his chest. To Bruce, it looked like he was making a valiant effort to disguise how cold he was. The suits and jackets were perfectly adequate for a short walk between the hotel and the valet service, but weren't meant to provide sustained warmth in this weather.

"You don't even know which way is south," Jason argued.

"I do! I was trained by age three to always know in which direction I'm facing by sensing the magnetic pull of the north pole."

Jason grinned meanly. "No, you were trained by the age of three to be full of bullshit."

"Jason, language."

"You only imagine it's bull because your plebian mind isn't capable of developing such self awareness."

"Damian, don't talk down to your brothers."

"If you're so self aware, tell us where we are without needing a road sign."

"Jason, stop needling him."

"It doesn't work like that, imbecile. Besides, the magnetic field is distorted here."

"Damian--" Bruce gave up temporarily at keeping the peace between his sons. Dick was staring at his phone with a furrowed brow.

"What is it, chum?"

"Absolutely nothing. It's like cell phones don't even exist out here. Even in the middle of Nowhere, USA, I can at least get roaming on some wireless network." He glared at his phone for another moment before snapping his head up to look at Bruce with earnest concern. "You don't think…"

"That the portal was not between locations, but between the multiverses?" Bruce frowned deeply. "It would explain the time it's taking to adjust to having been through the wormhole, among other things." He shifted Tim in his arms, finally starting to feel the strain that even the underweight teenager was putting on his arms. When he caught the tail end of West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming… he carefully lowered the fifteen-year-old to his feet. To his relief, it only took Tim a few seconds to steady himself, using Bruce's left arm as a support.

"I hate traveling in the multiverse," Jason groused. "And this monkey suit." He tugged at the lapels of his suit jacket and scuffed his once shiny leather shoes over the rough surface of the road.

Dick shoved his hands into his pockets and glanced each way down the fog-covered two lane. "So… do we walk or do we wait?"

"I vote for walking," Jason said. Bruce glanced at his tallest son, knowing that the eighteen-year-old despised being inactive and had little patience for caution and preparation. Walking would probably help them stay warm, as well, but the idea of abandoning their only sure means of shelter if the weather turned nastier, even with the shattered front windshield, made him hesitate.

Not only that, but Bruce didn't think Tim would be walking very far, no matter how much of a
trooper the kid was, and he didn't want to risk compromising Dick or Jason by asking them to carry Tim. "We will stay near the car," Bruce decided. He lifted his right arm to allow Damian to press up against his side, a direct response to Tim's nearness on his left.

"It is foolish to abandon our mode of transportation and protection from the elements," Damian said. He glared at Jason.

The older boy leaned down and smiled menacingly. Damian would never allow any sign of intimidation to show in his form or expression, but even Bruce had to admit that Jason could be unsettling when he wanted to be. "Newsflash, demon-spawn, that car ain't going nowhere."

Bruce swallowed a long-suffering sigh and shot Jason a disappointed look. Damian, of course, wouldn't stand for the slight. "I am not a demon spawn! And it is a sign of ill-breeding and low intelligence to use such despicable slang." His youngest had stepped away from him in order to deliver the furious retort, leaving him open to Dick's interference.

His eldest stepped between his younger siblings and nudged Damian back a few steps. "You're fine, L'il D," he said, squeezing the boy's shoulder. "Just ignore Jason." Dick pulled his brother into his own sideways hug. Damian melted into the contact for a moment before realizing that he'd relinquished his place at his father's side to Tim, which was just unacceptable. "Gee, I see where I rate," Dick complained after Damian pulled away to cement himself to Bruce's side again.

"Don't be foolish, Grayson. You are by far the most tolerable of Father's adopted children. I am simply making sure that Drake does not overstep his bounds."

"'Drake' has a bull trampling through his head like it's in a china shop, and would gladly go pass out under that tree," Tim said, sounding a mixture of indignant and resigned.

Bruce rubbed his large hand up and down the teenager's back in order to generate a little warmth and prevent Tim from actually passing out. "Stay with us, kid," he encouraged.

Jason smirked at Damian. "No, I think you're just a big Daddy's boy and that the idea of being in a parallel dimension scares the shit out of you."

"Jason, language."

Dick took his youngest brother's side - kind of. "You're just jealous that D is young enough to get away with turning to B for comfort, Jaybird." That set off a three-way argument about whether or not Jason wanted a hug himself, and whether Damian was seeking comfort or defending his territory. Bruce tuned them out and tried to develop a long-term plan for how to survive in this unknown universe and how to get back to their own.

_to be continued..._
Chapter Three

Forty-five minutes later, an old pickup truck rumbled down the back road and slowed to a stop a few dozen yards up the shoulder. The man that emerged was just as aged as his vehicle, and carried a shotgun to prove that while he had good intentions, he didn't like the look of five strange men loitering around a ruined Bentley.

"Car trouble?" he asked with a thick New England accent.

"No," said Jason, sarcasm heavy in his tone. "We like the smashed to hell look and the smoke pouring from the engine adds to the effect." Damian and Bruce were trying to get the engine running again, just enough to back the car out of the ditch and get them to some semblance of civilization. Jason had been helping until Bruce couldn't stand listening to him bicker with Damian anymore. He'd sent his second son to work on pinpointing their location. In the smelly back seat of the car, Dick sat with a drowsy Tim.

"Jason Peter," Bruce snapped. The old man looked about ready to abandon them to their fate and Bruce was to the point that he'd take any help he could get. Jason didn't look chastised. Rather, he muttered a few colorful words under his breath and stomped over to lean against the side of the car. He glared ruefully at the stranger, his blue-green eyes flickering often to the shotgun. The weapon made Bruce uncomfortable as well, but he planned to do a better job hiding that fact.

The stranger's frown deepened as Bruce took a step toward him. It was the billionaire's habit to always size up new people, and he found that he was easily twice as large as the wiry man. It was smart of him to be wary, if not tedious to the tired and stressed father. Bruce held up his hands in hopes of showing that he wasn't dangerous, and spoke in his best marketing voice. "I'm sorry for my son's attitude. We're obviously having a bad day—" He motioned to the car behind him. "—and could use some help. Do you have a cell phone I could borrow to call for a tow truck?"

"Ain't no reception out here," the man replied gruffly. "You folks don't look like the sorts we usually see around here."

"We got lost heading home from a function and lost control of the car in the fog. We're not even sure where we are." Bruce had to let his "Brucie" persona take over, because it was impossible for the Batman to admit such shortcomings. Brucie let out a self-deprecating laugh and shrugged as if to say, "What can you do?"

"They all yer kids?" The stranger eyed Jason and Damian for a few seconds each, then squinted as he peered into the shadowed interior of the car.

"Yes," Bruce replied. He hoped that appearing as a father in distress would gain them some sympathy from the so far useless passerby. That, and, "One of my boys hit his head pretty hard during the accident. He needs a doctor." That wasn't true, per say. Tim had moved past the worrisome effects of his concussion and Bruce was confident enough that the fifteen-year-old was out of danger to let him nap under Dick's watchful eye.

"We're about thirty miles outside of town," the man said. "I'll let the sheriff know about yer crash."

Jason snorted. "A good Samaritan would give us a lift into town, not just leave us out here in the elements."
"Well, I guess I ain't no good Samaritan," the stranger said, angry. "I'm not stupid, and stupid is letting strangers who don't belong ride shotgun in ol' Bessie."

"We understand," Bruce said, trying to diffuse the situation again. Had he taught Jason nothing about diplomacy? At least he could blame Damian's atrocious social skills on Talia and Ra's. "We appreciate whatever help you're willing to give."

The man looked unconvinced, but reiterated his promise to send the sheriff their way. Jason waited until the old man was climbing into his truck before straightening out of his hunch and walking up to Bruce's side. "What kind of jackass brings a shotgun to 'help' someone who's having car trouble?"

Bruce shook off his own feeling of foreboding at the awkward encounter. "Says my child who's very much fixated on guns." Jason scowled. "Whatever his reasons for the paranoid behavior, at least he's helping us, somewhat."

"Well, thank fucking goodness that Timmy doesn't actually need immediate care."

"Language."

Damian wiped his grease-stained hands on his already ruined suit pant legs and then tucked the still messy appendages under his armpits for warmth. "This worthless piece of junk is beyond my help with the pitiful tools I have to work with."

"I expected as much, but at least we tried," Bruce replied.

Damian scoffed. "I do not try, Father."

"Shut up, runt."

"Do not speak to me thusly, Todd."

"Both of you, be quiet." Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose with his own black-tipped fingers. His headache grew worse the longer they were in this world. He ignored the boys glaring at each other in order to check on his more mellow sons.

Dick looked up when Bruce opened the passenger door and peered into the interior of the car. It wasn't much warmer, but at least Dick and Tim were partially sheltered from the biting wind. "How're you holding up, chum?"

"I feel terrible," Dick replied. He ran his bruised fingers through Tim's hair, making sure to avoid the tender cut near the teenager's hairline. Bruce's last adopted son had his head pillowed in Dick's lap and languished somewhere between wakefulness and slumber.

"You did the best you could, chum," Bruce said. "It wasn't--"

"No," Dick interrupted. He took a deep breath. "I literally feel terrible. It's like my head is in a vice and my stomach would prefer to be anywhere except where it's meant to be."

Bruce frowned. He braced his hand on the edge of the seat near Tim's hip and leaned forward to press the back of his hand against Dick's scruffy cheek. "You're warm."

Dick grimaced, falling short of the smile he was going for. "That's funny, 'cause I feel like I'm freezing."

"Just hold on, old son," Bruce said. "The police should be here soon."
It took another hour before the distant sound of sirens cut through the ghostly fog, on the heels of diluted blue and red lights. Bruce was somewhat unnerved by the persistence of the suspended precipitation. Even in Gotham, the fog would have burned down to a more manageable density by now. The sheriff's car was trailed by an ambulance that had seen better days.

Damian stuck close to his father's side as Bruce and Jason explained the single vehicle accident, sans any details about alternate universes and portals that left a lingering feeling of nausea. One of the volunteer EMTs inspected the bump on Tim's forehead and took Dick's vitals. At least this part of the morning went by relatively quickly. Between the cab of the tow truck that arrived fifteen minutes later, the back of the sheriff's cruiser, and the crowded interior of the ambulance, Bruce and his sons were finally headed toward civilization.

There wasn't a hospital in the one traffic light town, but the resident doctor/town historian met them at a tiny clinic near the heart of the town. Even within the populated area, Bruce's cell phone remained stubbornly without signal. He sighed and slipped it back into his pocket, pushing down his frustration at noticing that the young woman with pink hair behind the receptionist's desk was having no trouble texting with someone on her outdated phone.

He left the cramped waiting room and slipped through the narrow hall filled with supplies that didn't fit within the one tiny storage closet, back to the single examination room. Inside, the doctor was finishing applying butterfly bandages to the small cut Tim had suffered. Tim was paler than usual, which wasn't a good sign in the already wan teenager. The redness of the cut and the surrounding bruise stood out all the more starkly against his near-white skin. "Hey, B," Tim greeted with a rough voice. Either Tim had picked up whatever bug was affecting Dick, or vice versa, but both of his boys were now sporting the same symptoms. He mentally vowed to keep a close eye on Jason and Damian's health in the next few hours.

"Hey, kid," Bruce replied. "Have you determined the source of his fever yet, Doctor?"

"The flu's been going around," the doctor reported. She checked Tim's pupil dilation once more, then slipped the medical tool into her pocket.

It wasn't the flu. "He's up to date on his vaccines," Bruce informed her. All of his boys were kept in pristine physical health thanks to Alfred's careful attention. Especially Tim, who'd lost his spleen to a knife injury during one of his outings as Red Robin.

"It looks like Influenza to me," the doctor said, giving Bruce the familiar look of a medical professional who was sick of people self-diagnosing and ignoring her sound advice earned over eight plus years of schooling. "Sometimes vaccines don't work."

"I'm fine, B," Tim insisted. He shrugged his suit jacket back on and carefully lowered himself off of the squeaky cot. Bruce held out his hand to the unsteady youth. Tim craved contact and attention too much to care about looking weak or needy, especially around his adoptive family, and easily let Bruce pull him into the warmth of his side. Bruce loved the awkward little genius too much to take advantage of his clinginess, though he was guilty in moments of weakness of using his third son's attachment to him to boost his own dwindling self-esteem.

The doctor nodded in approval at his mothering, and started an overused rundown on how to care for his sons that were showing the flu-like symptoms. Bruce knew what he was doing, thank you very much, but it wasn't worth antagonizing her. So far, the doctor was the only one who'd not treated the misplaced family like they were dangerous strangers, and that was only after she'd seen for herself that the kids were indeed human and that their father wasn't some heartless bastard.Ironically, it was everyone else who was correct, though Bruce didn't plan on being dangerous unless provoked.
Bruce settled his debt to the clinic and then to the tow truck driver. Unfortunately, the Bentley was a loss and the auto shop owner only had a barely functioning Pinto that he could trade for the luxury car's parts. Even a billionaire didn't carry enough petty cash to buy a car, and like his phone, all of his credit cards were issued by banks that apparently didn't exist in this universe. He was mildly surprised that even his cash was good here.

xXx

A rundown motel that boasted "-ACA-CY" had two rooms available for rent at a price that Bruce thought was much too high for the lumpy mattresses and scratchy linen. Still, he didn't have a lot of options right now.

He sat on the edge of Dick's bed, where his eldest was curled up miserably. His thick dark hair was matted to his scalp with sweat, despite how much he shivered under his blanket and the ratty top cover of Jason's bed. He'd given his son the medication suggested by the doctor, which fortunately didn't require a prescription. Now they had to play the waiting game.

Jason came back into the room smelling like cigarettes. Bruce let his disappointed look convey his unhappiness at the continuation of the bad habit and kept his words to himself. Jason knew how he felt about smoking. "It helps me think," Jason said, shooting the older man his own impatient look. "What're we gonna do?"

"We're going to be fine," Bruce said with more conviction than he felt. What he was sure of, however, was that he was going to do everything within his power to protect and care for his sons. And Batman had a lot of power, financially compromised or not.

Jason looked around the dingy room, then focused back on Bruce. "This reminds me way too much of my days taking back the Bowery. At least I had better company that time around."

Bruce wasn't hurt by the mean jibe. He knew that Jason didn't really mean it. He stood up stiffly, the aches and pains from the accident making themselves known more prevalently. "Get some sleep, Jay."

"It's eleven in the morning. Maybe if this shithole had blackout curtains…"

"I think you'll manage." Bruce clapped the teenager on the shoulder as he passed on his way to the door. "Let me know immediately if your brother's condition changes."

"You want me to sleep or play nursemaid?"

"You can't do both?" Bruce's grin was challenging and Jason huffed. He continued to pretend to be put out as Bruce exited the motel room and crossed the half dozen feet to their second room. The lock gave him a few seconds of trouble, so he wasn't surprised to be greeted in the dim interior by a pocket knife pressed against his stomach. "It's me, Damian," Bruce said, gently pushing the eleven-year-old away. "Did you eat?"

"Yes, despite the poor quality and selection of the food."

"You've been spoiled by Alfred," Bruce mused. He sat down heavily on the messy bed by the wall that separated the bedroom from the tiny bathroom. Tim was hunched over his broken tablet, which was connected to his smart phone by way of a short USB cable. Bruce leaned over his shoulder to see what he was working on.

"The computer still works," Tim reported. "It's just the LCD display that cracked." He reached up to rub at his sore head and stopped just before hitting the band-aids. "I can access most of its systems
through my phone, but the devices aren't a hundred percent compatible."

Bruce reached his arms around both sides of the slight teenager and pulled the electronics out of his son's hands. "You're supposed to be sleeping, kid."

"That's what I told him," Damian said, pressing himself against his father's side and scowling at his brother. "Of course, Drake does not listen to reason."

"I can fix it if I can get a replacement screen," Tim said, turning his head to glare at Damian. "I just need an electronics store, or a computer junkyard."

"Later," Bruce said. He tightened one arm around Tim's middle and pulled the other back so he could wrap it around Damian. He tugged his youngest two in close. Tim smelled of motel shampoo and body wash, while Damian bore his familiar scent of sun, steel, and Alfred's favorite laundry detergent. Both were warm, Tim a bit more so than usual.

"How's Dick?" Tim asked, relaxing into the shared hug.

"Grayson is fine," Damian decreed. "The common flu isn't enough to keep him down for long."

Tim coughed into his open palm and then reached for his brother's face. "Come here, Dami. Don't you want to share in the fun of the common flu?"

"That's disgusting, Drake!" Damian smacked the older boy's hand away. "Father!"

"That is gross, Timmy," Bruce chided. He let go of both boys. "Go wash your hands. Damian, we're going to take a nap. Go get comfortable on my bed."

Damian crossed his arms over his chest. "Why do I have to share? I may be the youngest, but I am the most deserving of my own space. Let the peasants share."

Bruce kept a close eye on Tim, who made the trek to the sink and back look as difficult as scaling a mountain, while he answered. "If you need your own bed that much, son, I can share with Tim."

"No!" Damian colored brightly at his slip. "I mean, you are our leader. It would not do for Drake to transfer his germs to you. I will sacrifice and share with you, Father."

"That's very noble of you, Damian," Bruce said with a perfectly straight face. Really, his younger boys were too easy sometimes.

He made sure that Tim was settled comfortably back into bed - as comfortable as he could get in the questionable motel - and then laid down on the bed closer to the door with his hands under his head. He studied the cracks in the ceiling as Damian got situated next to him. He eventually fell asleep. He slept until a pounding on the outside door jarred him back awake.

to be continued...
The pounding on the exterior door of the motel room jarred Bruce awake. He grudgingly rose from the bed, being careful to not wake Damian, and shuffled to the door. He cracked it open to see who was on the other side and easily recognized the uniform in hues of brown. "Sheriff," Bruce acknowledged, stepping out into the dim afternoon sun and pulling the door closed behind himself.

"Mr. Wayne," responded the sheriff curtly. "I'm here to take your statement. So if you'd kindly ride back to the station with me--"

"No."

"Excuse me?" The man shifted his stance, trying to put more authority into his posture. He was barely as tall as Dick, and didn't intimidate the six-foot-two vigilante at all.

"I have three sons who are under the age of twenty-one, and two who are pretty sick right now. I'm not leaving them here to go to the station for who knows how long."

"Ain't nothin' going to happen to 'em in this town," the sheriff argued.

Bruce wasn't stupid. This town was just as eerie as the quiet road where they'd wrecked, and the people who lived here acted like strangers were the scariest thing to happen upon the place. He wanted to know why, and he wasn't leaving his kids defenseless until he did.

"Then why does everyone act like we're criminals just because I accidentally hit a tree in the densest fog I've seen in years?" No one knew that Dick had actually been driving at the time, and Bruce intended to keep it that way. "I just want to take my kids and find a way back home with as little fanfare as possible."

"Look, it ain't you," the sheriff said, sounding a bit apologetic for the frosty reception they'd received so far. "It's just, in this town, people in suits and fancy cars usually mean bad news."

"Even eleven-year-olds?"

The man shrugged. "You ain't the first people who don't belong that have shown up here, and it's caused us plenty of headaches."

Bruce's detective instincts pinged loudly. "Oh?"

"Forget it." The man pulled out his notepad and a ballpoint pen. "Full name."

Bruce squashed down his irritation at being denied. "Bruce Thomas Wayne."

"Address?"

"1940 Finger Lane, Bristol, New Jersey."

"Jersey, huh? You're a long way from home."

"Don't remind me," Bruce grumbled. The man had no idea how right he was.
"And your boys?"

"Richard, Jason, Timothy, and Damian Wayne. Twenty-two, eighteen, fifteen, and eleven."

"Where's their mother?"

"She passed away about five years ago," Bruce lied easily.

"I'm sorry for your loss." The man scratched at his chin for a moment. "Bruce Wayne… why does that name sound familiar?"

Probably because Bruce Wayne was practically a celebrity due to his wealth and the influence of Wayne Enterprises. He refrained from rolling his eyes. "I own Wayne Enterprises," he said, because it was the truth and less because he wanted to use his position to take advantage of the legal system.

"Never heard of it," the sheriff said dismissively. Bruce blinked in surprise but otherwise hid his reaction. How could he have not heard of WE?

"What were you doing driving down Highway 4 in the middle of the night?"

"We were leaving a charity function, late, and I thought I'd try a shortcut. We got lost, the fog settled, and we ended up in the ditch."

"Where was the function?"

"In--" The door to his motel room suddenly cracked open, revealing one blue eye in a pale face under limp dark locks. "Excuse me," Bruce said, turning away from the sheriff. He nudged Tim away from the door so that he could open it wide enough to step inside. "What're you doing?" he asked in a low voice.

"I didn't know where you went," Tim whispered. He coughed to clear his throat, but it didn't help bring his voice back at all. Bruce sat on the foot of Tim's mused bed and pulled the teenager down to sit next to him. The sheriff had followed him into the room and loitered near the door. Bruce did his best to ignore the interloper. A moment of concentration made him aware of the sound of the shower running and he concluded that's where Damian was. Unlike Tim's bed, the one he'd shared with his youngest was made up pristinely.

"The sheriff is here to take my statement," Bruce informed him. "You need more medicine?"

"Probably." Tim glanced at the sheriff before shifting impossibly closer to Bruce's side. Usually Tim wasn't shy around strangers, especially when in the guise of Timothy Wayne. Bruce wasn't sure if the teenager was playacting or genuinely seeking comfort, especially since Damian wasn't in the room to see and be antagonized. Either way, he didn't call out his son, nor did he really mind the closeness. "I wanted to show you something."

Tim held up his smart phone and typed in the passcode. When it came awake, Bruce was thrilled to see that Tim had somehow managed to reconfigure the small computer to be able to access this strange world's internet. "Good boy," he whispered into Tim's hair. Tim made a small sound of agreement before flicking to the map app. It didn't take Bruce long to catch on to what Tim was trying to show him as the teenager zoomed in on the part of New Jersey where Gotham should have been a large dot on the map. Instead, it was just a solid black area. No Man's Land.

Bruce took the phone from Tim and scrolled down the map. He couldn't tell from the app what had happened to the once massive city, but if it was anything like the events that had taken place in his universe, he suspected that a large earthquake was to blame. He wondered if his alter-ego was
championing Gotham City's cause in Washington, D.C.

The sheriff cleared his throat to regain Bruce's attention. Bruce pretended to look repentant, and handed the phone back to Tim. With this new information, Bruce quickly reinvented the events that had led to their ending up in the ditch. "Lay down, kiddo." He purposefully neglected to retrieve Tim's dose of flu medication, knowing that it would knock the teenager out quickly. He wanted Tim to hear the story that he told the sheriff, so he could help relay it to his brothers.

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By late that afternoon, Damian was sporting a fever as well. He left Jason with his brothers, thankful that the resurrected Robin had a nearly unassailable immune system. Still, Dick and Damian rarely were ill, and especially not with a disease against which they'd been vaccinated. He worried that it was a strain of the virus that was foreign to their world, so their natural immunities and the vaccines would be useless against it. That made him less than confident that Jason and himself wouldn't still catch the strain.

Bruce walked through the small town, holding his head high in spite of the wary stares that he received from the locals. He didn't understand why everyone acted so nervous. It was as if they rarely received visitors, and when they did, those strangers did them harm. Bruce had no intention of getting on anyone's bad side as long as they left him and his boys alone, too.

He found a secondhand store that had a low quality, virus-ridden tablet for sale. Bruce didn't need it for any serious computing; he just wanted parts. The cashier gave him a questioning look when Bruce handed her the computer, but rang it up anyway. Normally, Bruce would have questioned the young woman about why everyone he'd met so far seemed so leery of him, but he was in a hurry to get back to the motel to see if he couldn't fix Tim's tablet while the teenager finished his nap.

Back at the motel, it took some tinkering, but Bruce finally managed to pop the damaged screen off of Tim's device and clip the wires that connected back to the motherboard. The emergency kit he kept in each of his vehicles included a tiny, battery operated smoldering pen, which he used to connect the screen from the secondhand store tablet to its new host. Some electrical tape from the emergency kit held the two pieces together for now, despite the new screen being a couple of inches too wide. It definitely wasn't pretty, but when Bruce powered up the tablet, he could see pictures.

He used the hacked WiFi from Tim's phone to power the tablet's internet connection and then began his research. He looked up Gotham City first, and confirmed his suspicion that the same earthquake that had rattled his version of the city had also decimated this one. What was surprising and disheartening was that fact that by the time the earthquake had leveled the city, there hadn't been much of it left to destroy. The city was practically overridden with crime, and then a mysterious plague had eradicated the population. People had been too afraid to enter the city limits prior to the quake, and now it was just gone, completely. He didn't understand how he - how this world's Bruce Wayne - could have let that happen. Was this one of the parallel universes where Batman was actually a villain?

The motel door opened and Jason slipped into the room. Bruce eyed him closely and was glad to see that his second son still looked free of the illness that had dropped his other three boys. "Is Dick all right?"

"He must be feeling swell, considering how energetically he's sawing those logs," Jason replied. He sounded a mixture of fond and annoyed.

"Dick doesn't snore," Bruce argued. He'd surely been around his eldest often enough while the younger man slept to be an authority on the topic.
"He does when he's congested to hell," Jason replied. Jason sat down messily on the bed a few feet from Bruce. "Oh, you fixed the RRRCU?"

"RRRCU?"

"Yeah, the Red Robin Remote Control to the Universe. It's not fair how quickly he can hack into anything with that computer."

Bruce was pleased that his sons were close enough to have pet names for each other's possessions, and a bit saddened that he'd been left out of the joke thus far. He shrugged off the feeling. There were enough positives about being the dad that made up for his exclusion from the "cool group". "It's just until I can replace it," Bruce said, frowning at the hack job he'd had to do just to be able to see what he was doing.

"Did you find out if we're in Oz or not?"

"We're not," Bruce replied. He gave Jason the rundown on what he'd learned of Gotham's fate, eliciting a dry whistle from the younger man.

"Sounds like this world's Bat is off his game."

Bruce grimaced. "I haven't found anything on Batman yet. It's possible there isn't one in this world."

"Want me to try?" Jason held out his hand for the computer, which Bruce reluctantly allowed him to take. "It's fucking boring in this one horse town."

"Language, Jason," Bruce scolded, mostly out of habit. And according to his habit, Jason smirked and started tapping on the low quality touch screen.

Bruce got up to check on Tim and Damian. Both slept soundly, and thankfully quietly, due to the natural sedatives in their flu medication. Damian was curled up in a tight ball on his side, his back pressed against his brother's side. Tim was on his stomach, hugging his bunched pillow like a lifeline. Knowing Dick, he was probably sprawled out on his back in the other room.

"I'll be right back," Bruce told Jason. He trusted the second Robin to let him know if anything was wrong with Dick, but it'd make his paranoid fatherly heart feel better to see for himself. Jason barely acknowledged the older man, already deeply invested into whatever he'd found.

Dick was indeed on his back, but his "snores" were merely miserably congested inhales and exhales that made Bruce suspect that excessive phlegm was building up in the young man. He carefully shook Dick awake. "Wake up, old chum."

"Bruce?"

"You sound like you need a booster on the medication," Bruce said. "Sit up. I'll get it."

Dick groggily complied. He rubbed his hands over his face and made a face when he felt the scruff filling in over his cheeks and chin. It had never been difficult for Dick to grow facial hair, though he much preferred a smooth shave. Tim had yet to generate much and Damian hadn't hit puberty yet. After a wide yawn, Dick asked, "How's Timmy?"

"About the same as you," Bruce replied. He handed off the plastic cup of red liquid. "Damian's sick, too."

"Shit." Dick threw back the dosage and made a disgusted face. "Jay?"
"So far, so good. I think this is a strain of the virus that doesn't exist in our world, hence the failure of the vaccine and your non-immunity. I just hope Jason can avoid it, anyway."

"And you," Dick added. He flopped back on the bed. "I feel gross from laying in bed all day, but I have zero desire to actually get up."

"You need to rest," Bruce replied. "Though you could probably benefit from a shower." He scrunched up his nose exaggeratedly.

"Yeah, yeah," Dick said. "Maybe later." His eyes slipped shut. The medicine hit hard and fast, especially in one who didn't have much reserve energy to start with. "Tell me what's going on before I pass out again," Dick requested.

Bruce repeated the same story he'd told Jason, keeping a watchful eye over his eldest as Dick slowly slipped into a deeper sleep. By the time he was finished, Dick was out cold. The weary father watched his beloved son sleep until enough time passed that he figured Jason would be done "baby-sitting". Bruce brushed his hand over Dick's forehead and adjusted his twisted blankets before heading toward the exit. He wished that this motel had rooms that adjoined.

to be continued...
The next morning, Bruce followed the stench of cigarette smoke around the corner of the building, to find his second oldest son hunched over next to the tarp-covered pool. He'd checked on his eldest, whose fever seemed to have finally broken sometime during the night, and then sought out Jason. Even though he strongly disliked the teenager's habit, Bruce still took a seat close enough that he could land a hand on Jason's tense shoulder. "Yeah, yeah, I know," Jason said gruffly. He tried to scrape away the evidence of how long he'd been out there, but Bruce had seen the multitude of butts as he walked up.

"We're going to look into e-cigarettes when we get home," Bruce said. He stole the lit smoke from Jason's chilled fingers and took a long drag himself. Thankfully for his pride he didn't choke on the acrid smoke, though it was a relief to exhale the fumes. He smashed the rest of the cigarette under the toe of his dress shoe.

"And give up my precious nicotine?" Jason scoffed. "Fuck, this town…"

"I know," Bruce said. He was feeling anxious himself, which was part of the reason that he hadn't wasted any time tracking down his wayward son upon finding his bed empty. "We need to move on."

"To where? Gotham's just a black spot on the map in this universe, and as far as we can tell, Bruce Wayne doesn't even exist here."

"We'll go to New York," Bruce said with more confidence than he felt.

"That's a long walk," commented Jason. He reached into his pocket, withdrawing his lighter instead of a new cigarette. He played with the device absently, letting the flame flicker to life and then extinguished it only to repeat a few seconds later. "How are the kids?"

Bruce sighed and dropped his hand from Jason's shoulder so he could lean forward and brace himself on his knees using both arms. "Tim might be coming out of it, but Damian's reached the worse stage. Dick's finally on the mend."

"A really long walk," said Jason with a sigh.

"You're still feeling all right?"

"Peachy," Jason replied. He didn't appear ill, so Bruce took him at his word.

"I'm reconsidering the Pinto," the older man said after a minute of silence. "I'm enough of a mechanic to keep the thing running for a few hours."

Bruce snorted. "How the mighty fall."

"We could paint it black. Add a few spoilers. Maybe an afterburner. It could be the Batmobile 2.0." Bruce mirrored Jason's amused grin. "And since I'm Batman, I'll drive this time."

"Then I'm calling dibs on shotgun," Jason said. "Goldie can play peacekeeper in the backseat."

"If you can help me get that piece of crap running reliably, I'll put a faceplate with your name on the
"Deal," Jason replied. Bruce pushed himself to his feet and offered a hand to Jason. Unlike his younger siblings, Jason didn't automatically tuck himself into Bruce's personal space, but he also didn't distance himself like Bruce had some highly contagious disease anymore, like he had when the Red Hood had first appeared. They walked back to the hotel rooms to check once more on the other three Robins and let Dick know where they were going.

About a block away from the motel, and four blocks shy of the mechanic's shop, Jason stopped along the side of the street to knock the toe of his left dress shoe against the pavement. "It's bad enough having to wear these stupid shoes to a three hour function. Three days is fucking torture."

Bruce frowned. They'd all been in the suits since the accident, underwear and all. For Jason to actually give voice to his discomfort, he had to be in serious pain. Bruce's own loafers were worn enough that they'd been broken in, but Jason's were new even if they no longer looked it. "We'll get some new clothes, too."

"Joy."

The rest of the walk was completed in a companionable quiet. Bruce ignored his discomfort at the fact that the street was deserted despite the growing lateness of the morning and instead focused on enjoying spending time with Jason without the stress of a fight. The mechanic wasn't readily found in the front of his shop, but he came eventually after Jason impatiently rang the bell a dozen times. "What?" the man asked, just as friendly as the rest of the townsfolk.

"I'm reconsidering the Pinto, if the offer is still valid," Bruce said before Jason could chime in with his opinion on the man's brand of customer service.

"She's out back," the mechanic said. "As is, no warranty."

"Of course not," Jason grumbled. The mechanic gave him a dirty look and when Jason's expression darkened in response, Bruce quickly stepped in front of his son.

"I'd like to take a look before we settle," Bruce stated. The man grunted and waved at Bruce to make his way around the back of the building to where the rusted vehicle was stored. "Keys?" Bruce swallowed his own ire when the mechanic acted inconvenienced at having to fish the key ring out of one of the drawers below his register. The Key West keychain was scuffed nearly to the point of obliterating the island's logo.

Bruce popped the hood of the faded gold car while Jason slid into the driver's seat to start the engine. She came to life easily and while she didn't purr like the recently deceased Bentley, she ran better than Bruce had hoped. The car was low on wiper fluid and he'd insist on an oil change before they left, but Bruce was optimistic that she might actually get them to New York City. He left Jason to check the brakes, lights, and tires while he tracked down the mechanic for the necessary equipment to change the oil.

"Anything wrong?" Bruce asked when he returned with an oil pan and a few quarts of cheap synthetic that he would never have used on one of his own cars.

"The steering wheel is a little loose and there's a spring determined to crawl up the driver's ass, but otherwise it runs and appears street legal." Bruce questioned the smirk that spread over Jason's face. "The radio gets two whole channels, though the cassette deck is busted. The good news is that it's so ancient there is no way that Timbers can hack it."
"A blessing in disguise," Bruce replied dryly. He trusted Jason's assessment of the road-worthiness of the vehicle, so with his son's help he changed the oil, further ruining his thousand dollar suit. The mechanic gruffly finalized the trade for the car with the workable parts of the Bentley as Bruce's payment. Bruce thought that the mechanic was getting the better end of the deal, but his held his peace in order to not nuke the deal as it was. The idea of driving hours in the dusty interior of the car made him cringe, so Bruce stopped at the local car wash to wash the outside and vacuum the inside before continuing to the discount warehouse store he'd noticed on their way into town two days ago.

Dick and Jason were responsible for clothing themselves with the generous wardrobe allowance Bruce provided, and Alfred took care of replacing the garments Tim and Damian wore out. To that end, Bruce assigned Jason the task of finding a change of clothes for himself and Dick, who was probably about one size smaller than his brother. The hapless father wandered through the boys' section and hoped that size eleven would be the right fit for his eleven-year-old. At least the shirt and pants looked to be about the correct size.

Needless to say, Jason finished much sooner. His son helpfully laughed at Bruce's ineptitude. "Go find yourself something, old man. I'll take care of Timmy." Bruce readily sacrificed his pride and hurried over to find his own change of clothes. It didn't escape his notice when he met back up with Jason that the outfit he'd picked for Damian had been replaced.

At least when they handed out the new clothing back at the motel, Bruce could honestly lay the blame on Jason when none of his siblings liked what they'd gotten.

"It's too small," Tim complained, tugging on the front of his hooded sweatshirt bearing the logo of a university that didn't exist in their universe.

"No," Jason argued, flicking the younger teen between the eyes. "It fits. The shit you consider civilian clothes is always at least two sizes too big." Tim huffed and scowled at his older brother.

"Jaybird," said Dick, aiming for diplomacy instead of confrontation. "I think you've mistakenly projected your love of grungy badass-ness onto me."

"You're welcome," Jason growled. "For not dressing like a--"

"Todd! I refuse to wear a pullover bearing the image of a sponge-shaped cartoon character."

"But yellow is so your color, brat," Jason snapped.

"Boys!" Bruce ran his hand through his hair. "We'll have more opportunities to buy new clothes. For now, these things that your brother graciously found for each of you will have to do."

Dick looked suspiciously at the older man. "Why did Jason have to find the clothes? You came out looking pretty normal, B."

"Father, this is an outrage! I demand that you make Todd return this ridiculous pullover."

"I'm not your servant, you little--"

"Stop," Bruce ordered. "Damian, deal. Tim, don't pout. Dick, help Jason pack up the car while I get the kids their next dose of medication."

The two oldest boys looked at each other in confusion then exaggeratedly looked around the motel room for anything that was actually theirs. A growl from Bruce snapped them out of their game and they moved to collect the pieces of formal wear and meager toiletries. Damian scowled at Bruce. "Unlike Drake, I am not a child, Father."
"You realize you're younger than me, right?" Tim asked irritably. Damian pointedly ignored him.

Bruce took the bottle of flu medication from Dick and poured Damian's dose. A quelling look encouraged the boy to drink it without further fuss. Of course Tim wouldn't drink from the cup directly after his younger brother, so Bruce washed it out and then refilled it for his fifteen-year-old.

Jason finished stuffing the various pieces of their formal wear into the complimentary plastic laundry bag. "You sure you want to brave the great unknown in that clunker today?"

"It'll be fine," Bruce said. He tossed the car keys to the eighteen-year-old. "I'm driving," he announced, his tone leaving no room for debate. Dick made a sad face in his direction.

Jason smirked at his older brother. "And I have permanent dibs on shotgun," he informed his siblings.

"Unacceptable," Damian argued. "As the only true Wayne--"

"Ugh, not this again," Tim complained, dropping his face to his hands.

"--I shall be granted the privilege of riding in the front seat."

"You're too late, squirt," Jason said. "There's a face plate with my name on it and everything."

"Really?" Dick questioned, turning to Bruce for confirmation. The weary father rolled his eyes and shook his head minutely.

"Then I shall have turns driving. My skill far exceeds Grayson's, and it is not worth mentioning yours or Drake's."

"Thanks for the kudos, Little D," Dick said dryly. "But aren't you forgetting that you and Timmy aren't even old enough yet?"

"Leave me out of this." Tim slumped over on the unmade bed and reached for one of the pillows to curl around.

"If the DMV were made aware of my superior abilities…" A disappointed look for Bruce. "They would certainly make an exception."

"You really are full of shit," Jason commented.

"I am not."

"Quiet," Bruce ordered. He considered leaving them all in the backwards town and making for New York by himself. It would certainly save him a few headaches. However, the pain he'd spare here probably wouldn’t be worth the lecture he'd receive from Alfred if he returned home without all four of his wonderful children. "Tim, you can sleep in the car. Get up. Damian, you will not drive anything with more than two wheels until you turn sixteen. Jason, stop antagonizing Damian. Am I forgetting anything?" He glared at each of the boys in turn.

"I think you covered it," said Dick smugly.

"Shut the fuck up, Goldie," snapped Jason.

"Language," Bruce growled. "I'm going to check us out. All of our things and each of you better be in the car and ready to go when I get back. Richard, make it happen."
"You heard the man," Dick said as Bruce closed the motel room door behind himself.

By the time Bruce returned to the gold Pinto after turning in the room keys and signing out of the motel, his instructions had been followed, albeit not very happily. Dick had lost whatever battle had certainly occurred between himself and Jason for the front seat, though his desire to keep the peace between his younger siblings had likely hamstrung him. Tim was curled up behind Jason's seat, looking well on his way to following Bruce's suggestion to sleep in the car. His refurbished tablet gave him the ability to plug in his earphones and tune out the rest of his family. Damian sat in the middle, the position best suited for staring down Jason as he listed all of the older boy's perceived shortcomings. Dick let Damian have free reign with his creative insults in response to his own irritation with Jason.

"Everyone is going to keep his mouth shut for the next thirty minutes," Bruce declared after he'd fastened his seat belt and started the ignition. "Damian, put your seat belt on."

"Father--"

"That task does not require speaking," Bruce interrupted. When would the flu medication knock out his youngest, too?

Damian fumed as he sat back and tugged at his seat belt. He squirmed a bit more than seemed strictly necessary, so to no great surprise his brothers started to grumble. "Ow, Damian!"

"Silence, Drake. It is not my fault that your useless carcass is blocking the buckle."

"You could ask nicely," Tim shot back. He pulled on the back of Jason's seat for leverage to lift himself temporarily off the seat so Damian could fasten his belt.

"The fuck, runt?" Jason swore when Tim inadvertently pulled his seat belt taut across his chest and waist. "Don't touch my seat."

"He didn't do it on purpose," Dick interceded. "Are you done yet, Dami?" There was a click that Bruce hoped meant his youngest was finally secured, but said hope was quickly dashed.

"Hey! Why did you unbuckle mine?"

"The buckle for the middle belt does not clasp satisfactorily," Damian said. "As I am not a waste of air and space, the functioning safety device will go to me."

"I seriously hate you," Tim seethed.

"Timothy Jackson," Bruce admonished.

"I didn't do anything!"

"You do not hate your brother."

"The feeling is mutual, Father."

"Damian, be quiet."

"Forget it," Tim snapped. A second later he was out of the car and stalking across the parking lot, clutching his tablet in a bear hug. Bruce's shout for him to return to the vehicle immediately was ignored. With a few choice words, Jason slid from the Pinto to chase down the younger teenager.

"Good job, D," said Dick angrily. Unrepentant, the eleven-year-old slid into the vacated seat and
buckled the seat belt.

Bruce was pretty certain that Jason, of all his sons, would not be able to talk Tim into rejoining the family. He was proven correct when the minor scuffle between the two broke out as Bruce reached the halfway point between them and the car. He quickened his stride in order to push them apart before shoving turned into slugging. "Thank you, Jason," Bruce ground out, strongly implying that the eighteen-year-old should back off. Bruce stepped in front of Tim and grasped the teenager's upper arms. Tim fought against the restraint. "Stop it," he said in as calm of a voice as he could muster.

"I didn't do anything," Tim repeated. His dark blue eyes were glassy as he looked up at Bruce, and full of the hurt of betrayal.

"I know you didn't start the fight, kid," Bruce said. "I know you're Damian's favorite target on which to unload his insecurities and prejudices. And I know you're smarter than to let him get under your skin and cause you to darken your own heart with hatred. Do not even suggest to yourself or anyone else that you might feel that way about another person. You may hate actions and unfortunate circumstances and philosophies, but not human beings and especially not your little brother."

"He's not my brother."

"You are my son, and so is he. Ergo, brothers."

"I changed my mind about letting you adopt me."

"It's too late," Bruce said. He released his grip in order to rub his hands up and down the teenager's arms in what he hoped was a comforting manner. "The paperwork has been signed in blood and you bear my surname."

"It's hyphenated," Tim reminded him.

Bruce smirked and pulled the boy into a hug. "That's what you think, Timmy Wayne." The look he got when Tim squirmed out of his hold was not amused, but it was a vast improvement over his previous expression. "Come on. I'd like to make it to the city while there's still daylight to see by." Bruce checked to see to where Jason had wandered off. The eighteen-year-old waited a few steps away, finishing off a cigarette.

Bruce felt a very strong urge to swallow an entire bottle of aspirin when he, Jason, and Tim returned to the car to find Damian sniffling and Dick frowning unsympathetically. Tim eyed the rear passenger door like Bruce was forcing him to walk down death row. Surprisingly, Jason opened the door for himself and slipped onto the rear bench after pushing Damian back into the middle seat. Bruce wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth, so he quickly nudged Tim toward the front seat.

"I revise my earlier directive," Bruce said once he was back in the driver's seat and the engine was rumbling roughly again. "There will be absolutely no talking for the next hour."

By the time the mandated hour expired, all four of his birds were out cold. Tim had curled himself into a tight ball in the seat next to him. Jason snored lightly from his position as sprawled out as he could muster in the cramped backseat. Dick mirrored his position behind Bruce, though he was further restricted by Damian using him as a body pillow. The eleven-year-old's breathing was wet and ragged. Unfortunately, it was too soon for more medicine.

There wasn't a sensor in the dash of the Pinto that Bruce fully trusted, so he decided to stop for gas once the gauge read half of a tank. His earlier anger continued to bleed away, replaced by the
protective feelings he'd grown used to once he'd taken a half-step back from his Mission in order to actually parent the little soldiers he'd taken in. Dick, Tim, and Damian slept through the brief stop, probably due to the lingering effects of their illnesses, and Jason merely blinked a few times to confirm that there was no danger before shifting and letting himself sleep again. Bruce smiled faintly.

By the time that another hour had passed, Jason shook off his drowsiness and requested a status update. The ensuing conversation drew Dick out of sleep as well, so the three oldest members of the family lapsed into a discussion about what they'd do when they finally reached New York and how'd they find a way back to their universe.

"Did you find anything about Wayne Enterprises?" Dick asked.

"As far as I can tell, the company was nearly bankrupt before the earthquake destroyed Gotham," said Bruce. A part of him was angry that his family's legacy had been left to die a slow, drawn-out death even in a world that wasn't his own. In their world, Wayne was still a name of power and prestige and Bruce had worked just as hard to bring his family's company up from the ashes as he had the city itself. "If it still exists at all, it's in name only."

"And your alter ego?" Jason queried.

"Nothing conclusive." Bruce glanced sideways for a moment to check on Tim. "There's no current records for Drake Industries, either."

"Well, they've pretty much gone into hibernation in our 'verse, too," Jason said.

"Just until Timmy's old enough to assume control," Dick reminded him. Bruce knew that the fifteen-year-old's current plan was to allow WE to buy DI as soon as he had the authority to permit the merger. Plenty of shareholders in the skeletal firm accused Bruce of manipulating the Drake heir into relinquishing his company to the jaws of a corporate behemoth. What they didn't care to understand was that it was Bruce's crafty legal team that had laid out the rules for Tim's trust, explicitly preventing Tim from selling until he turned twenty-one and thereby giving Bruce time to talk Tim out of the merger. It was also a WE shell corporation that was funneling money into the life support system that had so far kept DI from collapsing.

"The point is," said Bruce with an air of resignation, "that without WE or DI, we don't have much recourse when it comes to financial support." He kept it to himself that after buying gasoline, he had less than two hundred dollars of petty cash left in his wallet.

"So we'll rob a bank," suggested Jason. Bruce knew he wasn't completely serious, but there was enough of a real intent in the statement for Bruce to shoot him an unhappy look.

"We're not going to starve," Dick argued. "You and I are both old enough to find jobs if need be. I think you'd look cute in a baristo's apron, Jaybird."

"I don't look 'cute' in anything, asshole," Jason replied.

"Boys," Bruce chided. "I'll worry about money and food and shelter."

Dick shifted uncomfortably while trying to not wake up his littlest brother. "B, I know you're taking your role as father-figure seriously these days, but Jay and I are adults. We want to help."

"We'll see," Bruce said. He was certainly capable of providing for his birds. All of them.

Jason rolled his eyes and turned to stare out his window. Dick sighed and slouched further in his
seated. "So, Daddy Warbucks," his eldest groused. "I'm hungry."

to be continued...
Chapter Six

They reached the outskirts of New York around seven o'clock in the evening. It had taken longer than Bruce anticipated and that was mostly due to having to skirt the abandoned area once known as Gotham City. Bruce's concerns about the family's fiscal viability wore at him, even after the boys had each handed over what cash they'd been carrying during the charity event. This time, he didn't splurge on two motel rooms. Renting a cot was less expensive.

Damian dragged himself into the bathroom for a shower while Dick and Jason ventured out with some of their precious money to purchase dinner. Tim curled up on the bed he'd been assigned to share with Dick after shedding his hoodie and dress shoes. Bruce crouched down in front of him so he could get a better look at the teenager's face. "Hey, kid. How are you feeling?"

"Like dwarves are mining for precious gems inside by head," Tim replied.

Bruce frowned. He ran his hand over Tim's damp forehead, silently cursing the heat he felt radiating from the boy. He continued the motion back in order to smooth the teenager's damp bangs away from his face. It had now been three days since Tim had taken his prescribed antibiotics meant to help safeguard him against infections after the removal of his spleen. The teenager was likely being bombarded by new bacteria and viruses in this alternate universe, and what strength his immune system had was battered by the flu.

"Hang in there," Bruce said softly. He squeezed his son's shoulder as he stood up. He needed to replace Tim's antibiotics, but the pills weren't inexpensive even with the stellar health insurance Bruce used to have. In the meantime, he offered the teenager some aspirin with a cup of tap water. After swallowing the painkillers, Tim went back to hugging his pillow miserably.

Damian exited the bathroom followed by a billow of steam. His wet hair dripped down onto his shoulders where his damp towel rested. Bruce hoped that the flush on his face was more due to the heat of the shower than his lingering fever.

"Tt," scoffed Damian. "I am already starting to shake off this malady, unlike Drake. Once again, I am proven superior."

"Damian…" Bruce's warning caused the eleven-year-old to fold into himself, unhappy to have angered his father. Both father and son looked toward the bed when the anticipated acerbic response didn't come.

"Father, what is wrong with him?" Damian asked.

"He has a headache. Leave him alone." Of course, Damian wouldn't do that, instead taking a seat on the edge of the bed near his brother's feet. Damian stared at Tim, thankfully keeping whatever scornful thoughts were percolating in his mind to himself.

Jason and Dick returned then, casually bickering with each other in a way that was irritating but didn't have Bruce feeling like he needed to jump in to prevent a fight. "Dami, come here," Dick called upon spotting the youngest boy. He pulled a Styrofoam container out of a plastic bag and set in on the small table in the corner. "Tell Jason that during times of adversity, you can be convinced to eat something that's not quite vegetarian. In the interest of surviving and keeping up your strength, of course."
"You're a manipulative bastard, you know that. Right?" Jason said. He removed more Styrofoam boxes from his bags.

Dick ignored him. "Come on, L'il D."

"What are you playing at, Grayson?" Damian slowly approached his oldest brother, eyeing the man distrustfully.

"If you help me win this bet, I'll split the prize with you." Bruce quickly realized what Dick was trying to do when Jason opened the first of the containers and the smell of Chinese take-out reached him.

"Stop cheating, Goldie," Jason complained.

Damian's nose scrunched up. "I do not like unhealthy, low-quality take-out."

"Cha-ching," Jason said with a wide grin. He rubbed his fingers together in Dick's face.

Bruce's youngest wasn't stupid, however, and after his father and Alfred, Dick was the only person Damian admitted to liking. "But, in the interest of surviving..." He made a disgusted face. "I suppose I have no choice."

Jason's smile faltered as Dick's lit up. "Well said, baby bat. Come here." He caught Damian's hand and pulled the boy closer to the table. "What looks good... I mean, the least off-putting?"

Jason hummed as he picked a box at random and passed it to Bruce. "Jason," he said, making sure to keep his voice low. "Did you and Dick really make a bet on whether or not you'd purchased food that you knew Damian wouldn't eat?" The very idea both hurt and angered the father. He knew that Jason wasn't Damian's biggest fan, but now was not the time and place for abject sibling rivalry.

"We both know better than to take a bet we can't win," replied Jason, looking offended. "The bet was if Dick could talk him into eating it without causing a tantrum. You're welcome, old man."

Bruce sighed. "Jay--"

"Save it."

"I'm sorry."

Jason paused for a moment, then looked at Bruce incredulously. "Man, this alternate universe is really messing with you, isn't it? I don't think I've ever heard those words come from you."

Bruce frowned. He wasn't going to dignify that statement with a response. Jason sat down beside him and opened his own dinner. At the table, Damian unhappily stabbed a ball of chicken coated in sweet and sour sauce. He ate it, and that's all Bruce cared about.

Dick, ever the conscientious older brother, paused in eating his own meal to seek out the recipient of the last untouched container. "Timmy, aren't you hungry?"

"He has a headache. Leave him alone," Damian said, repeating Bruce's earlier admonishment. His older boys looked at the youngest in surprise. Dick grudgingly went back to eating, but Jason wouldn't let the subject drop.

"He has to eat. Hell, with his compromised immune system, he needs the extra energy more than any of us."
"Oh, shit," said Dick, dropping his fork into his beef and broccoli and twisting in his seat to look directly at Tim. "His antibiotics - he wouldn't have brought them to the charity event. It was only supposed to last for a few hours."

"I'll take care of it," Bruce said firmly. He wasn't going to let anything happen to his kid.

Their room came with a mini-fridge which had to be plugged in before it would generate cold air inside. Into it went the leftovers, which were fairly substantial considering Damian was only willing to force himself to eat so much and Bruce and Tim barely touched theirs.

Jason set up his cot while Dick showered. He took his turn when the eldest Robin exited. Dick wasted no time wrapping himself around Tim once he'd climbed onto the bed, his cuddle-prey for once unresisting.

Damian was warm against Bruce's side, but it was a normal temperature that had Bruce hopeful that he'd fought off the flu virus. Bruce was still awake when Jason exited the shower and flopped down on his cot, and he remained that way long into the night. First, he plotted, and then he worried.

xXx

"I refuse to eat leftover Chinese food for breakfast," Damian stated.

"Then go with Dick to find a grocery store and buy something inexpensive that you will eat," Bruce answered impatiently. He pulled the hood of Tim's sweatshirt up over his dark hair and tugged on the drawstrings so it would stay in place.

"I'm fine," Tim insisted as he reached up to push down the hood. "It's too hot."

"It's not hot outside," Bruce argued. He batted Tim's hands back down. "Where's your jacket?"

"My suit jacket? Probably in a balled up mess with the rest of our stuff." His blue eyes slanted sideways to stare down Jason. Jason shrugged, smirked, and went back to stabbing cold rice noodles with chopsticks.

Dick rose from his seat opposite Jason and fetched the faux leather jacket that Jason had picked for him the day before. "Here," he said. He draped it over Tim's shoulders.

"What about you?" Tim asked, pointing somewhat in the vicinity of Dick's bare arms, uncovered by the t-shirt he wore. Bruce took advantage of the outstretched limb to snag Tim's wrist and wrestle the teenager into one sleeve of the borrowed outerwear. It was easier than it should have been, but that didn't mean Tim didn't try his best to fight back.

"What about me?" Dick asked. "I'm not a walking germ magnet, baby bird. You need it more than I do."

"If you go out, stay out of the cold as much as possible," Bruce instructed. He didn't like taking one son's sole piece of warm clothing and giving it to another, but he appreciated Dick's gesture and was glad for the extra layer of protection against the biting cold for Tim. He succeeded in capturing Tim's other arm and then zipped the jacket up to the boy's chin.

"I'm hot," Tim repeated. "And I'm fine." He pulled away from Bruce and nearly unbalanced. His face plant was prevented by Bruce's quick reflexes.

"You're hot because you're feverish," Bruce said, on the verge of a growl. Why could none of his children just do as they were told without talking or fighting back? "We'll be back as soon as
possible," he informed his three remaining sons. He kept a firm grip on Tim's upper arm as he propelled his second youngest toward the door.

Bruce had managed to find a free clinic not far from their motel, much like the one that Dr. Leslie Thompkins ran in his version of Gotham City. He hoped that whomever worked there would have the same unassailable moral and ethical code as his once-foster parent. It was too far to walk, so he was forced to leave Dick and Jason in charge of Damian while he drove himself and Tim the ten miles to the charitable medical facility.

"Damian is still sick, too," Tim complained as he stared out of the passenger side window. "Why doesn't he have to come?"

"You know why," Bruce replied.

"I'm fine, Bruce. I just need coffee. You know I get migraines if I don't get my daily fix of caffeine."

"You're suffering from more than just minor caffeine withdrawals, kid."

"Shouldn't I be the judge of whether or not I'm 'suffering'?" His sorry attempt to disguise a cough didn't fool Bruce in the slightest.

"You have not proven yourself to be a trustworthy authority on the subject of your personal health."

"Oh, that's rich coming from you," Tim groused. "Mr. Save the World with a Broken Back."

"Well, when you're an adult, you can make bad judgment calls, too. Until then, my word is law."

"Do as I say and not as I do, huh?"

"It's the creed of all parents," Bruce rejoined. Tim fell silent then as he played with the cuffs of Dick's jacket. A quick glance assured Bruce that Tim wasn't upset, but rather introspective. He left the teenager to his thoughts until they pulled into the meager parking lot before the free clinic. He was used to the sight of the downtrodden and outcast members of society from his work as Batman and his many visits to Dr. Thompkins' domain. He knew that many of the homeless were just unlucky and not dangerous, but there were enough who were plagued by inner demons that he made it a point to wrap a protective arm around his son. The hold also served to straighten out Tim's somewhat meandering stride, exacerbated by the dizziness that had been bothering him since he awoke.

The waiting room was annoyingly busy at the early morning hour. Bruce's hope that their outing would be brief was quickly dashed. With a grim countenance, he took the clipboard from the receptionist and steered Tim toward a pair of vacant seats that were mostly separate from the rest of the ill. He wished that he had one of his rebreathers with him. Every sniffle, cough, and sneeze was just one more germ assault that could easily overwhelm Tim's low immunity.

Tim leaned against his shoulder as Bruce quickly filled in the patient information on the front of the paper and then flipped it over to check the boxes that described his son's symptoms. Once that task was completed, Bruce leaned his head back against the wall behind him and forced himself to exhale slowly. He couldn't do anything about the wait except practice being patient. He dropped his hand on Tim's far knee, his arm a metaphorical brace across the teen's body to keep his miserable son grounded and a shield to protect him from any threat, microscopic or otherwise.

By the time an hour had passed, Bruce was really wishing he had a working cell phone. He lamented not yet taking the time to hack into his own device and piggy back onto the cellular waves of this world. There was nothing he could do in the waiting room of the clinic, so he forced himself to focus
on something else.

"How's your head?" Tim's response was a muffled grunt into the side of Bruce's shoulder. Bruce shifted so he could pull his arm free and wrap it around the teenager. "I thought you were fine."

"I thought I was incapable of determining my own state of being."

"Hnn."

"You know, for as shitty as I feel, this is kind of nice," Tim said. "I don't think we've ever spent an extended amount of time just us, without the... secrets. I know you'd rather be back with the others, but--"

"No," interrupted Bruce. "What I'd rather is to be able to spend this time with you when you're not feeling shitty."

"Timothy Wayne?"

Bruce looked up at the sound of the petite nurse's voice. She motioned for them to follow her into the back of the clinic. Bruce squeezed his son for a moment before releasing him so they could stand. Bruce made sure to stay close in case another wave of dizziness hit Tim.

The clinic was obviously old and not well-funded, but the staff did the best that they could with what they had. Bruce was pleased to see that it rivaled one of the premiere hospitals for cleanliness, even if some of the wallpaper had yellowed and the baseboard was scuffed. "Mr. Wayne, I presume?" the nurse asked once they were closed into one of two examination rooms. She eyed Bruce over the top of her clipboard.

"Yes," Bruce replied. "I'm Tim's father." In this world, they didn't need to know that he'd gained that title by way of adoption.

"Sit," the nurse instructed, pointing Tim toward the outdated examination bed. Tim climbed onto the pad, making a face at the paper cover that crinkled under him. "How old are you, Tim?"

"Fifteen."

"Do you go to school at Lincoln?"

"No, ma'am."

"Why not?"

"I'm home-schooled," Tim responded without hesitation.

"Mmmh," the nurse hummed skeptically. She shot a look at Bruce, clearly questioning his parenting decisions. Bruce forced himself not to rise to the bait. Besides, if she only know what he permitted his boys to do for "fun", homeschooling would be the least of her worries. "You don't look so hot, sweetie."

"I'm very hot," Tim replied. He tugged at the collar of his sweatshirt.

"Cute." The nurse gave him a genuine smile as she produced a digital thermometer. "Lean down a bit." She pressed the device into Tim's right ear and waited for the beep that signaled his temperature had been recorded. "One-oh-one. I guess you are hot, honey." Tim grimaced in response. "Well, shed your coat and sweatshirt so I can listen to your heart and lungs."
Tim slowly did as she instructed. Bruce took the discarded clothes and raked his brain for a story to explain the many scars littering the teenager's arms. In hindsight, long sleeves for the Robin costume probably would have been a good call. At least Tim had worn leggings, unlike his somewhat fashion-impaired oldest brother.

"Now, what have you been into, young man?" the nurse asked when she turned back around and saw the markings.

"I was in a bad car accident almost a year ago," Tim replied. Bruce silently praised the boy's quick thinking, even as the nurse turned to ask him condescendingly if he'd been the one driving.

"No," Bruce answered, just as unfriendly. "His late mother was." Tim acted appropriately sad at the mention of the missing parent, easily integrating Bruce's fabrication into his own tall tale.

"My apologies," the nurse said honestly. She shed some of the aura of suspicion she'd adopted for Bruce. She'd probably seen her fair share of abuse cases in the clinic and Bruce could have forgiven her for her assumption if it weren't for the fact that he was so tired of hearing the rumors about why he'd really taken in Dick and then his subsequent brothers.

"Injuries from the accident resulted in Tim needing a splenectomy," Bruce continued. "We're not originally from New York, and Tim's run out of his antibiotics. The onset of winter isn't being kind."

"Neither of you talk like the types of people who usually come to a free clinic," the nurse said.

"I took my wife's passing hard," Bruce said. "I'm not... proud of how I reacted." It was almost as easy to act like a defeated but hopeful father as it was to act like billionaire playboy Brucie Wayne, or low-level mobster Matches Malone. "I came to New York to get a new start."

Unfortunately, a new start hadn't been high on his To Do list. Damned wormhole.

"Well, good for you." The nurse finished taking Tim's vitals. "The doctor should be in shortly."

After she left, Bruce handed Tim back his sweatshirt so the teenager didn't have to continue to sit on the examination bed self-consciously in just the undershirt he'd worn to the charity gala. "Do you think they'd mind if I layed down?"

"Go for it, kid," Bruce responded. He propped his hip against the side of the bed, and gazed down at his third Robin struggling to get comfortable. Because both of Tim's parents had been alive when the boy started as Robin, and then his father had lasted another couple of years, Bruce and Tim hadn't bonded as father and son during Tim's tenure as Robin the way Bruce had with Dick and, to a degree, Jason. His protective care for the teenager had felt more like that of an uncle or close family friend. He'd needed Tim more than Tim had needed him.

That was all different now, and Bruce loved his third son just the same as his first, second, and last. He regretted that Tim still saw himself as peripheral to the Batfamily, despite him being the most wrapped into the Wayne family besides Damian. Tim was still Bruce's primary heir to anything WE related, and most of Bruce's non-corporate estate as well. Tim was the one who followed the most closely in Bruce's footsteps, for better or worse.

As much as Bruce despised this new world, he could see one faint glimmer of silver lining. He'd take advantage of his lack of WE, Batman Incorporated, and Justice League responsibilities to spend time with his sons without their masks in place. Provided, of course, that they didn't drive him mad first.

_to be continued..._
Chapter Seven

Forty minutes later, Bruce helped Tim back into the passenger seat of the gold Pinto. The teenager looked exhausted from the entire outing and while he'd been able to take a first dose of antibiotics at the clinic, it would be a while before he completely overcame the flu virus. Bruce slid into the driver's seat and patted his jacket pocket to make sure that the prescription for the antibiotics was still there. The doctor had been more congenial to Bruce after speaking to Tim privately, during what Bruce assumed was a mandated inquiry into the "real" reason for Tim's numerous scars. Tim must have convinced the doctor that Bruce wasn't an abusive father-figure, but rather a good man who'd made some poor decisions and was now trying to rectify his mistakes. Bruce was thankful he hadn't had to bring Jason in - the eighteen-year-old probably would have made up some awful story about clowns and crowbars just to cause Bruce problems.

Back at the hotel, Bruce was alarmed to find the room empty. He scanned the low dresser and messy table for a note of some sort, but there was none. Anger warred with worry inside of him.

"Where'd they go?" asked Tim tiredly as he wiggled out of his multiple layers until he was left in just his undershirt and boxers. The teenager slipped back into his bed, and stole Dick's pillow to curl around while resting his head on his own.

"I don't know," Bruce answered shortly. He pulled out his defunct cell phone and was halfway through dialing Dick's number before he remembered that neither of their phones worked with this universe's cellular towers. "Damn it." He spun around to face the door, intent on storming out the room and tracking down his troublesome children. Before he could take a step toward the door, however, it swung open of its own accord.

"Grayson, I demand that you cease your infernal nattering this instant," Damian said as he stomped into the room, his face red.

"But Dami, I know you-- Oh, hey, you're back?" Dick grinned infuriatingly at Bruce.

"Where the hell were you?" Bruce demanded. Damian froze and Dick's smile turned upside immediately.

"Um… ice machine?" His eldest held up the small ice box which was filled with frozen chunks of water. "So we could drink cold water?"

Bruce balked for a second, but covered it up by grunting unhappily. "Fine." He wasn't going to apologize for being angry - they had scared him by not being in the room when he returned. He realized that his anger was still justified, however. He was missing one son. "Where is Jason?"

"Oh, he… went to check out the pool."

"It's November," Bruce said. "The pool is closed."

"Well," said Dick with false cheeriness. "I guess he should be back soon then." Damian smacked himself in the forehead.
"Don't try to deceive me, Richard," Bruce said. His eldest was always trying to make excuses for or protect his younger brothers based on some irrational thought that anything less than perfect behavior didn't necessitate yelling and punishment. "Where is he?"

Dick shrugged passive-aggressively and moved to flop down on the bed next to Tim. Damian, always eager to get one of his adopted siblings in trouble, spoke up. "Todd left shortly after you and Drake. He was being insufferable, so good riddance."

"You are both insufferable," Dick complained. He propped himself up on one elbow so he could lean over Tim. "Are you going to get better now, Timmy?"

"Not with you suffocating me," Tim mumbled.

"Nobody in this emotionally constipated family loves me," Dick said in an exaggeratedly whiny voice. Bruce felt a headache pulse to life behind his eyes.

"Don't be ridiculous, Grayson," Damian said. "Drake and Todd are the ones no one loves."

"Damian," Bruce ground out. Damian scowled and crossed his arms over his chest defiantly.

"I love Jason and Tim, even if Timmy is being a prickly pear right now."

"Dick, it's too hot!" Tim tried to shove his oldest brother away after Dick hugged him anyway, but he got tangled in the blanket. Dick gloated about his victory by refusing to let go of his younger brother.

"Did Jason say when he would be back?" Bruce asked. Three hours was a long time, and for as resourceful as Jason was, he could be anywhere.

"Of course not," Dick responded. "This is Jason that we're talking about."

Bruce sat down heavily on the foot of his bed, torn being staying in the hotel or searching aimlessly for his missing son. Once thing was certain; whenever he did see Jason again, he was going to wring the bird's neck.

"Father, I am bored," Damian announced, moving to stand directly in front of Bruce.

"Then do your exercises," Bruce replied distractedly.

"I already did so," Damian said. "Unlike Grayson and Todd."

"Watch TV."

"I will not do something so pointless," Damian argued. "I shall go out and scout the surrounding area."

"You are staying right here where I can see you," Bruce replied, using Batman's no-nonsense voice. His youngest looked on the verge of a tantrum, which was never a good situation with Damian. "Damian, borrow Tim's tablet and do some more research into the fate of our alter egos in this universe."

Tim reached over to snap his computer off of the nightstand and pulled it under the covers with him. Damian marched over to him. "Give me the tablet, Drake."

"No."
"Drake! Father has commanded it."

"Bug off."

"Tim, let him use the computer. He won't hurt it." Dick tried to pry the tablet away from Tim.

"I'm going to use it."

"You're about to fall asleep," Dick countered.

"Not when I feel like I'm in the middle of the Sahara desert." Dick pretended to not take the hint and continued to cuddle his unhappy brother.

"Tim, let Damian use the computer," Bruce ordered, exasperated. "Damian, do not start," he followed when the youngest Robin smirked victoriously. Tim grudgingly relinquished the tablet, which Damian carried over to the table.

Bruce reconsidered going to look for Jason. He was anxious, and the room was starting to feel claustrophobic. He was not used to being idle, nor not having whatever information he needed at his fingertips. In his own universe, Oracle could have tracked down Jason's location within minutes and reported back to him.

He stewed for thirty minutes before Jason finally returned. The eighteen-year-old whistled cheerfully as he swung a red ski-mask around on his index finger. Bruce launched himself off of the bed to confront him. "Where have you been?! I told you to stay here, not go gallivanting off and getting into who knows what kind of trouble!" Bruce could feel three sets of eyes on his back as he glared into Jason's blue-green ones.

"Hello to you, too, Bats," Jason snipped.

"Answer me! Where--"

"First of all, one: I'm eighteen. Two: you're not my father. And three: fuck you." Jason pulled a wad of cash out of the pocket of his jacket and tossed it onto the bed. Bruce could easily see the hundred dollar bills mixed in with the fives, tens, and twenties. Next, Jason added two new cell phones to the mix.

"How did you get this?"


Bruce snatched the ski-mask out of his son's hand and shook it in his face. "You will not confront criminals in this universe. It is too dangerous. No."

"It's dangerous in our fucking world, too!"

"We know how the criminals in our world operate," Bruce argued loudly. "And your body armor is made of Kevlar, not wool!" He shoved the red ski-mask in Jason's face again.

"Geez, if I didn't know any better, I'd think you cared, old man," Jason said sarcastically.

"God damn it, Jason," Bruce growled. He wanted to knock the boy's head against the wall if it would do any good embedding the notion that Bruce did care. He was the teenager's father, no matter how old he was, and he worried.

"Fine, you win. All right? Asshole. I'm sorry." Jason swept his hand out toward the stolen money.
"But we needed money, unless you plan to start hitting up Chinese delivery guys and pharmacies. The runt's drugs aren't going to be cheap and the brat isn't going to stand for eating take-out each meal."

"Damn straight," Damian muttered from where he was hunched over the tablet.

"Language, Damian," Bruce scolded. He ignored Damian's sputtering about how it wasn't fair that Jason could swear like a sailor. "Did you steal the phones, too?"

"No," Jason said with a glare. "I bought them with the drug money, so you would have a means of continuing your overbearing, obsessive stalking of one of us if we're ever out of your sight for more than five minutes."

"Hn," Bruce grumbled. "Next time, inform me of your plans beforehand. And do not engage criminals until we have a better understanding of the dynamics in this world."

"You're welcome, dick."

"Thanks, Jaybird!" Dick called brightly. Both Jason and Bruce turned to glower at the acrobat.

_to be continued..._

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for the shortness of this chapter. I've been out of town and haven't had a chance to write in over a week. The next part still needs some TLC, but hopefully I'll have a chance to work out the kinks quickly. Thank you for reading, and let me know what you think.
Chapter Eight

Chapter Eight

Needing to do something productive to ease his growing frustration at their predicament, Bruce decided it was time to address their lack of legally obtained income. He expected Tim to nap, even with his oldest brother crowding him, and Damian decided to go through his *kata* again, too antsy to sit still even with the tablet.

One of the new phones was left with Dick, who was to stay behind and keep an eye on his youngest brothers, while the second went with Bruce as he and Jason ventured out to investigate what social services were available in the New York City of this world. The teenager maintained an air of offended anger, knowing that he was basically being punished by not being allowed out of Bruce's sight.

Bruce wasn't in that great of a mood, either. He felt his pride rankle as he stood before the *Human Resource Authority* office. He was a billionaire, for goodness sake. He regretted bringing Jason with him now, as it meant that he had a witness to his embarrassment. It meant a lot to him to be able to provide for the children he'd fostered or adopted, even after they grew up and moved out, or got themselves killed and then went crazy after being resurrected with the help of a Lazarus pit.

> You're doing this so Damian can eat healthily, and Tim can get his antibiotics. You're doing this so Jason doesn't have to eke out a living on the streets again. You're doing this so Dick can stop worrying about how he can help provide for his younger siblings.

Bruce took a deep breath, ignored the curious look from Jason, and stepped into the small office space. A chime jangled over the door, alerting the receptionist of a new arrival. Like the free clinic that morning, the waiting area was nearly full. Bruce gritted his teeth and walked up the desk to sign in. When he heard that the wait would be over an hour, and he'd actually have to wait to keep his place in line, Bruce nearly walked back out. However, the feel of Jason at his back reminded him yet again why he was humbling himself to ask for help, and he took the offered pamphlets about possible social services to peruse while they waited.

Unlike Tim, Jason didn't curl into his side, but rather slouched down in the seat next to him and idly watched the news playing on the small TV in the corner. "Help me look through these," Bruce suggested, handing a few of the pamphlets to his son.

"You know, if coming to places like this actually worked, then there'd be a lot fewer destitute people wandering around," Jason grumbled under his breath as he took the glossy papers. "Remember when you put me in that fucking boys' home after I jacked your tires?"

"Language, and yes. I still regret that, by the way."

"Which part?" Jason asked cheekily.

Bruce eyed the younger man as he mentally catalogued the long list of reasons why he regretted making that decision so many years ago. If it were Dick, he'd crack a rare joke along the lines of, "Parking in that alley where you'd find me," or, "Letting you follow me home." But he couldn't joke about that with Jason, whose abandonment issues put to shame all of his siblings' combined. Instead,
he settled on, "Losing those weeks of training."

Jason scoffed. "I think I could stand to suffer being under your thumb less."

"Brat." Bruce pointed at the papers in Jason's hand. "Read."

He meant to take his own advice and sort through his pile, but the cheap cell phone in his pocket started to ring. Instantly concerned, he answered it. "Dick?"

"No, it is I, Father," Damian stated. "Drake is once again denying me use of the tablet--"

"My tablet," Bruce heard in the background.

"And Grayson has foolishly taken his side. I insist that you talk some reason into him."

The chatter picked up again in the background of the call. "I can't believe you called Bruce to make up some tattle-tale story just so you can get your way. You're such a brat."

"Shut up, Drake. This matter does not concern you."

"It's my tablet! It concerns me."

"Timmy, don't let him rile you up. Dami, let me talk to B."

Damian's voice grew more distant as Bruce assumed he passed the phone on to Dick. "Be sure to remind Father that Drake is supposed to be sleeping so that he can cease being pathetically ill."

"I will, Dami," said Dick dryly. A moment later, his voice was clearer as he spoke directly into the phone. "Bruce, your children are fighting. Again."

"I'm not a child!"

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose. Jason sat up a little straighter, as if he'd be able to hear the nonsense going on back at the hotel for himself. "Chum, you're supposed to be the one who can wrangle your younger brothers like a pro."

"Yeah, thanks," Dick snipped. "I didn't tell Damian to call you. He ninja-stole the phone. I do have this sorted, but since you're on the line and you've been getting all kinds of dad-practice recently, why not let you handle this?"

"Give me the details," Bruce replied, after emitting a long-suffering sigh.

"Tim is not sleeping, but we made a bargain that if he ate something, he could research our alter-egos until it was time for his next dose of medication. Damian is bored out of his mind and this has somehow made him care very much about Tim's general well-being, which translates to 'make Timmy go to sleep so I can play with his computer.'"

"I do not care about Drake's well-being. Stop slandering me, Grayson."

"I hope your alter ego fell into a very deep, very bottomless pit."

"It's not slander if it's true, Lil' D. You wuv your big brother, even if what he just said was not very nice."

"I do not wuv-- damn it, Grayson -- love Drake. I'm starting to question how much I love you."
"Ouch, baby bat. That hurts right here." Bruce imagined Dick tapping his chest over his heart.

"Tell Damian not to swear," Bruce said, rushing to get a word into the conversation.

"B says keep it clean, little man," Dick dutifully relayed.

"Let me talk to Father again. It is clear you cannot be reasoned with." There was a minor scuffle, after which Dick magnanimously relinquished the phone in favor of not destroying the hotel room. "Father, I demand that you order Drake to let me use the computer--"

"My computer!"

"So that I may at least do research while I waste away in this hotel room, surrounded by idiots."

"Damian, what have I told you about demanding things?" Bruce asked. He was annoyed that this argument had started up again, after he'd resolved it prior to leaving the hotel. He elbowed Jason for snickering at his parenting troubles.

"Fa-ther." That whine definitely sounded childish, and Tim didn't hesitate to inform Damian of such. There was a thud as the phone hit the carpeted floor, followed quickly by the sounds of a physical altercation. Damian's attack cry was mirrored by Tim's indignantly defensive shout, and then Bruce could hear Dick moving to break up the fight.

Bruce was just about to hang up the phone and march back to the hotel in order to put his two youngest in their places himself, when Dick came back on the phone. "What's going on?" Bruce demanded.

"I handled it," Dick reported, a bit winded. "Now no one is using Tim's computer."

"Are you all right?" Bruce had suffered a few bruises and scratches himself when he'd had to separate Tim and Damian.

"Of course. I'm Nightwing, who moonlights as Batman. I can take a scrawny Robin and a sickly Red Robin any day." Bruce waited impatiently while Dick fended off an assault from Damian. "How's it going at the center?"

"We're waiting for our turn," Bruce replied. "Tell the kids that they better stop antagonizing each other, or they'll be very sorry when I get back. And I'll know, so don't bother trying to cover for them, Dick."

"Yes, sir," Dick responded chirpily. Bruce was cut off from chiding the youth when Dick hung up on him. With a disgruntled huff, Bruce pocketed the phone again.

Jason opened his mouth. "Don't even," Bruce growled. For once in his life, he actually managed to silence his second Robin.

xXx

Three hours later, Jason rocked back and forth from his heels to his toes while he blew on his chilled fingers. The teenager was wisely keeping whatever smug comments he'd stored up throughout the afternoon to himself. Bruce refused to admit that he was wrong about social services working to help people like himself and his family.

He sat down on a rusted metal bench a block away from the Human Resources Advocacy office. "Damn it," he cursed under his breath, cold himself and his stomach gnawing with hunger after the
long wait and discouraging meeting with a counselor. He couldn't prove that he was a United States citizen because his social security number wasn't in the system and his drivers license was from a city that had been erased from the map two years ago. He couldn't prove that he'd been living in New York for any period of time, since they'd arrived the day before. He couldn't even prove that his kids were his, without documentation or a statement from multiple someones who could verify his paternity. Apparently, these were prerequisites for getting assistance through social services programs.

Yes, the case-worker said she'd follow up and hopefully find a loophole that would result in approval for Bruce's applications, but it would take days if not weeks. That was time Bruce didn't have. Even the money that Jason had lifted off of the drug dealer would only last them two more nights at the most, and Bruce was still adamant that his son not confront criminals in this strange world. The list of nearby homeless shelters and soup kitchens felt like a slap to face each time he looked at the clenched paper in his hand.

"So the government can't help us today," Jason said eventually, after taking a seat next to his father. "We passed about five employers on our way over here that would be thrilled to hire a man of your stature and experience causing people to shit themselves."

"I'm not going to work as an enforcer, Jason," Bruce snapped.

"Doesn't bother me," the teenager said nonchalantly.

"You're not getting an illegal job, either."

"B, this isn't Bristol, or even the happy-go-lucky parts of Gotham. You're going to have to give a little if you want to survive this."

"I'm not turning to a life of crime," Bruce insisted. "I'll figure something out."

"And if we starve to death in the meantime?"

"No one is going to starve."

"Or freeze to death?"

"Jason--"

"Or get murdered to death?"

"Be quiet." Bruce rubbed his hands over his face. "You're ridiculous. Nobody gets 'murdered to death'. That sounds like something Stephanie would say. Or your brother."

"I'm pretty sure murder ends in death," Jason argued. "At least nine times out of ten."

"Please stop," Bruce bit down on his lower lip. He didn't want to laugh. He wasn't in a laughing kind of mood.

Jason's smirk lasted for a few seconds, before he schooled his expression into a more serious one. "You know I'm right, B. We don't have the luxury of taking the high road here. We're not even staying at a nice hotel, and it's costing how much a night? Dinner alone cost sixty bucks for the five of us. I could survive on one meal a day. Timmy pretty much already does. But you and Damian?"

"I'm not as soft as I look, Jason," Bruce grumbled. "Before I became Batman, I lived on the streets to get a feel for how people survived. I know how difficult it is. I know what you went through."
"The fuck you do," Jason retorted, suddenly angry. He stood up again and crossed his arms over his chest. "So you slummed for a few nights. Maybe you didn't eat three squares a day, but you always had Alfred back at the big cushy manor on top of the hill. Welcome to a world without safety nets, jerk."

"Jason, sit down."

"No. You listen to me. You need to get off of your fucking high horse and understand what we're up against. We're not in Gotham City anymore. You're not the Dark Knight here. The kids need you to step up and provide. No one is going to blame you for doing what needs to be done."

"I will," Bruce replied gravely. "This is something I won't compromise on, Jason."

"Back home, you knowingly broke the law every night you went out as a vigilante," Jason said. "Just because the cops turned a blind eye to you beating the shit out of people because it made their jobs easier doesn't mean that it's legal."

Bruce frowned. "Encouraging criminals to right their behavior is not the same as knowingly committing the same crimes. What we do is bring justice to the guilty, who wrong the innocent." It wasn't the same. And there was no denying that Bruce had saved Gotham City a dozen times over from truly terrible terrorists, because he didn't bind himself to the same code of conduct as the police. The mission was dangerous, but he wasn't endangering his children. He gave his Robins everything they needed to be as safe as possible when on patrol, and in turn, they helped him keep the ever present shadow of his parents' deaths and the sheer hopelessness of Gotham's crime rates from consuming him. Batman wasn't wrong. Bruce Wayne was a good father. That had to be true, or Bruce wasn't sure how he could justify the last couple of decades.

His son looked unconvinced. "We're never going to be more important to you than your vaulted morals," Jason huffed with resignation. He sat down heavily on the cold bench and glared down the street, away from Bruce.

Bruce knew they were once again talking about the Joker's continued existence, but he refused to be drawn into that argument right now. "It's important to me to install those morals into you boys."

"At what cost?"

Bruce wasn't going to take the bait. "Do you trust me, Jason? Me, Bruce Wayne, not Batman."

"Is there a difference?"

"I think there is, in your eyes," Bruce replied. "Do you trust your father, son?" He turned Jason towards himself and cupped Jason's face with both hands, refusing to let the teenager's dark expression turn away from him. He stared into the blue-green eyes unwaveringly.

"I shouldn't," Jason said. "I still think you have no idea what in the fuck you're doing."

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes."

It was barely audible, though Bruce could see that Jason was being honest, as much as the younger man hated to admit it. He broke the stare and pulled his son into a hug. The weight that had been sinking down on his shoulders, as he once again counted the reasons for his work as the Dark Knight, lifted slightly. Jason's answer mattered to Bruce more than any public opinion supporting or decrying his actions. "I'm going to take care of you and your brothers. I promise. But I'm going to do
it my way." He felt Jason nod against his shoulder. He held on for a few more seconds, before releasing the teenager.

Jason patted his pocket and a second later produced a crumpled cigarette package. A few taps on his palm revealed that the carton was empty. "Shit," Jason swore, crushing it between his palms.

"Isn't that a damn shame," Bruce said, not at all sorry that the hated smokes were gone.

"Language, old man," Jason scolded.

"Be quiet, brat," Bruce rejoined. He prodded Jason to stand up from the bench. Father and son trekked back to the hotel in a tense silence. Neither was convinced that the other fully appreciated his point of view, but they wouldn't be Batman and the Red Hood if they agreed on much.

_to be continued..._

Chapter End Notes

This chapter gave me a lot of trouble, and I'm not convinced it's everything that could be, so any advice or constructive feedback would be greatly appreciated. Thanks for reading.
In the cramped hotel room, Dick looked up expectantly from his seat at the tiny table where he was working on Tim's tablet. "No luck, huh?" he accurately surmised at the sight of the disappointed pair. Bruce grit his teeth together and looked past his eldest to check on Tim and Damian. Both appeared to be sleeping on their respective beds.

"I'm gonna take a shower," Jason announced. "See if I can't get some feeling back in my fingers and toes."

Bruce leaned down to peer into Tim's lax face. The teenager slept through the inspection, breathing roughly through his still partially clogged sinuses. His forehead felt cooler to the touch and Bruce was glad for one small bit of good news that day.

On the opposite bed, Damian blinked awake. Bruce tried to check his temperature as well, but Damian batted his hands away. "I am fine, Father."

"You're not usually one to nap unless you're feeling unwell," Bruce said. He situated himself against the headboard and drew his youngest into his arms. Damian wasn't fond of being cuddled, nor was Bruce much of a cuddler himself, but the father found it surprisingly comforting to hold his child. His lingering embarrassment over asking for help and being denied slowly tapered as he reminded himself that he'd do it all over again if he thought it would help him take care of his boys.

"It was either sleep or go mad from boredom and inaction," Damian replied. That sounded more like his ambitious son. "Father, I insist that you take me with you tomorrow. I cannot abide wasting away in this stuffy hotel for another day."

"You might find waiting hopelessly in a social services office just as mind-numbing," Bruce said. He carded his large fingers through the boy's spiky hair.

"Surely the company will be better," Damian said bitterly. Bruce looked over at Dick, who'd been rather quiet since his dry greeting.

The twenty-two-year-old chewed on the side of his thumb as he tapped away at the screen of the tablet with his other hand. Bruce thought back to the time when the young man had been as small as Damian and would, much more eagerly, curl into his guardian's lap and be pet while Bruce stewed over his latest case as Batman. "What are you reading, chum?"

Dick sat up and ran his fingers through his own hair as he exhaled tiredly. "I managed to find some information about our strange little landing spot while the kids slept."

His first Robin usually didn't look so discouraged after successfully researching an anomaly. "What else?"

After a moment of internal debate, Dick pushed himself out of the stiff chair and settled onto the bed next to Bruce and Damian. Used to his eldest's desire for physical contact, Bruce didn't mind Dick leaning against his shoulder. "It appears that a lot of Gotham news was lost to the darkest corners of the internet when the city was destroyed in the earthquake, especially stories that would have been published before the digital age really took off." Dick accessed a website that he'd bookmarked. "But I finally found this earth's Bruce Wayne."
Bruce took a deep breath, but otherwise didn't react to the pixelated image of a twelve year old boy and his proudly smiling parents. Bruce didn't have a memory of that particular occasion from his own childhood, but it fit the gist of the life he'd been living before his parents' murders. The trio looked rather pleased to be at whatever party or charitable function made up the blurry background of the photograph. Above it, in bold black letters, the Gotham Gazette announced the untimely death of the Wayne family heir, before he'd even blossomed into adolescence.

"Father is… dead in this world?" Damian asked.

"I have heard of this before," Bruce said, squeezing the youth briefly. "This appears to be one of the multiverses where I die instead of my parents." Bruce had always figured that there were more than one world in which he was murdered in an alley after watching a film, given that there were dozens of others where he lived. In some of the latter universes, he still became Batman, Gotham City's Dark Knight. In others, he became a scourge on the world, even going so far as to become evil. And in one aberrant world that he knew of, his father, Thomas Wayne, became Batman after the murder of his only child, and terrorized the night. These were nightmares that he didn't share with his children.

Dick opened the second tab to another scanned newspaper article. "From what I can gather, grief drove Martha and Thomas Wayne apart, and Wayne Enterprises was another casualty in Thomas' search for answers in bottom of a bottle of spirits." He forced a smile and reached over to tweak Damian's nose. "Good news is that it's very unlikely that your doppelganger fell into Tim's bottomless pit."

"Because I was never born," Damian said darkly. "Keep your hands to yourself, Grayson." Instead of heeding his brother's wish, Dick instead skimmed his fingers up the back of Damian's calf to the pit of his knee, where apparently the boy was ticklish. Damian screeched loudly enough to jolt Tim awake. "I'll cut off your hands!" Damian promised as he kicked at Dick's face. Dick dodged the sock-clad weapon and chuckled unrepentantly when Damian couldn't escape Bruce's hold to maul him.

"Finally he goes after someone besides me," Tim grumbled as he sat up. He rubbed at his pale face, which did nothing to smooth the lines pressed into his face from the wrinkles in his pillowcase. Half of his mused hair was plastered to the side of his head while the rest stood out in oily clumps.

"How are you feeling, kid?" asked Bruce.

"Gross." He listened for a second to the running water in the bathroom. "How long 'til Jason's done?"

"Jaybird takes ridiculously long showers," Dick said from his seat just outside of Damian's reach. The once-acrobat grinned cheekily at his littlest brother when Damian's reaching fingers fell short of his shirtsleeve.

Bruce felt a rush of sympathy for his youngest at being so blatantly taunted. He released his hold, granting Damian the measure of surprise he needed to tackle his oldest brother. Bruce wisely moved out of the way of the flailing limbs and moved to the cluttered corner table. He frowned at the untidiness before gathering most of it up to deposit in the small trash can. A damp napkin took care of a little more of the mess, such that Bruce wasn't too disgusted to sit down. "Come here, Tim," he instructed, crooking his finger at the teenager. Once the youth was seated across from him, Bruce asked, "What have you eaten today?"

Tim turned a little green at the question. "Enough."

Damian yelled for his father's intervention, now that Dick had recovered from the surprise assault
and pinned the smaller male to the bed. The child's face was turning red thanks to the combination of forced laughter and growing frustration. Bruce tuned the pair out. "Enough isn't a type of food, kid."

"Dick already made me eat. I'm not hungry."

"Eat what?"

"Honey Oats."

"Father!"

"Damian, keep your voice down." Bruce squinted at the teenager. "We have Honey Oats?"

"Or this world's equivalent," Tim said with a shrug.

"Gr-gr-grayson! I shall not be h-h-held account-able…" Another burst of stolen laughter escaped the boy as Dick dug his fingers into Damian's sides.

"Since when?" Bruce asked, scanning the visible surfaces for the box in question.

Tim rolled his eyes, then pressed the heel of his palm against his forehead when apparently the action triggered a twinge of headache. "Since you told Dick to buy breakfast food. Did you expect him to come back with anything but cereal?"

A fair point. "Cereal is not sufficient. We need to decide on something substantial for dinner tonight." Bruce tried not to think about what a dent more food would put in their meager funds. Food was important, even more so than the crowded hotel room.

"I'm not hungry."

"That has no bearing on whether or not you will eat with the rest of us." Tim huffed and slouched down to pout in his chair.

Jason emerged from the bathroom, followed by a billow of steam and covered only by one of the hotel's white towels around his waist. His expression was perturbed as he scanned the room, seeking out the location of the cacophony coming from Damian and Dick. "All right, who's murdering the brat and can I help?"

Damian let out a sound like dying animal and in a last ditch effort to end his torture, drove his knee up into Dick's stomach. Bruce could almost hear the air rush out of his eldest's lungs. Dick flopped to the side with a groan, leaving him open for Damian's attempts to retaliate. He barely managed to cover his head with his arms, protecting himself from Damian's fists. Fortunately, Damian was too worn out from being tickled to mete out more than a few weak blows before collapsing next to his brother.

"My turn," Tim stated, pushing up from the table and skirting around Jason. He still lacked a bit of his hard-won grace, but Bruce was hopeful that his son was finally rounding the bend on the illnesses that had kept him down since they landed in this world. "Is there even any hot water left?"

"Probably not," Jason replied, shooting out an arm to catch the smaller teenager and proceeding to rub his knuckles into Tim's scalp.

"Nuh-urgh… don't!" Tim ducked to freedom and scowled at Jason. "Put some clothes on, asshole."

Jason made a face at Bruce while Tim made it to the relative safety of the bathroom. "Did you hear
what he called me, old man?"

"He probably learned it from you," Bruce replied sardonically.

"Fuck the double standards," Jason complained.

"Language." Bruce raised an eyebrow at the middle finger directed his way. Jason was unaffected. Bother.

Dick forced himself to sit upright, or as straight as he could while protecting his bruised diaphragm. "Timmy," he wheezed. "Leave the door open so we can hear if you pass out in there." The response was the bathroom door slamming closed and locking. Bruce wasn't concerned - the lock was simple and he'd have no trouble picking it if the need arose.

Damian dragged himself off of the severely rumpled bed and sat down grumpily on Bruce. "If only I had been the oldest, you would have had no need to adopt any of these simpletons."

"I love you, Dami," Dick cooed from his hunched position on the bed. Damian's flushed cheeks darkened again and he turned to hide his face in Bruce's shoulder. Bruce absently cupped the back of the boy's head to hold him in place as he regarded his oldest sons. Well, he focused mainly on Dick, since Jason was shamelessly pulling back on his only clothes near the foot of the second bed.

"We need to decide what to eat for dinner," Bruce stated. "Something besides Chinese and cereal."

"Pizza," Jason suggested. Damian made an unhappy sound, and Bruce somewhat agreed with him. After being spoiled by Alfred's homemade crusts and no holds toppings, Bruce had never been able to summon much enthusiasm for commercial pizza.

"I like cereal," Dick offered.

"You've had enough sugar for today," Bruce informed him. "If possible, I'd like something healthy. The kids especially could benefit from some fruits and vegetables."

"Healthy isn't cheap," Jason commented. He sat down next to Dick and slicked back his wet hair. The locks of white at his forehead were darkened enough by the dampness to nearly blend in with the rest of his hair. "Did you tell Dickie-bird about how helpful your precious social services were today?"

"Not very, I take it," said Dick. He leaned back now, slowly stretching out his sore abdomen. "Seriously, I'm good with cereal. Get Dami and Timmy something good for them and Jason something filling."

"You're going to eat more than cereal," Bruce argued, feeling his anger at being in this position swell again. Dick would sacrifice his own health for his younger siblings, and Bruce wasn't okay with that. "Jason, can you wait for Tim to finish showering while Dick, Damian, and I visit the grocer we passed earlier?"

"Whatever." Jason grabbed the remote for the small television and flipped it on. Bruce directed his bookend children to get ready to go out, and then walked over to knock on the door to the bathroom.

"You okay in there, kid?"

"Fine!" Given his son's tone, Bruce was prone to believing him.

*to be continued...*
Chapter Ten

Chapter Notes

I apologize for the delay in updating - everything's been crazy recently and I haven't had time to sit down, much less get into the writing mindset. I hope you continue to enjoy the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Ten

Bruce laid out the meager meal that he'd pieced together at the grocery store with Dick and Damian's help. He forewent grinding his teeth since his jaw had started to ache after the third time he'd had to ask Damian to put back the preferred food that the boy had found, citing that it was too expensive. A week ago, he could have bought every item in the store, and his accountant wouldn't have noticed the expenditure. Now, if he wanted to have enough money remaining at the end of this trip to pay for their next night at the hotel, they could only purchase the bare essentials.

The boys helped themselves and spread out in the small room. Damian leaned against Dick's side on the older boy's bed, chewing pointedly on a baby carrot as he glared at Tim. The fifteen-year-old studiously ignored his younger brother. Tim sat cross-legged between Bruce's knees, pretending to nibble at his own handful of carrots until his father nudged him in an impatient reminder to actually eat the vegetables.

At the table, Jason worked through his meal of canned ravioli, seemingly unbothered by the fact that it was room temperature. His meal was supplemented by the remainder of the carrots and a bowl of Dick's Honey Oats cereal. Bruce could hardly stand to watch his son eat dinner out of an aluminum can with a plastic spoon, knowing that in their world Alfred would have been ready with a home-cooked meal.

The thought of his surrogate parental figure further soured his mood. In an effort to distract himself, he turned to his eldest. "Chum, you started to tell me about the small town we landed near."

"Chambers, New Jersey," Dick said. "Timmy helpfully encrypted the login to his hacking software on the tablet, so I couldn't find actual police reports to verify the newspaper articles, but it appears that we're not the first strange visitors to that little town."

"I could have bypassed Drake's security," Damian muttered under his breath.

"Batman couldn't crack it," Tim argued, returning his little brother's scowl. Bruce frowned unhappily at that thought. He leaned forward to snag one of the carrots that Tim had been playing with to shove the orange vegetable into the teenager's mouth.

"Stop playing and eat," he scolded. "And we'll see what Batman can or can't decode." Tim's look of derision was softer for Bruce than it was for Damian, but still adequately expressed his unhappiness with their situation and Bruce's nagging.

"Anyway," Dick continued, nudging Damian with his elbow. "According to a few news articles,
plenty of residents in Chambers have complained to the county sheriff about extraterrestrial visitors. Once, the evidence was so convincing that the FBI took over the town for a week. I bet that's why old Farmer Joe was so distrustful when he found us on the side of the road in our tuxes."

"Or because he's an ass," Jason suggested.

"Don't," Bruce chided mildly. He asked Dick. "Did it seem like any of the reports were from strangers from other multiverses?"

"It's hard to tell." Dick frowned introspectively. "In a world like this one, where Krypton doesn't appear to be a real place, Atlantis is just a fairy tale, and the Amazons are considered ancient history, people probably wouldn't be able to distinguish aliens from multiverse travelers."

"Are there any theories about why that particular town is affected so often by alien landings or portals?"

"I'm sure the FBI had some, but I couldn't access that report."

"I can look into it later," Tim offered.

Dick pouted at the younger boy. "Don't you trust me with your password, baby bird?"

"Not even a little bit," Tim replied without pause.

"This world has made you mean, Timmy," Dick complained.

"You made me mean by trying to suffocate me earlier," Tim rejoined. "And by stealing my tablet."

"It was for the greater good," Dick grumbled. "Otherwise, World War III might have started in our hotel room."

Damian finished the last of his meal and tossed his napkin onto the small nightstand between the two beds. "Damian, the trash can is fifteen feet away," Bruce admonished. With an aggravated huff, Damian picked up the refuse and stood from the bed. He took Dick's Styrofoam bowl and plastic spoon when the older boy held them up, but refused to accept Tim's soiled napkin as well.

"Damian…"

"I am not the housekeeper," the eleven-year-old stated.

"You took Dick's trash," Tim said.

"I do not take issue with Grayson at the moment."

"He sat on you earlier."

"I said, 'at the moment.' And, I have trusted Grayson with my life." Bruce wasn't sure if Damian could turn up his little nose any higher without having to tilt his head back.

"Keep your feud for attention focused on Bruce," Dick complained. Bruce sent his eldest a betrayed look which Dick ignored.

"I trust Dick with my life, too. Just not my passwords."

Damian trudged over to the tiny hotel trash receptacle and deposited his and Dick's refuse. Bruce tugged on Tim's arm to get the teenager to scoot up to the head of the bed so that Bruce could press his forearm to Tim's forehead. Bruce couldn't tell if his son was still running a fever, which he
considered an improvement over that morning when the youth had clearly been too hot. "I'm fine, B," Tim insisted. He curled onto his side next to the older man, facing the second bed. Bruce carded his fingers through the fine hair at the back of Tim's head, letting his earlier irritation at the teenager's behavior toward Damian be completely wiped away with the repetitive motion.

He should have known that the administrations would draw Damian to his side like a moth to a flame. His youngest tucked himself under Bruce's other arm and wrapped his skinny arms around Bruce's middle possessively. Bruce patiently held him close.

"Does this mean I get my own bed tonight?" Dick asked. He flopped backwards on the bed, his arms flung wide.

"How about you sleep on the cot and I get my own bed," Jason said. He'd been curiously disinterested in the conversation so far, though Bruce wondered if their earlier disagreement was the cause of his son's demure countenance. The eighteen-year-old did look tired, and when Bruce had helped him set up the cot the night before, he'd noticed the lumpiness of the thin mattress.

"That's okay," Dick countered.

"We should go to sleep," Bruce said. He was exhausted himself, the emotional upheaval of the past handful of days more tiring than consecutive nights patrolling Gotham's streets. "And no, old friend, you do not get a queen-sized bed to yourself."

Tim grudgingly moved back to the bed he'd shared the night before with his oldest brother while Jason made a point to groan loudly as he settled onto the cot. Bruce would have felt worse if Jason hadn't hammed up his discomfort, though he doubted that was the youth's intention.

"This is my side of the bed, and this is yours," Tim informed Dick. He pushed at Dick's deadweight to get the older boy to move, but Dick wasn't interested in being banished to the far side of the mattress. "Dick."

"If I fall asleep before you do, then you can have this whole edge of the bed to yourself. But if you fall asleep first, there's nothing you can do to stop me from cuddling you, baby bird."

Pained blue eyes turned toward Bruce. "B, make him move."

"I'm quite stuck myself," Bruce replied, though it was clear than Tim didn't believe Bruce couldn't dislodge Damian. The teenager sulked as he settled onto the very edge of the mattress. Bruce pinched his youngest when Damian started to gloat. "Goodnight, everyone." He flipped off the light between the two beds.

"Goodnight, Father," Damian replied.

"Goodnight, Dami," Dick said. After a pause, he continued. "Goodnight, Timmy."

"Don't touch me."

"Goodnight, Jaybird." A muted grunt from the cot. "Goodnight, John-boy."

"Shut the fuck up, Goldie."

"Jason, language," Bruce scolded.

"Dick, don't touch me!"
"Silence!" Batman's growl quieted the room for all of thirty seconds.

"Father, I need a glass of water."

"Doesn't the heater in this hell-hole work?"

"Stay on your side of the bed."

"So mean, little brother."

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose and clenched his jaw, headache be damned.

_to be continued..._

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading. I'm looking forward to later parts of this story, and bridging the gap to get there is what causes the delays in updating. Please be patient with my tardiness in the meantime. Hopefully it will be worth it. :)
Chapter Eleven

"Batman, on your left!"

"Behind you!"

"Take cover!"

_The Dark Knight deftly dodged the ray of energy meant to lop his head from his shoulders and immediately rolled into a defensive position behind a rusty steel fence. The clang of rapid-fire bullets striking the opposite side of his cover echoed through the junkyard where he and the Justice League were facing yet another alien invasion._

_Above him, Superman used his laser vision to return fire on the ship equipped with the ray guns. Wonder Woman was hidden from sight, but Batman could sense her inching around to surprise their foes from behind. Green Arrow was likewise hidden behind another stretch of fencing, his collapsible steel bow replaced by a simple wooden one. The change in weaponry gave Batman pause, but he chalked it up to the other billionaire's eccentricity and focused instead on imagining a strategy to give his allies the upper hand._

_The Flash appeared before him in a cloud of dust. "Bruce!" the speedster exclaimed. "Your car!"

"It's fine, Allen," Batman replied.

"But Batman, they're messing with your car." The speedster was hard to focus on, but that wasn't uncommon for the fastest man alive. Batman turned away to scan the junkyard, with its multitude of dumpster fires spread throughout and giving light to the area. It was surprisingly cool, considering all of the fire around him. "Your car…"

"The Batmobile is impenetrable and cannot be stolen," Bruce replied acerbically. "What is Wonder Woman's status in preparing for a rear assault?"

_Barry Allen - no, Wally West was the Flash now - was gone. Good riddance, thought the Dark Knight. He had no reason to believe that anyone, even a highly-technically advanced alien from an invading planet, could break into the Batmobile. Bruce motioned for Oliver to cover him while he darted out from his protection in order to gain a few meters in the direction of the aliens' central location. Despite feeling like he was trudging through water, he managed to make it to the shadow of an old shipping container without being struck. It was a better shelter; the din of gunfire and smell of ozone burning thanks to lasers was lessened there._

"Hey, Batman." Bruce turned his head sharply, ready to instruct Cyborg to do something useful instead of hovering just off of the ground behind his left shoulder. "Isn't that your car?"

"For the last time, the Batmobile is fine!" Usually Cyborg didn't look quite so blasé about being yelled at by a senior member of the Justice League.

"Not the Batmobile, Batty!" Bruce froze momentarily, then slowly turned toward the sound of the one voice that always featured in his worst nightmares. Inane cackling provided the soundtrack for his slow-motion spin. "The Golden Pinto!"
Batman didn't actually get a visual on his green-haired nemesis before he suddenly awoke. His heart was beating more quickly than usual, though not as fast as it could when his nightmares really took hold of him. He swallowed a couple of times to wet his throat. The dim room slowly came into focus around him, starting with the popcorn ceiling above him and the suspicious stain near its juncture with the wall.

Even breathing tickled the side of his face. Bruce tilted his head so he could see Damian's lax face in the low light. The eleven year old was cool to the touch. Bruce could feel the chill in the air, despite the sweat that lined his forehead and made him feel sticky beneath the scratchy sheets. Gently, Bruce nudged the child off of his left arm so he could sit up.

He was awake now, in the subpar hotel room in another Earth's New York City, but his unease didn't settle completely. The mattress creaked as he stood up. Damian rolled into the warm spot that he left behind, remaining fast asleep. Bruce peered down at the second bed, where Dick was curled tightly around Tim. In spite of the younger boy's whining the night before, Tim was currently hugging his older brother right back and his face was hidden against Dick's neck. Bruce held the back of his hand to Tim's exposed cheek and was glad that no sign of fever was readily apparent. Still, the feeling of wrongness twisted in his gut.

Silently, he padded across the threadbare carpet until he stood beside the narrow cot on which Jason was curled in the fetal position. Bruce hated that he didn't have another blanket to give his second son, and had to console himself that Jason looked just warm enough in his current position. The Joker's laugh from his dream echoed through his mind, causing his frown to deepen. He leaned down to get a better look at Jason's face. Fortunately, Bruce seemed to be the only one dreaming of the hated clown that night.

With all of his boys accounted for, Bruce decided that some fresh air might help clear his mind enough that he could either go back to sleep or plan how to provide for his family until he could return them to their universe. Plus, he'd be able to check on the damned Pinto.

After taking Tim to the free clinic the day before, Bruce had parked the junker in the spot right before the exterior door of the hotel's back entrance. He blinked a couple of times now, trying to remember if he or one of his older boys had moved the car. No… they'd all walked, whether it be to the Human Resource Authority or the grocery store. They needed to conserve the car's gasoline as much as possible.

"Damn it," Bruce swore under his breath. He crouched down to get a closer look at the sprinkling of glass in the empty parking space. There was very little doubt in his mind that it came from one of the Pinto's side windows. The car was gone, an easy target since it clearly didn't have a working security system. "Damn it!" This time, his exclamation reverberated across the quiet, poorly lit lot.

He walked around the side of the building, taking deep breaths to calm himself down. By the time he reached the front of the hotel, he thought he might be able to calmly ask for the phone so he could call the police.

xXx

Jason's incredulous laugh reminded Bruce too much of the Joker's inane cackling from his dream. "Wow, this shit really just takes the cake," the teenager said. "Who in their right mind would want to steal the fucking Pinto?"

"Stop laughing, idiot!" Damian threw the hotel's remote controller at Jason' head. "And do not use such language."
Jason caught the hurled device easily. "Shut up, demon spawn."

"Both of you be quiet," Bruce growled in Batman's timbre.

On the bed he shared with Dick, Tim sat up a bit straighter. "While it might not have been as nice as the cars we're used to owning--"

"Speak for yourself, rich boy."

"It had the advantage of not having a built-in security system," Tim continued, glaring at Jason while he echoed Bruce's earlier assumption.

"And the police can't do anything?" Dick asked, looking up at his father.

"Apparently the odds of finding a car once it's been stolen in this neighborhood are not good," Bruce replied. He'd barely managed to keep his temper in check when the officers had arrived to take his statement. "They basically stated that all they could do is file a report so that the insurance company could pay to replace it."

Jason's irritating chuckling started again. "Insurance? That's a good one. Did you tell the fine officers of New York City about the complete coverage you have on the Pinto, including new car replacement?"

"Don't be daft, Jason," Tim argued. "If this world is anything like ours, it's illegal to not have car insurance. Bruce, you didn't tell them that the car was uninsured, did you?"

"No, I didn't, Timothy," Bruce answered. He felt a little bad when the boy pouted in response to his clipped tone, but he had bigger problems to deal with at the moment.

"Don't be daft, Timmy," Jason mocked.

"This is a serious matter, Todd," Damian scolded. "Father has been robbed, and the culprits must be found and punished."

"Damian…" Bruce could just imagine his eleven-year-old taking down a gang of car thieves in this strange world, and then getting shot or worse for his troubles. "Sit down."

"Father, I am the only one on your side in this matter," Damian protested.

"Since when are we taking sides?" Dick asked.

"I'm on whichever side Jason's not," Tim announced.

"We're not taking sides," Dick said. He scooted forward on the bed to hug Tim from behind. "This isn't a battle."

"I'm on my own side," Jason decided. "You're going down, runt." He pointed a finger at Tim.

"The only one going down is you, Todd. Together, Father and I are invincible."

"Guys…"

"Shut up, Goldie. You're either with them, or not. State your allegiance."

"You just told me to shut up, Jay," Dick groused. He tightened his hold on Tim when the younger teenager started squirming for freedom and the ability to reach Jason with either a foot or a fist.
"Stop fighting this instant," Bruce ordered. Why could his children not behave at a time when he was already beyond stressed?

"I am not fighting, Father," Damian said, tucking himself against Bruce's side.

"You're the one who started the fight by claiming sides," Tim informed his younger brother.

"Be silent, Drake. No one asked you."

"At the risk of sounding like I agree with the demon spawn: yeah, be silent, Drake."

"I am not a demon spawn!"

"Damian!" The boy's shrill shriek had cut through Bruce's worsening headache like a knife.

"Why are you against me, Father? I am the only one who respects your authority," Damian asked with a scowl. Now it was Tim's turn to burst out laughing. Dick pressed his face against the back of Tim's shoulder to hide his own mirth and even Jason was struggling to contain a smirk. "What?" demanded the youngest of Bruce's Robins.

Dick schooled himself first. "Baby bat, you and respecting authority are not things which typically go together."

"What do you know of such things, Grayson?"

"A lot, actually," said Dick. "For example, the whole time I was Batman and you were Robin."

"Whose fault was that?" Tim grumbled, his mirth exhausted.

"Shhh, we've talked about this," Dick soothed. He kept one arm around Tim and used his freed hand to brush his hair away from his face. Vision cleared, Dick said, "Dami, we're all on B's side, okay? It's bad luck that the car was stolen, but we'll get through it. We've all been through a lot worse, right?"

"I'm not on B's side," Jason said. "I think we should track down those assholes and teach them the error of their ways. No one steals from the Red Hood."

"Jason, you're not helping," Dick complained.

"Neither is sitting in a circle in this unheated hotel room and singing Kumbayah, Dick-face," Jason retorted.

"Enough." Bruce stood up, leaving Damian to scramble to retain his balance. "We're not going to track the thieves. By this time, the car is probably chopped up anyway. We're going to get something to eat and then plan our course of action to get back to our own world." He kept it to himself that he was sorely tempted to do what he'd just told his sons not to: teach a handful of foolhardy carjackers what it meant to get on the Bat's bad side.

_to be continued..._
Chapter Twelve

An hour later, Bruce clenched the handful of bills that added up to his last forty dollars. He'd just paid fifty to renew their hotel for one more night, and how he had less than twenty-four hours to come up with enough cash to buy another night of shelter and food for his sons.

Dick, Tim, and Damian all refused to be left behind in the hotel again, so the family of five walked together to the nearest soup kitchen for brunch. Bruce tried to pretend that they were volunteering at an outreach event for Wayne Enterprises, but he couldn't maintain the illusion as he stared back at the unfortunate souls who watched him curiously while he waited in line for his own serving.

Tim looked young for his age - not that fifteen was old - and he and Damian were attracting plenty of attention from the brightly grinning college co-eds who were the real volunteers at the kitchen. "It's so sad to see people struggling to survive, but especially little kids," one stage-whispered to her friend. Bruce's sharp glare brought an embarrassed blush to her face. He might be out of money, but he wasn't deaf. On either side of him, Tim bristled at being called "little" and Damian scowled more deeply at the girls' pity.

Jason kept his head down, a subconscious habit that his father remembered from the first few weeks his second son had lived in the manor. Surviving Gotham City as a preteen on his own had taught Jason that it was best to go unnoticed. It had taken Bruce and Alfred a while to convince Jason that not all attention was bad and that he didn't have to try to hide from them.

Dick… Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose and blindly nudged Damian up to the ancient cafeteria serving case. Behind him, his eldest smiled winningly at a cute redhead with rosy cheeks. "I'm Richard, but you can call me Dick," the young man informed her.

"Because he is one," Jason muttered loudly enough for the girl to hear.

She blinked in surprise, then dipped her chin to giggle into her hand as she looked up at Dick through her thick black lashes. "It's nice to meet you, Dick."

"You too, Aria," replied his eldest, as if he knew the young woman and hadn't just read her name off of the tag clipped to her apron. Her blushed deepened. "What brings you to this-- Ow! Jason."

"The rest of us are hungry, idiot," Jason said. "Move."

Dick looked ruefully at Aria. "Little brothers," he complained, as if it summed up the whole of his interactions with Jason.

"'Little' my ass," Jason countered. He came out of his defensive hunch in order to stand a full couple of inches taller than Dick. Aria looked like she wasn't sure if she should continue to flirt with Dick or hurry up and serve them before Jason became any more agitated. Cute, but she was no Barbara Gordon, who would have already put both brothers in their places by now.

"Father, Jason is using vulgar language again," Damian said.

"Don't start," Bruce scolded. They were nearly to the end of the serving line and Bruce finally took a look at what his younger two had accepted. Damian had a plate full of pale vegetables and a small red apple, which was infinitely more food than Tim had. He made himself overlook Damian's
meager haul, given that the boy was mostly a vegetarian and the rest of the food options had some kind of meat in them. None of it looked completely appetizing when compared to what Alfred could whip up, but they all had to eat something. "Richard," he called, distracting his eldest from the red-cheeked volunteer. Once he had Dick's attention, he pointed down at Tim's basically empty plate.

"Why won't you leave me alone?" Tim groused in a low voice. Bruce didn't deign to respond.

Dick smiled charmingly one last time at the redhead college student before catching up to Tim. "Hey, Timmy-kins, did you forget how to eat at a buffet?"

The teenager blushed all of the way to the tips of his ears. "Shut up."

"What did I do now?" Dick asked petulantly.

"You called him 'Timmy-kins' in front of a couple of chicks who already think he's a little kid," Jason stated as he brushed past his brothers. His plate was filled with the various food options and it helped Bruce's own embarrassment a little to see that his biggest son would be full after eating, even if Bruce hadn't been able to provide the food himself.

"Aw, I'm sorry baby bird," Dick said. He tried to wrap an arm consoling around his younger brother, only to jump back in pain a moment later. Bruce's keen eyes spotted the plastic spork in Tim's hand a moment before the fifteen-year-old threw it down onto his tray and stormed away from the counter. He acted as if he were going to completely bypass the table that Bruce, Damian, and Jason had already claimed in order to sit by himself, but just as Bruce prepared to jump up and corral the upset youth, Tim spun on his heel and instead slouched down into the open seat at Bruce's right.

"I didn't even think you liked girls, runt," Jason teased, leaning forward from where he sat across the table from Tim.

"I'm not a little kid," Tim seethed. Before Jason could further humiliate the younger teenager with some mean-spirited jibe about that not being exactly what he'd meant, Bruce kicked him under the table. Jason leaned back smugly, unfazed by Bruce's interference but thankfully refraining from taunting Tim anymore.

Damian craned his neck to see around his father's large form. "We finally agree on something, Drake. Girls are gross." Bruce covered his eyes with his hand, sure that Damian had thought he'd try to instigate an alliance against Jason without realizing that Tim wouldn't take the comment as such. Jason howled with laughter, drawing numerous sets of eyes to their table.

"What's so funny?" Dick asked as he sat next to Jason. Bruce realized with a mental sigh of relief that a plastic spork wouldn't have been able to do much damage through the leather of Dick's jacket, even if it was of fairly poor quality. His eldest's reaction must have been out of surprise rather than hurt.

"Dami… Damian…" Jason stopped to take a drink of his water, unable to speak through his laughter.

"I do not see what is so funny, Todd. Cease embarrassing the rest of us this instant!"

"You… you…" Jason waved his fork blindly in Tim's direction. "Oh my god, my stomach hurts."

"I hate you all," Tim declared. This time he did follow through with his inclination to bail on his family. A pause to shoot Jason a withering glare cost Bruce a few seconds and therefore he didn't catch up with Tim until the teenager was pushing through the glass door leading to the chilly exterior
beyond. He missed hearing if Dick ever received an answer to his persistent, "What's going on?"

Bruce snagged the sleeve of Tim's hoodie and spun the teenager around in order to interrupt his purposeful stomping in the opposite direction of the hotel. Before Tim could strike at him, Bruce pulled him into a tight hug. "Stop," Bruce ordered softly at the feel of Tim's fists hitting his back. "You're okay, kid." Whatever Tim mumbled into the front of Bruce's jacket was unintelligible, but he seemed fine with Bruce's lack of verbal response. Bruce cupped the back of his hair with one hand, keeping the teen's head close to his heart. Slowly, Tim calmed down to the point that he no longer felt like a coiled snake in Bruce's arms.

Bruce held him for another few seconds before letting out a tired sigh and loosening his arms so he could nudge Tim a step away from himself. "Kid… Look at me, Tim," Bruce insisted. Dark blue eyes slowly rose to meet his. "You can't run away from me, son," Bruce said, struggling to find the correct mixture of steel and compassion for his tone. "This is the second time you've tried since we landed in this horrible world."

"I'm sorry."

"I know you are," Bruce responded. "And I know you don't feel good, that your brothers can be as aggravating as hell, and that you're used to having space to cool down. But I need you to stay with me, Tim. Just like I need to keep Jason close, and Dick and Damian. Stay with me, kid."

"I want to go home."

"So do I." Bruce pulled Tim into another hug, less crushing this time, and pressed his lips to the top of the boy's dark hair. He scanned the dirty street desperately, searching for any kind of clue that would lead him out of this world and back to his own. He didn't see any neon billboards advertising a quick trip through the multiverses, but he did see a faded sign a few shops down that gave him a sudden bout of inspiration. He glanced back toward the soup kitchen, the sidewalk before it still void of the rest of his sons. "Come here," Bruce directed, guiding Tim down the street.

The smell of freshly ground coffee hit Bruce strongly as he pushed open the door to the local coffee joint. He inhaled deeply and while the comfort it offered barely put a dent in the weighty stress consuming him, Bruce relished it all the same.

The barista looked as if she'd had a rather rough time of it herself, and the seating was a menagerie of mismatched tables, chairs, and threadbare love seats scattered across dingy tiles and lit through a grimy window. Still, the familiar smell of heaven's brew was all he cared about, and to him, this place was just as good as any of the elitist coffee houses he frequented in the expensive neighborhoods of Gotham City.

"But we can't--"

"Hush," Bruce interrupted. He stepped up to the register and scanned the hand-drawn menu hanging precariously along the back wall. This would be the only time he dared to splurge like this. He ordered a small of the most sugar-filled concoction he could find and dutifully handed over four of his crumpled one dollar bills. The barista set to work preparing the drink while Tim fidgeted unhappily at his side. Even so, Bruce didn't miss the way that the teenager watched the barista raptly, anticipation warring with guilt in his expression.

Bruce accepted the drink when it was ready and led his son to the condiment stand just before the door. He pried the lid off of the cardboard cup so he could take his own sip of the drink. It was far from the type of drink he usually preferred, but the scalding heat of it felt like home on his tongue and he found he could ignore the sugar and milk in favor of focusing on the espresso. A single sip
was all he allowed himself before replacing the lid and handing the drink to Tim.

"B, I--"

"I know you prefer plain coffee, but you need the calories, kid, even if they are empty ones."

"Thanks," Tim said in a small voice and took his own tentative drink. He continued to sip at the espresso drink as he followed Bruce back into the cold.

Just before they reached the door to the soup kitchen, Bruce's remaining three sons spilled out onto the sidewalk. "Once again, Drake is the favorite," Damian complained upon seeing his older brother's windfall.

"Hey, little brother," Dick said, catching Tim by the shoulders. He leaned down the handful of inches he needed to be at eye level with Tim. "I wasn't trying to embarrass you. I forget sometimes that you guys don't appreciate my nicknames for you as much as I do."

"Like hell you 'forget'," Jason scoffed.

"Jaybird, you're not helping."

"Wasn't trying to."

Tim reached out to Dick before the eldest could try to put Jason in his place. "I forgive you," he said in a small voice.

Dick's smile was bright and for a moment, Bruce imagined that the twenty-two-year-old was back in his element in Gotham City, not struggling with the rest of them in this strange version of New York. "There's the baby bird I know and love," Dick said, reaching up to ruffle Tim's hair. "B, why didn't we think to water him with coffee sooner?"

"Dick!"

Bruce shook his head and started the walk back to the hotel, determinedly ignoring Tim's attempts to permanently maim his oldest brother while not spilling his precious coffee.

_to be continued..._
Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Notes

I'm posting this before I delete it for the third time, so apologies in advance for any OCC characterization, grammatical infractions, or general roughness in the flow. Hopefully it's a little bit worth the wait. Enjoy!

Warning: Lots of colorful language. No one's really happy.

Chapter Thirteen

As they walked, Bruce divided his attention unevenly between their surroundings, his robins on either side of him, and his older two sons a few paces ahead of them. Damian had taken a hold of Bruce's right wrist in an effort to console himself that he was still the most valued child despite not getting his own personal indulgence. Of course, he wasn't holding Bruce's hand, because he wasn't a baby. Bruce knew all of this because Damian had been muttering to himself since the once-billionaire had dragged Tim away from Dick and tucked the teenager under his left arm.

Dick didn't seem especially perturbed with Tim's sour attitude toward him, knowing that the younger male was the second most likely person in their family to forgive and forget innocent slights, and that he himself was the most likely to be forgiven. It helped that Damian's muttering included quite a few jealously mean comments about Tim, and in turn, Tim redirected his anger at Dick to Damian. With the heat of Tim's glare off his back, Dick was free to joke lightly with Jason.

Jason wasn't particularly in the mood to be teased, and his responses to Dick's ribbing were less jovial and more sarcastic. Still, they weren't exactly fighting, so Bruce let them banter. Following Dick's light - which sometimes felt more literal than metaphorical when Bruce's mind was in a dark place - bolstered the father's courage and renewed his energy to lead his family.

With his four boys accounted for and not physically trying to end each other, Bruce allowed the last fraction of his attention to dance between the various windows lining the street. None held "Help Wanted" signs so far, but he refused to give up so quickly. He'd had to develop a strong will and indomitable perseverance as Batman, which wouldn't be undone in a the space of a week and certainly not by this situation.

There was a gap between two buildings, which Bruce recalled passing on their way to the soup kitchen. The alley had been empty then, save for over flowing trash cans and a few stray cats. Both of his older sons glanced into the dimly lit area out of vigilante habit. Dick didn't pause in the midst of whatever nonsense he was babbling at Jason, but the younger man stopped suddenly and his whole figure tensed.

Bruce's heart rate sped up instantly and he subconsciously prepared himself for an altercation. Dick reacted quickly too, spinning around to take a second look at whatever had unnerved Jason. Damian's grumbling ceased upon registering Bruce's sudden wariness.

"I'd recognize that cheap ass fake leather jacket anywhere," drawled an unfamiliar voice. Bruce recognized the slurred quality of the speech and his paranoia increased with the knowledge that the
unknown male was likely under the influence of narcotics.

Jason pretended to flick dust from the lapel of said jacket. To those not trained by Batman, he'd look casual as he sized up the man that Bruce still couldn't see, but the Dark Knight read the narrowness of Jason’s glare and the tightness of his broad shoulders. "I see you don't learn well, do you? Dipshit."

Bruce had no idea from where Jason would know someone in this world. His mind raced to find the connection and he barely noticed Tim slipping away from him to get his own look at the stranger. It was only Bruce's lightning quick reflexes that allowed him to grab the back of Tim's sweatshirt before the teenager moved out of his reach.

"I know plenty," the stranger replied, finally stepping out of the shadows of the alley. His brownish blonde hair was oily and the sheen continued onto his wan face. Redness circled his eyes, further evidence of his compromised state. "Like the fact that I'm going to fucking put a cap in your ass!" He lunged forward, forcing Jason to take a half step back to avoid an unwelcome chest bump. Dick reached into the narrow space between Jason and the druggie, only to have his protective move rebuffed by his younger brother.

"Stay outta the way, N," Jason snapped as he started rolling up the sleeve over his right forearm. "I need to re-educate this fool." Said fool seemed to struggle with something wedged into the back of his pants and Bruce's blood ran cold at the implication. He was still trying to figure out how Jason had an adversary in this world as he dared to wretch his arm out of Damian's grip to dig into his pocket for the burner cell phone. As his fingers curled around the small plastic device, the connection clicked into place, to the sound effect of a pistol being cocked.

The world froze for an instant and narrowed sharply to the point that all Bruce could see was the once-drug lord, the unsteady handgun, and his defenseless eighteen-year-old. The moment passed. Bruce didn't resist Batman's mentality taking him over, needing his alter ego's nearly unshakable poise. This had to be the man that Jason had shaken down and put out of commission when they'd first arrived in New York. This was the reason that Bruce had been so angry at the risk Jason had taken, even if the money and phones had helped them. Only Batman was keeping him from letting his anger control his actions right now.

He shoved Tim and Damian backwards, shielding them with his much larger body. The gunman wasn't interested in Bruce's younger pair, but it would help the Dark Knight concentrate if half of his kids were out of sight.

Before him, the standoff continued. "Put the gun down," Dick ordered. He stood to the side, a mere foot from the shaking gun locked on his younger brother's forehead. He had one hand clamped firmly around Jason's lower arm, as if he'd have the strength and speed to pull Jason out of the way should the druggie actually shoot. Bruce wasn't consoled by the stranger's difficulty keeping his arm still; at that range, he'd hit Jason anyway and the chance of him hitting a bystander should he fire again was greatly increased.

For his part, Jason kept his composure save for the fact that he hadn't rudely freed himself from Dick's grip like Bruce would have expected if Jason felt like he was in total control of the situation. The eighteen-year-old's glare was unwavering as he looked past the barrel of the weapon to the thug behind it. "You don't have the fucking balls," Jason taunted.

"I will shoot you," the man promised, waving the gun dramatically. Bruce nearly flinched when it briefly pointed in his direction. He knew that all of his sons were grueling trained at dealing with all sorts of armed opponents - he'd made sure of it - and Jason had a wealth of personal experience to add to that training. Bruce could trust his older two to keep the situation under control for the few
seconds that he needed to deal with his robins. He needed them to be well away from stray bullets that could come from the erratically moving gun.

Bruce pulled the cell phone out of his pocket and thrust it into Tim's chest. "Take Damian, get to safety, and call the police," he ordered.

"I'm not leaving you, Father," Damian argued. "I can disarm that fool in a heartbeat." Bruce deftly caught Damian around the waist when the eleven-year-old tried to dart past him.

"Absolutely not," Bruce growled.

"B, we can help. There are five of us and--"

"Red Robin." The teenager cringed in response to the heat in Bruce's tone. Bruce pressed against the underside of Tim's chin to force the teenager to look at him. "You have your orders." Tim nodded shortly, dropping his head again as soon as Bruce released him. The father steered Damian toward his brother, ignoring the child's protests. To his relief, Damian kept his rebellion to hateful words instead of acting in direct opposition to the instructions he'd been given.

Tim reached out to grasp the bright yellow sleeve of Damian's pullover. "Come on," he muttered.

"Unhand me, Drake." The youngest shook Tim's hand loose before returning the favor by fisting his hand in the front of Tim's hoodie and tugging the older boy forward. "I am once again relegated to babysitting duties."

"I am older than you, you little brat!"

Bruce turned his back on them, confident that his directive would be obeyed now that Tim and Damian were moving toward the shelter of a nearby storefront with a recessed entry vestibule. Now he could focus fully on the standoff between Jason, Dick, and the ex-drug lord, which was deteriorating as the thug grew more agitated with Jason's taunting.

"Yours is not the first barrel of a gun I've stared down, prick," Jason said. He slowly moved his left arm, the one Dick still gripped, to the side. He wasn't able to actually move Dick before the older boy realized Jason's intention to push him further from the danger, as if the Red Hood was protecting one of his younger siblings. Of course, Dick wasn't going to stand for having his self-imposed big brother duties stolen from him.

"Look, why don't we all just calm down and talk this through," Dick suggested, more brightly than the situation warranted. Bruce inched slowly along the face of the building in order to flank the gunman and take him by surprise. It was more easily done in the dark, with an ebony costume that melded perfectly with the shadows. He grit his teeth when he recognized Nightwing's tactic of irritating a dangerous villain to the point that he or she would try to eradicate him before refocusing on the intended target. "You seem like the reasonable sort when you're not all high and trippy."

"Fuck off, fairy," the gunman snapped, his gaze briefly leaving Jason to land on Dick. Jason tensed, but there wasn't enough time for him to attack while the man was distracted.

"Hey, that's not very nice," Dick complained. "You're not very good at making friends, are you?"

"I have plenty of friends, and when they get here, we're going to fuck you up so bad you'll forget what day of the week it is."

"That would be impressive," Dick replied. "Except it's been a long few days and I'm actually not sure what day it is, anyway." He shrugged nonchalantly. "If it helps, you could threaten to make me
forget what city we're in, or what my name is."

The man looked at Dick now like he was the one on drugs. Dick's grin was sunny until it wasn't, a fraction of a second before Jason's fist connected with the man's face. The firearm discharged, stopping Bruce's heart and his forward progress. His sons sprung apart, Dick nimbly and Jason with a bit less grace. "Ow, you fucking fucker!" Bruce abandoned his plan to flank the druggie and changed direction to swoop in (less dramatically than he could have with his cape and cowl) and catch Jason in a protective hold. The teenager was doubled over and Bruce jumped to the conclusion that he'd just suffered a GSW to the stomach. He tried to simultaneously inspect his son for injury while twisting them around, placing himself between Jason and more danger.

"Get off me!" Jason protested. Bruce didn't. He also wasn't finding any blood on the boy, a fact that he didn't let console him just yet.

"Were you hit?"

"I'm fine. His fucking flailing foot caught me in the side." Jason pushed against Bruce again, but the older man refused to let him go.

"Nice alliteration, Jaybird," Dick called from behind them, where he was no doubt trying to finish subduing the gunman.

"Fuck off," Jason retorted.

Bruce never, ever wanted to see Jason held at gunpoint again, especially without his bulletproof gear. But his son was currently unhurt, so… "Watch your language," Bruce admonished, trying to erase the horrible image from his mind's eye.

"Really? Right now?" Jason's stink eye was pretty good. "I'm fine, old man. Go perv on someone else."

Bruce shot him a disappointed look. "I sent your brothers that way. Go find them." He pointed in the direction of the recessed storefront.

"Hell no. This is my fight." Jason finally managed to duck out of Bruce's arms. "I'm going to make this prick wish he'd never tried crack in the first place."

"Jason--" Bruce was ready to start his lecture right then and there about how this was exactly why he didn't want to engage the unknown criminals in this parallel universe, but the gun firing again derailed his plan. His head snapped around. "Dick…"

Was fine, thank goodness. "Would you stop that! You're going to hit someone." His eldest might be uninjured so far, but Dick was having little luck prying the firearm from their assailant.

"I'm going to kill you both!"

"Well, considering that you missed Jay by about a mile when he was three feet in front of you, I'm actually not that worried," Dick said. "Now give me the gun--"

"No!"

Bruce had always been impressed by Dick's agility and ability to contort his body into impossible forms in the blink of an eye, and he'd never been more thankful for his son's talent when he barely managed to dodge the third bullet, which instead embedded itself into the brick façade inches from Dick's hip.
He was going to end this now. Nobody shot at his kids without painful repercussions. "Put down your weapon," Bruce commanded, knowing that even without his mask and the shadows that followed him at night, he could often instill enough fear into his target to quell him or her into obeying.

"Who the fuck are you?" The gun swung to point at Bruce. He forgot he wasn't in his Kevlar-lined suit and continued to stride forward purposefully. Jason followed him.

"Nuh uh," Dick chided, shoving the man's arm so he was no longer pointing at Bruce.

When he was close enough to glower down at the shaking man - it looked like his high was wearing off and the dreaded low was setting in - Bruce growled, "Your worst nightmare."

Dick slapped his hand over his face. "Oh my god." Behind him, Jason snorted. What?

"I'll shoot you, too!"

The sound of police sirens suddenly rent the air, sending the four combatants into varying states of alertness. Batman and Nightwing usually tried to vanish from the scene before they could be hounded by the police, though Dick's stint as a police officer had him less concerned with the upcoming confrontation. The Red Hood was often on the wrong side of the law and it took Jason a moment to remember that he didn't have to run this time. The gunman, however, knew that if he didn't make a quick getaway, he'd be in a lot of trouble. Unfortunately, Bruce, Dick, and Jason were standing between him and freedom.

"Get out of the way!" Bruce ducked to avoid the fourth bullet and shoved Jason into Dick, sending both sprawling under the fifth. The ex-drug lord took advantage of the hole he'd created and made a run for it, though he only made it a few steps before he suddenly went flying. The gun discharged a sixth and final time as it flew from the man's quaking fingers, taking out an unlit street lamp. Bruce's surprise quickly morphed into anger as he took in the sight of his baby proudly gloating over the man he'd just tripped.

He hadn't found his voice by the time Jason brushed past him. "Nice, shrimp," Jason commented before he knelt down to dig a knee into the man's back and knock him out cold with a brutal punch. "That's for trying to shoot my family, you disgusting jackass."

"I'm not a--"

"Damian Wayne!" The boy's mixed expression of arrogant pride and irritation snapped to one of regret and fright before Damian schooled his features back into his typical look of aloofness. "I told you to get to safety!" His fury wasn't for his youngest alone, however. He glared at Tim as well, who'd secured the weapon and deftly unloaded the remaining bullets.

"I grew tired of waiting for Todd and Grayson to stop playing around, Father," Damian argued, wisely refraining from lumping Bruce into the accusation of inefficiency. "I told you that I could handle the fool." He crossed his arms over his narrow chest.

"You disobeyed a direct order. You both did." Tim had moved to stand beside Damian and Bruce didn't like the duo's suddenly united front against him.

"Technically, I did take Damian, got to safety, and then called the police," Tim said, motioning toward the police cruisers that were pulling up to the crime scene. "Damian added to the plan by coming back out of safety." Damian made his infamous "tt" sound, like he didn't believe he'd done anything wrong.
"And you followed him," Bruce said angrily. "Instead of stopping him."

"I--"

Dick appeared in front of his little brothers, hands held out complacently. "Maybe now isn't the best time, B. Besides, you know what it's like trying to corral Dami. Impossible." His little one seemed much too smug about having such a frustrating character trait.

"I shouldn't be asked to babysit the brat," Tim agreed.

Damian's smirk dropped. "I do not require a babysitter, Drake! I am the one continuously put upon to keep your sorry ass out of trouble."

"Language, Damian," Tim scolded, sounding much too condescending if he hoped to mimic Bruce's tired mantra. He nearly dropped the gun as he fended off Damian's angry fists.

"Stop it," Bruce demanded. Both boys stilled and stepped away from each other, wisely heeding to the tone of Bruce's voice.

"Everyone is fine, B. You don't have to be so angry."

"How many children do you have, Richard?"

"None, but I have--"

"It's not the same. And until you know what it's like to see your son standing at the business end of a gun, I do not want to hear any of your bullshit about how any part of this situation is fine." Bruce needed to walk off his anger, his fear, but he wasn't going to have the chance with the police officers quickly approaching, their own weapons drawn defensively. "Give me the gun, Timothy."

The teenager demurely placed the weapon and bullets in his father's outstretched hand before shifting back to the perceived safety of Dick's side. His eldest was working his jaw irately, holding back whatever rebuttal he had for Bruce's dressing-down. Good, because Bruce didn't want to hear it. He knew that Dick would accuse him of overreacting, of forgetting that they faced greater danger nightly in Gotham City. The difference was obvious to Bruce. In their world, his boys would have been dressed from head to toe in Kevlar. In their world, he didn't feel so frighteningly like everything was out of his control.

He turned his back on the three and took a deep breath to prepare for confronting the police.

_to be continued..._
Bruce Wayne, by virtue of not existing in this world, didn't have a criminal record. Apparently that wasn't going to save him from a drawn out interrogation, fueled by the questioning officer's suspicious nature. Bruce often begrudged the GCPD in his universe for being lax in their techniques, leaving the brunt of the information gathering to Batman and his team, but in this case he wished that the NYPD could just overlook the fact that his driver license was from a non-existent city and that he'd recently been involved in a single car accident and had his replacement vehicle stolen.

Bruce was left to stew in Interrogation Two when the officer in charge of his case was called away to confer with the other officers no doubt loitering in observation. He made a point to glare impatiently at the large mirror before him, then ignore it completely. He wasn't sure yet if his claim of self-defense was going to get Jason off of the hook for assaulting the ex-drug lord, so he refrained from storming out of the station on the argument that he couldn't be held without due cause.

To make matters worse, he had no idea what had become of his four children after he'd sat through Tim and Damian's interviews as their legal guardian. No doubt Jason was similarly being held under the microscope. One of the responding police officers had seen him clock the bad guy as they approached, and another had witnessed Tim hand over the firearm. At least the weapon would be more densely covered with the thug's fingerprints than his own or Tim's. Bruce's suggestion that Dick be allowed to take Tim and Damian back to the hotel had been quickly rejected.

According to the dying cell phone he'd reclaimed from Tim, hours had passed since they were hauled over to the closest police station for their statements. It was nearing dinner time, meaning Bruce had lost a whole other day without a reliable source of income or a clue as to why his family had been dragged to the alternate universe. His anger at Tim and Damian's involvement in the fight had lessened while he rotted away in the police station, making room for uncertainty and frustration to fester.

He needed to do something productive with this time or else he'd be liable to sneak (or storm) out of the interrogation room and demand that he and his children be released. He had long ago trained himself out of fiddling or twitching when idle, but he allowed himself the indulgence now. He justified the restless movement as an important component to Brucie Wayne's characterization. The soft clack of the flip phone closing each time after Bruce pried it open with his thumb helped anchor his roiling emotions.

Chambers, New Jersey, the suspicious little town where they'd landed, meant nothing to him. It was possible that it didn't even exist in his universe. Here, it seemed to be a hotbed for unexplainable activity, though nothing conclusive had ever been published as to why that was the case. Back home, the world had been forced to believe in magic and the supernatural, given how undeniable it was through the actions of the Justice League and the supervillains they faced. That didn't seem true in this place, and any explanation shy of scientific may have been hidden away for the sake of credibility.

This felt too… personal… to be related to Justice League business. Bruce honestly didn't have any evidence to support that theory except for a gut feeling, but his were rarely wrong. He wasn't currently at odds with any of those in his Rogues Gallery capable of sending him to a parallel dimension. It was always possible that one of his active foes had come by the necessary technology, but it just didn't seem plausible. If he had access to his super computer, he would be better able to
definitely rule out that possibly. Still, he shelved it for now.

Could it be that he hadn't been sent here, but rather brought? He didn't know enough about this world to conclusively determine that none here were aware of the multiverse, though it seemed unlikely given his interactions thus far. That same person would have to be capable of reaching across dimensions with enough accuracy to trap him. If such a person did exist here, Bruce wasn't sure he wanted to meet him or her without his full arsenal at the ready.

There was a scuffle of sound outside the door, followed by a brief knock and then the door cracking open. "Mr. Wayne?"

"Yes?" He cleared his throat. "Have you determined yet that my children and I are not dangerous criminals?" He laid the sarcasm on heavily, even though the dangerous part was rather true.

"Your claim of self-defense is holding water so far," said the officer who'd questioned him the most thoroughly that afternoon. "We have no reason to hold you any further, but I'd strongly suggest that you take care of your driver's license situation. Don't get behind the wheel until you have a valid license."

Bruce didn't plan on being stuck in this world long enough to need new identification cards. And as for driving without the proper license; that wouldn’t be a problem. "I'll keep that in mind if you ever locate my stolen vehicle." He regretted being ill-tempered when all he wanted to do was collect his kids and go, but his frustration was wearing away at his composure rapidly.

The officer frowned and jerked her head in the direction of the door, just as sick of dealing with him as he was of being held there. Bruce stood up quickly, eager to be out of the chilly room. He stepped into the brighter light of the hall that he knew would lead back to the bullpen and the exit beyond. The one visible window was dark, compounding his frustration that he'd have little chance to secure an income today.

He followed the officer to a small conference room where he found three quarters of his displaced family. Even though there were more open chairs in the room, his boys had assembled together on the couch with Dick in the middle. Damian was tucked under Dick's right arm while the little boy hugged him in return. Tim leaned against Dick's left shoulder.

Damian squirmed free when he saw Bruce and hurried over to the man. "Father, can we leave now? These incompetent fools have taken much too long to confirm your lack of any wrongdoing."

"Damian, do not be rude," Bruce chided tiredly. He ran his large hand over the boy's disheveled hair. Damian was antsy and it was clear that the long wait had been hard on him. "Where's Jason?" he asked the police officer, who looked unimpressed with Damian's assessment of the department's capabilities.

"They're just finishing his paperwork," she replied. "Next time, tell him to be less offensive while on the defense." She left as Bruce grunted ungratefully at her unsolicited advice. He didn't know how Jason's interrogation had gone, since the eighteen-year-old was legally an adult and he couldn't demand to be included like he had with his younger boys.

Bruce had been sitting for hours, so standing felt preferable. He looked down at his seated sons. He got the impression that Dick was pointedly ignoring him under the guise of speaking softly to Tim. Tim was playing with the sleeve of his hoodie, nodding occasionally to whatever his older brother was saying. Bruce was no stranger to his eldest being upset with him and usually he could outwait Dick's eventual forgiveness. Now, he wasn't sure how he could continue to maintain an even keel with Dick at odds with him. He cleared his throat.
Tim glanced up at him from under the fringe of his bangs, but Dick continued as if the older man didn't exist. "Dick…"

"What?" The response was crisp and cold. Bruce cringed internally. He was going to have to do something he loathed, but he'd suffered enough indignities thus far that he figured one more wouldn't kill him. It was worth it to feel like Dick was on his side again.

Bruce nudged Damian out of the way so he could pull one of the office chairs closer to the front of the couch. His youngest pressed against his side once he'd taken a seat. "I should not have taken my… unease at the situation out on you."

"Is that an apology?"

"Dick…" Dick squeezed Tim's fingers to quiet him without taking his disappointed gaze off of Bruce. Damian sucked in a breath between his teeth, shifting uncomfortably against him. No one liked it when Bruce and Dick fought, but Damian took it especially hard.

"I…" Bruce frowned. He liked it better when Dick forgave him without prompting.

"Because if it is, I'm not the only one full of bullshit."

"Dick." "I may not have children of my own, but I've stepped into your shoes plenty of times in the past, and that includes taking care of the kids when you were too wrapped up in your own issues. You think I wasn't scared when that asshole had a gun to Jason's head?"

"I know you were." Bruce wanted to reach out to squeeze Dick's forearm, but based on how tense the young man was, he didn't think it would be well received just yet.

"And I, for one, am glad that Damian and Tim came back, because without their element of surprise, that guy might still be running around shooting at us."

Tim studied Bruce cautiously, still expecting to be in trouble for disobeying a direct order. Damian's fingers dug into his arm. While he expected that the fifteen-year-old would accept Bruce's disappointment and punishment without argument, Damian would aggressively defend himself if he thought he had done right.

"I'm not always good at showing it--" Dick snorted rudely. "--but I care very much what happens to each of you. I sent Tim and Damian to safety for a reason. Tim seemed to shrink into himself further and Dick's expression darkened. "It was propitious that they were there to prevent the altercation from continuing," Bruce conceded.

It appeared to be what Dick wanted to hear, but Bruce wasn't finished. "I still expect my directives to be followed."

"That's fair," Dick said, finally sounding more like himself. "Still not an apology for overreacting, though."

Bruce grimaced. He was saved from the conversation by the entrance of a different police officer and his missing son. Bruce stood, eager to leave as soon as possible. "You're good to go?" he asked Jason.

"Hell yes," the teenager muttered. Even when he'd been Robin and on the same side as the non-corrupt GCPD officers, he'd never liked visiting police stations and maintained a steady distrust of
most of the uniformed public defenders. The escorting officer motioned toward the elevator. Jason led the exodus from the small conference room, followed closely by Damian. Bruce caught the sleeve of Dick's faux leather jacket as the young man stepped past him.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly so that only Dick could hear him.

"I'm not the only one you overreacted at."

"I..." Bruce took a deep breath. He wasn't sorry for being worried about his kids' safety. "I need you on my side, Dick. I can't do this alone." Admitting his need tasted sour on his tongue and his gut clenched with his fear of rejection.

Dick turned to look him directly in the eye. "Of course I'm on your side, B. I know you need me to act as your buffer, so let me do that. The kids weren't hurt and they did good today."

"Yes," Bruce agreed. "Thank you, chum."

"Always," Dick smirked.

The police hadn't been willing to drive them the dozen blocks back to their hotel, but had offered Bruce a prepaid subway card so that they could ride to within a few blocks of the rundown establishment. It was a short walk to the subway inlet from the precinct. Outside of the police station, Bruce made a point to fall into step beside Jason. He could see his son relax to a degree after exiting the stone-clad building. "What happened in your interview?"

"The typical," Jason replied evasively. He kept his eyes on the sidewalk as they walked.

"They didn't try to intimidate you?"

Jason scoffed. "I'm not easily intimidated, old man."

"Did they accuse you of anything?"

"Having a badass right hook," Jason said flippantly.

Bruce frowned. "This could have been serious, Jason. Dawson, or whatever that druglord's name is, could have easily turned the tables on you and tried to press charges for assault and robbery."

"That prick might be a lowlife drug addict, but he ain't that stupid," Jason argued. "He'd be an idiot to admit I stole his drug money."

"He could have made up a different source of income."

"It took me thirty seconds to recognize him for what he is. I get the feeling that this isn't the first time he's spent the night in holding. The police would have seen through any lie he tried to feed them."

"Unless they were in the habit of turning a blind eye to his schemes."

"You know." Jason finally looked up at Bruce. "I don't get the impression that the NYPD in this world are a fraction as corrupt as the lowlifes in the GCPD of our world. Just stingy assholes when it comes to giving rides to people whose stolen car they're inept at locating."

Bruce shook his head. "Well, we're lucky that this time, things finally went our way. But this is exactly why I want you to stay as far away from this world's criminal elements as possible."

"I don't need your lecture," Jason snipped. "I get it, okay?"
Bruce could clearly see the guilt in Jason's hunched posture. He could see the remnants of the stress and fear Jason had felt knowing he had only his wits to rely on in the face of druggie with a loaded weapon. "Okay."

"That's it?" Jason asked incredulously.

"Your brother has already informed me of how I may or may not have overreacted." A sardonic scoff from Jason. "Jay, I can't lose you again," Bruce said passionately. "Meet me halfway, son."

"Yeah, fine," Jason said. Uncomfortable with being sentimental, he quickened his pace to catch up with his brothers. Bruce was content to follow a few steps behind his sons and enjoy the knowledge that they were all within his sight and safe. He dared to think that this instance of good luck meant their fortune was finally turning positive.

He shouldn't have gotten his hopes up.

*to be continued...*
Chapter Fifteen

Tim was the first in the shower once they reached the hotel, claiming that if he didn't thaw out in the hot water, he'd lose his fingers to frostbite. The weather had turned foul during the time they'd spent on the subway and the family had been forced to walk the four blocks from the closest station to their hotel in a heavy drizzle and biting wind.

Damian called dibs on the second turn in the shower and proceeded to stand outside the bathroom door and complain that Tim was being a girl and taking entirely too long. Bruce hoped that Tim didn't draw out his time in the bathroom just to spite the younger boy. The older three members of the family settled for trying to dry out as much as possible by stripping off their wet outer layers and wrapping themselves in the bedding. Bruce kept to himself his frustrated venting for not having adequate dry clothes for his kids to change into.

Tim did eventually emerge from the steamy bathroom and headed to Bruce and Damian's bed after scooping his tablet up from the tiny dinette table. He crawled up to lean against the headboard behind Bruce's pillow, where he started tapping out rapid sequences on the computer screen. "What are you doing, kid?" Bruce asked tiredly. He didn't want to deal with the tantrum that would surely follow Damian finding Tim in his spot.

"Don't be mad," Tim said in a small voice. Bruce groaned. It was never good when Tim started with that request. His fifteen-year-old tapped a couple of more times on the tablet and then leaned over Bruce's shoulder to hold the screen a few inches from Bruce's face. "When we were waiting for you in the police station, I borrowed one of the officers' phones--"

"Timmy…" He mostly kept the growl out of his voice.

"And I was able to peak at the encryption they use for their network," he hurriedly finished. "Which is different from anything we use in our world, which means that it would have taken my Open Sesame software a long time to crack it, especially with the unreliable internet here. But with the head start, I should be able to access the NYPD's network within a much shorter time."

Bruce took the tablet so he could hold it an appropriate distance from his face. "What do you hope to learn from hacking the NYPD?"

"Not much," Tim said. "But if the FBI has left a backdoor into their network, too, then I can use that to access their systems and find out what's so weird about Chambers, New Jersey."

"Hm." Bruce watched the rapidly scrolling text of Tim's personally coded software as it ate away at the NYPD's firewalls.

Jason peeked out from the blanket cocoon he'd made on his roller cot. "Don't you think hacking into the FBI is a bit more dangerous than me putting a drug dealer out of business?" he asked.

"The FBI usually asks questions before shooting," Bruce said, letting his desire to know more about the strange city they'd landed in overrule his cautiousness against creating waves in this world. This could put them on the path to finding out who'd dragged them into this parallel universe, and in turn allow them to get back to their own. "How long, Tim?"

"Not much longer," Tim said.
"Good." He patted the teen's knee. "Go to bed."

"It's my computer," Tim complained.

"I paid for it," Bruce rejoined.

"Well, I wrote the program."

Bruce deftly held the tablet out of Tim's reach. "You also belong to me, and by extension, your program. Go to sleep."

"Dick!"

"You're on your own this time, baby bird," Dick replied. "Come here. It's cold."

Tim grumbled loudly as he climbed over Bruce, purposefully knocking the man with his bony knee. Bruce smirked victoriously. He set the tablet aside to continue running the hack when Damian exited the bathroom. He loosened his own tightly tucked blankets to allow Damian to press against his side. The child was warm and Bruce greedily pulled him closer to take advantage of the secondhand heat.

Jason rolled off of his cot in a effort to untangle himself, but seemed none the worse for wear despite the loud thud he'd made. The teenager slammed the door to the bathroom and a second later, Bruce heard the shower start again. Bruce let his tired eyes close, allowing himself the short rest. If Dick didn't want a turn, Bruce would take advantage of the quick heat next, and hopefully by then the hacking software will have finished its first task.

xXx

Hours later, Bruce woke slowly. His ears felt clogged and his throat raw. He swallowed thickly a few times, trying to soothe the dryness down his esophagus. The dull headache lingering between his temples and behind his eyes was easy enough to ignore for now. It took a minute, but he could soon focus on individual sounds within the room. Notably, the bathroom was silent. Bruce frowned, knowing that he'd been listening for Jason to finish. Instead, he could hear the teenager's muted snoring, muffled by the blanket he'd pulled over his head.

"Damn it," Bruce muttered. He pried his eyes open to find that the room was bright with the mid-morning sun. He'd let his exhaustion get the better of him and lost valuable time for finding a way to get himself and his family home. He didn't begrudge his sons the chance to sleep in, but he'd meant to make a lot of progress solving the mystery of Chambers.

The tablet was still on the nightstand between the two beds, though its screen was black and it wouldn't power on when he tried to wake it up. He didn't know where Tim had stashed the charger and he wasn't about to drag the kid out of the nest he'd made with Dick in order to find it. Being unable to use the computer added to his anxiousness and sense of claustrophobia, so he decided to take a shower now and then head over to the lobby to sort out their shelter for the next night.

A trip to the laundromat was definitely in order. Washing what they could in the hotel sink wasn't the same as having detergent to actually clean their undergarments. Bruce was not looking forward to donning dirty clothes for the third day in a row.

All of his sons except for Tim were up by the time Bruce exited the bathroom, though the man wasn't convinced the boy was actually sleeping. His subconscious wouldn't have permitted him to lay with his face buried against the pillow for long. "You're slacking off, old man," Jason teased mildly. "Weren't you planning to be up with the sun?"
"Your hair's standing up enough for both of us," Bruce grumbled, brushing his hand over the red-tinted brown strands as he passed the cot.

"Fuck off," Jason complained without heat. He reached up to blindly smooth down his hair.

"You missed a spot, Jaybird," Dick said when Jason lowered his hand. Jason scowled for being teased and ran his hand through the white patch over his forehead. "Nuh-uh. To the right." Jason self-consciously tried again. "No, left." Dick pointed to his own tousled locks, not even close to where he was verbally directing his younger brother.

Damian snickered and Jason's eyes narrowed. "You're such an asshole." Jason grabbed his pillow and threw it at Dick's head, who easily batted it away while chuckling. The offending object landed on Tim's back, who whined plaintively at being disturbed.

"Don't call your brother names," Bruce reprimanded tiredly. "Dick, don't antagonize him." He picked up his thin jacket. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

During their stay at the hotel of singular stars, Bruce had interacted with the same gruff front desk attendant each day. The man, assumed to also be the owner, appeared just as unkempt as Bruce and his boys, but he was gainfully employed and without excuse, in Bruce's opinion. His manner wasn't much more couth than his appearance, including chewing alternately on a toothpick or an unlit cigarette since smoking was discouraged in the public space.

"You finally checking out?" the man asked, squinting at Bruce.

"No," the once-billionaire replied. "But I don't have the full amount right now. I'll have to pay the rest tonight." It grated at his pride to be unable to pay for one night at such an establishment.

"We don't do I.O.U.s."

"I'll have the sum of the balance today," Bruce argued.

"If you want to reserve a room, you need the 'sum of the balance' right now," the proprietor retorted, his voice going nasally as he repeated Bruce's wording. "We ain't running a charity here. I can rent that room out to paying customers. If you need a place to stay, there's a homeless shelter over on Fifth."

"I highly doubt that you're at full occupancy right now," Bruce said. He struggled to keep his anger in check.

"And what if every other homeless sonuvabitch wanted to stay for free, too?"

Bruce took a deep breath. "Look, I have kids. My son is eleven. I will pay you the full amount, no matter how overinflated it is, tonight. I just need someplace relatively warm for him to stay while I get the money."

"My sister's got a brat, too, and she ain't here mooching off of me. Her kid's a lot quieter than yours, too. If you can't pay, get off my property."

"Have you no compassion?" Bruce demanded. His fingers ached from being clenched so tightly into fists.

"How's this for compassion: I'll call the police instead of running you out with my shotgun if you haven't cleared out of the room by noon." The man reached for the phone as if to make good on his threat right then. The last thing Bruce needed was to spend more time at the police station, and even
though he wasn't the heartless one at the moment, there was little he could do to fight the eviction.

"Go to hell," he snapped, the rest of his composure breaking like an overtaut string.

His adversary reacted predictably. "You and your fucking kids first! And get there by eleven!" the attendant shouted after him as Bruce stormed from the lobby. It was ten-thirty.

Bruce threw open the door to the room that had been their shelter since they arrived in New York, not caring that the doorknob had probably just dented the wallboard. "Get the stuff together," he ordered.

"What's going on?" Dick asked, immediately honing in on Bruce's fury.

"We're leaving. Hurry up."

"Where are we going, Father?"

"Somewhere better than this shithole," Bruce snapped. "Move!" The younger four jumped into action despite their confusion.

Jason had gotten dressed while he was gone, so his second oldest didn't need the extra time to get ready to leave. He crowded behind Bruce while the older man angrily started shoving their meager possessions into a plastic laundry bag. "What happened, B?"

"I decided that this establishment was no longer suitable for our needs."

"Bullshit. We can't afford anything nicer and..." Jason trailed off and his teeth clicked as he snapped them together momentarily. "B?" The barest hint of fear in the teenager's voice - the silent plea to tell him that he'd come to the wrong conclusion - proved to be the straw that broke Bruce's back.

"You guessed right," Bruce growled loudly, spinning angrily on him. "Spending all afternoon in the police station after getting assaulted by a vengeful drug lord prevented me from earning the money necessary to pay for another night in this dump!"

"Hey!" Suddenly Dick was between Bruce and Jason. "This isn't Jason's fault." His eldest turned briefly to Jason, who'd gone startlingly pale. "This isn't your fault, Jay." Dick looked back to Bruce. "Come on, calm down." He stared hard at Bruce, who looked right back at him, fighting the red bleeding into the edges of his vision.

"Fuck," Jason cursed under his breath. "Shit, B..."

Dick broke his stare down with Bruce to push his younger brother toward where Tim and Damian were watching them worriedly. "This isn't your fault, Jay. Go help the kids finish getting ready."

Jason shook off his remorse, letting his own temper flare defensively. "Let me talk to that prick. He'll be a lot more accommodating when I'm done with him."

"No." Bruce forcefully squashed down his rage. "No, he's not worth it. We'll figure this out."

"Yes, we will," Dick agreed.

"Then I'll--"

"No," Bruce interrupted. "You'll do nothing." He stepped past Dick to grab Jason by the elbow and tug him a step closer. "I will not lose you to violence or the law. Now find your jacket so we can get out of here."
Jason hardly looked convinced that he shouldn't go beat the hotel owner into submission, but he also didn't look like he would, either, so Bruce let him go. Dick inserted himself between them again. "Why don't you take the kids back to the soup kitchen we ate at yesterday. We'll be right behind you," he suggested to Jason.

"Fine," Jason conceded. He mumbled a quick string of curse words as he turned to face Tim and Damian. "Let's go, squirts."

"Preferably without starting any more feuds with gangsters," Tim griped as he started walking toward the door, his uncharged tablet clutched protectively to his chest. Jason's face reddened and his jaw ticked, but he otherwise didn't react.

"I would assist you in teaching that despicable proprietor a lesson in charity if Father and Grayson permitted it, Todd," Damian informed his brother.

"Thanks, brat," Jason replied dryly. "And for the record, I don't need Grayson's permission for anything."

When the door shut behind them, Bruce sat down heavily in one of the chairs flanking the messy table. He emitted his own litany of stressed curses to the beat of his pulsing headache. He flinched when Dick's hand landed on his shoulder.

"It's going to be okay, B," Dick said, softly but firmly. "What if it's not?" Bruce asked. He had no patience for empty platitudes.

"It will be, because it has to be." Dick crouched down so he could look up into Bruce's downcast face. "Listen, I know you're determined to prove your rugged manliness by taking care of us, but this is too much to put on one person's shoulders. You're being a pig-headed, stubborn mule."

"Richard--"

"Don't correct me; it's true. So I'm done being the babysitter. Our odds are twice as good of finding legal income if we're both looking for employment. Besides, I'm a gorgeous, charismatic young man who anyone would love to have tending their bar or waiting tables. You're a grizzly old man who'd just as soon give someone a death glare than smile prettily at them."

"I can smile prettily," Bruce complained. "The ladies love me."

"You ain't got nothing on me, Bats," Dick rejoined. "I'm not the one wearing dad jeans."

"I'll show you who's old and grizzly, you little punk," Bruce threatened. He trapped Dick in a headlock before the younger man could jump out of reach and dug his knuckles into the youth's scalp.

"Ow, ow, stop!" Dick was laughing, so Bruce knew he hadn't actually hurt him. Still, they were running out of time so he let Dick free anyway. "You jerk," Dick gasped. "My hair is my best feature after my face and my ass!"

"Stop it," Bruce ordered. "I don't want to laugh. I'm in a bad mood." He stood up and swatted at said ass, but this time Dick was fast enough to dodge him. To his surprise, the weight of their situation didn't seem to be bearing so heavily on his shoulders. "Thank you, chum." He was still in a bad mood, but it wasn't quite as dour as before.

"You're welcome, Dad. Remember this the next time you're being stingy and I need a new pair of
Tom Ford Aviators."

"When we get back to our world, you can have all of the sunglasses you want," Bruce promised.

*to be continued*...
Chapter Sixteen

Bruce was relieved to see his younger boys safely within the soup kitchen when he and Dick arrived with their pitiful plastic laundry bag of possessions. Jason and Damian sat at one end of a long table. Tim was seated nearby on the floor under the window with his tablet plugged into a lonely wall socket.

"Did he eat?" Bruce asked as he sat down with his own tray of food, across from Jason. He tilted his head in Tim's direction. Dick claimed the seat next to Damian, who picked at the remains of his lunch discontentedly.

"Half of a bowl of soup, and mainly the broth," Jason reported. "He claims that it all tastes like cardboard, which apparently offends his prissy senses. He bailed when the brat starting nagging him about eating better."

Bruce sighed. He could imagine how well that had gone over. Damian tended to show his concern for Dick by commanding his older brother to do things that the boy thought beneficial for one's health. As far as Bruce was aware, Damian didn't bother Tim and Jason, considering them unworthy of his concern. Whereas Dick thought Damian was adorable and willingly played along, Tim would no doubt fight back at being treated like a child by his younger brother. He couldn't complain that Damian was warming up to Tim, but he lamented the probable fights that would occur as Tim resisted Damian's brand of affection.

"Tim, come over here," Bruce called. The teenager regarded him appraisingly before grudgingly unplugging his computer's charger and slowly climbing to his feet. When Tim was seated at his side, Bruce placed his single serving bag of potato chips in front of him. "We're not getting coffee today, so you need to eat."

"I had soup," Tim replied.

"Chicken broth," Jason corrected.

Tim shot Jason a mean look. He then looked up at his father. "B, I had soup."

"You need more than soup, kid," Bruce said. "I thought you liked Doritos."

"I'm not in the mood right now," Tim argued.

"Don't talk to me about being in a mood."

Tim grimaced. "Please, I'd rather not eat the chips. They'll be killer on my throat."

"You have a sore throat?" Bruce scrutinized the teenager, causing Tim to squirm.

"It's not bad, really. I just don't want chips. I'm fine."

Bruce pressed the inside of his wrist against Tim's forehead. "You don't feel feverish."
"Because I'm fine," Tim repeated sourly. Bruce took back the chips and gave the boy his bowl of pudding instead. Tim wisely refrained from complaining and morosely started eating. Bruce started on his own food as Dick and Damian did the same.

Jason finished his meal and pushed the tray further down the table. "So, I was thinking… Since Dawson caused us to lose the whole afternoon yesterday, and it was because of me that he attacked us--"

"It's not your fault, Jay," Dick interrupted. "We probably would have been out on the streets sooner if you hadn't found that money."

"Regardless," Jason continued. He looked intently at Bruce. "I can make up for it. I can find us someplace to stay until we figure out the money situation. Or, until you're tired of sitting up on your high horse and will let me take care of the monetary problem, too."

"Jason, I'm sorry for being short with you this morning," said Bruce. "I should not have implied that we lost the hotel room because of your dealings with Dawson." He meant to continue, to reiterate his desire to stay within the law, but Jason broke in, first.

"Whatever. I'm used to getting blamed for shit. But I can fix this."

Bruce didn't want to let that comment go, but he figured that it was a conversation better left for when he could speak to his son privately. "I'm going to take care of us, Jay. Dick and I have a plan."

"You and Dickface have a plan," Jason deadpanned. "B, you don't even have the first idea--"

"You said you trusted me," Bruce reminded him. "Give me another day to figure this out."

Jason scowled and crumbled his paper napkin aggressively. Bruce wasn't naïve to think that Jason was appeased at all. He reaffirmed his vow to find employment by the end of the day, if only to prove to his second son that he could, and would, do everything in his power to take care of his family, without breaking the law.

Eager to change the subject, Bruce checked on Tim's progress with the bowl of pudding. It was gone, though Tim hadn't made any effort to scrape the bowl clean. Now the teenager tapped listlessly at his computer screen, his chin propped up in one hand with his elbow resting on the table. "I didn't have a chance to check this morning - did your program finish running?"

"Yes, but the computer shut down when the battery died. Everything was lost, and now I don't even have the hotel's shitty Wi-Fi to connect to." Bruce hid his cringe at the implied chastisement for allowing the tablet to run all night. Tim's dark look, however, was directed at Jason instead of Bruce.

"We'll get you guys set up somewhere warm and dry, with public Wi-Fi, while Dick and I look for work. Maybe you and Damian can spend the afternoon at the public library."

"I wouldn't let them out of your sight if I were you," Jason spoke up, annoyed at Tim's judging. "You just need one 'concerned citizen' to call protective services and they'll be taken from you before you can blink. Though, now that I think about it…"

"Don't even joke about that," Dick said curtly. Damian glowered at Jason. Tim directed his glare down at the tablet, though the tension in his shoulders and back was obvious.

"Take a pill," Jason retorted. "You're going to need a fucking sense of humor if you want to make it through this with as little trauma as possible."

"Don't swear," Bruce said, followed by a sigh.
"I do not think your 'joke' is funny, sense of humor or no," Damian said. "Besides, Father would not consider allowing me to be taken from him." Damian's typical bravado was tempered with a hint of insecurity that was usually hidden a lot better by his youngest. "Right, Father?"

Bruce could only stare at Damian incredulously. Surely his little boy didn't doubt for one second that Bruce wouldn't let him go without a fight. He'd stood up to the League of Assassins to keep Damian with him.

Unfortunately, his silence stretched for a moment too long and Damian's expression hardened at the perceived betrayal. Dick quickly wrapped his arms around the eleven-year-old. "Right, Dami. Of course! You're not going anywhere, and I completely agree. Jason's not funny at all. I'm not sure what's got B tongue-tied right now, but I'm sure he'll get himself straightened out quickly." The pointed look from his eldest finally broke Bruce out of his shock.

He turned fully in his seat to face Damian directly, accidentally bumping Tim in the process. Dick kept his arm protectively around Damian's narrow shoulders. Bruce reached across him to grasp Damian's hand. "You surprised me Damian, that you could even entertain the notion that I would allow you to be taken from me."

"I forgive you, Father," Damian said brusquely, as if Bruce's stuttered explanation would have met Dick's wearisome definition of an apology. "I desire to leave this place. I cannot abide waiting idly. I shall accompany you to find a job."

Bruce didn't really have much of an appetite for the rest of his meal, and the sky was growing darker outside. Dick ate more quickly than he did, so the twenty-two-year-old was mostly done, as well. "Fine. Let's go." The rest of his family seemed eager to leave and stood quickly except for Tim. "Come on, kid," Bruce prompted distractedly, his mind already set on the task of finding employment. The fifteen-year-old rose slowly, drawing a huff of impatience from Damian.

"Jason and I can head a few blocks south," Dick suggested. "You and the kids go north. We can meet back here around five."

Bruce nodded in agreement. "You have the second phone?"

"Yeah." Dick patted his jacket pocket. "Come on, Jaybird. I bet we can find a job before B can."

Bruce smirked at the challenge. "Don't be too disappointed when your old man shows you up, chum."

xXx

Ten minutes after leaving the soup kitchen, the skies opened up. Even with ducking under every awning and overhang along their chosen path, Bruce, Tim, and Damian were quickly soaked. At least the kids had sweatshirts with hoods, which kept the fat drops of water from hitting them in the face directly. Bruce didn't dare sacrifice a few dollars to purchase a convenience store umbrella, not wanting the expense to be the difference between shelter or not that night. He wiped his dripping hair away from his face and squared his shoulders before stepping into the next business displaying a 'Help Wanted' sign. Tim and Damian waited awkwardly next to the door, dripping on the worn linoleum.

After being turned away from the fourth establishment because he had no legitimate identification, Bruce was once again feeling crushed by their desperate situation. He'd felt a measure of hope at the fifth place he'd tried, but his fingers were stiff with cold and his hand shook as he tried to fill out his minimal contact information on the generic application. The proprietor had gruffly taken the paper
back and asked them to leave under the mistaken impression that the shivering was due to drug or alcohol withdrawals. Arguing with the man hadn't helped his case.

A bus stop a block away had a narrow glass enclosure for waiting passengers. It wasn't watertight by any stretch of the imagination, but the chipped roof would shield them from the direct rain and the scratched wall panels would divert the gusts of bitterly cold wind. As soon as he sat down on the bench, Damian clambered into his lap. Bruce wrapped an arm around him and used the other to pull Tim down and against his side. "It's going to be okay," Bruce whispered.

"I want to go home," Damian whined.

"So do I," Bruce replied gruffly.

"It's four-thirty," Tim announced. It was the first time he'd spoken in the past couple of hours that hadn't consisted of defending himself against Damian's bursts of frustration.

Feeling completely discouraged and exhausted by the hours of trudging through the rain, Bruce allowed himself only another minute of rest before directing his sons to start the trek back to the soup kitchen. Damian walked as close to Bruce's side as possible, while Tim fell a few steps behind. "Keep up, kid," Bruce admonished. He paused to let Tim catch up and wrapped an arm around the teenager when he had.

The rain finally slowed to a stop, though the air remained heavy with humidity and Bruce didn't doubt that it would return soon. Dick and Jason were waiting just outside the charity, looking as wet and miserable as Bruce felt. Neither looked particularly happy and Bruce prepared himself for bad news. "Apparently there's not a great job market for drowned rats," Jason groused in explanation for their lack of success.

The soup kitchen wasn't open yet and Bruce wasn't keen to wait outside in the cold for an indeterminate amount of time. Even if they miraculously found work, there wasn't time to earn enough to pay for a hotel. Begging for money might not generate enough either, and Bruce knew he needed to find shelter for his sons soon. Tim shivered against his side and Damian's teeth chattered. Jason hugged himself, allowing an uncharacteristic moment of weakness, and that was the tipping point for Bruce.

He set aside his tattered pride and decided their next step. "Do you have the address for the shelter, chum?" he asked Dick. Jason huffed, his breath coming out in a white puff, and he made a skeptical face. Damian pressed closer yet to Bruce side, making his dislike of the idea evident without needing words.

xXx

There was no one waiting in the lobby of the homeless shelter an hour later when Bruce and his weary family finally trudged into the warm interior. Bruce approached the desk, eager to get this over with. His stomach was starting to twist with hunger pains, despite his stress, and he could only imagine how hungry his boys were. He felt a jolt of worry when the worker at the front desk watched him approach with a look of sympathy and regret.

Before he could state his needs, she said, "I'm sorry, sir, but we're full for tonight."

"Full?" Bruce echoed in surprise.

"All of the beds are taken. I'm sorry, but you can't stay here tonight."

In Gotham, he knew that there was inadequate housing for the less fortunate, especially in the poorer areas of town. Plenty of people were fined or arrested for trespassing in the search for shelter when
the weather was foul. He hadn't considered the possibility of that happening to him. "Where are we supposed to go?"

"You can try the shelter on Hudson," she suggested, reaching for a pamphlet. "They don't usually fill as quickly as we do, but at this hour I can't guarantee you'll have luck there, either."

"We're freezing cold, haven't eaten in hours, and it's about to start raining again," Bruce insisted. "I can't drag my sons through that again."

She looked past him to where his four miserable sons waited. "I can call CPS for the ones under eighteen."

"No," Bruce denied immediately. "Don't you have any spare room? I'll sleep on the floor if--"

"I'm sorry, sir, but we have no space. You can try again tomorrow. Usually guests start lining up around eleven."

Bruce's frustration was quickly turning into anger, his go-to coping method when he felt completely out of control. He clenched and unclenched his fists as he fought to avoid yelling at the worker. It wasn't her fault that they had limited space, but she was an easy target. He started internally when Dick moved to his side suddenly. "Come on, B," he said in a low voice. "We'll try the other shelter."

Dick gave the woman at the desk a strained smile. "Can you give us directions?"

"Sure, sweetie," she replied. She pulled out a pad of paper and started scribbling down a list of directions to the smaller shelter. Before handing over the paper, she hesitated and looked at Bruce. "I know a social worker who is trustworthy. She'll make sure your younger boys are put in a good home until you can get back on your feet."

"I refuse to be separated from Father," Damian snapped. He sounded more fearful than angry.

"No, thank you." Bruce stepped back and then turned sharply on his heel. "Let's go," he ordered crisply.

Outside, Jason scuffed his shoe over the wet concrete, sending a stone skidding into the street. "Fuck. This is always how it goes."

"We'll figure it out, Jay," Dick said. "Come on. It's a long walk. We should start moving."

"It's going to be full, too. This weather sucks and anyone in their right mind will have already gone to the shelter," Jason countered. "We need to find something else."

"I'll take care of it," Bruce said.

Jason spun on him angrily. "I'm sick of waiting for you to 'take care of it'," Jason said, on the verge of a shout. "I'll find us shelter for tonight."

"I can do it," Bruce replied. He needed to be able to provide for his kids. He was their father and it was his responsibility.

"You can't." This time Jason did shout. "We're going to freeze to death before you get over your ridiculous pride and admit that you have no fucking clue what to do next!"

"Jaybird…" Dick stood huddled with Tim and Damian close to the side of the building, minimally protected from the chilled wind sweeping down the street. He looked like he wanted to drag his third younger brother into a hug, too.
"And you do? You're just a kid." My kid, Bruce thought painfully.

"I know a shit ton more than you do," Jason said. "I was on the streets surviving by the time I was nine. I was a fucking kid then, but I'm here now, aren't I? Don't even look down at me from your fucking high horse!"

"You think you can do better?" Bruce was barely able to keep himself from yelling. As it was, he leaned in aggressively toward his second son. "Fine. Go ahead!"

Jason snarled at the challenge but didn't back down. He turned away from Bruce and took a few deep breathes before speaking in a tightly controlled voice. "This way, asshole."

to be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Finally bridged a gap in the story that was giving me all sorts of headaches. That means I actually have a few chapters in reserve now, which is a great relief. Thanks for your patience in the meantime!
Chapter Seventeen

Hours later, Bruce was in a foul mood and not even bothering to hide it. Even Tim and Damian had started shying away from him, leery of being too close to the man when his temper finally snapped. Dick refrained from trying to ease the tension with bad jokes or inane chattering, instead keeping his few comments quiet and directed at his younger brothers. Jason's shoulders were nearly as tense as Bruce's, and the older man was certain that if (not when - he did have ironclad self-control after all) he exploded, it was going to be because of something Jason said or did.

He had plenty of reasons to be mad. Less than a week ago, he was a billionaire vigilante that had no problem providing for his needs or for those who depended on him. Now, he and his sons were without shelter, suffering from hunger pangs, and sneaking through a condemned building in hopes of finding some protection from the increasingly chilly weather. His pride hurt even more than his grumbling stomach, and he wanted to smash in the face of whomever had opened the portal between his universe and this one.

Bruce had to consciously work his jaw to undo the clench that had his teeth aching and a headache festering at this temples. Jason paused in his gruff explanation of why this squat was good-enough for a few days when he registered the action. His blue-green eyes narrowed defensively and he crossed his arms over his chest. "I don't see you coming up with something fucking better!"

Dick obviously dragged Tim and Damian to the furthest corner of the filthy room as Jason stalked up to Bruce to poke him in the chest. Bruce batted the offending hand away and felt his feeble control snap as he leaned in, his nose mere inches from Jason's. "I hate this!" Anger was easier to deal with than failure. He wasn't angry with Jason, but himself, though he couldn't stop himself from falling into his old habit of venting his fury on others.

"Shut up!" Miraculously, Jason's teeth clicked as he snapped his mouth shut, though his glare remained fully heated. Thank goodness for the two inches and couple dozen pounds that Bruce still had on his second-oldest. "None of us has eaten in almost twelve hours and I'm sick of being thirsty, hungry, and cold. I'm sick of wearing the same dirty clothes. I'm sick of dealing with a subpar social services system and the vicious cycle of not being able to work because we have no home address. And the icing on the cake: this rat-infested death trap is completely unacceptable as a living space!"

"B…"

Bruce ignored Dick's weak plea. He was laser focused on Jason. The younger man looked a mixture of hurt and furious, though in typical Jason fashion, fury was quickly becoming the dominant emotion. What a great character flaw for Bruce to pass on to his child. "Damn you to fucking hell," Jason shouted, pressing right back into Bruce's personal space. "What do you fucking know about surviving, asshole?"

"B…"

Bruce ignored Dick's weak plea. He was laser focused on Jason. The younger man looked a mixture of hurt and furious, though in typical Jason fashion, fury was quickly becoming the dominant emotion. What a great character flaw for Bruce to pass on to his child. "Damn you to fucking hell," Jason shouted, pressing right back into Bruce's personal space. "What do you fucking know about surviving, asshole?"

It was the right thing and the wrong thing to say. Bruce desperately held on to his rage as his despair drowned the flames and promised to drown him as well. He grabbed Jason's upper arms tightly, anchoring himself in the here and now, and growled through the lump expanding in his throat. "I hate this world and the lunatic who dragged us here. I hate it!" He punctuated each sentence with a quick shake of the struggling teenager. "But in this moment, what I hate most is that fact that you can
be so blasé while listing this shithole's few virtues, which you recognize from *experience*, and I've failed to take care of you."

His voice broke on the last sentence and he squeezed his eyes shut against the shameful tears that burned the back of his eyeballs. Jason stopped trying to free himself from Bruce's bruising grip and instead tightened his own hands around Bruce's arms, just above his elbows. "Don't..." Jason started, sounding a little froggy himself. "We're all taking care of everyone. Each of us has a strength we gained the hard way. We're gonna be okay, old man. Just... please don't break."

It was too late for that. Bruce felt as if his pride were completely shattered and he didn't bother denying himself as he shifted his hold on Jason so that he was crushing the teenager against his chest. He barely felt the awkward pats to his back as Jason cringed in the embrace. A moment later, he was too weak to resist the gentle pressure pushing him away from Jason.

"Bruce." Dick's voice was lower than usual, a little hoarse and barely loud enough to register over the thrumming in Bruce's head. Bruce made himself regard his eldest and his gut twisted anew when he saw the dampness on the young man's face and the redness around his eyes. "You're doing a fantastic job. You've far exceeded my expectations, and you know I expect a lot from the Batman. It's not your fault that karma is being a bitch right now. Really, is this worse than anything you've dealt with before?"

"Dickie..."

"Hush. You've been selfishly hoarding the burden of taking care of this family and now it's time for you to take a break. Jay and I are going to check out the neighborhood. You stay here with the kids. This universe may have taken away all of our creature comforts, but it can't take away the fact that you're our father, and right now Timmy and Dami need their daddy."

Dick was subjected to his own suffocating hug as Bruce managed to somehow capture the frayed ends of his control and push back his depression. A deep breath locked it away and he felt a little bit stronger when he stepped back from his first blessing. "Be back soon," he instructed, letting the two go before his overprotective tendencies surged again.

"Will do," Dick promised. Bruce sent Jason an apologetic look, to which the teenager responded with a hesitant smirk and minute shrug. The two slipped through the doorway, one of the few that still boasted both a solid door and a lock, leaving Bruce to slowly turn to face Tim and Damian.

He almost missed the quick movement a second before both were plastered to his sides, hugging him as tightly as he'd held Jason and then Dick. Bruce drew them closer still, kissing the top of Tim's head and squeezing Damian's shoulder. "Come on," he said, pulling them over to a space mostly clear of debris and wearily lowering himself to the floor. Damian landed in his lap and Tim tucked in against his side. Bruce was sure that his youngest two were drawing comfort from his heat and his presence, no matter how useless he felt himself, but it couldn't compare to how much their closeness bolstered his courage. Batman needed his Robins indeed.

xXx

"When we get home, I call dibs on all of the hot water in the house," Tim said, shivering against Bruce's knees. The older man was slouching against the peeling wall with his knees bent loosely before him. Damian was still curled against his chest, but Tim had shifted so he could lean against Bruce's inclined thighs, using his arms as a pillow atop the man's knees. Bruce rubbed his hand slowly up and down the teenager's back. The moon was high in the sky, painting the New York slums an eerie blue color. He expected Dick and Jason to return any minute.
“You'll have to fight me for it,” Bruce rejoined. He couldn't see Tim's face from this angle, though he figured he could imagine pretty closely the boy's expression.

"Do you think the wormhole was deliberate?"

"Deliberately created or deliberately aimed at us?"

"Either. Both."

"What do you think?"

"It seemed pretty determined to suck someone in, and the only people really worth anything in Gotham City are Batman and Bruce Wayne."

"I think that's a bit of an exaggeration, kid, but I agree that the portal seemed intentional."

"It's just... why go through the trouble to abduct someone from a different multiverse and then not make contact on this side?"

"The perpetrator could be someone from our world," Bruce replied. "If he or she simply wanted us out of the way, it wouldn't have mattered what happens to us here."

"So this whole world is like our cage."

"Abstractly, I suppose." Bruce stilled his tired arm, opting to maintain contact by curling his fingers around Tim's exposed hip.

"Batman's Rogues Gallery doesn't have anyone who comes to mind as capable of or wanting to banish us to a parallel dimension," Tim reasoned. "But the JLA has plenty of bad guys who'd be motivated to do such a thing. Maybe Batman isn't the only one trapped here."

Bruce refused to let the idea give him hope that he might actually know someone in this world besides his boys. He had no way of confirming or rejecting the idea that Superman, Wonder Woman, or others had been sucked into their own versions of hell, but this situation felt strangely personal and his instincts were adamant that the Batfamily was alone in their misfortune. He'd go so far as to say that it was completely personal, and even his children were unfortunate victims caught in the cosmic crosshairs.

"So far, my intuition tells me that Batman only was the target," he said, mostly just speaking aloud and not really laying out cold, hard facts. Tim was good for bouncing ideas off of. "If the perpetrator was looking for the Dark Knight, he or she may be under the impression that the plan failed when the Wayne family was netted instead."

"That feels more right to me than simply being banished to a universal wasteland while someone wreaks havoc on Gotham City," replied Tim. He was quiet for a minute or two, and then, "Even if Bruce Wayne died in this dimension, maybe others like Zatara and Zatanna exist."

"No," said Damian, startling Bruce. He'd thought Damian asleep for a while now.

"No?"

"I searched for allies days ago," Damian said. "Unless the hero community is much more hidden in this world than ours, it is more likely that it doesn't exist at all."

"It's not really possible to hide the existence of Superman," Tim murmured. "Did you search for
"Clark Kent, too?"

"Of course," Damian replied. "Neither he, nor Lois Lane, nor Lex Luthor have accomplished anything in this world to warrant a byte in the internet." They fell quiet after that, each drifting into his own thoughts.

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The missing youths returned a while later with pink noses and cheeks, and breathing puffs of white vapor. Dick carried something that looked like it might be food. Bruce decided that if it was, he didn't want to know how Dick had come to possess it. Damian jumped up to see what the older two had found and Bruce was struck with a sudden flood of cool air against his front.

Jason sat down on his opposite side from Tim, his shoulder just shy of brushing against Bruce's. "We're not the only ones squatting in this building," he reported in a low, calm voice. "Seem like decent people, but the wolves typically don't come out 'til later. Sounds like the cops don't bother coming around much."

"You did good," Bruce replied, reaching over to pat Jason's closer knee.

"I wish we didn't have to slum like this," Jason said. "The lot of you are too soft for this lifestyle."

Bruce shook his head at Jason's teasing. "Thank you for respecting my wish to not commit crimes."

"Don't thank me yet," Jason countered. "Letting yourself starve to prove you're holier than anyone else is bullshit. You're not better than me because of the way I lived when I was a homeless kid. I'll do what I have to do to see us all through this."

"I know," Bruce said, suddenly struggling to swallow against another lump in his throat. He sighed. "And when it comes to it, so will I."

Jason shifted down the wall a bit, going for fatigued and uncomfortable. Bruce wisely kept his fatherly contentment to himself when Jason's cheek rested against his shoulder. The younger man reached across his father to tug on the back of Tim's sweatshirt. "How're you holding up, baby bird?"

Tim made a non-committal grunting sound and wrapped his arms around Bruce's legs, securing his support/pillow in place. Jason didn't take offense to the non-response. Instead, he exhaled slowly and Bruce imagined that his eyes had slipped shut, his head still propped against Bruce's shoulder. Bruce wished he had four arms so that he could hold each of his sons, but he had to content himself by holding two at a time.

Damian returned with a browning apple and white toast and clambered back into his father's lap. Bruce wanted to turn up his nose at the nearly spoiled food, but he'd be a bigger hypocrite than he already was if he forbade his sons from stealing and then refused to eat what little they had scavenged. He took his share of the food and carefully ate around the bruises and discarded the hardened crust of the bread.

"Timmy, it's food time," Dick cajoled, pulling on his younger brother's arm to get the boy to sit up.

"I'm good," the teenager replied.

"You're not 'good'," Jason argued. "It's been hours since we last ate and your stomach has been growling just as loudly as the rest of ours."
"Come on, baby bird," Dick insisted.

"I just want to sleep," Tim protested shortly.

"Listen, runt--"

"Shh," Bruce interjected. He shook his head briefly at Jason, silently asking that the eighteen-year-old let him handle the brewing altercation. "May I borrow your pocket knife?" Jason shifted irritably and handed it over. Bruce lifted Damian over onto Jason, much to both of their displeasures, and leaned forward so he could manhandle Tim into a reclining position.

"Leave me alone," Tim demanded. The teenager's mood was turning sour with the unwanted attention.

"You can eat under your own power, or I will force feed you," Bruce said. For all that Tim was usually his most mature son, despite his age, occasionally he had his moments of childish rebellion. Bruce didn't have the patience for stubbornness right then.

"I'm not being difficult," Tim argued. "I'm honestly not hungry right now."

Bruce scored through the soft flesh of the apple a bit more aggressively than necessary, causing apple juice to run tackily down the blade of the knife. He held the first chunk of fruit up to Tim's mouth. "Open," he ordered in Batman's voice. Tim scowled but did as he was told. Bruce continued to cut up the apple until Tim had unhappily consumed all of it. His protest against the bread was likewise overridden, and the teen's countenance grew darker with every bite he was ordered to eat. All Bruce cared about was that his son who was the most likely to get sick kept up his strength, whether or not Tim liked it.

The cold was enough to keep Tim in place between his adoptive father and Dick, though the angry waves of frustration coming off of him like a bad odor made it clear that he'd much prefer to stomp away in a huff and not give any of them the time of day for a long time. Damian returned to his preferred seat on top of Bruce the moment that the once-billionaire handed back the soiled knife. It would be up to their shared body heat to keep them warm throughout the night, since they had no blankets. Bruce vowed to make it to the homeless shelter early enough the next day to avoid this situation from happening again.

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Bruce expected to wake up chilled to the bone. He was pleasantly surprised a few hours later when his only complaint was a sore neck and back from leaning against the wall. To his left, both Damian and Jason slept soundly, looking far younger than they did when awake. Both had pale faces and the beginnings of a bluish tint to their lips, but he wasn't concerned about hypothermia quite yet. On his right, Dick appeared to be in the same state. Tim, squished between him and Dick, breathed unevenly and his pale face was flushed under the sheen of sweat that was also soaking into his already greasy hair.

"Damn it," Bruce swore under his breath. His family could never catch a break. Carefully, he scooted out from between Tim and Damian, making sure that each of the boys tilted toward their older brothers. Tim slept through Bruce pulling him up off of the floor, though Dick woke up at the loss of heat and pressure against his side. "Go back to sleep, chum," Bruce whispered. Dick nodded drowsily and moved over to lean against Damian.

Bruce set Tim down next to the plastic bag of their soiled suits and rummaged through it until he found his and Jason's jackets. He spread the silk-lined items over a relatively clear patch of floor,
then shifted Tim to lay prone over the fabric, at least keeping his head and upper body off of the grimy tiles.

"Alright, kid," Bruce said under his breath. The lights of the city beyond the dirty windows gave him just enough light to see by as he checked the teenager's vitals. The thermometer from the first aid kit salvaged from the trunk of the Bentley revealed that Tim was hovering around 100 degrees. At about the time that Bruce withdrew the simple thermometer, Tim woke up with a pitiful moan. "Hey," Bruce said, trying to gain his son's attention. Tim tried to push himself up with shaky arms, but he could barely summon the strength to roll away from Bruce, getting his knees underneath himself just enough to lift his torso off of the floor. He was sick a moment later.

"What's going on?" Jason asked, sounding more alert than Dick had been a few minutes earlier. Bruce could barely see his other three son's faces across the room from where he knelt behind Tim, holding the teenager up so he didn't collapse in his own mess. The sounds of the fifteen-year-old's nausea had awoken the others.

"That's disgusting, Drake," Damian complained, cupping his hands over his face.

"Stop it," Dick admonished, elbowing his youngest brother.

Tim didn't have much to give up, but his stomach continued to try through a series of miserable sounding dry heaves. Bruce's frustration at being able to do nothing to ease his son's suffering boiled into anger deep within him. He wished that whatever virus plagued the boy before him was a sizeable creature that he could beat into submission with his fists.

Jason moved closer and handed Bruce the water bottle that they'd shared the night before. Without worrying about what they'd do when the liquid was gone, Bruce held it up to Tim's lips when the worst of the boy's shuddering had tapered off. "Spit," he coached after Tim had swished the water a few times around his mouth. After that, he settled into a seated position with his legs folded in front of him and pulled the slight teenager into his lap. Tim drank a few sips before pushing the bottle away.

Jason gathered some of the debris strewn about the abandoned unit and covered Tim's mess. It wouldn't do much to vanquish the smell, but at least it was hidden from sight. Bruce rocked slowly, holding his son close in order to impart as much body heat as he could. "Hold on, kid," he urged. "You're going to be fine."

Tears tracked down the boy's dusty cheeks, but his breathing didn't indicate that Tim was crying, so the tears were likely a by-product of the burning he had to be feeling in his throat and mouth. Tim kept one arm wrapped around his midsection and his other hand clutched tightly at the front of Bruce's shirt. "B…"

"Shhh. Just relax, kid."

"I told… you." Tim made another sound of discomfort. "Not hungry."

Bruce refused to feel guilty for making his son eat earlier that night. "Hush. You need to keep up your strength."

"What… strength?"

"Go to sleep," Bruce instructed.

"You should just… leave me behind," Tim mumbled. "I can't… get over…"
"No," Jason snapped before Bruce could respond the same. "We're all staying together, even if you puke over every inch of the floor."

Tim scrunched up his nose at the terrible sounding idea. Bruce lifted his left arm, supporting Tim's upper back, enough that he could kiss the boy's slick, overheated forehead. "I'm never letting you go, son," Bruce promised gravely. He looked over to where Dick and Damian were huddled together, expecting his youngest to actually agree with Tim for once. But Damian was silent and his eyes shadowed with concern as he watched his father and brother. At least that eased a bit of the ache growing in Bruce's heart.

_to be continued..._
"This is ridiculous," Jason complained as he glowered at the line of people hoping to score a night indoors at the homeless shelter. Bruce had made sure they arrived plenty early enough to be guaranteed beds, but that meant they were going to lose half of the day merely waiting in line. Dick had left them standing in the cold in order to search for food or employment, and a chorus of angry shouts had erupted when the young man tried to rejoin his family. Jason had had to reign Bruce in when the offended father had started describing to their fellow homeless peers just where they could go and how to get there. In the end, Dick remained with his family, but there were plenty of affronted sorts behind them in line.

The shelter was supposed to open in about an hour. Bruce's feet were sore from standing, but he wasn't about to start complaining about such a minor annoyance. He wasn't nearly as miserable as his third son, who was only still standing because Bruce had an arm wrapped securely around his back. Tim hugged Bruce tightly, his face hidden in the folds of the older man's cheap jacket. The teenager was still burning with a low-grade fever and was starting to develop a cough to go with it. Bruce fully intended to take advantage of the shelter's medical assistance program once he was sure that they would have beds to sleep in.

Damian alternated between hugging his father from behind and enduring one of Dick's enveloping holds. Bruce could see Jason twitching as he yearned for a cigarette, but that indulgence had been one of the first things Bruce had put his foot down against. Quitting cold turkey wasn't easy on Jason, and Bruce felt bad for his son's suffering, but he wasn't sad to see the habit go.

They finally reached the front of the line and Bruce requested beds for five. "How old are your sons," the shelter worker asked, glancing at each of the four younger men. "Twenty-two, eighteen, fifteen, and eleven," Bruce replied monotonously. The worker checked her computer screen and frowned at whatever it showed. "I have two family rooms still available, but they're small," she said. "Two beds each, but we could set up a third cot. We don't put children in the general dorms unless it's absolutely necessary."

"I have four sons," Bruce reminded her.

"Two of whom are adults," the worker said. "Here's a key to room 17. I've put in a request for the extra bed." Bruce took the keycard unhappily. The worker next offered two badges. "Here are passes to the general men's dorm on the third floor. Bedding and toiletries are at each bed." Next were five meal tickets. "Dinner starts at five."

"We need to stay together," Bruce argued.

"Dad," Dick said, resting a hand on Bruce's shoulder. "Jason and I will be fine. You just worry about the kids."

Bruce took the badges and meal tickets gruffly. He didn't feel bad about his attitude, though apparently Dick did enough to offer the woman a small smile. Bruce pulled Tim down the hall in the direction indicated by worker, the rest of his boys trailing closely behind him. The individual rooms appeared to be on the fifth floor, leaving the second, third, and fourth as general dormitories and the first for the shelter's other services. The first floor was also the location of the dining hall.

To Bruce's consternation, the elevator was manned by an employee who would only allow those
with the correct passes to disembark at each floor. Jason and Dick couldn't come up to the fifth floor with him, nor could he venture onto the third floor to inspect where his oldest two would be sleeping. He barely refrained from giving the burly man a piece of his mind, and only because Dick was talking a mile-a-minute to calm him down. "We'll meet you downstairs at five," Dick promised, looking directly into Bruce's narrowed eyes. "You trust me to take care of Jay, right?"

Jason snorted. Bruce forced himself to stop grinding his teeth. "Just be careful. Both of you."

"We will, Dad," Dick replied, half smirking at him. He glanced down at his youngest brother. "Behave, Lil' D."

"Take your own advice, Grayson," Damian replied. Bruce could tell that Damian was just as upset about the forced separation as he was. It didn't matter that Dick was twice as old as Damian. The little boy took after his father when it came to being fiercely protective of the charismatic youth. Now, if only Bruce could get Damian to feel the same way about his middle brothers.

The elevator attendant cleared his throat impatiently. Bruce scowled as Dick and Jason exited, leaving him with just his actual dependents. Tim's grip was rapidly losing strength and Bruce worried that the boy would faint before they reached their private room. He really hated this world they were trapped in.

Fortunately, Tim managed to finish the trek to room 17, though he rather fell onto the cot across from the door instead of lying down. Damian took a seat on the other bed, making a face at the comfort of the thin mattress. "It's better than what we had last night," Bruce said.

"I didn't say anything," Damian scowled. "This is stupid. Why can't Grayson and Todd stay with us?"

Bruce wasn't sure how they were going to fit a third cot into the closet-sized room, let alone three more. He appreciated that his younger boys wouldn't be mixed in with a bunch of strange adult men, and he knew that Dick and Jason were more than capable of taking care of themselves. This was probably for the best, even if he despised the separation. He told Damian as much. "Why don't you see what kind of toiletries are in the pouches," he said. Damian looked plenty put-out by the request, but he did as directed, leaving Bruce free to tend to Tim.

Bruce stripped Tim out of his outer layers, leaving the teenager in just his tee-shirt, jeans, and socks. There should be an on-site laundry facility, which he definitely planned to take advantage of. "You just can't give your old man's heart a break, can you, kid?" he asked as he ran his fingers through Tim's matted hair. Tim made face, but otherwise didn't respond. "We'll go down to the clinic after dinner."

"Father, how much time do we have before we're to meet Grayson?" Bruce checked on the cheap phone Jason had purchased a few days ago. It was nearly four, so a little over an hour. He needed to remember to plug in and charge the device. "I wish to take a shower."

"All right." Bruce smoothed his palm over Tim's hair once more before standing up. "We'll go check out the restroom." He wasn't surprised that it was communal, though at least there were separate men's and women's facilities. He'd like to get Tim cleaned up, too, but that would have to wait until the teenager could stand on his own.

He made sure he had the keycard and that the door was securely latched before he and Damian wandered toward the restrooms. Another shelter worker had clean, though thread-bare towels for them to use, and directed them to available shower stalls. Bruce greatly missed his luxury showerhead and well-appointed bathroom at Wayne Manor. He forced himself to push aside those
thoughts and be happy that at least the cramped stall had hot water. He quickly cleaned his hair and body with the all-in-one cleanser and dried off as well as he could before shrugging back on his old clothes. Yes, he was definitely going to do a load of laundry before going to bed.

Despite the speed of his shower, Damian still finished before him. Together, they walked back to their private closet, where Damian settled in with his brother's damaged tablet and Bruce sat down again at the foot of Tim's bed. He took a moment to lean his head back and close his eyes. It was warm in the shelter, it wouldn't rain or snow on them, his boys were going to eat a hot meal and get hot showers, and there were volunteer doctors and nurses on site that could help him combat Tim's latest illness. He had to count his blessings where he could.

His thoughts wandered then to Cassandra, as they'd been doing more often recently. He had no idea if time was moving at the same pace in the two universes. It was possible that only seconds had passed in his real world, and his butler, daughter, and friends didn't even know they were gone yet. If time was moving at the same rate, he was sure that Alfred was beyond worried, and Cassandra would be going on over a week without the support of her adoptive family. He didn't even dare think about the implications if time was moving more quickly back home, and Gotham had been without its bats for longer than a handful of days.

Five o'clock came surprisingly quickly. It had been made clear to Bruce that food wasn't to leave the dining room, so he had no choice but to drag his miserable teenager back downstairs to eat. The short nap seemed to have helped Tim a little, though he still hung on Bruce for support. Damian was too concerned with finding his oldest brother to worry about Bruce's attention being mostly delegated Tim's way.

Dick and Jason had also taken advantage of the time to shower, as well as to visit the clothing post. Each of the young men were sporting fresh clothes, a sight that lightened Bruce's heart more than it ever would have in their world. He'd be sure to drag Tim and Damian to the post before they headed back upstairs.

Dinner was uneventful. Damian stayed in the common areas on the first floor with his brothers while Bruce and Tim headed to the clinic. Tim hadn't said a word since arguing with Bruce over eating the apple and bread the night before, and then the few words he'd muttered after being ill. Tim was his quietest child, but even the reserved teenager usually had an opinion he didn't hesitate to share. The unfocused state of his gaze and clearly evident physical weakness greatly concerned his father.

The wait at this clinic was shorter than the last, probably since most of the visitors were still at dinner. A perky blonde RN who reminded Bruce of Stephanie Brown attended to them. "Wow, you don't look so good, cutie," she stated as she strapped the blood pressure cuff around Tim's upper arm. "Does he have a history of low blood pressure?" she asked a minute later, once the cuff had beeped. "Not that low," Bruce replied tiredly. He wished someone would just invent a miracle cure for all childhood illnesses so that he could stop worrying so much about his son's well-being. He helped Tim off of the examination table after the nurse drew the blood sample and together they slowly returned to the common area. He was torn between sequestering himself away in the private room upstairs so Tim could sleep and remaining downstairs where he could actually be with Jason and Dick.
Either way, he entered the crowded room and sought out his family. The three had claimed a couch along one wall and were flipping through a selection of dated magazines. When Bruce and Tim arrived at the couch, Dick reached for his little brother. Tim was fairly easy to manipulate right now, making it simple for Dick to situate the teenager in his lap and cuddle him protectively. "Why don't you and Dami check out the clothing store," his eldest suggested. Bruce understood that Dick was trying to give him a short break from dealing with Tim's illness and he appreciated the gesture even if he didn't truly feel burdened or inconvenienced. Tim didn't seem to mind being left with his brother, so Bruce agreed.

Dick was all too eager to find something to wear besides the hated yellow hoodie with the cartoon sponge on it. Bruce absentmindedly followed the eleven-year-old through the boy's section, his mind wandering tiredly as he tried to decide the best course of action for his family. They couldn't live in the homeless shelter forever, even if he never found a way back to their earth.

A dramatic sigh from his son drew Bruce out of his musings and he raised an eyebrow expectantly at the boy. Damian put back the shirt he'd pulled from the rack, his thin lips turned down into a frown. "I know that I cannot be picky, but there is nothing here that I could see myself wearing."

"What's wrong?"

"It is… I've never worn anything secondhand before, nor something that wasn't finely tailored." Damian looked genuinely upset at not being able to pick anything for himself. "If Grayson or Todd could see me, they would surely have unpleasant things to say about my character."

"I know this isn't what you're used to, son," Bruce replied. He brushed his hand over the top of Damian's head. Like his son, he'd always had brand new clothes of his own to wear, often from the most expensive youth clothiers in town. "Think of it as a disguise for an undercover mission."

"Am I really the bad person that Todd and Drake claim that I am?" Now Damian's chin was quivering. He turned away from his father and took steadying breaths to hold his emotions in check.

Bruce placed his hand on Damian's shoulder to turn the boy back towards him and then lifted his son off of the ground. Damian looped his arms tightly around Bruce's neck, sputtering unhappily at being held like a child. Still, he didn't try very hard to get Bruce to put him down. His weight settled on Bruce's left arm, supporting his rear end, and Bruce rubbed his back through the hated sweatshirt with his right hand. Damian, after making sure that none of his brothers had suddenly followed them into the store, relaxed slowly against his father's chest. "You're not a bad person, Damian. You were taught bad things by your mother and grandfather, but you've risen above those lessons. I still don't fully understand why you have such special dislike for Tim, but I can tell you're allowing other people to grow close to you."

"Grayson pesters me to exhaustion about being kind and compassionate to others," Damian groused. "Though I have found it useful when others do what I say without talking back or refusing altogether. It is more efficient."

"People are usually more willing to help you or do what you suggest when you are nice to them," Bruce agreed.

"Todd and Drake refuse to follow my commands, despite the fact that I have ceased to advocate their timely demises."

Bruce chuckled. "Well, I've heard that brothers and sisters can be challenging like that. Thankfully I never had to suffer the indignity of siblings."
"You are fortunate beyond your comprehension," Damian agreed. He dropped his chin on Bruce's shoulder as the man slowly made his way toward the men's section. Maybe if he could find something for himself, Damian would be more likely to put aside his misgivings at wearing secondhand clothing. Bruce fully planned to wash everything before wearing it, as he would have with new clothes from a store, too.

"Maybe not," Bruce said after a minute of introspection. "Growing up an only child was lonely at times. I wonder how I would have turned out if I'd had an older brother like Dick when I was young."

"Grayson is the only sibling you've foisted upon me that is remotely tolerable."

"I know Jason, Tim, and Cassandra have each had their moments," Bruce replied.

Damian scoffed. "If so, they have been few and far between." After a few seconds of silence, Damian sighed again. He pushed away from Bruce's shoulder so he could look his father in the eye. "Is... Drake going to survive this multiverse?"

"Yes," Bruce replied with conviction and without hesitation. "I will not let anything happen to him, or to any of you."

"I knew he was sickly before, what with his pathetic actions that led to the removal of his spleen, but this is becoming ridiculous." The words were callous, but Bruce could see and hear that Damian was worried about his older brother, even if he tried to hide it.

"Tim saved a lot of people the night that he was stabbed through the spleen," Bruce reminded Damian in a low voice so his words couldn't be overheard. "And I'll be forever grateful that losing an organ is the worst that happened to him."

"You love him a lot."

"I do."

"More than me?"

Bruce made a face. "Sometimes you talk like you're forty, Damian, but then you worry like an eleven-year-old."

"It is not that I am eleven that makes me question how much you care for me. Todd is also convinced that most of your love is reserved for Grayson, and then Drake."

They reached a rack of clothes that looked like it might have something suitable for Bruce, but he didn't set his son down right away. "Currently, you and Jason do tend to try my patience the most often, but since I brought Dick home as a child, the sum of our disagreements vastly outnumbers the ones I have had with you and Jason combined."

"You do not have disagreements with Drake."

"I do. Sometimes even he forgets that I am infallible and all-knowing." Damian snorted in amusement and shook his head at Bruce's smirk. "Damian, there is no contest as to whom I love most out of my children. You all have all of my love. Right now, Tim needs me a little more than the rest of you, but it doesn't mean that I love him more than you. You know this, even if you choose to not believe it."

"I suppose I shall have to compromise my immune system to get some attention, too."
"Don't be silly," Bruce chided. "I don't think my old heart could take it if another one of you were so miserable."

"You're not that old, Father."

"I think that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me, Damian," Bruce teased. He kissed his son's cheek and then set him down. Damian frowned and prepared to deny that statement until he realized that Bruce wasn't being serious. "You know, this is the first time during our current adventure that I haven't been terribly worried about the immediate future. Thank you, Damian."

"You are welcome, Father." Bruce smiled at him. "I shall inform Todd and the others that only I have reduced your stress, rather than added to it." Bruce rolled his eyes. He started shifting through the racks of clothes until he found a shirt and a pair of pants that looked nearly new and warm enough for the approaching winter. Damian located a winter ski coat for him, and together they sorted through a bin of winter gloves, scarves, and hats. Satisfied with what he'd found for himself, Bruce guided Damian back to the children's section. Led by his father's example, Damian was able to settle on his own clothes. He then helped Bruce find new items for Tim to wear, made easier since Bruce had prepared by inspecting the tags on his fifteen-year-old's tuxedo and determining his size ahead of time.

"Drake will probably be more comfortable in a bed," Damian observed as they approached the couch where Bruce's oldest three were waiting. "I shall sit with him while you wash these new clothes."

"I'm sure Tim will appreciate that," Bruce replied. The teenager in question was still curled up in Dick's lap with his feet draped over Jason's legs. He looked beyond miserable at being upright for so long. Damian took the bag that Bruce held so the man could lean down. "You ready to go to bed, kid?"

"Mm hm," Tim replied, neither looking at Bruce nor opening his eyes.

"Walk for me one more time, then," Bruce prompted. He helped Tim stand and wrapped a steadying arm around the teenager. Dick looked relieved to be out from under the overheated youth, though Bruce doubted his eldest would complain about getting to coddle one of his brothers.

"You turning in for the night, old man?" Jason asked as he stretched as far as he could while remaining seated.

"Just putting the kids to bed," Bruce replied. "I'll be back down in a bit and you two can help me wash clothes."

"That sounds like fun," Jason replied dryly.

"It is an inconvenience to have clean clothes," Bruce quipped.

On the fifth floor, in their even more cramped room now that the third cot had been added, Bruce stripped Tim down to his underwear and guided him in between the crisp sheets. He'd purposefully put Tim in the bed pushed into the far corner of the room. It was easy enough to slide the second bed right up against it, creating one larger sleeping space and opening up the floor a bit. Damian angled his cot so that it was perpendicular to Bruce's, with their heads close to each other. Damian undressed as well and settled into his bed, though he laid on his stomach so he could keep Tim in his sight while he was "in charge".

Bruce kissed both of his sons on the tops of their heads before gathering their meager wardrobe and
heading back downstairs.

to be continued...
Chapter Nineteen

Bruce met Jason and Dick in the on-site laundry facility. Bruce was struck by the smells of detergent as soon as he stepped through the door, the scent of bleach being the strongest. The laundry machines were coin operated, though the shelter provided quarters for a first load. It was tight, but Bruce was determined to fit all of their things in one load. He shook out a pair of black tuxedo pants, reflecting briefly on how small they were and how much he wished their owner was back home, safe in the manor. As he prepared to drop them into the top-loading washing machine, he caught the expression on Dick's face. "What?"

"I'm no Alfred, but I'm pretty sure those are dry clean only."

Bruce paused and eyed the wrinkled fabric critically. What would happen if he washed them? Would the damage be irreparable? Did it matter?

Jason snorted out a derisive laugh and grabbed the pants from his hands to ball up and toss into the metal tub. "They're already ruined, B. Alfred had a conniption if our formal wear was ever left draped over the back of a chair, let alone crumpled in a ball for almost a week."

"What about separating the darks from the lights?" asked Dick. He had pulled his own white dress shirt from the plastic bag of laundry and scratched at a drop of blood that had likely landed there after the car accident.

"Again - already ruined," Jason replied. "Though I hope you're not attached to it being white, because after a spin with Timmy's sweatshirt, it'll probably be pink." Jason shoved said hooded university pullover into the wash, as well. "If it's all the same to you, old man, I'd prefer to never wear any of this shit again once we're back home."

"Agreed," Bruce said, the corner of his mouth twitching upward at Jason referring to the manor as home.

"I can pull off pink," Dick decided, and added his shirt to the mix. "I am fashion forward."

Jason laughed out loud at that. Even Bruce smirked. "Dickiebird, Alfred's greatest contribution to mankind was revoking your clothing allowance and putting you back on the Wayne family plan."

"Alfred buys your clothes?" Bruce had thought Dick was more independent than that.

"Most of them," Dick grumbled. "But it makes him happy, so who I am to complain?"

"It makes his eyes not bleed," Jason teased. "And it makes all of us happy."

Bruce picked up the box of powdered laundry detergent and searched for the serving size. Was this load considered large or extra large? The machine was quite full, but it was possible that it wasn't overly big. He had the impression that the ones at the manor were bigger.

"Just put it all in," Jason suggested. He lowered the lid briefly in order to adjust the various knobs controlling the water temperature and degree of agitation. Bruce watched closely and committed to memory the selected combination. Jason hit the start button and the machine rumbled to life, filling with tepid water. "Wait for it to fill with water. We probably should have put the water in first, but
you jumped the gun, B."

Bruce grunted dismissively. He watched as the water slowly filled the tub, soaking their clothes in the process. At Jason's nod, he shook the powder evenly around the agitator. "Does Alfred buy your clothes, Jay?"

"No," Jason lightly punched Dick's shoulder. "Unlike the rest of you pampered assholes, I'm a fully functioning adult."

"Ow," Dick complained, even though it couldn't have possibly hurt. "I function. I lived in a whole other city by myself, remember?"

"Yes, and we just talked about how Alfred revoked your grown-up card after that, remember?" Jason lifted himself onto the narrow folding table against the opposite wall of the laundry room and leaned back against the wall. There were a couple of chairs nearby for the shelter residents' use while they waited for the laundry cycles to complete. Bruce took his own seat, realizing belatedly that they probably needed to keep an eye on their belongings or risk them being stolen.

Bruce preferred having Dick closer, even if he maintained an apartment inside the Gotham city limits. It didn't really matter, since Dick spent a lot of time at the manor anyway, in an effort to bond with his youngest siblings. "You don't have to be a fully functioning adult, Jason," he said after a minute of quiet. "You can move back home. I'll take care of you."

Jason shook his head quickly. "Thanks but no thanks. There's a reason Dickhead is as fucked up as he is."

"What! Jaybird, that's not nice at all. I am not messed up."

"It's not completely your fault," Jason said patronizingly. Bruce frowned at the smirk Jason sent his way.

"Are you implying that I'm not a fully functioning adult, brat?"

Jason shrugged. "You don't know how to do your own laundry."

Bruce sighed, long-suffering. "It's not that I don't know how to do laundry. I'm just out of practice."

Neither of his boys looked convinced.

Dick leaned back against the faded wall tiles and hugged himself loosely. "We'll have to put all of this to the test when we get back," he said, though there was a hint of something in his voice that led Bruce to think Dick's confidence in their return was being shaken.

"We will," said Bruce with firm confidence. The trick was just going to be figuring out how. "We'll get on our feet here, and then focus on figuring out why we're here." He summarized his suspicions about why they were there to his older sons.

"When we find the asshat who dragged us here, I'm going to punch his lights out, twice," Jason said angrily. "Once for myself, and once for the runt."

"What about the rest of us?" Dick asked.

"I'm sure you'll want your own turn."

"Me first," Bruce decided. And his first hit would be for all of his boys.
The washing machine's vibrating hum grew louder as it entered the final spin cycle. A few minutes later, it ground to a halt and emitted a pitched tone to indicate that it was done. Bruce pulled their damp clothes out one-by-one and handed them to Jason, who shook each piece out a few times before passing them on to Dick. The eldest brother tossed the clothes into the dryer they'd claimed. Once everything was transferred, Jason adjusted the few available settings and inserted the rest of their quarters. The dryer wasn't quite as loud as the washer had been, though the clinks of various zipper and buttons against the metal drum were audible now.

The trio sat in a companionable silence for the first part of the drying time. A few more shelter visitors entered the tight space, laden down with trash bags or worn suitcases filled with their own clothes. Bruce and his sons drew a few curious looks, but no one bothered them. Once their load had finished, his boys helped Bruce shake out and fold the clothes, dividing the garments between their respective wearers.

Bruce was loath to part with his older boys, and once more earned the ire of the elevator attendant by drawing out his good-nights. "B, we're going to be fine," promised Dick. "And I have the second phone, so if anything does go wrong, you'll be the first to know."

"Fine," Bruce said unhappily. "Sleep well."

"You too. Give the kiddos a hug and kiss for me." Bruce grunted in what possibly could be mistaken for agreement.

"Night, old man," said Jason.

"Good-night, Jaybird."

The elevator door closed after Dick and Jason exited, taking the measure of peace that Bruce felt with them. He frowned at the inside face of the sliding doors during the few seconds that it took to reach the floor of more private family rooms. When they opened once more, Bruce dipped his head in tired acknowledgement of the attendant and then stepped into the dimly lit hall that smelled vaguely of must and strongly of cleaning products. The heavy feeling of responsibility weighed on him as he trekked toward room 17.

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That night, thunder rumbled through the late and early hours, shaking the shelter itself. Bruce laid on his back, staring up at the paneled ceiling which was nearly continuously lit by the lightning outside. The thin curtain covering the small window at the foot of his cot did little to block the bursts of light. Tim's face was pressed against the side of his chest, which may have helped shield his eyes but did nothing to banish the noise. The teenager shuddered intermittently, all the more miserable for being denied the ability to sleep through the worst of his illness. It rankled Bruce that he could do nothing for his son.

Perpendicular to his cot, Damian tossed and turned on his own, likewise denied sleep thanks to the storm. At least they were in a safe, dry place. Bruce had no doubt that the building in which they'd squatted the night before had no shortage of leaks. "Damian." Bruce kept his voice just low enough be heard over the lingering rumbles of the latest thunderbolt.

"I hate this world," Damian complained with a whine that Bruce rarely heard from his youngest. Damian actually sounded eleven years old. "I want to go home."

Bruce usually didn't believe in false assurances. He had no idea how to get his family back to their
world, and each day homeless and nearly penniless eroded that much more of his hope. But he couldn't help himself from saying, "We will, son."

Damian slid off of his own bed and a moment later was climbing onto the narrow stretch of thin mattress between Bruce and the edge of his cot. The storm was making him miserable enough that he barely minded the corded edge of his mattress pressing against his back as he shifted to lay across the narrow gap between his and Tim's beds, to make room for Damian. Tim made an unhappy sound at being shifted around and his breathing remained uneven once Bruce had him settled with his head on the older man's shoulder. Damian mirrored his brother's position on Bruce's right side.

"I hate this," Damian repeated, his voice watery. "Why won't stupid Drake get better?"

"He's okay," Bruce soothed. "You're both okay."

Damian's snuffles outlasted the end of the storm, though not by much. Bruce now stared up at the ceiling in the near darkness, the room more dimly lit by the city lights than it'd been by the lightning. He listened to Tim's struggles to breathe and Damian's quieter inhales and exhales until the sun cleared the horizon and the phone beeped in warning that breakfast would soon be served.

xXx

Jason and Dick didn't look like they'd slept well either. Dick gripped his paper cup of cheap coffee like a lifeline while Jason's fingers twitched regularly as he suffered through a bout of nicotine withdrawal. Bruce sat down heavily across from them, followed by a sullen Damian. "The storm keep you up, too?" Of course it had. None of his boys were particularly heavy sleepers, even when they were safely tucked away in the manor.

"Did something else happen?" Bruce asked.

"I took care of it," Jason said at the same time that Dick said, "No." Dick turned his head to glare at the teenager.

"What?" Bruce insisted. The fact that the boys hadn't been kicked out of the shelter gave Bruce hope that Jason hadn't "taken care of it" with brute force. Still, it was never a good sign when Jason uttered those words.

"It was nothing, B," Dick finally said. "How'd you sleep, Little D?" he asked with false cheeriness.

Bruce frowned deeply and resolved to hear what had happened, however minor Dick wanted him to believe it was. Given that Dick wasn't acting overly protective of Jason made Bruce believe that whatever it was, it hadn't been directed at the younger man. That just made Bruce's protective instincts flare sharply for his first Robin.

"I didn't." Damian groused. "Between the storm and Drake's incessant wheezing, it was much too loud in the room."

"Where is Timmy?" Dick questioned.

Damian didn't pause in shredding one of Jason's extra paper napkins. "As always, he is too lazy to rise and act productively."

"You're such a little shit," Jason grumbled.
Damian's face scrunched up in what would have looked like the onset of a tantrum if Damian were prone to such things in such a public setting. "I am not--"

"Stop it," Bruce ordered. He was not in the mood for their bickering. "Tim is finally sleeping and Damian's lack of rest is a direct result of his worrying for his brother's health."

Damian scowled but didn't deny it. Dick smiled fondly at his youngest brother. Jason shook his head and went back to picking at the diced fruit on his paper plate.

"What's the plan for today, pops?" Dick asked, to break the silence and keep the conversation off of whatever he'd had to deal with the night before.

"I'm going to speak to the director about getting a larger family room," Bruce replied. "Then we shall see about a source of income."

Dick's fingers tightened around his cup, crushing it slightly. Bruce narrowed his eyes, studying the unhelpful evidence with frustration. Jason cleared his throat and smiled, wide and fake. "Take Dickie with you. I'll watch the kids for a couple of hours."

"Jace…" Dick protested, but Bruce was quick to agree. His eldest was terrible at keeping secrets from him, a fact he fully planned to exploit once they had some privacy.

"Here," Bruce offered, handing over his pass to the fifth floor. "See if you can't sneak some food upstairs for later." Jason was very good at covertly hoarding food, a talent Bruce both lamented and admired.

"You really want to leave the three of them alone together?" Dick asked tiredly.

"Shut up, Dickface," Jason complained. "I can do the big brother thing just as well as you can." Dick snorted at that.

"Boys…" Bruce swallowed a yawn and pushed his chair back from the table. "Come on, chum."

Dick reluctantly rose as well and Bruce waited for his eldest to step past him so that Dick could lead the way to the administrative offices.

_to be continued..._
Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty

There were still no available private rooms large enough for the five of them, a fact that Bruce had to swallow bitterly. His lack of sleep, his constant worrying, and his mounting stress were nearly more than he could control, and it took every ounce of his willpower not to vent his frustration on the unhelpful social worker. Perhaps he and Dick could walk about a bit before seeking out employment, to give him time to cool his temper.

Plenty of the shelter residents had wandered outside to take in the chill sunlight after finishing their breakfasts. Others had spread out further, taking up panhandling spots on nearby corners. One such man, with a ragged beard and gap-toothed sneer, loitered half of a dozen blocks from the shelter. The man leered as they drew closer and Bruce instinctively situated himself between the stranger and his son. His warning glare didn't faze the man.

"Hey, pretty boy," called the stranger, followed by a sick chuckle. "Pretty, pretty boy. Where's your pro-pro-protector?"

"Fuck off," Dick snapped, uncharacteristically. Bruce stopped, too surprised at the interaction to allow it to go unmarked. Dick kept walking until Bruce threw out an arm to stop him, keeping the younger man shielded behind him.

The stranger laughed, reminding Bruce too much of the Joker. "Rich folks like pretty things." He pointed across the street where a Mercedes was pulling away from the curb, leaving a scantily clad girl shivering on the sidewalk. "Pretty boy."

The thin wire holding together Bruce's control snapped. In less than a heartbeat, he was in the man's personal space, his large hands fisted in the lapels of the worn corduroy jacket. The man's sour odor washed over Bruce. Thankfully, the laughter stopped when Bruce slammed him backward against a light pole. "Do not ever speak to my son that way again," he ordered in Batman's voice. It wasn't quite the same as when he wore the cape and cowl, but the man seemed to take the hint.

Or not. "Maybe your boy's pretty enough to catch a Mercedes, too."

Bruce's knuckles were smarting from the punch before he even realized he'd delivered it. The man slumped against the light pole, down to the littered sidewalk. "B!" Dick exclaimed from behind him. Bruce spun around and grabbed Dick by the arm, propelling him into the narrow alley at the far end of the block. "Bruce--"

"He was in the common room at the shelter last night," Bruce said, anger preventing him from completely letting go of the Bat. His fingers curled into fists against the brick wall where he braced himself, one arm on either side of his oldest child.

"I'm fine," Dick said, pushing lightly against Bruce's chest, but the larger man wasn't ready to be budged. "He left me alone after Jason threatened him, and even if he hadn't, you know I can take care of myself."

"What did he say to you?"

"You're just going to go back and beat the shit out of him."
"Richard."

"Bruce." Batman's growl. Dick exhaled loudly. "You're such a Neanderthal," Dick complained. "He was just spouting shit about how I could earn my keep working the street corners. It's not like I haven't heard that before, you know."

"I will never allow that," Bruce said, furious.

"It's not high on my list, either."

Beating the man he'd left unconscious to a bloody pulp would probably get his family permanently banned from the shelter, himself arrested, and his dependent children shipped off to foster care. Bruce took a series of deep breaths to smooth the edges of his anger, but didn't move out of his hunched pose against the wall until Dick shifted uncomfortably within the confines of Bruce's arms. Bruce smirked, losing another measure of his ire. "You're shirking the chance to be close to one of us?"

"It's not as nice when you're as riled as a bull facing down a red blanket," Dick replied dryly. He hugged himself, rubbing briefly at his own arms to generate a bit of heat. Even with their upgraded winter wear, the cold air was biting.

Bruce exhaled pointedly again. When he pulled his eldest into a protective hug, Dick melted into him easily. It killed another clump of fury wedged in his gut. "I'm going to take care of you. All of you. I'll walk back on my vow to not break the law and help Jason rob a bank if I have to." He conveniently ignored the fact that he'd just assaulted another man.

"I'm not sure if Jason would be offended or pleased that you'd think of him first for something so criminal," Dick said with a small laugh. "Knowing Jason, he'd be all for it."

Letting Dick go with a brief kiss to his temple, Bruce muttered, "That boy will be the death of me some day."

"Not Damian?"

He pretended to ponder the various ways his second and fourth sons did their best to turn his hair gray and drive his heart rate dangerously high. "He would, but Jason will do me in first." A surge of warmth in his chest, rare but not unfamiliar, caused him to smile at Dick. "I love you, chum."

"Love you too, old man," Dick replied. "You know, for as much as this universe royally sucks, it's had an interesting effect on you, B."

"Constant stress does that to a man."

"Sure, but that's not what I mean. In our world, we all know that you care about us, but you're never so forthright about it. I think I can count on one hand the number of times I've ever gotten an unsolicited 'I love you' before today."

Bruce realized that Dick was right. He was rarely vocal about his affection for his children unless prompted by Alfred or Dick. He was protective of the ones he'd trained to wear Robin's colors, and enjoyed parental feelings when his boys and girl succeeded. But he'd never really felt such a constant fatherly need to protect and nurture his protégés like he did here. Each of his children were fully capable of taking care of themselves, which they'd proven numerous times. Yes, Damian depended on him for basic needs like food and shelter, but if necessary his eleven-year-old could provide for himself.
Now, there was no doubt that Tim was one hundred percent dependent on Bruce to take care of him, and that had crumbled the protective walls around Bruce's heart more quickly than he liked to admit. It had left the way to his vulnerable inner-self wide open to his other three sons, and they had each taken advantage of that in their own ways. He didn't mind like he probably would have previously. After all, he'd built the walls to protect himself for a reason. Loving other people hurt a lot. Dick was brave enough to face that pain head-on. Bruce cowered from it pitifully.

Dick touched his wrist. "Did I break you?"

"No," Bruce responded. "Just thinking about how you're right." That made Dick grin widely. Bruce was searching for a clever way to put the younger man back in his place, since it just wouldn't do for the Batman to not be infallible, when the cheap flip phone in his pocket started buzzing. The lightness he'd felt a moment before was crushed under a new bout of worry. Jason wouldn't call him just to chat.

"Yup," said Dick, popping the P cheekily. "Those three alone together could only be explosive."

Bruce shot him a dark look that failed to quell Dick's mirth while he pressed the talk button on his phone. The sound of Damian shrieking caused him to jerk the phone away from his ear. It was loud enough that Dick could hear, too, and while his smug expression stayed on his face, it grew tempered with concern.

"Come back," Jason rasped, closer to his phone's microphone but barely as loud as Damian in the background. "Dami, shut the fuck up!"

"What's going on?" Bruce demanded. He didn't bother stumbling through the motions of looking calm and collected, but simply started running back the way they'd come. Dick easily kept up with him. In the background of the call, he finally deciphered Damian's repetitive shouts. His youngest was making it no secret that he hated this version of New York and this universe at large. The fresh sound of sirens joined the cacophony and Bruce nearly stumbled.

"I got to go," Jason said instead of answering. The phone call ended abruptly, but by now he could hear the sirens himself. He and Dick rounded the corner to the homeless shelter just as the back doors of the ambulance sprung open and two paramedics jumped out, lugging a stretcher between them.

Social workers tried to clear curious spectators back from the entrance to the shelter so that the emergency responders could work. A fire truck parked next, and a handful of firemen hurried into the building as well. There was no evidence of smoke from any part of the building, but Bruce gathered that in this world, just as in his own, the fire department typically accompanied 9-1-1 responses.

"What's going on?" Bruce demanded of the shelter worker who refused to get out of his way.

"Calm down, sir. You'll be able to re-enter the facility shortly."

Bruce didn't know for sure that the emergency concerned one of his sons, but it seemed likely. The knot of dread in his stomach all but confirmed it. He had nearly convinced himself that Jason and Damian had fought and the altercation had turned violent as it usually did between those two. Hope that the two could behave considering their circumstances was apparently wasted. He imagined Jason bleeding out with a katana through his chest, somehow remembering that his second son was without his armor but not that Damian was without his favorite weapon. Or, Jason had finally made good on his threat to put a bullet through Damian (non-lethally, or Damian wouldn't make such a ruckus), despite that being equally impossible.
"That's my son!" Bruce shouted. All of the calm he'd achieved with Dick a few minutes ago was completely gone. His chest hurt with how hard his heart was beating.

The man had the decency to look sympathetic, but not enough to let Bruce pass. "I'm sorry, sir."

He was totally going to make a scene. 'Brucie' surged to the forefront of his consciousness and he entered a rant that his playboy billionaire alter-ego would gape at. He was every ounce the spoiled, rich diva of his world, despite being homeless and penniless in this universe.

Clearly used to dealing with salty sorts, the social worker held his ground until Bruce was distracted by a high-pitched voice shouting, "Father!" Bruce barely turned in time to catch Damian mid-leap. His youngest clung to him, choking on sobs and making a huge mess on his father's overcoat. "I hate…" Damian couldn't finish his statement, too breathless to string the words together, and then dissolved into uncontrollable weeping. Bruce could barely juggle the eleven-year-old, but he somehow managed while simultaneously checking for bullet holes. As far as he could tell, Damian was whole and his blood remained inside of him as it should.

The first responders exited the shelter then, led by two firefighters. It was impossible to see the small form strapped to the stretcher, face obscured by an oxygen mask, but Bruce had no trouble identifying the eighteen-year-old with the white knuckle grip on the backboard. Bruce's frantically beating heart stopped with the crescendo of Damian's wailing.

In the blink of an eye, Bruce was next to the stretcher. The EMT he'd rudely shoved aside fought back, pulling on Bruce's arm to drag him back. "He's mine!" Bruce roared, reaching for the lifeless form shrouded in crisp white sheets that matched the hue of Tim's complexion. That caught the attention of one of the firefighters, a beefy man in his thirties that didn't have much trouble hauling Bruce back from his son's side.

"You're his father?" the man asked.

"What happened?" Bruce demanded. The stretcher was lifted into the back of the ambulance. "I need to go--"

Somehow, Damian managed to scream louder, causing Bruce's ear to ring painfully. The boy's chokehold tightened around his neck and Bruce despaired at knowing he'd never be able to pry his youngest off of him in order to jump into the ambulance, too. He wanted to scream himself when Dick climbed in with his little brother instead, and the doors slammed shut. A moment later, it pulled away from the curb.

"What's your name, sir?" asked the firefighter.

"Bruce Wayne." The answer didn't come from the once-billionaire. Jason's voice was just as hoarse as it had been on the phone, and eerily monotone as if his second son had no energy left to speak with any inflection. "He's our dad. The kid in the bus is my little brother, Tim."

"You're the one who called 9-1-1," the fireman stated. He paused in his note taking to look over Jason briefly, frowning at the teenager's countenance. Bruce eyed his son, too, pleased with how blood-free he was, but not with the paleness that made up for it. "Are you okay, son?" Jason nodded slowly. "On the phone, you told the operator that your brother… Tim… wasn't breathing. When we arrived, he was breathing on his own."

"I… we all know CPR," Jason replied. He motioned vaguely toward Bruce. "He insists."

"You administered CPR? For how long?"
"Two minutes," Jason answered. He glanced at his wristwatch. "Fuck, it felt like ten years."

Bruce shifted Damian to one arm so he could draw Jason into his side with the other. Damian was quieter now, mumbling about how he hated this world in between hiccups. "Good boy," Bruce said, squeezing the teenager protectively. "Tell me what happened, Jaybird," he instructed firmly, in the voice Batman reserved for Robin.

"The brat and I were arguing over the rules of War." It took Bruce a second to gather that Jason meant the card game, not the actual act of going into battle. "Tim was sleeping, breathing like each fucking breath was a mountain to overcome, and then… he wasn't." Jason's fingers curled into Bruce's coat, holding tightly. "Fuck, B."

"You did everything right, Jason," Bruce promised him. "Thank you so much." He looked back at the firefighter. "Can we go now? I need to get to my little boy."

"They're taking him to Mercy General," said the first responder. He reached into his own pocket and withdrew a fifty-dollar bill. "Call a taxi."

_to be continued..._
Chapter Twenty-One

Bruce was so tired. His eyes burned and the world swam around his peripheral vision. The beeps of the machines hooked up to his fifteen-year-old and the din of the world outside the curtains cloaking the ER gurney sounded weak, like he was hearing them from underwater. It had been hours since the sterile, bleach-like smell had turned his nose blind to itself. Still, he remained awake, with one arm braced on the plastic mattress to hold him upright. He rhythmically smoothed Tim's dark hair back from his impossibly pale forehead, memorizing the boy's features all over again. If his son didn't survive this unexpected trip through the multiverse, he would never forgive... He didn't even know who was to blame for his being here. That made it all the worse, without a place to direct his fury and hurt.

"Mr. Wayne?"

Bruce jerked slightly, not expecting the soft sound of the doctor's voice. However, his motions were fluid as he turned toward her. "Yes," he replied with what was left of his voice.

"I am Dr. Keller." She didn't seem bothered that Bruce didn't rise to greet her, the way he'd been taught by first his father, and then Alfred. He didn't think his legs could support him right then. "I'm one of the physicians on duty tonight in the ER."

"What's wrong with him?" Bruce asked. He'd thought he was dealing with the flu, or pneumonia at the worst. Not something that would steal his precious child from him in the middle of a crisp fall morning.

"You have a very sick young man on your hands, Mr. Wayne," the doctor said. There was a hint of accusation in her voice and Bruce almost felt like he deserved it, except that...

"I've taken him to the doctor twice in the last week," Bruce said. "He's on his antibiotics for his splenectomy. They prescribed him medication for the flu." He'd never sounded so broken to his own ears as he did then, trying to make this doctor believe that he'd done everything he could for his son, considering the position he was in.

"I'm aware of your situation," the doctor said. "Free clinics, by their very nature, tend to avoid asking hard questions. Confrontation doesn't bother me." By the tone of her voice, she was serious. "How long has he been sick, Mr. Wayne?"

Bruce took a moment to count back the days since the night they'd landed in the ditch outside of a small, paranoid town. "Six days, Doctor. He caught the flu after spending too much time in the cold. Two of my other boys did, as well. They are fine now, but I don't know why Tim isn't getting better. I thought it was that he missed a few doses of his antibiotics, but he's been on them for a few days now."

"Based on what I can see in Timothy's blood work and the results of his brief physical, his health has been subpar for much longer than six days, Mr. Wayne."

Bruce thought about Tim's habit of regularly forcing himself to stay awake for days on end, surviving on coffee, energy drinks, and Cheetos. It hadn't really affected his work as Red Robin, nor his grades at school, so Bruce had let the boy make his own decisions with respect to his health. Now, Bruce vowed that he was never letting Tim drink another caffeinated beverage until he turned
twenty-five. Even dark chocolate was potentially off the table.

"Before we lost everything," Bruce explained, borrowing from the story he'd told the nurses at the free clinics he'd taken Tim to previously, "I was a bit of a workaholic. Tim learned that from me. It's true that I failed to make him go to bed at a decent hour each night, and let him skip a few meals while under the impression that he'd feed himself when he'd finished his homework." It wasn't hard to look as regretful as he should be. He wished he could take back the last few years. Hell, why not the past decade while he was at it?

The doctor sighed, her confrontational posture smoothing out into a more caring one that better befit her occupation. "We'll get him back on his feet. In a perfect world, I wouldn't let him go until he was back to 100%, but the world isn't perfect." Bruce knew that the hospital was going to kick them out as soon as Tim was no longer in imminent danger of slipping away. Back in their world, his son would have gotten the best medical attention Gotham City could offer, and if that wasn't good enough, Bruce would send him somewhere better, anywhere in the world. Here, the hospital would honor its doctors' Hippocratic oaths, but cut its losses as soon as possible.

He turned away from the doctor to look upon his son again, whose breathing was still labored but not as badly as before. "Mr. Wayne," the doctor spoke. Her voice was low, sympathetic, but firm. "If you can't take care of him, or his siblings, perhaps you should consider giving them to someone who can."

The muscles in his back tensed to the point that a sharp twinge shot down his spine. "The boys are all I have left. I absolutely will not give any of them up." She seemed to understand that he was serious, what with Batman's growl leaking into his voice and all.

"Then let's get this one better," she responded. "But if I find out that nothing has changed, or if I see him in here again, you very much better expect a visit from Protective Services, Mr. Wayne." Bruce had to sit back to give her room to check Tim's vitals and compare what she was currently seeing to the notes in Tim's thin medical records. After she left, Bruce rested his weary head on the mattress near Tim's shoulder for just a moment. The moisture leaking from the corner of his eyes could easily be attributed to fatigue should anyone notice.

xXx

"Hey, pops," said Jason, in a voice too realistic to belong to the flickering version of himself standing in the library of Wayne Manor beside Bruce. Bruce blinked, and then the manor was gone, replaced by the harsh light of the emergency room and the loud background noise. Equally tired blue-green eyes stared back at him. "You were supposed to let the rest of us horribly worried people know what's going on. Instead, you're sleeping on the job."

Bruce sat up and rubbed at his face, grimacing as his palms caught on the thick scruff at his jaw. "Jay," he said to buy time while he tried to clear out his mental cobwebs. "Where are Dick and Damian?"

"Superbrat finally cried himself to sleep about an hour ago. Dickie wants to take him back to the shelter. I'm here to relieve you of your bedside vigil duties so you can sleep, too."

"No," Bruce denied. "I need to be here."

"B, you're running on empty. You'll be the next one to pass out if you're not careful, and that is the last thing we need. Baby bat might go apoplectic on us if that happens."

"I'll be fine. I promise." Bruce rose so he could stretch and pop the stiffness out of his spine. Jason
frowned deeply at him. Bruce was used to fielding looks of disappointment from his various family members, and the boys had nothing on Alfred, so he easily ignored the look. Taking advantage of Jason's proximity, he dragged the teenager into a hug. Jason resisted, of course, squawking about personal boundaries and his bad boy image. "Thank you," Bruce whispered directly into his ear. Jason stilled, relaxed into the embrace. "Thank you so much for saving him. I love you, Jay."

He let Jason go the next time his son pushed against him. "You're welcome, old man. Besides, I've heard what an asshole you become when one of us dies on you."

"Do not even joke about that," Bruce scolded. Jason shrugged and looked a little sheepish. "Go with Dick and Damian. You can all sleep in the family room now. I'll call you if anything changes with Tim."

"You need to take care of yourself, too," Jason argued.

"I know. But right now I can't leave him here without me." Jason looked unhappy, but he gave in. His own fatigue made it easier for Bruce to overcome his objections. "Call me when you're all settled in." Jason nodded and then he was gone.

xXx

It was the middle of the next afternoon when Tim finally woke for more than a few disoriented minutes at a time. His color had slowly improved during the evening, night, and morning. Bruce's short, uncomfortable naps in the plastic chair at his son's bedside barely kept him going, but he'd wanted to be the first person Tim recognized upon waking.

"Hey, kid," Bruce said. He cleared his throat to hopefully remove some of the gruffness. "How are you feeling?" He brushed Tim's oily bangs back from his forehead. The teenager desperately needed a bath, but that would have to wait until they were back at the shelter.

"Tired," Tim answered.

"You've slept for over twenty hours," Bruce told him.

"What happened? Where... are we?" The constant noise from the rest of the ER beyond the privacy curtain must have finally registered with the teenager.

"The hospital," Bruce replied. "You took a turn for the worse. Scared us all pretty badly, but I can now say for certain that your little brother does indeed want to keep you around." His smile was strained, though Tim didn't seem to notice as he made a face at the unbelievable proclamation. His sons had shown up in the ER again first thing that morning, though they couldn't all crowd into Tim's area at the same time.

"I don't... The last thing I remember is you and Damian leaving for breakfast."

"I'm surprised you even remember that. You've been pretty out of it, kid."

"Huh."

The curtain brushed aside, revealing Bruce's eldest. Dick's mouth was already open in preparation to scold him yet again for being a stubborn mule about getting something to eat and sleeping in a bed. He did a double take when he noticed Tim's blue eyes were open. "Timmy!" Dick was instantly at his brother's side, crushing him in a hug that pulled him halfway off of the mattress. "Thank goodness." He let Tim go enough that he could cup the teenager's face in his hands and drag him forward for a kiss on the forehead.
"Dick," Tim protested, pushing weakly at his older brother.

Dick's happiness morphed into tempered anger. "Don't you ever scare us like that again, baby bird. *Gods.* He took advantage of the hold he still had on the smaller male to kiss him again. "Never again, Timmy."

"*Okay.*" Dick finally let Tim go at the sound of the teenager's whine. "I don't even know what happened."

Dick glanced at Bruce for confirmation. The exhausted father nodded to validate Tim's statement. "I don't know if I should tell you, or let Jason do the honors."

"Right now, you both need to let him rest," Bruce said, nudging Dick out of reach of Tim. His younger son settled weakly back against his pillow. "Did you get lunch?"

"We did, yes," Dick replied, accusation heavy in his tone. "Did you?"

"I will in a minute," Bruce said dismissively. He pushed a few locks of dark hair behind Tim's ear, only to have it trapped when Tim leaned into the caress, pinning Bruce's hand between his cheek and the pillow as he settled onto his side. "You going back to sleep, kid?"

"Tired." Bruce leaned in to press his own kiss to the boy's cheek, earning a disgruntled sound from the teenager. "You're too scruffy, Bruce."

"How about I sit with him for a couple of hours while you eat, shower, and shave," Dick suggested. He pulled the hospital blanket further up Tim's thin frame.

"Is that all right with you, kid?" Bruce asked.

"Mm hm," Tim hummed, mostly asleep again. He didn't protest when Bruce pulled his hand back. Bruce grudgingly stood up, relinquishing the uncomfortable chair to his oldest son. A shower and some food did sound good right then, and he needed to see how Damian and Jason were holding up.

"I'll be back shortly," Bruce told Dick.

"Take your time." Dick settled into the chair, bracing his forearms on the edge of the gurney so he could rest his chin on them, mere inches from his brother's lax face. Bruce indulged in watching them for a minute, his heart lighter than it had been in a while. Dick was great with all of his siblings, and loved them all equally, but Tim was the brother Dick deserved. He'd idolized the older boy to start, and his affection had barely tapered since then, despite the few deep disputes between them. He was much easier to love sometimes than Jason or Damian, who demanded that Dick constantly prove just how much he cared about each of them.

xXx

When Bruce arrived back at the hospital two hours later, thanks to the rather long walk each way, he found Jason seated outside, dragging on a cigarette. "Where did you get that?" Bruce asked, annoyed at the reinstatement of the bad habit.

"From one of the nice nurses on her break about five minutes ago." He tapped out the ash at the end of the stick before bringing it back up to his lips. "You didn't sleep, did you?"

It wasn't worth lying. "No." Bruce sat down heavily on the stone bench next to his son. He rubbed his hands over his face. "I don't know if I'll truly be able to sleep again until your brother is back on his feet."
"He's a tough kid," Jason said absently.

"Jay…" Bruce took a deep breath in order to gain time to collect his thoughts. "Thank you again for being there. For saving him." A lump rose in his throat as he thought about how close he'd come to actually losing one of his precious sons. Jason kept his head bowed, not outwardly responding to Bruce's words, but a little more tension leaked out of his posture. "You shouldn't feel like you're the one to blame whenever something goes wrong." Jason's admission to feeling like the family scapegoat a couple of days ago still bothered Bruce.

"You really want to talk about feelings right now, after you've had no sleep in days?" Jason tossed his spent cigarette butt onto the sidewalk and crushed it under his shoe. "I never want to talk about feelings," Bruce said dryly, earning a snort of agreement. "But it bothers me that you feel that way, and this is the first time we've had privacy from your brothers since we landed here."

"It's fine, B. I deserve it after the shit I pulled when I first came back to Gotham."

"If I hadn't failed you--"

A shiny black SUV pulled into the handicap parking spot before the bench. It should have barely garnered Bruce's attention, but his hackles rose as a sense of unease rapidly overcame him. Jason glanced at him first, a mixture of confused and grateful that the older man had cut himself off mid-sentence. He then followed Bruce's line of sight to where both the driver's and passenger's doors of the vehicle were opening.

A woman about Bruce's age slammed the driver side door shut, then briskly moved around the large vehicle to assist an older female. The driver had dyed red hair and large, dark sunglasses that covered most of her visage, though something about her face and her figure seemed familiar to him. He didn't know her, but she reminded him of someone from his world. She moved purposefully with crisp, quick movements. Even her clear voice was sharp as she spoke to her elderly companion.

"Auntie, I told you to wait for me to help you."

"Thomas," said the older woman, her voice roughened from the same excess of grief that had likely lined her face so deeply. She was staring straight at Bruce. "He looks like Thomas."

Bruce's heart sped up, feeling like it was beating twice as fast as it should. He gaped at her, taking in her graying hair and diminutive figure, and the pearl necklace that graced her neck and looked out of place with the rest of her neat but inexpensive clothing. She looked right back at him, giving Bruce the impression that she was seeing a ghost, just the same as he was.

_to be continued…_
Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Notes

Please don't be too disappointed that the redhead isn't whom everyone hoped she would be...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-Two

"He looks like Thomas."

"Then we're in the right place," said the younger woman. She held onto her aunt's arm with one hand and swept her sunglasses to the top of her head. She looked warily at Bruce when he jumped to his feet, taking half of a step toward them while the other half positioned himself between the unknowns and Jason. Bruce barely registered Jason standing up behind him, as he stared back into the woman's green eyes.

If it weren't for his fatigue, Bruce imagined that he wouldn't have been so slow on the uptake, or at least more confident in his suspicion as to who the younger woman was. Of the older woman's identity, he had no doubt. He'd looked upon her face a thousand times, even if those memories seemed like barely more than a dream he'd had over thirty years ago. Whereas her niece made Bruce uneasy, she didn't feel threatening at all.

To sound more confident than he felt, Bruce said decisively, "Elizabeth." He absently reached back to make sure Jason stayed behind him.

She was a stranger to him in both this world and his own, having died as a child in his timeline. It was her twin sister, Kate, with whom Bruce worked occasionally. The glint in this woman's eyes was calculating instead of the determination he saw in Kate's. He didn't trust her.

"Bruce Wayne," the redhead said instead of confirming her identity. "I've finally found you."

"Who the fuck are you?" Jason demanded, leaning over Bruce's shoulder. He wouldn't be hushed for swearing in front of the elderly woman, even if she did gasp and cover her mouth in shock at the volume and vulgarity of his question. Bruce thought she looked too frail for how old she should be and his chest tightened momentarily at the possibility that her health was failing. She looked like life had been very cruel to her.

"I could ask the same of you, punk," answered Bruce's cousin. Bruce shifted his weight to the left, blocking Jason's attempt to get out from behind him.

"Elizabeth," Bruce tried again, glancing quickly between the women.

She squinted irritably once more at Jason, then focused on Bruce. "It's Ella," she corrected shortly. "You've made this past week very difficult for me."

"Oh, fuck you," Jason snapped, this time getting around Bruce and making a beeline for the redhead. Bruce barely caught the teenager's arm and pulled him up short.
"Stop it, Jay. You're fine. I've got this." Bruce maintained his hold on the boy, who was strung tighter than a bow string as he glowered at Eliz-- Ella Kane.

"Oh dear," said the older woman, looking distressed.

Ella's mistrustful look morphed into a tender one as she turned to her companion. "Don't worry, Auntie. I have everything under control. Aren't you happy to see Bruce?"

Her blue eyes, faded a bit with age and illness, widened and then the numerous wrinkles at their corners deepened slightly as she smiled. "He looks like Thomas."

"Poor him," Ella snarked under her breath, but the older woman didn't seem to notice as she gazed at Bruce. Ella turned back to the defensive men. "Bruce, this is my aunt, Martha Kane. I'm sure you recognize her."

"Actually, dear, it's Martha Wayne," said the older woman. "Brucie… I've missed you so much."

Her eyes filled with tears, but none fell.

"Mother," said Bruce, barely loud enough for himself to hear. If possible, Jason tensed even further, prompting Bruce to squeeze the boy's arm reassuringly. "Mother," he repeated more clearly. "I have missed you as well." She didn't seem dangerous to him, the way Ella did. He knew he still had to tread cautiously, but he trusted his instincts and he didn't think she was culpable for his being in this parallel universe.

"Holy shit," Jason said as pieces of the puzzle started falling into place for him, too. "You're Martha Wayne?"

"I am?" The older woman looked over at Ella, as if the question had triggered some kind of doubt as to her own veracity. Bruce wondered if his heart could break for his mother a second time. She was not well and it was obvious.

"I don't know why you hold on to that reprehensible surname," Ella said in response. "Come on, Auntie, you should sit down." She motioned toward the bench that Bruce and Jason had occupied previously.

"I'm okay, Ella, dear," Martha said, finding her poise again. "It's good to see Brucie again."

"I'm glad you think so." Ella turned to Bruce and Jason. "Your decision to bail on Chambers has caused us plenty of stress and delay, Bruce. I've had to search all over for you. We should go before Aunt Martha grows any more tired." Ella glanced at Jason. "I'll give you a minute to say good-bye to your… friend." Ella abandoned the idea of the bench and nudged Martha back to the SUV.

"No," Bruce stated. He kept a firm grip on Jason's arm. "I'm not going anywhere with you until you explain yourself."

"I brought you here so you could see your mother again, Bruce Wayne," Ella said impatiently, like she was scolding a child. "You should be thanking me."

"You brought us here." Bruce took a second to process that information. It answered the question that had been first and foremost in his mind since they landed in the ditch outside of Chambers, but opened the way for many more. "How?"

"We can talk about the details, later. Let's go. It's nearly time for Aunt Martha's afternoon nap and the drive back to the house isn't short."
"You're the bitch who opened the fucking wormhole…"

"Jason, stop," Bruce ordered. He was keenly aware of how his son's anger was affecting Martha. He also didn't like the furious way Ella was now glaring at Jason. He slipped an arm around the teenager's chest, pulling the boy back against him and hoping to impart some sense of security in order to stave off a defensive assault from his most volatile son.

"Call me a bitch again," Ella taunted, her green eyes glowing eerily. She dropped her supportive hold on Martha to approach father and son threateningly.

Bruce held out his free hand to stop her progress. "You will not lay a finger on my son," he informed her. A flicker of confusion passed through Ella's expression. "And I will not go with you until you explain how and why you brought us here."

"Your son." Ella frowned at Jason before looking up at Bruce. "You were meant to come alone."

"I'd figured as much," Bruce responded. He felt Batman's growl burning at the back of his throat. "But you didn't just drag me through the wormhole, cousin. I had my kids with me, and if this week has been difficult for you, it's been hell for us." He cursed the lump that reappeared in his esophagus.

"'Supposed to or not, here we are," Jason said, seething. "And I promised I'd deck the asshole who dragged us here and left us to fucking freeze or starve to death!"

Ella's gaze sharpened angrily. She looked nervous, like she expected Jason to act on his statement, and given the degree of power she claimed to have, she could react adversely. Bruce twisted slightly, daring to turn such that he wasn't facing Ella squarely, in order to fully hug Jason. "Calm down, Jaybird. I'm angry too, but we need to be rational right now to deal with this. She might be our only way to get home."

"I need another cigarette."

"You don't." Bruce pressed his cheek against Jason's temple, holding on tightly until he could feel the teenager slowly let go of some of his violent anger. Jason's arms came partially around Bruce, his hands gripping the sides of Bruce's coat to the point that Bruce worried it might tear.

"Ella…" The soft call from Martha reminded Bruce that their audience was made of more than one. Standing by the black SUV, his mother looked confused. She didn't look lost, however, as if her illness were befuddling her again. It was a good sign. "What's going on?"

Ella returned to her aunt's side in order to slowly guide the older woman up onto the sidewalk. "Apparently, Aunt Martha, you have grandchildren."

"I do?" Bruce's mother's face lit up in wonder. "I've always wanted a grandchild, Ella."

"I know, Auntie. I'm sorry the one you got has such a foul mouth."

Jason mouthed something inappropriate at Ella, but she didn't rise to the bait while once again supporting her aunt's balance. Bruce cleared his throat as he gently guided Jason out of his embrace to face the older woman. "Mother, this is my son, Jason. He's eighteen." Jason pressed back against his father, like he'd back away further if Bruce wasn't blocking his way.

"It's nice to meet you, Jason," she said, as if she'd already forgotten being scandalized by Jason's
language a few minutes ago. Bruce mused darkly that it was one small benefit to the degenerate disease that he suspected was slowly affecting her.

"Uh… you too, I guess." Jason made no move to approach her. It was possible that the boy felt threatened by her, even if Bruce felt she wasn't any danger to them. He wouldn't disregard Jason's reservations, knowing that his own feelings were possibly impacted by loss and desire to know his long dead parents again.

"I like your hair, Jason," Martha said, focused on the patch of white in the front. "It's very… what is the term, Ella?"

"Progressive," she supplied, though Bruce could tell she had other, less politically sensitive terms she'd like to use.

"Yes, progressive. It's very nice."

"Thank you, Mother," said Bruce when Jason didn't seem ready to respond.

"How many kids do you have?" Ella asked, sounding frustrated that she had to deal with any at all. Bruce didn't care if she felt put out.

"Five. You dragged four of them here with me."

"Well, where are they? I'm seriously ready to be done with this trip." Ella looked around, as if expecting the three missing children to emerge suddenly from the bushes.

"Yes, about that," Bruce said, his own voice wry. "There's a reason you found me at a hospital."

xXx

As much as she wanted to return home, Ella didn't push Bruce once she learned that one of her unexpected cousins-once-removed was still admitted in the ER. Instead, she directed her impatience and irritation at the hospital staff, trying to convince them to release "the boy" into her care without admitting any kind of relation to him that would end up with her paying any medical bills.

Martha, thrilled with the idea of more grandchildren, latched onto Bruce's arm like they weren't strangers of more than 30 years. Her grasp alternated between tentative and strong, seemingly in sync with her bouts of momentary confusion. It made Bruce's heart ache while the scent of her rosy perfume made it soar. She insisted on meeting the rest of the boys, and hummed happily as Bruce led her carefully through the bustling ER where Tim was hidden behind a thin curtain. Jason seemed torn between keeping a healthy distance from Martha and remaining close to Bruce. In the end, the teenager walked a few steps ahead of them and peeked into the semi-private area to give Dick a few seconds of warning about their visitor.

Dick was standing by the time Bruce and Martha came around the edge of the frayed curtain, his body shielding Damian even as the boy tried to peer around him. Dick's right hand, the one not trying to keep Damian hidden, rested protectively on Tim's hip. The fifteen-year-old slept on his side, his breaths still wet but not filled with phlegm like previously.

Jason moved to the far side of the gurney while keeping a wary eye on the older woman. Dick spared him a glance, though his keen blue gaze returned quickly to Bruce and Martha. He looked confused, but it reminded Bruce more of the expression his eldest wore not when he didn't recognize a newcomer, but when he wondered why he or she had come. "You're…" Dick pushed Damian back when the boy tried to dart around him. "Mrs. Wayne?"
"You recognize her?" Bruce asked, surprised. She'd passed away many years before Dick was born, and more still before Bruce brought the orphan home.

"I've only stared at that portrait above the fireplace a hundred thousand times," Dick replied.

"I want to see," Damian insisted, twisting Dick's wrist until the older brother made an expression of pain and shook him off. Damian stepped in front of Dick, but didn't rush up to Bruce like he'd gotten into the habit of in the past couple of days. "You are Father's mother?" Bruce wanted to chuckle at Damian's skeptical expression, if only the tumultuous mix of emotions within him would allow any mirth to arise.

"Bruce is my son." Martha smiled demurely, and if it appeared a bit absentminded, Bruce denied it. "You look like my Brucie, little one."

Damian lifted his chin and puffed out his narrow chest. "I am Father's only--"

"Damian is my youngest son," Bruce interrupted, earning a scowl from the boy. "He is eleven."

"Damian is a good name. It is saintly," said Martha.

From the other side of the bed, Jason snorted. "Sounds like 'demon-y' to me."

Damian's face turned red and Bruce jumped in to prevent the pair from starting a fight in the middle of the ER, in front of his mother. "Richard is my oldest at twenty-two. Timothy is fifteen. Our trip here has been very hard on him. I also have a daughter, Cassandra, who was not with us when we arrived here."

"It is wonderful to meet all of you," said Martha. She looked up at Bruce. "I've missed you, Brucie." Her eyes turned glassy again. "You look so much like Thomas."

"Perhaps you should sit down," suggested Bruce. He caught the leg of the hard plastic chair with his foot and dragged it close enough to reach with his hand and position it to his liking. Martha sat down heavily and her pale blue eyes darted between the boys.

"Mrs. Wayne, how did you find us?" asked Dick. He sat down stiffly on the edge of Tim's bed, blocking the smaller male from view. His wariness wasn't as acute as Jason's, but it was still clear that he also lacked the ease that Bruce felt with the older woman. Unlike Jason, however, Dick usually trusted Bruce when it came to determining if strangers were safe or not.

"Ella told me that Brucie was coming to visit. You were not at home, it seems, so she drove us here."

Bruce suspected that more had transpired considering that a week had passed, but he didn't press his mother.

"Who is Ella?" Dick looked between Martha and Bruce.

"I am," said the woman in question as she brusquely entered the crowded area, followed by Dr. Keller. The physician took exception to the number of visitors and insisted that everyone return to the waiting room. Bruce didn't want to leave Tim alone, and only allowed himself to be herded to the crowded, smelly waiting area after Jason insisted on remaining with his slumbering brother.

Once grouped in a corner of the large space, Dr. Keller focused on Bruce. "Ms. Kane has informed me that she is your cousin, and has come to take your family to her home. Is this true, Mr. Wayne?"

"It is true that she's my cousin," Bruce replied. No matter that he yearned to spend time with this universe's version of his mother, he would not decide anything that could further endanger his
children. Dr. Keller's eyes narrowed as he failed to confirm the second part of her question, but she continued anyway.

"I am not confident that Timothy is well enough to leave yet. However, Ms. Kane claims that a registered nurse visits her home each day to assist in the care of her elderly aunt, and that this nurse can provide medical advice in Timothy's case if I release him from the hospital."

Bruce looked to Ella. She nodded succinctly. Knowing that Dr. Keller was one suspicious behavior away from calling Social Services to remove Tim and Damian from his custody, Bruce decided to question his cousin himself on the qualifications of the supposed nurse. Impatient and fed up with the delay, Ella offered to call the woman herself and let Dr. Keller speak with her. Bruce listened closely to the conversation. He wouldn't take Tim out of the hospital against medical advice without feeling confident that his son would get the care he needed at their new destination.

The doctor grudgingly agreed to start the paperwork to have Tim released from the emergency room after Ella ended the call with Martha's personal home nurse. Dr. Keller insisted on running a few more tests, first, which gave Bruce another hour or so to determine if Ella could be trusted.

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Ella took Martha back out to the black SUV to rest when the constant buzz of the emergency room started to upset the older woman. Bruce joined them, hoping for a few minutes alone with Ella. After making sure that Martha was comfortable with the temperature of the car, the next generation sat down on the stone bench. Ella kept her eyes focused mainly on her vehicle.

"How were you able to bring us here?" Bruce asked, alternating between looking at her familiar yet foreign profile and the idling SUV.

"I have… gifts," said Ella. She sounded as if she expected to be judged for what she'd just admitted, but unwilling to renounce whatever powers her "gift" afforded her. "And I dabble in other arts."

"Black magic," Bruce said, accusatory.

"Interdimensional control," she correctly shortly. "It is possible to see between the Earths of the multiverse if one has the knowledge and the tools to do so. I found a world where Martha and Thomas Wayne were murdered, leaving their son behind, as opposed to what transpired here."

"So you opened an interdimensional wormhole to drag me here, without any consideration for whatever damage you might do?" His anger bled into his words.

"I don't care what you think of me, Bruce Wayne. I figured that you would be a selfish, arrogant asshole like your father. Martha Kane is the only one who didn't label me a witch and disown me from the family. I mean to give her this last gift. All she has ever wanted was to see her little boy once more."

Bruce had a dozen new questions based upon her bitter revelations, but he forced himself to remain on topic. "Last gift?"

"Surely you've noticed that she is not well." Ella sighed and reached up to brush her hair more firmly behind her ear. "And she only gets worse."

"How bad is it?" Bruce clenched his fists.

Ella laughed breathlessly. "She's actually having a good day, today. Most days, she forgets that thirty odd years have passed since… since you died. All she speaks of is Thomas, that bastard, and you.
She's had a hard life, Bruce. I mean to see that the end of it is joyful."

It felt to Bruce like a dagger had been driven through his chest and that no matter how hard he pulled, it could not be withdrawn. This was the culmination of a terrible week during which he'd been ripped from his home, struggled to keep his family together, nearly lost a beloved child, and was now reunited with his long lost mother only to be forced to relive her passing anew. He'd never been one to dwell on whether or not he was treated fairly, considering that justice was in his mind the most important objective to pursue. But this felt hugely unfair to his tattered spirit, and he wanted to scream that fact to anyone who'd listen. Only his resolve to stay strong for his sons allowed him to bite his tongue.

"What about my life?" he asked after a moment of contemplation. "What about my family?"

"Martha is the only one about whom I care," said Ella stubbornly. "You can go back to your self-centered life once she is ready to let you go."

"I am not the one here who is self-centered, Elizabeth."

"Do not call me that."

"You stole me from my world for your own interests. You're not the first who has done so, but the fact that my children have been made to suffer for something that was laid to rest decades ago is unacceptable to me."

"I do not care," said Ella. I will not care, heard Bruce. Honestly, he wasn't surprised.

"I am not blind to the fact that you may be the only one who can send us home," he said, his voice dark. "I'd rather not force you, out of respect for my mother, but I will if you do not vow to return us all, with no further harm, to our world without unnecessary delay."

"It's hilarious that you think you can force me to do anything, Bruce Wayne," she replied dryly.

"You have no idea what you have brought into your world, Elizabeth Kane," he answered gravely.

*to be continued...*

Chapter End Notes

The rare author's note: The decision to use Elizabeth Kane instead of Kate Kane was made a long time ago. I needed a "villain" who could be close to Martha, and didn't want to write a well-known character too OOC just to force the story in a certain direction. (Not that I haven't already done that with Bruce.) I didn't expect such a great anticipation for Kate when I started this story so many months ago, though now that *Rebirth* has happened, I completely understand. At the same time, I'm glad I didn't make Kate the "bad" guy in the story, and now that I know so many readers would like to maybe see her, I'll see what I can do about bringing her in.

For everyone whose hopes at seeing Kate have just been dashed - I'm sorry and I hope you'll continue to give the story a chance. :) Happy Saturday!
Chapter Twenty-Three

It wasn't until early the next morning that Tim's release from the ER was finalized, which had resulted in yet another night of minimal sleep for Bruce. At least he'd managed to guilt his cousin into paying for a second hotel room that Dick, Jason, and Damian could share. None of the kids had wanted to be separated from him but the promise of sleeping in a bed instead of on a cot, with privacy away from those who'd harass them, had tipped the debate in Bruce's favor. They still had the hotel for a couple of more hours, so Bruce intended to see both himself and Tim scrubbed clean before they embarked on what promised to be a long car ride to wherever Martha and Ella lived. He was currently seated in the plastic chair that he now loathed, idly twirling a few strands of Tim's dark hair between his fingers while he waited for his cousin to pick them up.

Adrenaline fueled Bruce now that he had a clearer view of their future in this world. He had been correct to infer that Jason was wholly untrusting of Ella and Martha, and that Dick was heavily leery of them. His oldest two vacillated between condoning Bruce's decision to take advantage of the respite from their homelessness to see where his cousin took them and outright opposing it. Eventually Bruce's eldest sided with him, if only to see Bruce get some sleep and worry less about providing for his family in unforgiving New York City. Jason vowed to keep a close on their female companions if he was going to be overridden. Surprisingly, Damian didn't seem to care either way as long as he got to remain with his father. Bruce chided himself for growing exasperated by his youngest's clinginess. It was much better than the aloof attitude the pre-teen usually exhibited. Once he wasn't so bone-wearily exhausted and covered with days worth of grime, Bruce would relish having his baby hang on him constantly. For the time being, he tried to subtly redirect the boy's affection to Dick.

All of Bruce's reflecting and deflecting helped him avoid thinking about the reason why they were here in the first place. His heart was battered enough by Tim's lingering illness and the deathly scare that had landed them in the hospital. It might stop if he considered spending the near future slowly watching his mother waste away. She'd been in the prime of her young life when Joe Chill had murdered Bruce's parents under the guise of robbing them in a dark alley. Until the day before, Bruce had never imagined her as anything besides beautiful, vibrant, passionate, and lively. Martha of this world was by no means the stark opposite of any of these virtues, though it was painfully clear that whatever had transpired since his boyhood death here had been very hard on her. And Bruce could understand her pain. He withdrew his fingers from Tim's hair in order to clench his fists and grind his teeth. He was much too familiar with the devastation that came with losing a child. Jason was back from his own death and subsequent murderous rampage, enough of himself again for Bruce to be proud to call the teenager his son. The resurrection and passage of time had dulled that pain to the point where Bruce sometimes made it through a whole day without his chest seizing in remembrance of that decimated warehouse in Ethiopia. All of those feelings had been dragged ruthlessly back to the forefront with Tim's close call. It was not a stretch to imagine what his parents must have felt when he'd died tragically in that alley behind a movie theatre.

"B?" Tim's voice was quiet and his eyes were only half open as he regarded the older man.

"Hey, kid. I thought you were sleeping." Bruce brushed his large, calloused hand over Tim's smooth forehead.
"Are you okay?"

"It's been a bad week," Bruce said lightly.

"You seem sad." As opposed to angry, no doubt the reaction that Tim would be more familiar with when things didn't go Batman's way.

"Just tired," Bruce fibbed. "I haven't slept for two days straight." Tim made a face, scrunching up his nose and squeezing his eyes shut. Bruce couldn't resist bopping the tip of the boy's button nose with his finger. "How is your headache?" Bruce could hear for himself that Tim's breathing was improved, though well shy of completely better.

"It's there. What were you thinking about?"

Ugh, his little detective prodigy could never let anything go. Fortunately, Dr. Keller slipped behind the curtain then, followed by Ella. His cousin held a curiously large canvas bag. A twinge of ire struck Bruce when the redhead appeared. "Your ride is here, Mr. Wayne," said the doctor. "Let's have one more look at your kiddo before I grudgingly let you take him... home." Ella huffed and Bruce felt vindicated to not be the only one who wasn't a big fan of Ella's. Dr. Keller didn't even know the truth of how deep the younger woman's treachery ran.

"It's a five hour drive without stops to Pleasanton," said Ella. Bruce deduced that this was the town where the two women lived now that Gotham City was nothing but a black mark on New England. "I mean to leave as soon as possible."

"I need time at the hotel to get Tim ready for the trip," Bruce replied. He didn't care about Ella's plans, but he did appreciate her concern about prolonging the trip any longer than necessary for Martha. Even so, Bruce would put his sons' well-being ahead of anyone else's. He was their protector and their provider. Martha, though his heart thudded otherwise, was a ghost to him.

Ella clenched her jaw and glowered at the gurney where Dr. Keller was coaxing Tim to sit up and allow her to press a thermometer into his ear. Her expression softened somewhat when she actually looked at the pale teenager and her shoulders slumped slightly. Bruce didn't think Ella considered herself to blame for the boy's state, but she wasn't such a monster that she'd spite a suffering child. For all that she'd thoughtlessly upended his life, it was obvious that Ella harbored a measure of compassion, in the tender way that she doted on her aunt.

"Ninety-eight point two," said Dr. Keller. "Are you feeling chilled, sweetheart?" She squeezed Tim's hand to check his temperature superficially.

"I usually have a temperature below average," said Tim. Bruce nodded to confirm the boy's statement.

"Well then, maybe this won't feel quite as freezing to you," the doctor teased as she held up the end of her stethoscope. Still, she pressed it against her own palm for a few seconds to try to warm the metal. "Sit up straight, honey." Tim did as she instructed, including inhaling and exhaling on her commands. "You sound better than last night." Dr. Keller put away her scope. "You're going to tell your dad immediately if you feel worse in any way, right Tim?"

"Uh huh," Tim mumbled.

"I'll be watching him closely," Bruce added.

"I don't doubt that," said Dr. Keller. She seemed to have thawed toward Bruce after seeing his devotion to his sick little boy during their stay in the ER. If she thought that Tim's health and safety
were at risk. Bruce knew that she wouldn't hesitate to call Protective Services, but he hoped she believed him now that Bruce hadn't intentionally let the teenager become so ill. "Here are some prescriptions for medicine I want him to take for at least a week, and more if any of his symptoms persist." She launched into a summary of the care she expected for the boy and Bruce hoped that she'd written it down somewhere, too. He worried he'd forget something thanks to his fatigue.

"How much is all of this going to cost?" Ella asked, exasperated. An angry tirade was on the tip of Bruce's tongue until he realized that she sounded put out because she expected to pay for the prescriptions even though no one thus far had asked it of her. He settled for glaring at her instead.

"There are some coupon cards in Tim's packet that should help offset the costs," Dr. Keller answered crisply. She looked back at Bruce. "Remember Mr. Wayne; I never want to see Tim in my ER again for pneumonia complicated by malnutrition and exhaustion."

"Yes ma'am."

They were free to go then. Dr. Keller left to summon a nurse to bring a wheelchair for the short walk to the parking garage where Bruce assumed that Ella had parked. Ella reached into her canvas bag and pulled out a fleece blanket. Bruce took it in surprise. The fabric was deliciously soft against his fingers and it carried the plastic scent of its retail outlet.

"It's cold outside," Ella explained shortly. She looked away, refusing to make eye contact.

"Thanks," Bruce replied quietly. He moved to the side of the bed. "All right, kid. Let's get out of this place, huh?"

"Definitely." Bruce wrapped the new blanket tightly around Tim. The teenager wrapped his arms around Bruce's neck as the older man scooped him off of the bed bridal-style. He took a moment to press his cheek against Tim's cool forehead, relishing the lack of fever and the life filling his child's body.

The newly arrived nurse frowned at the idea of Bruce carrying Tim to the SUV, so he obediently settled the teenager into the wheelchair. "Do I need to sign any paperwork?" he asked.

"It's been taken care of," said Ella. "I'm on the third floor."

The nurse escorted them all of the way to the black SUV, where Bruce lifted Tim into the captain's chair behind the driver's seat. He claimed the one behind the front passenger seat for himself so that he could keep an eye on Tim during the short drive to the motel. The rest of his sons had slept there after retrieving their meager possessions from the shelter the night before. It still wasn't a five star hotel, but it was many times better than the cheap establishments that his family had stayed in before their funds ran out.

They reached the stucco-clad building and Bruce quickly exited the SUV. He pulled open the door next to Tim's seat after walking around behind the vehicle. He reached for his bundled son only to be rebuked. "I think I can walk, B," Tim complained.

"Humor me. And you don't have shoes on." Bruce scooped him up before Tim could protest again. Ella closed the door and locked the vehicle prior to parting in order to check on Martha. In the boys' room, Damian eagerly bounced up to meet his father at the door. Bruce had to set Tim down or risk dropping him when the teenager started squirming, though it freed him to hug Damian, and Dick was there to whisk Tim off to one of the beds anyway. "We're leaving soon, and Tim and I still need to get cleaned up," Bruce informed his kids.
"You still think we're safe to go with the witch?" Jason asked wryly from his seat at the small corner table.

Bruce felt more confident in his response than he would have the night before. He glanced over to where Dick was rubbing the corner of the fleece against Tim's cheek amidst the teen's protests. "Yes. More so than at the shelter, with no safety net to speak of." Jason shrugged and looked back down at Tim's tablet. He tapped firmly on the screen a few times.

Tim didn't want any help in the shower. Bruce ordered him to leave the door to the bathroom unlocked and to wash his hair twice. Despite the kid's bravado, he looked wiped out by the time he stumbled out of the steamy bathroom and into Dick's open arms. Bruce grudgingly left his eldest to care for the teenager while he quickly took his own shower. He nearly tripped over Damian when he emerged from an even more densely clouded bathroom. "What are you doing, son?"

"Making tea," replied the boy curtly, as if his actions were obvious. Bruce supposed that he could have guessed that, given the hot cup of water and the telltale string hanging down the side. His next question - why? - was promptly answered, too.

His youngest approached the bed and shoved the insulated paper cup under Tim's nose. "Drink this, Drake."

Tim frowned. "I don't want--"

"Wow," exclaimed Dick, overriding Tim's dismissal. "That's so thoughtful of you, Dami! I think some warm tea is just what Timmy needs to feel better right now." He poked Tim in the side.

"Uh... thanks, Damian," Tim said cautiously. Damian nodded shortly in approval and then proceeded to stare down the older boy until Tim took a tentative sip of the brew. "It's good."

"I shall ensure that you make a full recovery and do not become ill again. Such stress is not good for Father's blood pressure."

Bruce rolled his eyes. He wasn't that old. Dick beamed fondly at the smallest Wayne. "Damian was extremely worried about you, Timmy. Weren't you, baby bat?"

"Tt."

Damian glared at the geometric pattern on the fleece blanket once more bundled around Tim. He aggressively tucked an edge of the fleece blanket further under Tim's bare foot. "I should have realized that Drake was too stubborn to die. Otherwise, Todd's maniacal attempts to end him would have stuck."

"Fuck you, brat," Jason snapped. "I'm not the only one--"

"Boys!" The four fell silent. Bruce gave Damian and Jason each a disgruntled look. "Please try to behave. Even if you don't consider this world's Martha Wayne to be your grandmother, she is still a respectable old lady who doesn't deserve to be exposed to vulgar language or bickering."

"I don't consider our world's Martha Wayne to be my grandmother," Jason said just to be annoying.

"You're my son and she is my mother. Do the math," Bruce replied impatiently. Jason refrained from saying anything else, and Bruce hoped the absolute conviction in his voice when he'd said that Jason was his son was the reason. "Are we ready to go?" he asked, directing his focus to Dick.

"As soon as Timmy finishes his lovingly prepared tea," the young man replied. Tim grimaced before taking another sip of the scalding beverage and Damian flushed.
"Do not be so ridiculous, Grayson."

xXx

It took some creative packing to move the items from the third row of seats in the SUV to the crammed trunk, but Ella managed with Bruce's help though she grumbled about not expecting five passengers when she'd prepared for one. Bruce squeezed into the corner of the backseat, followed by Dick and Tim. The fifteen-year-old was easy enough to manipulate into laying on his back with his head pillowed on his folded up sweatshirt in Bruce's lap and his feet draped over Dick's thighs. The fleece blanket was tucked tightly around him.

Damian took the second row seat in front of Bruce, leaving the last for Jason. Ella helped Martha climb into the front passenger seat. The older woman was surprised to see the full back seats. "We found Bruce yesterday, remember? He came to visit you, and brought his kids, too."

"How nice," said Martha, unsure and oblivious to the skeptical look Jason was giving her.

"Father, what is wrong with her?" Damian asked, twisting in his seat to keep his question shielded from the two women. Unfortunately, Ella still seemed to hear him, though Martha didn't. "She saw us all just yesterday."

"Shhh," Bruce soothed. "We will talk later, okay?" Damian pouted but turned nonetheless to join Jason in regarding Martha coolly.

The motel was close to the highway and before Bruce knew it, they were cruising easily down the interstate out of the city. He expected the soothing hum of the engine on the open road to lull him to sleep quickly. Instead, his mind jumped from memory to thought and back, too stressed to allow him to relax just yet. Having Tim safe with him and breathing almost normally was a great relief to his heavy heart. Still, he couldn't stop from thinking about the what-ifs… what could have transpired after he first heard the ambulance sirens.

Fortunately, he appeared to be the only one unable to find peace at the moment. Ella was too far in front of him for a quiet conversation and he didn't want to speak loudly and risk waking his sleeping sons or Martha, who snored softly in the front passenger seat. It seemed that Ella was different from the sister that Bruce knew from his world. Like Bruce, she preferred to drive in silence whereas Kate usually had her mp3 player plugged in. He had no way of knowing if the twin sisters from his world would have been close as adults since Elizabeth had died so young, but he suspected that here Ella didn't maintain close contact with Kate. Skewing her name was the first clue, as was the overly protective way that she cared for Martha like they were two lost souls in a sea of distant relatives.

For as obviously as Ella adored Martha, she appeared to detest Thomas Wayne with equal passion. From the little research that his family had been able to do on the Waynes, Bruce knew that his father hadn't handled his son's passing well. He'd turned to alcohol to dull his pain and left his wife and business to wither away. This was a variation on other versions of his father that had survived that dank alley behind the theatre. Yes, alcohol abuse had featured heavily in those worlds, too, but Thomas had also managed to keep his company afloat and oftentimes became his own version of the Batman. Bruce wondered what the difference had been here.

Damian's head lolled past the side of his seatback, leaving his neck craned at an awkward angle. It took some effort in the small, cramped back row, but Bruce managed to wedge his foot between the door and the base of Damian's seat to depress the lever that reclined it. He was grateful then for the electronic upgrade. He lowered Damian's seat just far enough that he didn't think it would bother Tim with his head on Bruce's lap. His youngest son sighed at the end of the transition and curled up on his side to continue sleeping. Bruce lovingly smoothed his hand over the soft hair crowning the
boy's head.

When he looked up, he caught Ella's gaze in the review mirror. She didn't say anything and eventually refocused on the road. Bruce checked on Jason, whose head was propped against the window, and Dick, whose eyes were closed but his fingers were busy as he worried the stitching at the end of the fleece blanket.

"Chum," Bruce said softly.

Dick's blue eyes slowly fluttered open. "Everything all right?" he asked in a thick voice, as if he'd been on the verge of sleep and Bruce had dragged him back to full consciousness. He stretched as much as he could in the cramped seat. When he settled again, he hugged Tim's bent knees to his chest. "B?"

"I think so," replied Bruce. "You?" Small talk was never his thing, but he realized with a start that he didn't want to be alone with his thoughts any longer.

"Oh, you know me and long car rides," Dick said wryly. He grimaced slightly and shifted once more. "This drive is how long?"

"Six hours or so."

"Ouch."

"Indeed."

Dick was quiet for a long moment before he spoke again. "How are you handling this new turn of events, B?" His gaze was heavy on his father's face.

"I'm glad to be out of the hospital and the homeless shelter," Bruce answered.

"You know what I mean," Dick said. He frowned and peered toward the front of the vehicle. "She's dying, isn't she?" Bruce had to strain slightly to hear him.

Bruce felt a rush of nausea swell from his stomach. He forced it back down.

"Yes."

"How long?"

"I don't know." He thought maybe a couple of years, though it could be as short as months. That she suffered from a mild to severe case of dementia was clear, but he didn't know if she had even more health problems. She is too young, he wanted to scream.

"Is that why we're… why you're here?" The corners of Dick's mouth were turned down deeply. The younger man looked away to stare out his window, hiding the glean of moisture in his eyes.

"It appears so." His anger at Ella flared briefly. When he wasn't so utterly exhausted, he was sure it would rage brilliantly.

"My parents were gone so quickly," Dick said. "It was almost like ripping off a band aid. One second they were smiling and doing what they loved, and the next, it was over. No warning, no time to prepare. Just… bam."

"I'm so sorry, chum," said Bruce. He reached over to grasp the younger man's shoulder. If only Batman hadn't been so new, or if he hadn't been out on the town as Brucie Wayne, he might have been able to save the Flying Graysons. Raising their son after the fact was a paltry recompense for
how badly he'd failed them.

Dick lifted the hand of the arm crossed over his chest to rest on top of Bruce's. "Growing up, I wondered if it was better that way. The alternative was knowing ahead of time, and dragging out the loss. But I could have said good-bye."

"I know." Bruce had lost his parents in a heartbeat, too. Tim hadn't witnessed his mother's murder firsthand, but he'd had much longer than a split second to listen to his father being hunted down in their apartment. Two more examples of how Bruce had failed his sons in the worst way. Jason, however, had watched his stepmother waste away and Bruce had no idea if it was better or worse that way. Probably neither.

"Sometimes we'll come across a druggy mother with a child flitting around her," said Dick. "Jaybird always gets this look on his face, like he understands what it's like to be tortured in the most horrible way. You can tell, even when he's wearing the hood, that he's reliving his own loss. You and I ask ourselves what we could have done differently, to save them. And then we forgive ourselves because what could a child have done in the time between heartbeats to change fate? Jason asks himself what could have been done differently in the passage of years."

"Has he mentioned to you if he got to say good-bye?" As a surly teenager, Jason hadn't been overly forthcoming with his feelings to Alfred, let alone Bruce. Then the Joker had happened and just recently were they getting to the point where they could have deep conversations. Jason was closer to his brothers, and Dick had a way of getting even the most reticent person to open up to him.

"He once told me that he said good-bye every time he left to scavenge for food or boost tires from outrageously overpimped muscle cars."

Bruce leaned forward so he could see more of Jason's profile. The eighteen-year-old didn't look like he was sleeping well, but Bruce and Dick's muted conversation hadn't woken him. Unlike Damian, whose face was smooth in slumber and looked young and innocent, Jason's brow remained furrowed and his jaw clenched loosely. Bruce wished that he could banish the worries and stress that was adversely affecting his son's rest, though it was likely that some of the strain was from the awkward position.

Dick yawned widely, half-heartedly covering his mouth with his hand. "You should try to sleep, chum," said Bruce. "It will make the trip go by more quickly."

"Only if you sleep, too," Dick mumbled. He tugged at Tim's blanket until he could cover his own shoulders and slouched down in his seat as much as Tim's legs and the back of Jason's seat would allow. Bruce watched his eldest until he thought the young man was asleep. As he settled into his own cramped space, he once again caught Ella's gaze in the rearview mirror.

to be continued...
Chapter Twenty-Four

The trip didn't go by quickly, even if Bruce did doze for a half of an hour here and there. His whole body ached from being held immobile for so long and he wasn't sure if he'd ever regain feeling in his numb behind. Even the short stops for food and bathroom breaks didn't provide much relief.

Ella finally parked in front of a narrow row house that had probably been lovely in its Victorian heyday. The passage of time had aged it in much the same way that it had stolen Martha's joie de vie, though Bruce could tell that Ella did her best to maintain the historic dwelling. It was by no means the nicest of the conjoined homes, but neither was it the worst.

Bruce took his time stretching once he was out of the cramped SUV, popping first his back and then any other joint that was protesting the long car ride. While he had his arms extended outward, his younger boys took advantage of the open posture to press into his sides. Tim was still wrapped like a burrito in his blanket, though he now sported his scuffed dress shoes as well. Damian shivered minutely against the biting wind despite his secondhand winter coat.

"Welcome," said Ella dryly. She eyed her guests seriously. "Try not to break anything."

Jason made a face. "We're not manner-less heathens," he snapped.

"We'll see," Ella replied curtly. "You're still a male, whose kind seems incapable of not destroying everything they touch."

Bruce stepped forward to grab Jason and drag him away from Ella. "Woah," gasped Tim quietly when his stable support moved so unexpectedly. Bruce reached back to clutch the front of the blanket to keep Tim upright. Unfortunately, he didn't have enough hands to restrain all of his sons simultaneously, which left Damian free to confront Ella in Jason's stead. "Your biases are unfounded and inaccurate," Damian said angrily. "Despite his beginnings as a street rat, Todd is capable of impeccable manners." Jason bristled further and Bruce tightened his grip with a mental groan. Damian didn't wait to see Ella's brief look of confusion, quickly shuttered by the return of her irritated glare. The boy spun on his heel and marched back to his father and brothers. "Come, Todd. We shall show this hateful woman the true quality of Wayne men," Damian said, as if he hadn't just inadvertently insulted his older brother. Jason seemed to realize the same thing and let some of the anger bleed out of himself. "Damn straight, brat." He shook off Bruce's hand and nudged Damian to start walking toward the front door. Both boys pointedly kept their faces turned away from their unenthusiastic host.

Dick started after his brothers, though he paused as he passed Ella to lean in slightly. "Just so you know: I was, in fact, raised in a circus." He continued on then, his chin held high, to join his brothers.

Bruce ran his hand over his face and sighed. He looked down at Tim, who was watching the rest of their family with the familiar keen glint that had been missing for the past few days. At least Bruce could count that as one good thing he currently had going for him. "Come on, kid. Let's get you out
Tim studied his brothers and Ella for a moment longer before looking up at his father sadly. "I think that being 'Wayne men' is part of the problem," Tim mused just loud enough for Bruce to hear him.

"I think you're right." Bruce ruffled the teenager's hair - much to Tim's dismay - and then set a pace he felt Tim could keep up with as he moved toward his waiting sons. Ella backtracked to assist Martha from the SUV. Bruce was glad that the older woman seemed unaware of the tension between her niece and pseudo-grandchildren. While Jason, Damian, and even Dick weren't hiding the fact that they didn't appreciate Ella's attitude toward them, at least they were respectful enough to step out of the way to allow Ella to unlock the door and guide Martha into the house.

"Ella, dear, I didn't know we were having company," Martha said somewhat loudly once they were inside.

Ella patted her arm. "Bruce has come to visit you. Unfortunately, he brought your grandchildren with him."

"Brucie is here?" Martha looked about herself briefly, but her face never turned toward her "son". "I haven't seen him in so long."

"I know," said Ella patiently. "Would you like some tea?"

"Yes, dear, some coffee would be nice."

"Tea, Auntie," Ella insisted. She looked over her shoulder to glare at Bruce and his boys, especially Damian who was staring at Martha with his mouth agape and Dick who was grimacing obviously. "Come on then, shut the door. We're not paying to heat the outside."

"Are they coming in, Ella?"

"I should hope they aren't planning to loiter on the front porch all night," Ella replied. The sarcasm was wasted on Martha.

"Go," Bruce hissed to get his kids moving inside.

"Father, why can't she remember us?" The boy's expression was frustrated.

"Damian, I need your help, son," said Bruce, hoping to get Damian on a different train of thought. This wasn't the time to explain to the child what he suspected was ailing Martha. "Please keep an eye on your brother." Damian wasn't simple enough to be distracted by the rather obvious diversion, but it seemed he could understand that Bruce wasn't ready to have their promised conversation in the cramped space of the tiny foyer.

The child huffed. "Come, Drake, it appears that I am to be your nursemaid once again."

"Pass." Tim shuffled a couple of steps away from the shorter boy.

"Would you rather Todd attend to you?" Damian challenged, moving back into Tim's personal space and glaring up the teenager.

Tim looked between his older and younger brother, contemplating no doubt which would be the lesser of two evils. Damian grew increasingly upset that his "care" was in imminent danger of being rejected.
"Oh, for fuck's sake," Jason growled, eliciting a shocked gasp from Martha. He ignored her as he stomped toward his younger brothers and grabbed both by the backs of their collars.

"Don't. Fight." Bruce demanded while Jason hauled Damian and Tim into the tiny living room off of the central foyer and hallway.

Dick sighed with long-suffering. "I'll--"

"No," Bruce interrupted. He ignored the twinge of embarrassment he felt at sounding and acting so needy by throwing out an arm to keep Dick with him instead of allowing the younger man to join his siblings. He cleared his throat and set his face into a serious expression. "I would appreciate your opinion on the matters at hand." Admitting to that tasted less bitter than admitting that he didn't want to be alone with the women.

Dick picked up on his bullshit immediately. "You're too scared to go by yourself, aren't you?"

"Be quiet," Bruce hissed. He tried to push Dick in the direction that Ella was guiding Martha, further into the old house. Dick held his ground, a smug smirk stretching across his handsome features. Bruce wasn't interested in hearing whatever ribbing was on the tip of Dick's tongue as the younger man opened his mouth. "Six," Bruce snapped. "Is the number of weeks straight you tried to sleep with me because you were afraid of ghosts in the manor."

"I was twelve, B."

"So?" This time Bruce was able to make Dick start walking. At least from behind his heartless child, he couldn't see Dick's stupid grin.

The quaint kitchen was located at the back of the narrow house. They passed an office that filled the original dining room, a tiny powder room tucked under the stairs, and a small bedroom suite that smelled so much like his mother's perfume that Bruce was certain it was where Martha slept.

The appliances in the kitchen reminded Bruce of the stereotypical ones he'd seen in movies about the decades just before his birth. The countertops were set with individual porcelain tiles - white except for where they'd been chipped or burned by the underside of a hot pan - and the backsplash behind the stove featured yellowing flowers. The cabinets were made of quality wood but the color was reminiscent of those that had filled the cooking center at Wayne Manor right after the chef-style kitchen had been added to the main house. Alfred had recently demanded a remodel of the space, bringing it much closer to modern aesthetics.

A small wooden table with folded wings was pushed into the corner. Ella helped Martha to sit in the matching chair with its back to the lace-covered window, leaving the second for either Bruce or Dick. Dick made himself comfortable leaning one hip against the counter, so Bruce cautiously sat across from his mother. Martha looked between him and Dick with a hesitant smile. "Are you related to Thomas?"

"That's Bruce, Auntie. He does look like Thomas, doesn't he?" Ella answered when the lump in Bruce's throat prevented him from doing so.

Martha looked at Bruce wistfully. "Oh, yes. He does look like Thomas." She pulled a large golden locket out from under the neckline of her blouse and popped it open. Based on the looseness of the spring, Bruce surmised that she opened it often. "This is my Brucie," Martha said in explanation. Bruce obediently leaned forward to view the faded photograph of a preteen boy that bore an exact resemblance to the one in the old photographs that Alfred refused to store away back home.
"I am sorry for your loss," said Bruce. He motioned toward Dick. "This is my son, Richard."

"You can call me Dick," his eldest said. He'd always preferred the moniker to his full name, no matter the jibes he'd suffered from his siblings, classmates, and even strangers.

"Hello," said Martha. She looked confused again. Dick rubbed at the back of his neck awkwardly and glanced toward the door to the hallway. Bruce shot him a look meant to imply that he shouldn't even think about bailing on his father.

Ella set a cup of steaming tea in front of her aunt. "Auntie, I invited Bruce to visit you, since I know you missed him so much."

"That's nice, dear." She smiled down at her locket before closing it and tucking it away safely. "Is Thomas coming to visit?"

Ella scowled, her face turned away from Martha. It took her a moment to twist her expression into a more neutral one. "No, Auntie. Thomas isn't welcome here."

"Oh."

Bruce clenched his fists under the table at the sight of Martha's crestfallen expression. He almost felt guilty for how his alter-ego's death had affected his parents, though rationally he knew it wasn't his fault. He was torn between anger at his father for allowing alcoholism to destroy his marriage and the family company, and heartbreak for how lonely his mother looked right now. Across the kitchen, Dick shifted uncomfortably.

Ella returned to the stove where her kettle of tea boiled away. She poured a cup for Dick and then carried one over to Bruce. "Nurse Anne should be here shortly. Wouldn't you like to finish your tea before she arrives?" she asked Martha.

"Ah, yes. Anne is coming today?"

"She comes every day," Ella said patiently. "Now she has two friends to care for."

"Very good." Martha sipped delicately at her tea. Bruce watched the painfully slow realization dawn across her face. "Two friends, Ella?"

Ella moved to place a comforting hand on Martha's shoulder. "Why don't you go check on the others," she suggested to Bruce. He understood that she wanted to give Martha a break from the influx of new faces so he agreed. His tattered heartstrings could also use a rest, as seeing his alternate universe mother in such a state was tearing at them.

Besides, he was burning with curiosity about what had happened to his mother and cousin in the time since his death and he was having trouble thinking of anything else. That conversation was better had in privacy with Ella, even if he suspected any parts having to do with his father would be heavily biased. He stood, mindful of the stiffness that still lingered in his muscles and joints, and motioned discretely for Dick to follow him back toward the front of the house.

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After the home nurse arrived and tended to Martha, the middle-aged woman was introduced to Bruce and his sons. Her manner was professional, though she seemed comfortable in the home and didn't mind sending Ella on multiple trips throughout the house to find items that she needed to care for Tim. Damian remained close to his brother's side, keeping a sharp eye on the stranger. Tim alternated between sending exasperated pleas for help to Bruce via tragic looks and skewering Damian with
annoyed glares.

"Damian, come here, son," Bruce said after the fifth such pitiful glance from Tim. Damian reluctantly left Tim's side to flop down on Bruce's lap, though his acute observation of the home nurse didn't lessen.

Anne put away the light she'd used to shine onto the back of Tim's throat and patted the boy's shoulder once. "You don't appear to have regressed any from Dr. Keller's notes," she announced. "Get some sleep and we'll try to find some signs of continued improvement tomorrow."

It was just past seven when Anne left after a muted conversation with Ella. The sun had set over an hour ago and taken with it what little willpower Bruce had to stay awake. Besides Tim who was still shadowed by his persistent illness, the rest of Bruce's boys didn't seem ready to call it a night with their old man. If he was going to force himself to stay awake, he would definitely need something stronger than tea.

After escorting the nurse out and checking on Martha, Ella came back into the room with a sour expression on her face, like she'd eaten something tart. Underneath it, Bruce thought he could see unease and a wavering from her purpose. She watched Dick cuddle-tickle Tim for a few seconds, his eldest drawing muted puffs of laughter from the pale teenager. Then, as if flipping a mental switch, she looked away and focused on Bruce with hard eyes. "This is usually about the time Aunt Martha retires for the evening. I must insist that you are quiet and do not disturb her."

"Of course," said Bruce smoothly, before any of his brood could take offense to the assumption that they'd be loud and boisterous in a near stranger's house. "I assume you have some idea of sleeping arrangements?"

Ella ran her hand through her short, dyed hair, and follow the motion with a distasteful look for each of the unexpected multiverse travelers. "We have one guest room that I specifically prepared for you. We don't get many visitors."

"Shocking," muttered Jason.

"Jace," Bruce scolded. The eighteen-year-old didn't look repentant and Ella grew more agitated. "Let's see the space you've got and we'll go from there," he told her. She nodded stiffly. Bruce guided Damian off of his lap and stood up, once again unusually sore. He hoped that whatever sleeping surfaces she did have were better than a plastic hospital chair or the thin mattresses at the homeless shelter. Given that he'd probably end up sleeping on a hardwood floor in order to leave the beds for his children, he didn't let his hopes rise too much.

Ella was silent as they climbed the stairs to the second floor. A single full bathroom, filled to the brim with a modern woman's toiletries, was located right off of the landing. Bruce could see three additional doors, excluding the closed one at the top of the second flight of stairs. "That's the attic," Ella mentioned when she noticed his gaze up the stairs. "It's full of your mother's things. I need to go through it someday..." She trailed off, the corners of her mouth turning down at the thought of losing her aunt. She shook her head a few seconds later. "This is the guest room." She pushed open the first door to the left of the bathroom. Bruce followed her inside and quickly assessed the space.

A full size bed on a thin metal frame was pushed into the far corner, though the bedding looked new and clean. An antique dresser stood against the opposite wall. Filling the rest of the space was an old secretary desk and a faded wingback chair. The room didn't smell musty, as if it were regularly unused, and Bruce surmised that it had been a sort of home office until very recently. Whatever its past or present use, it was much too small for five people.
Back in the hallway, Bruce eyed the other two doors. Surely one was Ella's room, leaving the second as a possibility for more sleeping space. "What's in there?" Bruce asked, gesturing toward the door with a knob looking less polished from frequent use.

"A lot of what used to be in the guest room." Ella pinched the bridge of her nose. "Damn it."

Bruce frowned. He refused to feel any sympathy for her. She'd brought this upon herself, and put his family through hell as well. "I have an idea," he said grimly. "Send us home."

Ella straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. "No. I brought you here for a reason and some unforeseen circumstance isn't going to change that."

"Your reason is selfish and shortsighted," Bruce accused her. "Even if you had managed to only trap me here, it doesn't change the fact that you brought me here to relive the worst day of my life in slow agony!" He ground his teeth together, unhappy that he'd possibly raised his voice enough to alarm those downstairs.

"You get to see your mother again, Bruce Wayne. I've given you a gift not many people can receive."

"She's not my mother," Bruce argued. Martha wasn't the woman he remembered. The more time he spent with this alternate universe version of his mother, the more it hurt, not less.

"It doesn't matter what you think, as long as she feels like you're her son."

"Haven't you considered how it will hurt her when we leave? Won't it upset her to lose 'Brucie' again?"

"She won't lose you again," Ella said with determination. "You'll be there when she passes on."

Bruce forcefully squashed down the urge to physically shake some sense into her. "That could be years from now, Elizabeth!"

"She doesn't have years, you self-centered prick!" Ella coughed around a sob. She wiped angrily at her eyes when footsteps sounded on the wooden stairs leading up to them. She glared hatefully at Bruce to further temper her emotions.

"What's going on?" Dick asked, stopping a couple of steps down from the landing. He looked between the older two worriedly.

"Nothing, Dickie," Bruce replied with as much calm as he could muster. "Go back downstairs."

"If I go back downstairs and we hear you yelling again, Jason will try to come up here."

"You can tell your little asshole of a brother that he's in my house and--"

"I'm not going to tell Jason anything," Dick interrupted her. He climbed the last two steps and stood in front of Ella. Like her twin sister, Ella wasn't short and her height was amplified by her heels. Dick was barely taller than she was. "You brought us here against our will. Alfred didn't raise us to be rude houseguests, but you're going to have to expect a little antagonism on our part."

Bruce stepped up behind Dick. "It's all right, chum."

"It's actually not 'all right'," Dick countered, not looking away from Ella. "What you're asking of Bruce is downright atrocious."
"Get out of my face."

"Can't you see what you've already done to Bruce, and what you're currently doing?"

Ella shook her finger in Dick's face. "Martha is the only family I have, and when she's gone I'll have no one. I will do whatever it takes to see her final days be joyful." She pulled her hand back, clutching it to her chest as emotion overtook her again.

Dick tentatively reached out. When she didn't flinch away, he grasped her shoulder. "Ella, your aunt doesn't even know Bruce. But she knows you. She'd likely prefer to spend her last days with you."

"No. All she talks about is Bruce."

"She talks about a little boy who died in a dank alley, not a fifty-year-old man with more baggage than a jetliner during the holidays."

Bruce balked. "I am not fifty, you little brat," he admonished. Dick waved him off without looking away from Ella. "I was eighteen when you were born," Bruce insisted. "That makes me forty."

"You were eighteen?" Ella peered at him around Dick.

"I… look, we're talking about sleeping arrangements and you sending us home."

"He's not your son," Ella said, her eyes narrowing as she looked between Bruce and Dick. "I can sense it."

"He is absolutely my son," Bruce said. "We might not be related by blood, but he is mine in every other way. They all are."

"Except Damian. He is also your son by blood," Dick added.

Bruce nudged Dick to the side so he could step between them. He faced Ella. "I am tired. We're not having this conversation right now. I haven't slept in days and I have a child who really should still be in the hospital with complications from an illness that you caused him by recklessly dragging us here. You're going to find a way to accommodate all of us, and in the morning we're going to talk about sending us back to our universe."

"Maybe you can conjure up an air mattress," Dick suggested glibly. Ella scowled at him.

xXx

Ella hadn't needed to use any supernatural skills to produce a dusty air mattress from the attic, as well as a few blankets that thankfully smelled of cedar instead of mothballs. In the third upstairs room, Jason had claimed the worn corduroy couch that had once stood in the converted guest room while Damian had grudgingly agreed to share the air mattress with Dick. He had protested being separated from his father until Bruce had told him in no uncertain terms that if he wanted to share with Bruce, he had to go to bed right away and he couldn't make a single noise until morning.

As he had predicted, Damian wasn't ready to sleep so early since the kids had started catching up on sleep. Now Dick, Jason, and Damian were safely tucked away in the cluttered office while Bruce fussed over Tim in the actual guest room.

"Dick's going to be mad at you if you don't sleep again," Tim said, resisting Bruce's attempts to get him to lie down. He had the fleece blanket wrapped around his shoulders, which took away from the serious and commanding look with which the teenager was trying to cow Bruce.
"And he's not going to be upset with you?" Bruce was seriously considering a nerve strike if it meant he could pass out himself on the floor a few feet away. "Timmy…"

"You can't sleep on the floor."

"I could sleep anywhere right now," Bruce argued.

"So can I. Especially if you give me coffee."

Bruce chuckled dryly. "No coffee for you ever again, kid. Lie down."

"You first. On the bed." Tim scooted toward the edge and it was only due to his lingering illness that Bruce was able to catch him around the waist before he stood up. He flopped down on the bed, dragging the teenager with him, blanket and all.

"I am too tired to fight with you," Bruce grumbled as Tim flailed for balance. He managed to manipulate the boy onto his side, curled up in the narrow space that Bruce's bulky frame didn't fill on a bed that would have been too small for him alone. Bruce pulled the sheet and coverlet up over them and exhaled tiredly. "Okay?"

"Uh huh," Tim mumbled. "Night, B."

"Good-night, son." Bruce relaxed into his pillow, then blew away the strands of Tim's dark hair that tickled his nose. Content that he wouldn't be sneezing all night by the irritant, he closed his eyes and urged himself to sleep.

It was blessedly quiet until, "B?" Bruce grunted the way Batman usually did when he wanted Robin to be silent. "Bruce?"

"Go to sleep," Bruce ordered without opening his eyes. The slight teenager needed the sleep just as much as Bruce did. Otherwise, the exhausted father would have left him to the mercy of his brothers.

Tim's fingers ghosted over the large arm locked around his torso and holding him in place on the narrow bed. "You seem… different."

"I'm very, very tired, Tim," Bruce answered impatiently. "Please try to rest."

"No, I mean - you're clingier than usual."

Bruce tightened his arm around Tim in order to drag the teenager backwards a couple of millimeters, making it possible to speak directly into the teenager's ear without having to move his head much. "I dearly love you, kid, but I will knock you out if you don't go to sleep."

Tim hmm'd unhappily. "We'll see about the coffee," he muttered, but remained blessedly quiet after that. Bruce knew the boy was tired, too, and hoped he'd drift off quickly without any "help" from Bruce. The father waited with baited breath for a few minutes, until his son's breathing evened out as much as it would with the effects of his illness still hampering it. Bruce adjusted his hold on the teenager once more before finally sleeping himself.

*to be continued...*
I apologize for the delay in the story - the holidays got the best of me and I haven't been able to write, or even read, like I'd hoped. And unfortunately it might be a bit of wait before the next chapter, too. I'm trying to squeeze in wedding planning around a full-time job. ;-)
Chapter Twenty-Five

It felt like only a few minutes had passed before Bruce was once again dragged unhappily from sleep. Between the hard lumpiness of the mattress beneath him and the extremely irritating voices above him, Bruce was fighting a losing battle to remain unconscious. While he knew intellectually that it probably wouldn't work, he let himself hope that ignoring his discomforts would make them go away.

"Do you think he's doing it on purpose?" asked someone who sounded much too much like Jason to be a coincidence.

"Of course not," Dick replied, though he sounded rather unsure of himself.

The third voice came from behind him and was accompanied by a weight pressing against his back. "If Father truly wanted to suffocate someone, he would be much more efficient."

"Dami, you're not helping the situation," said Dick. The pressure against Bruce's back lightened, though he could still feel the heat of the small body squeezed between his side and the wall.

Someone jabbed Bruce's shoulder with a finger. "Hey, boss-man. Why are you trying to undo all of my hard work?"

Bruce had no idea what Jason was talking about and he wished that the teenager would go find someone else to bother. He hadn't even opened his eyes yet and he could already tell that they felt puffy. His whole body was lethargic. He wasn't sure if he could force himself to get up if he wanted to. He turned his face into his pillow, which only served to encourage his tormentors.

"Are you awake, B?"

_No, Dick. Go away._

"Pinch him, Damian," Jason suggested.

"Why?"

"Because you're the baby and B probably won't be as mad at you."

"I am not a baby, Todd."

"Guys, focus," Dick insisted. "B won't be mad when he realizes we're just trying to rescue our poor flattened baby bird."

_B will be very mad... wait. What?_ Bruce finally registered the sounds of labored breathing and weak shoves against his chest coming from _underneath_ his sprawled form. _Oops._

"Don't worry, runt, we'll free you yet," Jason promised.

Damian squawked inelegantly when Bruce rolled over suddenly, pressing the child against the wall.
"Father!"

"Oh, shit, he's going for Damian now," said Jason.

"Get out of my room," Bruce growled as he blearily reached for the fifteen-year-old coughing dramatically beside him.

Tim managed to wheeze out a cry for help between coughs. "Dick!"

Bruce caught the narrow wrist of the hand reaching for the oldest Robin and tucked the appendage under its owner's squirming body. He twisted around until he landed on his back, one son splayed across his wide chest and another pinned next to him. He squeezed his eyes shut against the bright light sneaking around the edges of the curtain over the south facing window as he rubbed his large hand up and down Tim's back to help soothe away the thankfully dry coughs. Tim slowly relaxed against him now that their positions were reversed.

"You okay now, baby bird?" Dick asked. Through one cracked eyelid, Bruce saw the young man lean over to push Tim's damp bangs away from his slick forehead. Alarmed that the dreaded fever had returned due to his own carelessness, Bruce reached up to press the back of his own hand against Tim's cheek. His boy was cool to the touch beneath the sheen of sweat.

Tim made a muted sound halfway between a reassurance and a complaint. He was likely hot due to Bruce's body heat, which was regretful but not a cause for immediate concern.

"You sure?" Jason implored. "You're still looking a bit like a pancake."

"Help," Tim said weakly. He tried to sit up.

Bruce pulled him back down, positioning the teenager's head under his chin and holding it there with one hand while his other arm locked across Tim's upper back. "No. We're still sleeping. The rest of you, get out."

"Father, I wish you remain with you," Damian said. He ducked down, wedging himself into place.

"Then be silent," Bruce said gruffly.

One of the bigger boys sat down on the inches of mattress between Bruce and the edge of the bed. "Dami, you'll make sure B doesn't try to squish Timmy again, won't you?" Bruce jerked his knee to the side and rewarded with the sound of Dick hitting the hardwood floor. "Ow! Bad daddy bats." Bruce growled low in the back of his throat as a warning.

Damian wrapped one set of little fingers around Bruce's bicep as if to make sure the man didn't disappear or suddenly change his mind and evict him as well. "Of course I will, Grayson." Damian's other hand brushed Bruce's as the boy stroked the back of Tim's neck.

"What're you doing?" Tim asked, tensing noticeably.

"It's comforting," Damian informed his brother.

"It's creepy," Tim argued.

Damian tutted unhappily. "Grayson does it and you don't complain then."

"Gray-- Dick has never tried to maim me in my sleep," Tim replied.

"I do not require the subterfuge of a nocturnal attack if I wish to maim my foes," Damian replied as if
offended by the very thought. Tim clearly didn't take that as assurance he'd remain unhurt while he was vulnerable.

"Hush." Bruce ended the debate between his younger two by lifting his hand from Tim's hair to wrap the arm around Damian in a loose headlock. He rubbed his thumb lightly back and forth across the child's soft cheek. "Why are you still in here?" he asked after a few seconds of silence when he could still sense Dick and Jason watching him.

"I don't have a camera, so I am committing this scene to memory," said Dick in an artificially emotional voice.

"I ain't goin' down there by myself," said Jason. The wingback chair creaked as Jason settled into it. Bruce resigned himself to defeat and returned to his initial plan to simply ignore the interlopers. He took as deep of a breath as he could muster with a fifteen-year-old using him as a body pillow and slowly released it while mentally relaxing his muscles one at a time. He was asleep again before he was able to finish.

xXx

The next time that Bruce awoke it was for just a minute. The room was dark. Tim's comforting weight still covered him like a heated blanket and Damian had caused his left arm to turn to pins and needles. He could turn his head just enough to see the wingback chair. Jason was slouched to one side and a borrowed paperback dangled precariously from his fingers. His other hand rested on Dick's flattened hair as the older brother slept with his head pillowed on his arms folded across Jason's lap.

Content that all of his sons were accounted for, Bruce slept again.

xXx

The room was brighter when Bruce awoke for the third time that day, though due to artificial means. His protective instincts flared when Tim was lifted off of him, enabling him to overcome the thickness of his eyelids and the drowning drowsiness that he'd yet to shake. He sat up, blinking rapidly.

"The nurse wants to check on your kid," Ella's quiet contralto voice informed him. True to her word, Tim was merely seated on the bed near Bruce's feet with the newly familiar nurse checking his vitals.

"Where are Dick and Jason?" he asked after checking on the empty chair.

"Eating me out of house and home," Ella replied, though not entirely unkindly. "The little ones should probably eat something too, as should you." The nurse made a sound of agreement as she held the ear thermometer in place.

"What time is it?" Bruce still felt a bit fuzzy - a feeling he detested - and it didn't dawn on him until after Ella informed him that it was going on six o'clock that he could have looked at his own watch for the exact time. He swallowed to ease the dryness in his throat.

"The effects of your… travel should not have lasted for so long," said Ella. He surmised that she meant the trip through the wormhole a week and a half ago.

"I haven't slept since…" Bruce really wasn't sure. He didn't count the uncomfortable catnaps he'd stolen in the emergency room and he hadn't truly slept the night before Tim's emergency, either. "Well, it's much more than our travel that's cost me sleep," he said grumpily. Ella looked away and
Bruce could see her jaw tick minutely.

Damian crawled across the rumpled bedding to claim Bruce's lap. "Has Drake recovered yet from his ailment?"

"Why don't you refer to your brothers by their given names?" Ella asked. Her green eyes were sharp and Bruce knew she was comparing Damian's quirk to her realization the night before that Dick was adopted.

"I…" Damian snapped his mouth shut and shot Ella a sharp look of his own. "Father, has Timothy recovered yet from his ailment?"

"I don't think quite yet," Bruce replied. He hugged the little boy when Damian's stomach rumbled with hunger. He was feeling pangs himself and decided that he'd have to fight his fatigue just long enough to see himself and the boys fed.

"His lungs sound slightly better," confirmed the nurse. "Are you having trouble breathing, young man?" she asked Tim.

"Only when oversized Orcs try to squash me," Tim muttered.

"That happens with brothers," the nurse said softly. She put her thermometer away and straightened up. Tim's side-eye toward Bruce went unnoticed. Bruce ignored the look himself and pushed against the mattress to stand. He had to grab the headboard when a wave of dizziness washed over him unexpectedly and his head surged with an ache that he just now noticed.

“Father!” Damian exclaimed, echoed by Tim’s alarmed, “B!”

Bruce sat down heavily, holding his pulsing forehead with one hand while his other clenched the rumpled bedding in a tight fist. Damian’s weight against his back suddenly felt like the Sahara Desert. He swallowed rapidly to stem his rising nausea.

“Are you okay?” Tim didn’t crowd him like Damian, but he was close enough that Bruce could feel his warmth as well.

“Fine,” Bruce said gruffly once his stomach felt less rebellious. “I just stood up too quickly.”

A cool hand landed briefly against his cheek, and was gone again before he could appreciate the minute comfort. “Boys, give him some space,” chided the nurse softly. Bruce felt a little guilty about the amount of relief he felt when his kids did as requested, even if it was just because the removal of their heat felt wonderful. “Mr. Wayne, are you feeling dizzy?”

“No,” Bruce lied. He forced his eyes open to meet the nurse’s skeptical look.

“Oh, fuck me,” groaned Ella in the background. “Don’t tell me that you’re sick now, too.”

“Father does not get sick,” Damian informed her haughtily.

“I think this is pretty good evidence to the contrary,” snapped Tim. Bruce could sense him inching closer as the nurse prodded at him annoyingly.

Damian made a sharp sound of derision. “Father wouldn’t normally get sick, Drake, but he’s exhausted and been subjected to your disgusting germs non-stop. This is all your fault!”

Tim bumped against Bruce’s side as he twisted to face his younger brother head on. The jostling
made Bruce’s headache throb anew and he could feel his temper fray. “It’s not my fault,” the teenager denied. He sounded too emotional to be convincing.

“Boys.” The growl scratched across his sore throat painfully, but at least it served its purpose. His sons desisted.

“Hush,” scolded Nurse Anne. “Get off of the bed, both of you.”

“I have done nothing wrong,” Damian insisted as he crawled to the edge of the bed and dropped loudly to the wood floor. “Why am I being banished?”

The nurse took each of the recalcitrant boys by an arm and pulled them toward the door. “Ella, they need to eat,” she said. Their hostess sighed, then moved to join her unwanted guests by the door. Nurse Anne refocused on Damian and Tim. “Too much stress and not enough sleep makes everyone vulnerable to illness, even something as mundane as a cold. If that’s the case, I don’t want you anywhere near him,” she told Tim. The teenager scowled.

“Come on,” Ella said shortly. “Let’s see if there’s even any food left in my kitchen.”

“I demand to stay with Father,” said Damian. He sounded on the verge of tears.

Bruce took a deep breath and this time when he stood he took care to not rise too quickly. His cautiousness paid off and his dizziness remained at bay. “I’m fine, Dami. It’s probably just a cold, like she said.” It surely felt like one.

Bruce felt a sharp pang of homesickness then and he missed Alfred fiercely. The older man had seen him through many colds and he preferred his butler’s comfort to anyone else’s. “Come on, let’s eat.”

“I’m serious about Timothy keeping his distance from you,” Nurse Anne reiterated. “Why don’t you just sit back down. I’m sure Ella will bring you something light after she’s fed the kids.” Ella made a face like she was sucking a lemon but didn’t disagree.

“If you’re worried about him catching my germs or me catching his, it’s probably already too late,” Tim said. He barely managed to raise an arm in time to defend himself from Damian’s fists.

“If Father dies from this, I will never forgive you, Drake. I wish we’d have left you at the hospital and CPS could have had you!” Damian’s red face glinted with tears in the dim light of the room.

Bruce brushed past the females, unconcerned with their attempts to separate his children from the threat of more illness. His arms trembled with the exertion, but he lifted Damian anyway and clutched the sobbing child close. “It’s just a cold, baby. I’m not going anywhere, I promise.”

“Besides,” said Tim, his own voice thick. “Bruce isn’t ‘weak and pathetic’ like I am. Pneumonia wouldn’t kill him.” Damian didn’t acknowledge the bitter statement. Bruce brought his arm from around Damian’s back to wrap around Tim’s tense shoulders and draw the teenager in close, the nurse’s fears be damned.

He pressed a kiss to the top of Tim’s head and then to Damian’s wet cheek. “It’s okay. We’re all going to be okay.” This time, when his youngest two clung to him, he didn’t care if he felt stifled. There’d be time for peace, quiet, and coolness when his sons didn’t need him quite so badly.

Nurse Anne wisely waited for Damian to calm to intermittent sniffles and Tim to relax against Bruce’s side before recommending again that the boys let Ella take them downstairs for dinner. Bruce’s arms were starting to loudly protest holding Damian’s weight, so he set the boy down and gently nudged him toward the door. He held Tim a second longer to whisper, “This didn’t come from you, kid. I’m just an old man who’s tired and hungry. And I will never give you up for
“I know,” Tim said in a small voice. He pulled away and let the nurse push him after Damian, who’d taken up scowling darkly to hide his embarrassment at breaking down. Once they were out of sight, Bruce let his shoulders slump. He slowly made his way back to the bed and sat down heavily.

“This is the last thing I need,” he muttered.

“How do you feel?” asked the nurse. Bruce described his symptoms honestly and she nodded attentively. “I really do think this is just a cold that snuck in when your defenses were down from the terrible couple of days you’ve just been through. The dizziness is likely due to not eating in almost a day.”

“Hnn.” Bruce swallowed again, the burn in his throat quickly becoming more annoying than the headache focused between his eyes.

“It’s still a good idea to keep your distance from Timothy, in hopes that he hasn’t already picked up this new bug, too. He seemed fine when I checked on him just now, so I’m optimistic that the excessive amount of antibiotics he’s taken recently are doing their job.” She patted his shoulder. “I’ll ask Ella to make you some soup, and send up some throat lozenges and cold medicine with it.”

“Thank you.”

She left him alone. The quiet was nice for a few minutes, until the homesickness took him again and Bruce missed the constant noise of his sons, even if it was just the sounds of their soft breathing. Bruce took a deep breath and forced the feeling of loneliness away. He was supposed to thrive in solitude. That’s who Batman was.

The corner of his mouth quirked up. Well, that’s who Batman had been, until Robin.

to be continued...

Chapter End Notes

I’m sorry for the long delay - I’ve had no free time since the new year, but I'm trying to write whenever I can. With a wedding coordinator on board and the bridal fairs over for a couple of months, I should get some of my weekends back, lol.
I'm a day late due to the Superbowl being too distracting last night. Hopefully posting today means the narrative will be more coherent than it would have been otherwise. :)

Chapter Twenty-Six

A short knock on the door warned Bruce that his time alone was at its imminent end. Before he could rise to admit his cousin, the door swung open and Jason stood there instead. “Rumor has it that you’ve finally fallen, old man. That leaves yours truly as the only one of us so badass that even viruses steer clear.”

“You have unfair advantages,” Bruce grumbled. He took the steaming bowl of soup off of the tray that Jason held. “Like sleep and youth.”

“I’m pretty sure that I myself told you to take a nap at least a dozen times in the past two days,” Jason said. “You nearly drove Dickie-bird hoarse by being a stubborn mule.” Jason looked introspective for a moment. “Though, that wouldn’t have been too bad.”

“Be nice to me. I’m still your father.” Bruce swalloed a mouthful of the soup and was impressed that the delicious mix of flavors managed to pierce through the tasteless veil caused by his rapidly congesting sinuses. “Ella let you cook in her kitchen?”

“Jace…” Bruce decided against reprimanding the teenager for speaking so irreverently about Martha. Even though she wasn’t actually his mother, his heart still ached for her the same and he didn’t like her being mentioned so callously. But Jason had been through the same hell that he had, and it didn’t seem fair to ask his son to look past what had been done to them. Instead, he asked, “How did Martha seem today?”

“I didn’t seek her out to ask,” Jason said.

“You didn’t avoid her, did you?” Bruce frowned sadly at the thought. Martha had seemed excited about the idea of grandchildren and he didn’t want her already fragile heart battered again by being rejected by the boys. She didn’t seem to understand that Ella had dragged their current guests from a parallel universe and might not realize that was the cause of the boys’ reticence.

“So what if I did,” said Jason defensively. “She’s the reason we’re here, even if she’s not the one who opened the wormhole.”

“It’s not her fault—“

“Dick told me what Ella excepts of you,” Jason interrupted. He sounded angry. “It’s bullshit and it’s
Bruce was struck by the memory of his conversation with Dick on the drive to Pleasanton, about how different their losses were from Jason’s. He set down the bowl and held out a hand to the teenager. “Come here, son.”

“I’m not one of the kids… or Goldie,” Jason huffed. “You don’t get to cuddle me.”

“I need a hug. I don’t feel well, Jaybird,” Bruce tried, wondering if he could guilt the younger man into taking pity on him.

“Then eat your damn soup.”

Bruce sighed and relented only because his stomach was still grumbling about being mostly empty. He picked up a piece of perfectly browned toast and dipped it into the broth before taking a small bite. “Will you tell me about Catherine?”

“Why the hell would I want to talk about her?” Jason asked.

“Because for all intents and purposes she was your mother,” said Bruce. “And losing her was hard for you. Because I didn’t push you enough to talk about it when you were little, like I should have as your dad.”

“No thanks.”

Bruce leveled Jason with a tragic look. “You told Dick about her.” Jealousy was beneath him, so that couldn't be what he was feeling.

“Exactly.” Jason crossed his arms over his chest. “Therapy complete, life moved on.”

“Dick isn’t your dad.”

“Thank goodness for small miracles,” Jason muttered.

“So talk to me, Jason.”

“I’d really rather not,” Jason said. His sideways glances at the door were a clear indication to Bruce that if he didn’t stop pushing, the teenager would bail on him.

“Fine,” Bruce said unhappily. “Then tell me what else you and Dick did today while I eat.”

“I read Catch 22. Dickie talked at me until he finally wore himself out.”

Bruce smiled softly. “I thought I’d dreamed that you two napped in here at some point.”

“Definitely a dream.”

“You’re better at lying with the hood on,” Bruce informed him. “And you better be careful, little boy, or the viruses will find out that you’re not such a badass, either.”

“I am the badass, Bruce,” Jason argued. “They don’t come badder than me.”

“Keep telling yourself that, Jaybird.”

The soup was gone. Bruce set the bowl on the tray again and yawned widely. Now that his stomach was full, his bladder wanted relief. “I’ll be back in a minute.” His aching body protested as he slowly
pushed himself off of the bed. Jason moved to help him. Bruce wished that he didn’t actually have to pee so badly, or he’d take advantage of the teenager’s lowered defenses and steal a hug or two. He did pause when he noticed Jason’s worried blue-green eyes tracking his slow trudge toward the door. “You kids,” Bruce said, sounding extra exasperated. “I’m fine. I’m not that old.”

Jason made a face and retreated back to the wingback chair that was unofficially becoming his. Bruce made it to the cluttered second floor bathroom without trouble and quickly took care of his business. After washing his hands, he leaned in close to the small mirror above the sink to inspect his haggard reflection. He was scruffy again and the bags under his eyes were large. The effect was worsened by the wan tone of his skin that his fading tan couldn't fully disguise. It wasn't the first time he'd looked as such, but usually it was the result of his work as Batman and not just life in general.

Being on his feet reminded Bruce that he wasn't one for idleness, even when sick. While crawling back into bed still sounded heavenly, he opted to venture downstairs in order to catch up on his family's current situation. In the back of his mind, some commercial catch phrase played about dads not taking sick days. Decision made, Bruce poked his head back into the guest room to alert Jason to his plan.

"I'm not going to argue with you, since I want to get home more than anyone," the teenager said. "At least take the medicine prescribed by the nurse." Jason held up the bottle of over-the-counter cold medicine.

"That is nighttime," Bruce observed flatly.

"It's almost nighttime," Jason replied, just as dryly. "You slept all day."

"Where's the daytime medicine?"

"Do you see another bottle in here?" Jason aped scanning the room with wide eyes. "Looks like your options are limited, old man."

"Now I'm rooting for the germs to take you," Bruce said with annoyance, though truthfully he never wanted one of his kids to feel ill again. "You'll love my brand of concerned nurturing."

Jason merely grinned and sauntered past Bruce, smacking the star and moon-covered bottle against the older man's chest as he passed. "Ain't gonna happen, B." Bruce made his own disgusted face at the cold syrup before dropping it back onto the bedside table. If, however unlikely that scenario might be, he felt like he needed it later, it would be there. In the meantime, Bruce could crush the cold virus into submission by the sheer force of his indomitable will.

xXx

"Wow, you look like crap."

Bruce glared toward the corner of the cramped kitchen where his remaining three sons were crowded. "Thanks, Dick."

"No, I'm serious." His eldest slid out of his seat at the two-person dinette and approached Bruce with a overtly concerned expression. "Should you even be out of bed?"

"I'm fine." Growling was frustratingly painful for his throat. He was also annoyed that he couldn't quite tell if Dick was teasing him or not.

"Did you take any of the meds?" Dick tilted his head toward his younger brother. "Did you give him the medicine, Jay?"
Jason crossed his arms over his chest. "Yeah, I put it right in his frickin' hand. Did the stubborn ass take it? What do you think?"

Dick tsked and shook his head in disappointment. Bruce scowled. "Jason, the man looks like he's about to fall over. It would have been easy enough to convince B to take some."

Jason smirked and Bruce's older two sons were only saved from his righteous wrath by Damian springing from where he'd been hovering at Dick's back after being banished from the guest bedroom. "Don't joke about such things, Gray-- Richard! What if Father were to perish suddenly? You know it's very likely that he contracted Drake's sickness."

Dick's expression as he stared at his littlest brother was a mixture of surprise, glee, and compassion. The combination made him look a bit constipated, especially when he struggled to smother a smile in order to look appropriately admonished in the face of Damian's very real concerns. "Oh, Dami. The nurse said it's just a cold. B will be okay. He's not as sick as poor Timmy was." The smile finally broke through and Dick leaned down to meet Damian at eye level. "Richard, huh?"

Damian flushed darkly and tried to hide it with a smoldering glare. "Be serious, man," he chided.

"Besides," chimed in Jason. "I believe it's actually 'Gray Richard'. You know, 'cause you're old, too."

Dick ignored Jason in favor of beaming at Damian. Damian snapped, "Shut up, Todd. No one asked you," without looking away from his favorite sibling. "It was brought to my attention that referring to you by your surname was counterproductive to maintaining the charade that we are all brothers. That woman has become suspicious."

Dick's smile slipped a bit. "It's not a charade, baby bat. We are brothers. And Ella knows that I, Jason, and Timmy are adopted. She also knows that it doesn't make one lick of difference to the fact that B is our dad and loves us all the same."

"Perhaps you and I," Damian grumbled. "You are mostly tolerable."

"All of us the same, Dami," Dick corrected. His high-wattage smile returned. "You're so cute, baby brother."

He barely managed to retract his hand from ruffling Damian's short hair in time to avoid losing it to the miniature ninja's wrath. "Grayson!"

"Ouch," said Jason with a laugh from where he'd moved to lean against the wall next to Tim's chair. "Looks like you've fallen back into the ranks of us 'intolerables'." He squeezed the smaller teenager's shoulder. Tim merely rolled his eyes.

Bruce was growing tired from standing in the middle of the kitchen. He discretely moved to stand next to the narrow stretch of lower cabinets next to the stove and casually leaned his hip against the edge of the laminate counter. "Come here, Damian." His youngest quickly moved to his side and readily accepted his father's one-armed hug, from where he glared at the rest of his siblings. "Where are Ella and Martha?"

"Don't know, don't care," Jason said glibly. Tim shrugged and continued swirling his spoon through the bowl of soup before him without ever actually eating any of it. Dick said, "You should sit down, B," and motioned toward his abandoned seat.

"I'm fine, son," Bruce snipped impatiently, hoping to remind the nuisance of his place in the caretaking hierarchy of their family. Sitting down did sound nice though. The surely cold bowl of
soup on the table gave him a sudden bout of inspiration. "What is that, your second or third helping, Tim?" Bruce dragged Damian along with him as he moved to claim the open chair and then looked earnestly at his third son.

"Sure," the teenager muttered. He dropped the spoon into the full bowl and then folded his hands in his lap, ignoring the puddle of chicken broth that had splashed onto the tablecloth.

"Drake is lying to you, Father," Damian said imperiously. His dark blue eyes were fixed on the older boy. "Our care has been wasted upon him."

"Your care," Tim scoffed. "Don't worry, I didn't believe it was genuine for a second, anyway."

"Timmy..." said Dick sadly. His likely attempt to insist that Damian was trying to turn over a new leaf and really did worry about his adopted siblings was loudly overridden by the boy himself.

"You ungrateful peasant! I shall remember this and never spend another ounce of concern on you, Drake." Damian shivered, noticeable only to Bruce since the child was leaning against his side.

Bruce subconsciously registered the tone of hurt and regret in his youngest's voice as Damian delivered his judgment, but he was too upset by the hateful words to fully mark it.

"Damian, that is enough," he scolded. He was ignored as the Robins continued their staring match.

Tim's lighter blue eyes went icy just before he looked away first. "I don't want your concern, demon. I don't want any of yours." He pushed back from the table and stood up. "Don't touch me," he snapped, slapping Jason's hand from where it had rested on his shoulder since Damian's irritation at Dick. Tim rushed from the kitchen, too quickly for even Jason, the closest to him, to grab the teenager. Bruce clenched his jaw, hating anew Tim's habit of seeking solitude when upset. A feeling of helplessness rose in him when Damian started sniffling, followed by halting sobs. Bruce wished he could split himself in two, to comfort both of his children simultaneously.

"F-father," Damian wept, throwing his arms around Bruce's neck. "Why d-does he hate me s-so much?"

Really? Jason mouthed at Dick, waving incredulously at Damian. Dick made a slashing motion across his throat, urging Jason to not say out loud anything derisive he might be thinking about the eleven-year-old. The twenty-two-year-old turned a strained smile on Bruce and gave him a thumbs up as if the overwhelmed father had any idea what to say to comfort his distraught son. Dick abandoned him then, dragging Jason from the kitchen despite the teenager's protests against being manhandled. At least they were probably tracking down Tim.

Bruce sighed and leaned more fully into holding Damian. He rested his chin on the boy's hair, justifying his lack of soothing words with the excuse that Damian probably wouldn't hear or believe them anyway. A couple of minutes after Dick and Jason had bailed on him, Ella appeared in the doorway to the kitchen. She looked smug at first, as if the tension between the boys was due to Bruce being a Wayne and therefore completely reproachable. Her expression softened after registering Damian's misery and Bruce's floundering attempts to comfort him.

"Tim let himself outside, in just his sleepwear," she reported, barely loudly enough for Bruce to hear her. "If he gets himself admitted to the hospital again, I'm not going to pay for it." He suspected that she'd originally intended to deliver the ultimatum with a lot more scorn.

"Dick will talk him back inside before it comes to that," Bruce said wearily. He regretting trying to man up in the face of his cold instead of just taking the sleep aid and hiding from this situation for a few more hours.
Ella moved to her freezer and pulled out a carton of ice cream. She scooped a healthy serving into a bowl. She set it and a clean spoon on the table in front of Damian. "Here, honey. This always made me feel better after fighting with my sister."

Bruce focused on the comment eagerly. "Your sister, Kate?" Damian was more interested in the sweet treat. He wiped at his wet cheeks while reaching for the spoon.

Ella looked confused for a second before she realized whom Bruce meant. "My twin sister Catherine. She goes by Cathy in this world. You know her as Kate?"

"Yes," Bruce replied. "She's still alive?"

"Why wouldn't she be?"

Bruce cleared his throat awkwardly. "You didn't do much research before stealing us from our universe."

"You may have noticed that I have a lot going on here," said Ella impatiently. "All I needed was a version of you who hadn't died that night. It was a boon that you'd lost your mother - I figured you'd jump at the chance to see Aunt Martha again."

Bruce didn't appreciate his parents' death being mentioned so insensitively. Still, he let it go in the interest of learning more about their reluctant hostess. Anything he discovered might be useful in getting her to send them home. "Why are you the only one caring for Martha?"

Ella sneered. "Like who?"

"Your father, for one," Bruce replied, just as crisply. "In my world he was pretty protective of his cousin."

"Was he protective of his daughters in your world?" Ella's brows furrowed in anger.

"Yes, in his own way," Bruce replied. He didn't think it was necessary to mention that Jacob Kane had become nearly overbearing in his protectiveness of Kate after his wife and Elizabeth died. He'd felt his own measure of bitterness toward the man for his lack of compassion toward his cousin's recently orphaned son.

"Well, in this universe, he bought into the judgmental supremacy of the Kane heraldry. Anyone who went against the family image was summarily ostracized."

"Like practicing 'interdimensional control'," Bruce said. The seclusion of Ella and Martha made more sense in that context.

Ella nodded briskly. "Or like marrying a loathsome Wayne."

Bruce could understand her attitude. His feelings towards his mother's side of the family after his parents' deaths hadn't been very positive either. Plenty of people had wondered why the affluent family did nothing to support their daughter's bereaved son. At least the Waynes all had the excuse of being dead.

Ella plucked a napkin out of the holder at the edge of the table and worried it between her fingers. "I admired her for standing up to the family and marrying her true love. Her defiance gave me the courage to accept my own gifts even though I knew I'd be branded as a witch and disowned. That's why it was so heartbreaking after you - after you of this world, I mean - died and Thomas Wayne showed his true colors."

"She gave up everything for him, and he chose
"They weren't right," Bruce said. He did his best to find the voice he used as Batman to reassure terrified victims that he'd just rescued (yes, any of his Robins were leagues better at it than he, but that was besides the point), despite his cold leaving rough edges to his tone. "My father turned his back on a global empire of a company to become a doctor. Until the day he died, he also stood up to the elitists and did everything he could to help the less fortunate of Gotham. That's why my mother loved him so much."

"Then it's a shame that he died and this world's Thomas Wayne lived," Ella said darkly.

"My grandfather had to have been a remarkable man, or else my father would not be so revered," said Damian. His lips were discolored from the food coloring in the ice cream. Bruce was happy that the tears had stopped for now.

"You're revered, huh?"

"Some people like me," Bruce replied lightly. He pinched Damian before the boy could bring up his favorite example of the impression that Bruce made on some people. Bruce was not proud of the fact that Ra's al Ghul had once favored him as a successor for the League of Assassins. He was also not pleased with the amount of interest that the old ghoul had in his various children.

Damian wasn't happy to be denied the chance to laud what he considered one of his father's greatest accomplishments, despite having himself soured toward his maternal grandfather. Instead, he said, "If not for Father's efforts, our Gotham City would be the same despised pit of ruin that it is here."

"Gotham was a pit of ruin before the Clench and the earthquake." Ella smirked. "Aunt Martha and I moved away well before karma repaid Gotham in full."

"Bitch," said Damian.

"Excuse me?" Ella was instantly angry and offended. Bruce was bewildered that Damian would so casually upset the careful peace between them.

"That's what Todd always says," Damian said, unperturbed by Ella's fury. "Karma is a bitch."

The young woman gaped at him for a few seconds before shaking her head and barking out a laugh. "Right."

"Damian… why would you even want to repeat the things your brother says?" Bruce rubbed his forehead tiredly.

"Todd… or is it Jason?" Ella frowned uncertainly.

"It's Jason Todd-Wayne," Bruce clarified.

"I see." Ella cocked her head, as if listening for something. Bruce didn't hear any sounds, which was both comforting and alarming. After all, three young men shouldn't be so quiet. Ella apparently didn't feel the need to address whatever had briefly stolen her attention. Her green eyes focused on Bruce again. "You should teach that boy some manners."

"Considering the trouble he used to get himself into, I'll take his lack of manners," Bruce said. "He really is a good boy. Life hasn't been easy for him but he's made due despite all of that. He is precious to me, for all of the hell that he gives me."
"Drake-- Timothy says that Jason was good practice for Richard before I came along." Damian frowned deeply. Bruce was sure that he was thinking about the recent regression of his relationship with the previous Robin, but wouldn't want to speak of it with Ella.

In order to change the subject, Bruce asked about Martha. "How is she feeling?"

"She's getting used to a house full of boys," Ella said. "I wish you hadn't caught a cold. It's be nice if you could actually spend some time with her."

"She doesn't know me, Ella. If anything, she thinks I'm Thomas Wayne."

"You just need to talk to her. Remind her of Brucie, not that lush."

"You need to send us home. There are people there who need me, too. Martha doesn't know me. I'm not her son."

"I can't send you back yet," said Ella. She sounded irritated again.

"Won't," Bruce challenged. His own anger grew in response to her obstinacy.

Ella crossed her arms over her chest, though the action seemed defensive rather than offensive. "I can't."

*to be continued...*
Chapter Twenty-Seven

The delicate, flower-patterned teacup rattled against its saucer when Bruce lowered it from his mouth. He set the whole assembly on the end table, no longer wanting the lukewarm brew. Bruce had never suffered from unsteady hands. He'd had naturally strong nerves and had trained out any chance of ticks or shakes that may have resulted from his work as Batman. Honestly, he rarely felt the need to express himself with jitters. He trusted his training, his technology, and his teammates. Beyond that, he had spent countless hours learning to channel his anger positively, without any tell-tale signs of his feelings like twitches or clenched fists unless he wanted his counterpart to know his ire. This was all before he'd brought home four rambunctious boys and a girl skilled enough to upset the countenance of a saint. He'd only perfected his poker face since then.

He focused on the freezing rain outside the window of the living room. It fit his mood rather well as he sat alone during the early morning hours, watching the weather turn sour. After learning that it wasn't possible to return home immediately, his initial, bright anger had slowly burned down from "I am seriously considering breaking my greatest rule for you and even the Joker didn't push me this far" to "I can't stand the sight of you and I'm going to sit in this other room for a while". Since then, he had been filled with a mixture of cold fury and sharp worry for his family, both on this side of the multiverse and back home.

According to their host, it had taken Ella a massive amount of energy and careful timing to open the wormhole at just the right time to catch Bruce Wayne while minimizing the damage as much as possible. Bruce had no idea if anyone had been hurt while the wormhole was open, but he clearly recalled the devastation and destruction of the downtown Gotham City road. To add insult to injury, she'd only calibrated her power to bring one man across the multiverse. The burden of five had broken the wormhole tunnel and dropped the family in this universe's dumping ground for interdimensional travelers without a specific destination in mind - outside of Chambers, New Jersey. Ella had been too drained to start the search right away and by the time she'd reached Chambers, Bruce had already moved his family to New York.

She had claimed to need time to build up enough reserve energy to repeat the magic that could send them home, and then she had to wait until their worlds came in close enough proximity again to shorten the trip to a manageable distance. If she tried before either criteria was met, she couldn't assure Bruce that they'd make it back to their world. At least here, she could eventually help them. Amidst the Elseworlds, there were no guarantees.

He heard shuffling steps approach him from the hallway, his son being purposefully loud to announce his presence. Bruce didn't turn from the window, not wanting to face one he felt like he was failing so completely. The cushion next to him shifted as the younger man sat down and familiar arms came around him in a backwards hug. Bruce finally moved in order to clasp his hands over the ones circling his midsection. A heavy head rested against his back, between his shoulder blades.

"We could try," his son said in a quiet voice, followed by a tempered yawn. "It couldn't be much worse than this."

His older three had had bluish lips by the time they'd come back inside, but Tim seemed in better
spirits and no worse for wear. Of course, that all changed when Bruce summarized his conversation with Ella about her inability to send them home in the near future. He'd expected emotional responses, but all three had been stoically quiet. Even Jason had refrained from swearing out his anger at Ella. Frustrated at being unable to fix his family's situation, Bruce had retired to the guest room alone, claiming that he was finally going to try to sleep off the worst of his cold. Growling at Ella had worsened his sore throat and grinding his teeth had exacerbated his headache.

"You will not hold us hostage here indefinitely. Find a way to fix the mess you've made," he'd practically yelled at her. Half a thought spared for Martha had kept his voice barely within speaking volume.

Ella had scoffed. "You'd knowingly risk losing one of your precious brats on an insufficient spell? Don't be such a self-righteous hypocrite."

"I won't risk you boys' well-being," Bruce replied.

"We risk our well-being all of the time."

"No. I never act without multiple backup plans and contingencies in place. You've all been given the best training available in the world. The risks are calculated and minimal."

"So let's make a couple of plans."

"Unfortunately, my unwavering optimism is rather low right now," Bruce said dryly.

"If you're too weak to send us home, then find someone who can," he'd demanded.

"Like who?" she had challenged.

"In my universe, they are plenty of magic users who can travel within the multiverse. I don't know - call one of your witchy friends. Maybe the one who taught you this dangerous craft in the first place!"

"Well, we're not in your universe, asshole! I don't know of anyone else who has my gift. Face it, we're stuck with each other for the time being."

"Well, that's why you have me."

Bruce reached behind himself to blindly pat his son's knee. "I'm thankful for you every day." They fell quiet then, Bruce slowly relaxing in the loose embrace. His son's cheek continued to rest against his back, and he was so unnaturally still that Bruce wondered if he'd fallen asleep. "Hey, chum. You still with me?"

"Of course."

Bruce turned, breaking the hold. It was time to stop feeling angry and sorry for himself and start thinking of a way to get home without Ella's help. (Without her help was somewhat because he still didn't think he could stomach the sight of her.) "Where are your brothers?"

"It's early. They're still sleeping," Dick replied. Bruce wanted to check on them, so father and son headed upstairs together. Ella's bedroom door was still closed when they passed it en route to the disrupted home office where the boys were staying. They'd agreed it was better Tim and Damian to stay with Dick and Jason until the risk of any of his kids catching Bruce's cold had passed. Of course, his youngest sons hadn't wanted to be anywhere near each other, and Dick had been made to veto Damian's suggestion that Tim sleep outside near the enclosure where Ella kept her curbside
trash container. He'd likewise countered Tim's proposition that Damian skip freezing to death outside and simply going straight to hell. Bruce had been glad to leave the pair for his eldest to deal with.

He shot the door to Ella's room a disparaging look. Part of him hoped she was keeping a low profile because she understood just how furious he was with her. A nudge from Dick reminded him to stop glaring at inanimate objects and keep moving down the hallway. It only took a half of a dozen more steps to reach their destination. Bruce entered the room first.

Jason's bulky frame was sprawled as much as the corduroy couch would allow. He slept soundly, as evidenced by the thin trickle of drool trailing from the corner of his lax mouth. Bruce allowed himself a small smile. From the time that Jason had been small, it had always warmed his heart to see the abused boy relaxed enough to let himself sleep deeply. He wouldn't have expected it given their situation, but maybe the constant exposure to his brothers and father was making Jason’s subconscious feel safe even here.

Bruce's eyes then tracked downwards to the air mattress on the floor where his younger two were curled up together.

He did a double-take.

Yes, unless his cold was making him hallucinate, he was looking at Tim lying on his stomach near the middle of the inflated double bed, his face turned in Damian's direction. Damian was a little lower on the mattress and used his brother's back as a pillow. The blanket they shared was twisted around both of them. "How?"

Dick grinned tiredly. "They're brothers who love each other, and know they need to band together during times of strife." Bruce raised an eyebrow skeptically. "Or, Dami doesn't realize I got up and thinks Tim is me, while Timmy has slept through the whole thing?" That sounded more likely.

"Well, I don't want to be here when they wake up," Bruce said. "What do you say we leave Jason to deal with the fireworks and go get some fresh coffee?"

"I think that is a great plan, B. See, you're thinking on your feet again already."

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When they reached the kitchen, Bruce and Dick found that they weren't the only ones awake anymore. Martha stood before the stove, looking a little lost as she eyed the bag of coffee grounds in her hands. A gas burner was lit, but the kettle intended for the hot water was kitty corner to it.

"Can I help you?" Bruce asked, moving quickly to her side.

"Oh my! Oh, Thomas. You startled me."

Bruce bit his tongue to keep from correcting her. He shot an expectant look at Dick before he gently took her arm. "Let's sit down over here." She didn't resist being guided to the tiny dinette set in the corner, though her frown deepened.

"Wouldn't you like some coffee?" she asked.

"Coffee sounds wonderful. Why don't you let me take care of it?" He held out his hand for the bag.

"Oh, that's kind of you. I haven't seen Alfred yet today." She sat down with a fond smile. "Is Bruce awake yet?"
Bruce's heart clenched at the question. He handed the coffee grounds to Dick, who sported his own pained expression. Bruce sat down across from the older woman as Dick retreated to the stove. The twenty-two-year-old had already shut off the stove and removed the empty tea kettle. He searched now for where Ella kept the filters for the modern coffee machine, unabashedly opening and closing Ella's cabinet doors.

Bruce took a deep breath and swallowed hard across his sore throat. "Martha, I'm not Thomas," he said as gently as he could. "I'm Bruce."

Martha frowned and looked about the kitchen in confusion. "Bruce?"

"Ella brought me here to visit you. She wanted to do something special for you."

"Oh. You're… Bruce? My son is named Bruce."

"Yes, Ella mentioned him," Bruce said. He didn't think it was fair to perpetuate the lie that Ella had started. It wasn't fair to her, nor was it fair to the Bruce of this world who'd died in a dark alley. Still, it didn't mean that he couldn't make the best of the time that he was trapped in this world. He could help make her last days pleasant, even if it wasn't as her long lost son. After all, she wasn't the one for whom he felt such a cold fury. "Would you tell me about him?"

Martha grinned, the expression carving additional wrinkles into her face. "My Brucie is a good boy. He just turned twelve, can you believe it? It still seems like just yest… yest…"

"Yesterday," said Bruce in barely more than a whisper. He looked toward the counter, wondering what the world was taking Dick so damn long to make the coffee. He expected a painful conversation, even if he was willing to endure it for this universe's version of his late mother. Coffee would help make it more bearable.

"Yes, thank you. I'm always so tongue-tied these days." Martha pressed her palm to her forehead for a few seconds, drawing Bruce's attention back to her. "Where was I?"

"Bruce had just turned twelve," the grown version prompted.

"Right. Thomas and I are planning to take him to see *The Mask of Zorro* as a kind of late celebration. Thomas had a pre-op appointment so we couldn't celebrate the day of." Martha patted her hair as if to check its style. It wasn't the delicate curls and careful molding that Bruce remembered from his youth, but rather a rumpled mess of thinning gray locks that were still tangled from sleep. "They're showing the original from the 1930s. That's Thomas' favorite version, and now Brucie loves it, too."

"I'm sure he'll love that… idea," Bruce said. Of course she'd subconsciously want to relive *this* memory - her last good one before the death of her only child. Bruce stood up more briskly than he'd meant to, determinedly banishing away his own memories of the way their trip to see *Zorro* had ended. "Do you need help, Dick?" Bruce was *not* going to make it through the rest of this conversation without the comforting brew.

The twenty-two year old had found the filters, but instead of being useful and starting a fresh pot of coffee, he was standing there idly. At Bruce's brusque question, his eldest jerked his head around to look at him instead of in Martha's general direction. The young man's brow was furrowed and his lower lip was red from being chewed on. Bruce immediately felt a twinge of guilt. "Excuse me," he told Martha. She nodded absently, probably imagining her plans for her young son's birthday.

Bruce crowded his oldest son against the counter in front of the coffee machine, angling himself to shield the smaller male from Martha's view and to keep their words as private as possible. "I'm sorry
for being short," Bruce whispered as he took the package of filters and peeled off the top one. He tossed the rest on the counter before prying the top off of the machine. He frowned at the old filter with soggy grounds that was revealed. Alfred never would have allowed such a thing.

"I'm sorry that you have to put up with this," Dick replied just as quietly. He blinked his glassy eyes a few times in rapid succession.

"Toss this in the trash," Bruce instructed, handing the old filter to the younger man. He also passed on the empty carafe. "And fill this with water." Dick was quick, returning with the requested water by the time Bruce was done measuring out the new serving of powdered coffee. Alfred usually ground the beans fresh each morning, but Bruce could make do with this if it meant he'd have coffee sooner than later. "I don't consider listening to an elderly lady something I have to put up with," he murmured when Dick had squeezed in close to him again.

"First she tried to burn the whole house down and now… B, she's talking about the night you… she… everyone died. Like it hasn't even happened yet."

"Shhh," Bruce hushed as Dick's voice rose with the swell of his emotion toward the end of his statement. "I know what she's talking about." He had to take a second to get his own feelings under control again. "Sometimes this happens when people suffer from degenerative mental illnesses. She's just reliving a happier memory."

"What about you? It's not a happier memory for you."

"I'm fine, chum."

"I don't believe you. It's hard for me to listen to and I wasn't even born yet when it all happened."

"Is everything all right?" Martha asked, reminding the pair that she had been abandoned at the tiny table.

Bruce turned and smiled charmingly at her. "Yes - this child of mine has terrible taste in coffee and we're discussing why my favorite blend is better than his." His voice was deceptively free of heavy emotions.

"Wait, what?" Dick poked him, harder than necessary. "The crap you and Timmy drink is so thick you could stand a stick up in it."

"Mmm," Bruce teased. He hit the button to start the machine. Before returning to the table, he drew Dick in for a quick, tight hug. "Don't worry about me. It's my job to worry about you," he whispered into the youth's dark locks.

"Someone has to fill in for Alfred, or you'll drive yourself mad," Dick grumbled.

Bruce let him go and moved back to the chair across from Martha. She looked between father and son with a concerned expression. "Is he all right? He looks sad."

"He's very homesick," Bruce replied. "All of the boys are."

"Oh dear." Martha smiled softly at Dick, who kind of grimaced in return. "I used to get dreadfully homesick when I first went away to college. I would console myself by counting down the days until I'd planned to return home. At least it was always just a train ride away."

Bruce cringed internally before thanking whichever Fate had put Dick in that kitchen with him and Martha, and not Jason or Damian. As it was, the young man laughed awkwardly and faked a smile
that even the most vapid Gotham socialite would have been able to see through. "I'd love to be able
to jump on a train and go home whenever I wanted."

"Wouldn't we all."

Bruce turned at the bitter statement and immediately felt his hackles rise at the sight of Ella entering
the kitchen. Her jaw was set tensely, as if she was determined to not let any of her unwanted
houseguests get under her skin. She carried herself defensively too, hopefully still smarting from the
dressing down Bruce had given her the night before after her great revelation.

"Good morning, Ella," said Martha, oblivious to the strain filling the room.

"Good morning, Auntie. Are you enjoying spending time with Brucie and your grandkids?" She
sounded almost normal while addressing her aunt.

"Grandkids?" Martha laughed. "Oh, my Brucie is much too young for children of his own."

"Maybe for this one," Ella snarked, practically hip-checking Dick out of the way so she could reach
the freshly finished carafe of coffee.

"Excuse you," Dick said, making as mean of a face as he dared with Martha looking on. Ella ignored
him as she filled a mug, though she did pull two more down from the cabinet and leave them on the
counter once she was done.

"What have you and Bruce been speaking of, Auntie?" She sent Bruce a suspicious look, like she
expected him to have told Martha about her ill-advised kidnapping of an entire family on Martha's
behalf.

"Isn't it funny that this nice young man has the same name as my son, and looks so much like
Thomas?" Martha grinned. "I'm telling him about our plans for Brucie's postponed twelfth birthday."

"What?"

"Yes, Bruce's birthday was last week."

"Auntie, it's 2016. Bruce isn't a little boy anymore. But he's here to visit you now."

"He… is?" Martha looked confused. "Where… this isn't the manor. Where's Alfred?"

Ella was now glaring daggers at Bruce. "What the hell have you been telling her?"

"The truth," Bruce said with a snarl. "I'm not her son, Ella."

"Ella, where's Thomas? I need to see my husband." Martha fretted now, wringing her hands together
and looking nervously at the two men who basically amounted to strangers in her eyes. "And
Bruce… where's my son?" Her eyes filled with tears.

"It's all right, Auntie." Ella nearly dropped her mug, and coffee sloshed onto the tablecloth. She
grasped both of Martha's hand and urged the older woman to focus on her. "It's all right."

"No… no… I don't… where am I?"

"You're at home, Auntie. You live here with me. Thomas, damn his eyes, lives in that stupid hunting
cabin in the northern part of the state. Don't you remember?" Martha squeezed her eyes shut and
shook her head. "Auntie, it's me, Ella."
"Ella. Oh, Ella." Martha started to calm down, though she still seemed uncertain of where, or when, she was. "Oh yes." She maintained eye contact with Ella for a few more seconds, then scanned the familiar kitchen. She peered at Dick. "Would you remind me of your name, young man? I fear my memory isn't what it used to be. Truly, I must be losing my mind some days." She was the only one who chuckled quietly at her joke.

"I'm going to be sick," said Dick instead of replying. He did look a bit pale, but Bruce hoped his son wasn't serious.

"His name is Richard… Dick for short," explained Ella hastily to offset Martha's confused expression. "He came with Bruce to visit you, along with--"

A resounding crash sounded from directly above them. Everyone looked up instinctively. "What was that?" asked Martha nervously. She clutched her hands close to her chest.

"Fireworks," Dick said weakly. His eyes remained trained on the ceiling as the sounds of mayhem and destruction continued above them.

"Fireworks? Inside the house?"

Ella stepped away from Martha to glare furiously at Bruce. "If they break anything, I swear I'll--"

"You'll do what, exactly?" Bruce asked dangerously, using Batman's tone of voice that promised plenty of misery.

Ella shuddered, then steeled her nerves and glower back at him. "Get out of my kitchen before you upset Martha any further, and get your brats under control." She pointed at the door back to the hallway, her whole arm shaking.

Something shattered against the wood floor in the office above. "Jason!" "Father!" And by the far the loudest, "BRUCE!"

Bruce leveled one last disgusted look at Ella. "Find a way to expedite the timeline and we'll gladly get out of your hair." With that, he motioned for Dick to follow him back upstairs. Behind them, Martha continued to worry over her missing family and explosives inside the townhome.

to be continued...

Chapter End Notes

My apologies for the delay. :( Unfortunately, the next chapter might be late, too.
Bruce didn't bother knocking on the closed door to the converted office of the second floor. Dick was right at his heels and nearly crashed into his back when Bruce stopped just inside of the doorway after throwing it open.

"Father!" Damian shouted from where he was struggling to overcome Jason's longer reach and land a fist against Tim, whom Jason had trapped under his other arm in a headlock. Jason's hand was bloodied with long scratches where it was fisted in the front of Damian's shirt. The corner of Tim's mouth was bloody too, as if Damian had already managed to land one blow before Jason interceded.

Beside the air mattress was the Frankenstein-esque tablet, its replacement screen cracked in a cobweb-type pattern. A cheap lamp was in pieces a few feet away. The old couch that Jason had been sleeping on was knocked over on its back, which Bruce surmised was the source of the initial loud crash they'd heard downstairs.

"What is going on?" Bruce demanded angrily. He ignored the burn in his sore throat and the cough that tickled it. He moved forward to grab Damian's upper arm and pulled his youngest toward himself, away from Jason and Tim.

"What do you think?" Jason sneered. "The demon made a completely uncalled for, insulting comment and the runt overreacted." Tim finally managed to wrestle free of Jason's hold, enabling him to glare unhindered at the rest of his family. His tousled bed-head dark hair was more disheveled than usual and the boy running his hands angrily through it didn't help much.

"I am not a demon!" Damian screeched, the sound cutting against Bruce's eardrums. It didn't help the father's persistent headache. His youngest looked slightly more put together, save for his bright red face and menacing sneer.

Tim's fingers got caught in a particularly dense knot, causing his frustration to narrowly focus on his older brother. "You're an asshole," Tim informed Jason. Jason threw out a hand, catching Tim in the back of the head with an open-palm smack. The smaller teenager staggered forward a step before regaining his balance and spinning around to confront Jason.

"Stop," Bruce ordered sharply before the yelling could start and cause his headache to throb worse. Tim put a hold on his plans to repay Jason for his earlier rough treatment, though the look he gave Bruce was anything but remorseful for misbehaving. Damian sulked near the end of the couch and wiggled his finger through a hole in the sleeve of his shirt, which Bruce couldn't say for certain was new or not.

Jason focused his aggravation on Dick. "Where the hell did you go?"

"Anywhere but here," Dick muttered under his breath. Bruce suspected that he was the only one who heard. Aloud he said, "To get coffee and check on B. Believe it or not, you're not the only ones unhappy to be here." Dick sent each Tim and Damian a disappointed look. "You're not even having the worst time of it. So stop acting like spoiled little brats."

Damian jumped forward to wrap his arms around Dick's waist. "I am sorry, Grayson. Don't hate me, too."
Dick emitted a long-suffering sigh as Jason rolled his eyes. Bruce shook his head, exhausted already despite the early hour. He needed to get out of the claustrophobic house, away from everything that hurt and made his stomach roil with mixing feelings. He very much missed Alfred right now, who was much better than Bruce at navigating his sons' emotional minefields; and Cassandra, who got along so much better with each of her adopted siblings than they did with each other.

An idea struck him then, that would get him out of the house and away from Ella, as well as give him a chance to once again try to talk some sense into his youngest boys. "Come here, Timothy," Bruce instructed, unable to completely erase his annoyance from his tone. Tim regarded him coolly for a few seconds before trudging toward the older man with as much attitude as Bruce had ever seen from his least confrontational child. Bruce swallowed down a surge of anger at the thought that Tim might now be deciding to rebel against his father-figure, well after Bruce had considered himself lucky to dodge that exact bullet after dealing with enough drama from Dick and Jason to last him a lifetime. He'd been hopeful that Tim would spare him before Bruce had to face the wrath of teenage Damian.

Pushing those thoughts aside, Bruce said, "Let me see your mouth."

"I'm fine," Tim said in denial. He wiped at the smear of blood with the back of his hand. "It hurt the tablet more than my face."

Another throb of his headache and a brief wave of nausea had Bruce wishing he was a million miles away from this room. "Damian," said Bruce, interrupting Dick's assurances to the pre-teen that just because they were disappointed in the boy's actions didn't mean Bruce or he loved Damian any less. "Did you throw a computer at your brother's head?"

Damian hunched his shoulders and looked up at his livid father through his glistening lashes. "It was only a glancing blow. Todd's interference allowed Drake to dodge, despite his inferior reflexes."

"You wouldn't have even had the chance to throw it if you hadn't just jabbed me right at the pressure point in my knee," Jason snapped.

"Damian--"

"He's twice as big as me!" Damian insisted. "Even Drake has superior reach than I do right now. Do you expect me to not defend myself at whatever cost against my enemies?" He sniffled with the onset of fresh tears.

"Jason and Tim are not your enemies, Dami," Dick argued, sounding close to exasperated tears himself. Bruce mildly panicked at the thought of Dick breaking down. Selfishly, he needed his eldest to keep it together, or Bruce wasn't sure he could survive the rest of this trip.

"Me and the demon brat are definitely enemies," Jason countered. He rubbed at one of the angry-looking scratches on his right hand.

"Jason, why are you trying to make things worse?" Dick asked.

"Because my fucking hand and knee hurt, that's why, Dickface! You left me alone up here with a powder keg and a lit fuse, and if you don't like my fucking brand of tough love, then to hell with you! Obviously babying them isn't making things better." He flung his hands out to indicate Tim and Damian. "Maybe it's time to knock some sense into them the old-fashioned away. My old man might have been a pathetic excuse for a human being, but I sure as hell knew better than to act like a little prick when he was around."
"Jason--" said Bruce and Dick simultaneously. They glanced at each other briefly. Bruce didn't like the look of sad resignation in the twenty-two-year-old's eyes. He cleared his throat loudly. "All right, listen," he said, adopting Batman's voice of authority. "Damian and Tim, get dressed in your warmest clothes for a walk outside. Tim, use the bathroom. Damian, stay in here and when you're done, clean up the broken lamp."

"I'll help y--," Dick started to offer. Bruce cut him off. "Dick, take a few minutes for yourself in my room. You deserve a break." He followed that with a pointed look at his remaining sons, of whom only Tim looked mildly ashamed. It was a testament to just how much Dick wanted to escape the madness that he didn't protest that he was fine and could help Bruce play peacekeeper. "Jason, with me."

Bruce drew to a stop after closing the door to the small room with only Damian left inside. Dick and Tim continued on to their assigned rooms, leaving Jason with Bruce. Bruce cleared his throat again, which only caused him to start coughing. "Do you need to lie down, old man?"

"I'm fine," Bruce said once the tickle eased. He casually leaned against wall, hopefully disguising his fatigue from Jason. "Do you think you need some antibacterial lotion for your hand?"

"It'll heal," Jason replied flippantly. "We've established that my immune system is better than all of yours. But B, you have got to do something about Damian. Unless of course, you really don't care if you scare off another kid before he reaches eighteen."

"Of course I care," Bruce snapped. His heart throbbed painfully at the implication that he wouldn't mind if Tim decided he'd do better with a different family, or even worse, on his own at fifteen. It ached at the allegation that he hadn't cared when Dick moved in with the Teen Titans at seventeen, or when Jason had run away at sixteen to chase down a whisper of a rumor in Afghanistan. "Jason, it breaks my heart when you boys fight with each other. I don't know how to make it better, but physically beating them into submission is definitely not the answer. I didn't discipline you that way, and I won't abuse them, either."

"Then they'll just do it to each other," Jason countered. He looked angry. "And Dick and I can keep getting caught in the middle. At least they both like Dick."

Bruce reached out to tug Jason in close, trapping the teenager in a hug before Jason had a chance to resist. Jason pushed against him and squawked about personal boundaries, but Bruce held on tightly. "I wish I'd found you a decade sooner, Jaybird. And I wish I'd had the chance to give your father a dose of his own medicine. I won't forgive him for everything he did you to, especially hitting you until you were terrified of him."

Jason stopped trying to escape long enough to sag against Bruce's chest and mumble into his shoulder. "You're not the one he wronged, B. And I was a shit kid, we all know that."

"He wronged me by hurting my son," Bruce said firmly. He tightened the hug, feeling like he could never hold the boy securely enough to erase his tragic past. "You're a good boy, Jason, despite everything that's happened to you. We all have bad days. I have more than my fair share." Jason made a noise of agreement, then fell quiet.

"Sometimes I'd make him mad on purpose," Jason said quietly after the long pause. "So he'd beat me instead of Catherine. It actually hurt less when he was falling down drunk, 'cause his aim was severely compromised." Bruce made his own sound of derision in the back of his sore throat. "You really confused me at first, you know? You 'n' Alfred and your groundings and time-outs."

"We were wise to your ways," Bruce said. At Jason's muffled snort, he amended, "Well, Alfred was,
but he let me in on his understanding of a twelve-year-old's plan to see just how far he could push us until we reacted the same way as his late father. It was pretty easy to wait you out, you know. I had no desire to ever punish you like that."

"You didn't hold back on the Gotham scum."

"They weren't misguided little boys with huge blue-green eyes and an even bigger heart. They weren't my son."

Jason was contemplative for another peaceful minute before he spoke again. "Some days, I don't regret trying to jack the Batmobile's tires."

"I never regret catching you in the act." Bruce dared to kiss the back of Jason's head. "Thank you for playing referee and keeping the damage limited to the tablet and an ugly table lamp."

"I don't know. That rock-filled couch might be in a better place now, too." Bruce smirked.

Tim emerged from the bathroom, his lip free of blood and clothed in the warmest layers he had. Bruce was grateful for the secondhand winter wear they'd gotten at the shelter. Still, he needed to find a way to buy more clothes for his children as the days would only continue to get colder from here.

As if sensing his younger brother, Jason pushed against Bruce again and this time the older man let him go. Jason tugged at his shirt self-consciously, straightening out imagined wrinkles. He refused to look at the smaller teenager. Bruce allowed himself a mental chuckle. For his part, Tim's expression vacillated between curious, hopeful, and chagrinned. He settled on watching Jason with furrowed brows and a deep frown, but there was no anger in his eyes.

"Come here, kiddo," said Bruce softly. Tim moved to his side and allowed Bruce to press down on his lower lip with a thumb. The cut where the soft skin had caught on hard teeth was readily visible, but it didn't appear that any of Tim's teeth or gums had been damaged when the hard plastic computer hit him. He made a mental note to find out what Tim had said or done to prompt Damian to throw the tablet at him in the first place, but that was a question for the conversation he planned to have during their upcoming walk. "I think you'll live," he announced lightly.

Tim made a face and stepped away from him. He looked up at Jason, who was still pointedly looking away from him. "You should wash your hands. Who knows what kind of germs live under Damian's nails."

"Timothy," Bruce scolded. Tim ignored him.

Jason finally looked at the younger male. "I'll live. I've had worse."

Tim folded his hands together nervously and started to chew on his lower lip until the probable sting from the cut made him stop. "Thank… thank you for helping me stand up to Damian." Tim's sideways glance at Bruce clearly implied, you're the only one who does.

Jason must have read the same thing in the minute action. He looked at his successor as Robin (never his "replacement" in Bruce's eyes) for a long moment before standing up straighter and uncrossing his arms. "I owe you a few, runt." He reached out to tousle Tim's hair - much more roughly than necessary - and then sauntered past the unbalanced fifteen-year-old toward the stairs. "I'm gonna hunt down some breakfast. I hear there's coffee downstairs."

"Jason, you're such a jerk sometimes," Tim complained as he followed his brother down the stairs. "Do you know if Ella has dark roast?"
"No coffee for him!" Bruce yelled after the pair. He had the distinct impression that he'd be summarily ignored. He supposed one cup in the morning wouldn't hurt the young teenager, but he'd make sure there was absolutely no coffee available after noon.

Because that would be an easy fight. Bruce sighed, shook his head wearyingly, and then turned around so he could knock on the door to the boys' room. "Damian, are you dressed?" He pressed open the door to peek inside.

"Yes, Father," said Damian. He knelt by a dusty pile of ceramic lamp base, which he was sweeping into a small plastic dustpan that he must have found stashed somewhere in the room. The couch was upright again, too. The sight lifted Bruce's spirits a bit. He'd be sure to tell Damian that he appreciated the extra effort during their talk.

"Good. I'll be ready to go in a few minutes." He stepped out of the room and pulled the door until there was an inch gap to the jamb. From there he crossed the landing to enter the guest bedroom. It was dim in the small room despite the light shining through the thin blinds. Still, it was easy enough for him to find his eldest stretched out face down on his rumpled bed.

Bruce crossed the room silently and sat down on the edge of the bed near Dick's hip. He placed a hand on the younger man's back, knowing that his first child responded best to physical affection. "Rough morning, huh, chum?"

"One of the worst," Dick agreed. He hugged Bruce's pillow more tightly.

"Are you more upset about Martha or the kids?" Bruce asked. Empathy served Dick well when trying to navigate a family and numerous friends with abundant emotional hang ups, but it also left him vulnerable to being overwhelmed when everyone seemed to be having a bad day simultaneously. It was especially difficult where family was concerned.

"I'm mostly upset for you," Dick said. "I can't even imagine being in your shoes right now."

"You must be doing a pretty good job of it if you're this affected," Bruce replied. It was quiet for a minute as Bruce contemplated his eldest while lightly rubbing small circles over the youth's back. When the urge to stay hidden in the peace and quiet became hard to resist, Bruce spoke again. "I'm going to take the kids for a walk. We will figure out a way to keep some measure of tenuous peace, even if it takes until we turn blue from the cold. While we're out, I'd like it if you would take advantage of the quiet in here. Preferably you'd catch up some more on sleep, but whatever you decide to do, I want you to focus on Dick Grayson-Wayne and no one else. Not me, not Jason, not the kids, and not Ella or Martha."

"I want to go home, B," said Dick in a small voice. Bruce barely heard him.

"I know, chum," said Bruce, around the lump that had sprung up in his throat. He leaned down until his lips were close to Dick's ear. "You don't have to be the strong one all of the time, Dickie. You're definitely better at people than I am, but in the end, let me take care of you, too."

"You need my help," Dick argued.

"There's no doubt about that," Bruce said, letting himself smile slightly. "But mostly I want to see your sunny smile again." He moved his hand up to card through Dick's thick black hair. There was no question that Bruce loved each of his children equally - he couldn't imagine his life now without any of them - but he couldn't deny that his fondness for Dick is what had cracked open his stone-clad heart initially and had allowed him to even accept the rest of his blessings. "I love you, old son."
"I love you, too, B."

"Good." Bruce kissed Dick's upturned temple. "Now sleep for an hour or so. You officially have no responsibilities for the time being."

"Thanks, Dad."

"You're welcome, son."

Bruce rose from the bed and quietly let himself out of the room. He securely closed the door behind himself, then paused to gather his courage. Two down, two to go. He'd definitely saved the hardest for last. Bruce meant what he'd told Dick: he was going to get to bottom of Tim and Damian's heated sibling rivalry today.

*to be continued...*
Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chapter Notes

It's late, not that good, and took a darker turn than I expected at the end... but it's really long. That's good, right? :)

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Damian looked much smaller than his eleven years when Bruce reentered the office bedroom, curled up as he was at one end of the abused couch. The fire in his eyes was bright though, as if he was well-prepared to justify himself and his actions. He was emitting a vibe that Bruce interpreted as nearly feral, like Damian expected everyone to take Tim's side over his, and if no one else would defend the boy, he'd do it himself.

Damian shrunk even further into himself, confusing Bruce until he realized that he was frowning deeply. The father made a pointed effort to relax his features, not wanting to frighten Damian more. Bruce was well aware of how acerbic Tim could be with a needle-sharp verbal jibes that cut just as deeply as one of Damian's katana. It was a skill Bruce loved to see the teenager use against Batman's foes, and looked forward to watching Tim use to put prickly Wayne Enterprises directors in their places once he was more than a mere intern at the company. He did not like seeing it used against the boy's brothers.

"Are you ready to take a walk, son?" Bruce asked.

"Are you very mad at me, Father?" Damian questioned.

"I'm angry that things were broken - things that don't belong to us, Damian."

"There's very little that does belong to us now," Damian muttered wryly.

Bruce chided the boy silently with a raised eyebrow, then leaned down to pick up the pieces of the tablet. The makeshift screen was now disconnected, though he had small hope of it actually working should he reaffect it to the motherboard. The screen sported an intricate spider web pattern of cracks, and a whole chuck of glass was missing from one corner. Besides that, he could tell that a few of the resistors and capacitors had broken off of the circuit board. He feared it was beyond help in this universe. "This tablet was our only means of researching ways to get home on our own," Bruce said, unable to keep all of the ire out of his voice. "That you broke it by throwing it at your brother's head does make me very mad."

"He… he…" Damian sputtered, which was out of character for the confident child. He looked both angry and defeated. Apparently thinking that it would do him no good to plead his case since Bruce wouldn't believe him anyway, Damian fell silent save for the grinding of his teeth.

"Damian." Bruce sighed and moved to take a seat on the couch next to his son. It groaned forebodingly and Bruce discreetly shifted his weight forward to make it easier to catch himself and Damian if it should give away. "I can imagine that whatever Tim said to make you feel like throwing the tablet really was mean. But you could have seriously hurt him, maybe even as badly as he was hurt by the pneumonia."
"I did want to hurt him," Damian admitted. "I wanted him to stop pointing out my flaws so viciously." He looked up at Bruce defiantly. Bruce made sure to keep his expression stern and hoped that Damian would realize on his own why his father was disappointed. He was rewarded when Damian's scowl lightened and he dropped his gaze to his own lap. "But I used violence to make him quiet." The boy's shoulders drooped. "I am no better than Todd."

Bruce rubbed his hand over his forehead, trying to put away his annoyance at the comment and ease his headache at the same time. "You're not better than Jason, Damian, because Jason is not a bad person, nor is he worthless. Just as you are not unworthy of being my son, nor are you a bad person. I love you both with all of my heart. You both behave badly, that is true. All of you do."

"Even Grayson?"

"Especially Grayson." Bruce smiled softly. "Don't try to distract me, young man. I am mad and there will be repercussions for the showdown this morning." He squeezed the back of Damian's neck fondly. "But another time, I will tell you about some of Dick's poorest moments."

"That would be fair," said Damian seriously. "Grayson has told me of many of your 'poor moments' too, Father."

Bruce could only imagine. He sighed, then slapped his knees and forced himself to stand. He fought down the surge of dizziness that took him once he was upright, though he did a good enough job of hiding it that Damian didn't comment. "Let's find your brother. We have a long talk ahead of us."

Bruce shrugged on his secondhand coat that he'd grabbed from his room after speaking to Dick. Damian stayed dutifully at Bruce's side as they made their way downstairs to find Tim. It was quiet, a fact that worried Bruce until he turned into the kitchen and found his middle children coexisting peacefully. Jason looked up when Bruce and Damian entered. Tim kept his head bowed over his steaming cup of coffee.

"Finish up, Tim," Bruce directed. He wanted to ask about breakfast next, but he was distracted by the rear door slamming open and Ella stomping back into the house and then into her kitchen. Her green eyes took in the room's occupants quickly, and her frown morphed into a scowl.

"You finally done destroying my house?" she snapped, glaring at each of the boys in turn. "Are you done terrifying old ladies?"

Bruce stepped forward without thinking, putting himself between her and his children. "I will deal with them. I don't need your help," he said firmly.

Ella brushed past him anyway. "Like you're such a class act of a father." She reached the small dinette table and stole the mug of coffee right out of Tim's hands as the teenager lifted it to take a sip. The dark, steaming brew sloshed over the sides, catching Tim's fingers and causing him to recoil sharply at the burn. Ella swung the mug around, nearly hitting Bruce and Damian with another cascade of the scalding liquid. "Twelve-year-olds shouldn't be drinking coffee."

Tim's "I'm not twelve" was nearly lost as Jason reacted loudly. "What the fuck is your problem?" the eighteen-year-old demanded. He was out of his chair and next to Bruce in a heartbeat, pushing Damian back and shielding the boy protectively.

"I'm not paying for any more prescription drugs if you're just going to be ungrateful little shits and break all of my stuff," Ella threatened.

"The only thing of yours that was broken was a fugly lamp," Jason shouted. "You're welcome,
"Jason!" snapped Bruce sharply. "Let me handle this. Help your brother." Jason growled in frustration but obeyed. The older teenager dragged Tim out of his chair and across the kitchen to the sink to run cool water over his reddened fingers. Damian clung to the back of Bruce's coat, whether for security or to resist the urge to act out violently Bruce wasn't sure.

"I am not crazy!" Ella dropped her hands to sides as if exhausted, spilling the rest of the coffee onto the faded linoleum. "I work so hard to keep this house, to make it a home. Do you think it's easy to be all alone, taking care of my aunt who sometimes forgets my name? Do you think it's easy scraping by, having barely enough to keep a roof over our heads after paying for nurses and medication?" She sniffled. Bruce wondered if he should feel sympathy for her. It was difficult to do so after she all that she'd done, including her latest act with the coffee. "Nobody helps me, and it doesn't help to have what little I possess broken by spoiled Wayne brats!" Hateful tears ran freely down her face now.

"Where is Martha?" Bruce asked, worried suddenly for the older woman's safety. Ella obviously felt a measure of resentment toward her aunt for the situation she was in, and if she could so callously strike out at children, was she a danger to her elderly dependent?

"She's recovering from you messing with her memories and then being traumatized by your heathen children," Ella sneered.

Bruce ignored her accusations. "Jason, I'll be right back. Stay here with Tim and Damian."

"You leave her alone! Haven't you done enough already? It took me ages to convince her that there weren't actual explosives in the house, just horrible children fighting like animals!"

Damian's fists tightened in the back of Bruce's coat. He could feel the child shift even closer to him, and Bruce still wasn't sure if it was for restraint or a sense of security. Near the kitchen sink, Tim pushed Jason away so he could hug himself miserably, his face reddening with embarrassment. Jason looked livid, and Bruce didn't doubt that he left the abandoned sink running in order to spite their host.

Bruce paused to glare at Ella. "Don't talk about my sons like that." He had to take a deep breath in order to reign in his anger, or he'd likely resume his shouted tirade at her from the night before. More calmly, he said, "You brought me here because you thought Martha would be comforted to have her long lost son with her. If you think I'm a danger to her, then you should have thought twice."

Bruce exited the kitchen then and strode purposefully toward the closed door that led to Martha's suite. He took a deep breath to slow his quickly beating heart and to gather his nerves, then knocked gently on the door.

"Come in," Martha called from within.

Bruce stepped into the brightly lit room. "Mo-- Martha, are you well?"

"I am better now. Chamomile always soothes my nerves," she replied.

"I'm glad to hear it," said Bruce. He motioned to the door. "Do you mind if I close this? I wish to speak to you in confidence."

"Of course." She looked at him knowingly, though what she thought she knew, Bruce wasn't sure. He didn't lock the door after it latched securely, in case he needed to make a hasty retreat to avert another disaster-in-progress thanks to his sons. He slowly moved to sit near Martha in the empty chair that matched the wingback one Martha was using.
Before he could open his mouth to ask Martha if Ella ever abused her, the older woman started a different conversation. "Growing up, my brothers and I used to have terrible fights," she said.

"You fought with Uncle Philip and Uncle Nathan?" It was hard for Bruce to imagine that his perfectly poised mother had ever behaved as poorly as his children did sometimes.

"Oh dear me, yes. Like cats and dogs. I was like the cat, mind you. Too clever for outright brawling, and crafty enough to convince our parents that I was never at fault." Martha smiled softly. Her wrinkled eyes seemed clearer as she recalled her past. "Thomas prefers a direct confrontation as well. Who knows how Brucie would have turned out."

"Probably a mixture of both," said Bruce, knowing from experience. "Maybe not so good at dealing with emotions, or understanding his beautiful, complicated children."

Martha reached over to pat his hand. "Boys will be boys. That's what my mother always said when Philip and Nathan were roughhousing."

"It scares me how much they need me," said Bruce. "I don't know enough. I make mistakes - terrible mistakes." He closed his eyes briefly at the memory of Jason's death. "How can someone as selfish and repressed as I am possibly give them all of the support that they need?"

"My dear--"

"Mother-- Martha," he continued, suddenly desperate to unburden himself to the one who'd kissed his scrapes and wiped away his tears a lifetime ago. He coughed hoarsely as his throat tightened. "I haven't heard of a case of sibling rivalry worse than my youngest two have cooked up. I don't know what to do to make it stop. And then there's all of the ways I've failed my older boys."

"It is easy for me to see how much you love them," said Martha. "You will figure it out, I'm sure of it. I only had one child, but he even was prone to doubting if Thomas and I really loved him as much as we claimed."

"He didn't doubt your love for him," Bruce insisted.

"Brucie was such a smart boy. He demanded proof of all things." Martha chuckled faintly. "I imagine it would have been worse if he felt like he had to compete with a brother or sister."

Bruce supposed that she was probably right. That still didn't help him with his current situation. "How do I make them understand that I will never love one more than the other? It doesn't matter to me that Tim is adopted, or that Damian's mother hid him from me for the first ten years of his life and abused him horribly."

"All you can do is tell them over and over," said Martha. "Like we assured Brucie, every day. Even when he wasn't pressing us for proof." She took a sip of her tea. She was quiet for a long while after that, staring blankly out of the daintily dressed window. Bruce worried that she was having another spell, until she suddenly spoke again. "Men are not always as good at expressing their feelings as females. It is possible that your sons have misunderstood each other, which has led to their fights."

Bruce knew that was a fact. "I plan to make them talk about their differences, so we don't have to wake up to fights again like this morning."

"Just be gentle with them. They're young and immature. They don't have all of your life experiences yet."

"Thank you for speaking with me, Martha," said Bruce. He felt a little better, and a little more
confident that he could help Tim and Damian. After all, he wasn't the only struggling parent to have screwed up his children, right? Getting her advice hadn't been his initial reason for visiting her, however. "How does Ella treat you? She's never angry with you, is she?"

"Ella has had a difficult life," said Martha. "And I know I add to her burdens. But she is ever kind and caring to me. I treasure her greatly."

"I am glad to hear it," said Bruce. She seemed present in the moment, so Bruce was inclined to believe her. Even so, he would keep an eye out for any sign of abuse, and he'd question Nurse Anne when she arrived that evening, too. "I will leave you to rest now, while I try to negotiate peace between my children."

Martha smiled sadly. "If my Brucie was still alive, I'd like it if he turned out like you," she said. Bruce was sure she'd feel differently if she really knew him, but he treasured the compliment just the same. He let himself out of the room and quietly closed the door. He took a moment for himself, leaning against the faded wallpaper on the wall and closing his eyes. Once he felt strong enough to endure the aches from his cold on top of what was sure to be an emotionally wrought conversation, he pushed himself upright and returned to the kitchen.

To his relief, Ella had made herself scarce, and his boys were all coexisting, albeit sulkily on the parts of Tim and Damian. Jason leaned against the counter, fiddling with a dish towel. Each time one of his younger siblings would shift or sigh, the eighteen-year-old's blue-green eyes would focus on the culprit, looking expectantly for the next eruption of violence. His second Robin was right; it wasn't fair for Jason and Dick to keep ending up in the middle of Tim and Damian's spats when their father wasn't there to handle it himself.

"Let's go," said Bruce, motioning toward the hall. His younger two slowly rose and moved in the direction he indicated.

"Is she…?"

Bruce smiled softly at Jason. "She's fine. Why don't you find another book and take a few minutes for yourself, too." Jason nodded in agreement.

Tim and Damian had made it to the front door by the time that Bruce caught up with them. Outside on the small front stoop, Damian reached for Bruce's hand. Bruce squeezed the boy's fingers reassuringly. He looked over at Tim, catching the teenager glaring at the conjoined fingers with his own arms crossed tightly across his chest. Bruce held out his free hand in a gesture intended to show that he loved both boys equally, but Tim turned up his nose and stomped down the concrete steps. It only took Bruce, with his longer stride, two steps to catch up to him. He caught the teenager by the elbow and tugged until Tim's arms unfolded and Bruce could snag his right hand.

"I'm not a little kid," Tim protested, trying to shake off Bruce's hold, but the older man held on tightly.

"Humor me," Bruce ordered, dragging the recalcitrant teenager after himself and Damian. Damian scowled at Tim for trying to squander Bruce's attention.

With both sons equally in hand, Bruce looked down the unfamiliar street. Ella's townhome was toward the middle of the block, sandwiched between identical houses that could only be distinguished by the colors of their faded exterior paint. In the distance, he could barely make out the yellow triangle of a school crossing road sign, which gave him hope that there may be a park or playground up ahead. He wasn't sure he was up for a trek of longer than a block or two. For now, the cold crispness of the air felt good on his face.
The trio was quiet as they walked down the narrow, uneven sidewalk. They reached the open playground behind the elementary school without a word passing between the three of them. Bruce led his boys to a small metal bench off to one side which was partially sheltered by an old elm tree. It was a tight squeeze, mostly due to Bruce's large frame, but they managed to sit together with Bruce's arms around two pairs of narrow shoulders.

"So, what started the fight this time?" he asked, allowing a hint of exasperation to sound in his voice.

"I was soundly asleep when Drake kicked me viciously off of the mattress," Damian informed him immediately. He leaned forward to glare at his brother. Tim ignored him in favor of staring angrily across the school yard.

"Tim?"

"What he said," Tim replied tersely. There wasn't room between Bruce's side and the wrought iron arm of the bench to move much, but the teenager tried to shift away from him.

"I want to hear your side," Bruce replied, forcing himself to be patient. He remembered Martha's advice to be gentle, and that his kids were young and immature.

"It's not going to change anything. You're still going to let him get away with murder and remind me that I'm older so I should just suck it up and let the little tyrant terrorize me."

"Tim--"

Damian cut him off. "I never get away with anything! Everyone always believes you, the perfect little Robin, over me."

"If I was the perfect little Robin, I'd still be Robin!" Tim shouted, finally turning to return Damian's fierce stare.

"I am Father's true son. I deserve to b--"

Tim jumped up from the bench before Bruce could stop him. Instead of running off, however, Tim spun on his heel a few feet before the bench and jabbed his finger angrily in Damian's direction. "Why are you still fighting me? You won, Damian. You're Robin, even though you have no appreciation for what Robin is supposed to be. You're Bruce's favorite charity case, Dick's favorite little brother. Isn't that enough for you, or will you really never be satisfied until I'm actually dead?"

"Timothy!" Bruce admonished over Damian's sputtered denials.

The teenager's furious, icy blue gaze shifted to Bruce momentarily. "I bet you're hoping that you can find some common ground between Damian and I, to fix this 'sibling rivalry' we have going on. Well here, I'll give you a hint: Damian and I both agree on one thing - we all would have been better off if Jason had just left well enough alone back at the shelter!"

"I do not want you dead, Drake!" Damian screeched as Bruce launched himself off of the bench to catch Tim before he actually did bolt. Tim struggled to evade capture, but even Red Robin couldn't outmaneuver the Batman.

"Stop it, right now," Bruce ordered. He finally pinned Tim's flailing arms and swept the kicking youth up into his arms to save his own legs from being battered.

"Leave me alone!" Tim howled. It took all of Bruce's concentration to avoid dropping his son, so he wasn't able to prevent Damian from rushing up to pummel his trapped sibling.
"Stop saying such vicious lies about me!" the eleven-year-old shouted to be heard over Tim's demands for release. "I'm not that person anymore! I don't want you dead!" Each statement was punctuated with a blow to his struggling brother.

"Damian, cease at once!" Bruce had to drop his hold on Tim's legs in order to grab Damian's arm before he could hit Tim again. He was amazed that he somehow managed to keep Tim from breaking free while restraining his frustrated youngest. "Both of you, stop!"

To his utter surprise, they listened. Bruce felt his strength leave him and his knees buckled, taking all three of them to the cold, hard ground. It wasn't until he'd twisted himself into a halfway comfortable seated position that he realized the shaking he felt wasn't from his boys, but from his own trembling limbs. He didn't dare release one of his sons in order to wipe the tracks of saltwater from his face, fearful that the boy would vanish into thin air.

"Father, don't cry," Damian insisted tearfully. "Drake, you miserable creature, look what you've done."

"Bruce doesn't care enough to cry over me," Tim argued. Anger warred with depression within Bruce. He moved his arm until he was able to seal his hand over Tim's mouth, to stop the teenager from listing all of the proof he supposedly had that he was the least of Bruce's children.

"Who are you trying to hurt?" he asked in a rough whisper into the boy's chilled ear. "Damian or me?" Tim pulled Bruce's hand away from his face, but didn't resume his tirade. He did shudder, likely at the feel of moisture leaking into his dark, tangled hair.

Damian returned the favor to Bruce, pressing his tear-streaked face against the side of his father's neck. "You must believe me, Father. I don't want Drake dead. He's lying."

"I know, Damian," said Bruce as he lifted his head to look at his youngest. "I remember how devastated you were when the ambulance took Tim to the hospital."

"Conveniently, you forget how since then, he's wished for CPS to take me away, blamed me for your cold, and--"

"You're lying!"

"I'm not lying! That's exactly what happened. Is part of ninja training to learn how to expediently forget everything that your own stupid mouth says?"

"I'm trying," Damian wailed. "Nothing I do is good enough for you. I'm trying to understand this strange world that you and Father live in, but it's hard."

"I didn't do anything to you when you first came to Gotham," Tim snapped. "And you threw me off of the T-Rex for trying to be nice to you. Since then, you've gone out of your way to manipulate the rest of the family into hating me, too. You even turned Dick against me, the only person who ever pretended to care about me from the start."

"Grayson doesn't pretend to care about you, Drake. You're a blind fool if you think so, and not nearly as smart as Grandfather thinks you are. Grayson cherishes you." Damian rubbed at his face with the back of his coat sleeve. "Mother warned me about you before we left the League. About how you were the apple of Father's eye - whatever that means - and that even as his blood son I would have a difficult time earning the same measure of Father's affection."

Bruce cleared his throat, though he hated to interrupt the first real, albeit emotionally charged, conversation he suspected had ever transpired between his two youngest. "I'm very pleased that
we're talking with our mouths instead of our fists, but I want to make one thing absolutely clear for the last time: You are both my sons, I love you both with all of my heart, and neither of you need to do anything to 'earn' the affection that I freely give to you both. If either of you so much as imply differently again, you will both be assigned to cleaning the guano in the cave for the next year after we get home."

Tim scoffed. "I would not consider your affection 'freely' given."

"My emotional… deficiencies… are not the point right now, Timothy." He squeezed the teenager briefly. "Now, continue speaking to each other civilly."

The boys looked at each other skeptically for a long while, and Bruce lamented that he really had ruined things by trying to finally put to rest what he considered the boys' biggest hang up with each other. He was searching for a way to get them started again when Damian spoke up without prompting. "Grayson and Pennyworth are the only ones who have taken the time to help me understand the complicated social cues of the world outside of the League. Clearly Grayson is not the expert that he purports to be, or his advice concerning Drake would have worked."

"Clearly." Tim reached over to pull at a thick blade of grass. Bruce frowned at the redness and tiny blisters on Tim's fingertips.

Damian pouted and hunched down, tucking himself closer to Bruce's warmth. "Even if you never forgive me for existing, you should forgive Grayson for allowing me to be Robin. It has been made apparent to me on many occasions that he regrets that decision."

"Like when you're being an entitled little shit?"

Damian clenched his fists. Bruce wondered if he needed to speak up again and clarify that Dick also felt the same way that he did. Tim and Damian weren't as clever as they supposed if they thought they could get around Bruce's ban on doubting his love by transferring the focus to Dick. It would break his eldest's heart to hear the kids talking about him like they were.

Damian unclenched his fists and exhaled sharply. "Yes," he said briskly. "But more so after you've reminded him yet again about how he failed to handle the situation to your liking. Be honest with yourself, Drake. Would you have given up Robin if Grayson had asked nicely?"

"Not to you, no," Tim replied. "You only wanted to be Robin because I was. You knew that Robin was all that I had left after losing my idol, my parents, my two best friends, my girlfriend, and then my adopted dad. You knew that Robin was the only thing worthwhile in my life, and the only thing that made me worth something."

"You're worth a lot as Red Robin," Bruce interjected.

Tim continued as if he hadn't heard Bruce. "You knew from your manipulative, psychotic ninja training that taking Robin would hurt worse than stabbing me again, so you convinced Grayson that Robin was the only thing that could save you from your past. And he's a sucker for lost causes."

"Tim, that's mean and--"

"Hush, Father," Damian chided. He turned back earnestly toward his brother. "No, I didn't know all of that, Drake. I didn't know you back then. I didn't know about the clone, or how your parents were unfit for the title."

"You knew what Robin meant to me. That's why you gloated after Dick picked you over me."
"I was proud of myself, because being Robin meant that Grayson saw the same good in me that he saw in you," Damian corrected. "I needed to know that I could be valued for being good, not just revered for being evil. I don't want to be a bad person."

"You're not a bad person, Dami--"

"Father, please," Damian said impatiently. "Can you not see that Drake and I are speaking?"

"Sorry," Bruce huffed, and kept his fond smile secret.

"Damian, being Robin isn't about being a good person, or even being Batman's son or daughter. It's about being a light to Batman's darkness. It's about keeping Batman from going too far, from stepping over the line from which there's no going back. It's about giving Batman, and the people of Gotham City, hope for a better future. It's about reminding the jaded and cynical in the world that there's innocence and expectations worth fighting for. That's the hero that Dick created; the costume that Jason died wearing. It's a not a birthright. I would have willingly given the role up for someone who understood that."

"I do understand that… now. That's what Grayson taught me by allowing me to be Robin. I'm not perfect at it, I know. But I am trying. Why won't you admit that?"

Tim rubbed at his face tiredly. "Damian, just leave me alone. You have everything you wanted: a dad who loves you, a big brother who adores you, the role of Robin…"

"I don't have everything I want, Drake," Damian argued. "I want you as an ally, not an enemy. The more time I spend around you, the more I understand why Grandfather and Mother see you as a formidable foe, and the more time I spend around Grayson, the more I understand that the League's teachings are flawed. I would have you on my side."

"I'm sick of being a tool in everyone's arsenal," Tim said. "I'm tired of being used and cast aside when my usefulness expires. So, no thank you. I think I'll sit out your battle with the League of Assassins."

Bruce couldn't stay quiet on this topic, either. "There will be no child of mine going into battle against the League of Assassins. I have made it clear to Ra's and Talia that they are to stay away from me and mine, and it better be clear to you boys and Cassandra that you are to stay away from the League."

Damian slapped his hand over Bruce's mouth without ever looking away from Tim. "Fine. I don't need your help, Drake." Tim rolled his eyes. Damian removed his hand just before Bruce gave in to the childish urge to lick it in revenge, only to fist it in the front of Tim's coat. "But we're still brothers according to Father and Grayson, and I want you to accept me as such."

The older boy slapped the younger's hands away. "I'm not going to let you in, Damian," said Tim, though his tone was more tired than spiteful. "I've been hurt enough by people whom I trusted. I can't lose anyone else and I certainly don't trust you not to abandon me or betray me."

Fresh tears glistened in Damian's eyes. "That's not fair! Grayson said that if I was kind to you, you'd forgive me and love me like he does."

"One, we've already established that 'Grayson' doesn't know what the hell he's talking about, and two, you're not even remotely 'kind' to me."

"I have been kind. I made sure that nurse didn't step out of bounds with you, and have attempted to pet you in the same manner than Grayson does."
Tim glowered. "That's not kind, it's creepy."

Damian looked completely flustered and frustrated that Tim wasn't acting the way that Grayson must have promised Damian that he would. Bruce wasn't surprised that Damian had resorted to his old habits of being completely abrasive after being be spurned by Tim. The child only knew one way of handling negative feedback.

Still, it was clear that Damian was determined to stick to the plan of talking instead of fighting. "What about Todd? You have given him a second chance," the younger boy pointed out.

"Jason was the first person I cared about whom I lost, and he was the first to try to kill me for being Robin. But I know that your upbringing was unnatural, so I'll forgive you for mistaking me gravitating toward the only person in this family who appreciates my feelings at the way you treat me, as me opening up my heart to yet another trauma."

"I can't help the way I was raised," Damian said mournfully. "I will figure out a way to treat you better, to your standards, if only you'll extend to me the same courtesy. I won't even ask Grayson for help if that's part of the problem."

"I'm not interested in developing new relationships, Damian, or even really in keeping the ones I've already got. It hurts too much and I'm done. So focus on Dick, or hell, bother Jason for a change."

Tim drew his legs up to hug to his chest and dropped his chin to rest on his knees.

Bruce pressed his lips to Tim's head and closed his eyes against the pain in his own chest at hearing his precious child sound so jaded and knowing that same child was desperately trying to close himself off from the rest of the world to avoid more heartache. The worst part was that he knew Tim didn't always feel like this. Less than a week ago, he'd been fighting Damian for Bruce's attention because he wanted it - thought he deserved some of it. Now the well of despair that always simmered within the youth had overflowed due to the stress of their situation and Bruce felt powerless to prevent his son from drowning in it.

Damian sniffled and looked away from his brother to his father. Bruce looked toward him when he felt the boy's heavy gaze. "I don't know what to do, Father. I can't fix this," Damian whispered.

"Keep trying, baby," Bruce mouthed back, knowing Damian could read his lips. At Damian's determined nod, Bruce dared to carefully unwrap his right arm from around his youngest to draw Tim fully into his lap. Tim didn't fight the move, or Bruce's backwards bear hug and subsequent gentle rocking. He rested his cheek on top of Tim's bowed head so he could meet Damian's eyes. He hoped that Damian could see the love that he felt for the eleven-year-old in his eyes, even if right now Bruce needed to focus on Tim. Damian cuddled up close to Bruce's side, seeming to understand the silent sentiment.

Bruce wasn't sure how long they remained seated in the thin grass under the old oak tree, but even the beginnings of a winter snowfall didn't budge them.

_to be continued..._
Chapter Thirty

When the snow started melting in his hair and trickling icily through its roots, Bruce decided that it was probably time to uncurl from their huddle on the ground and start walking back to Ella's townhome. Damian and Tim both began shivering from the cold, though Bruce had been aware of Tim's minute trembling since the teen had given voice to his worsening depression.

"Come on," he said softly. He guided Tim off of his stiffly folded legs. The bitter cold of the chilly day was made readily apparent as he lost the teen's warmth at his front and Damian's at his right side. Damian's lips were purpling and Bruce immediately felt guilty for keeping his little desert boy out in the miserable New England late fall weather. "What do you say to some lunch and a hot drink? Non-caffeinated, of course."

Tim shrugged, wrinkling his nose, and then stared off into the middle distance, his face turned away from his family and toward the empty playground. One of the swings creaked eerily as the wind picked up.

Damian hugged himself and nodded as he valiantly tried to keep his teeth from chattering. Bruce spared a minute to try to rub some heat back into the boy's arms, though he doubted it did much good. "F-father, if t-this is your p-punishment for Drake and I f-fighting earlier, it is p-proving ef-ffective."

Bruce cringed. "No, Damian. I did not mean to keep you outside for so long in the freezing temperatures, and I would not do so purposefully. I'm sorry that I became lost in my thoughts." He pulled the boy close, and then reached over to do the same to his older son. Tim startled slightly at suddenly being pulled out of his own musings. "Let's go back to the house."

As they moved toward the row of townhouses where Ella and Martha lived, Bruce pushed the pace of their walk to the point where Damian was just shy of having to jog in order to keep up with his father's long strides. They made it to the end of the short sidewalk leading to Ella's front door in nearly half of the time it had taken them to reach the playground. Just as they turned up the path of slightly uneven concrete rectangles, the plain wood door opened to reveal a bundled pair of young men.

"Bruce!" Dick exclaimed upon noticing their approach. "You've been gone nearly two hours."

"What the hell?" Jason asked, his own concern echoed in the question.

"Did you get lost?" As if it were possible for Batman to get lost after walking in a straight line for a measly few blocks. Bruce frowned, insulted, at his eldest.

Damian gave voice to his father's feelings. "Of c-course w-we were not lost, G-grayson. Do you t-
"If the shoe fits," Jason groused. "Exhibit A: the runt and his recent dalliance with pneumonia." He motioned towards Tim, still tucked stiffly under Bruce's other arm. Bruce held the fifteen-year-old more closely, as if he could erase any unintended consequences to their long outing by keeping the youth warm now.

Dick met them halfway down the short walk and pulled Damian away from Bruce to wrap his own arms around the shivering youth. "You're so cold, Dami!" Narrowed blue eyes looked up reproachfully at Bruce from where the twenty-two-year-old crouched before Damian.

"I am f-fine, G-grayson," Damian insisted. He pushed at his brother's arms, and then face when he couldn't budge Dick.

"If y-you s-s-say s-so, Porky," mocked Jason with an exaggerated stutter.

Damian finally disentangled himself from Dick's octopus-like coddling and stepped up to face Jason. "Rec-cant your f-false insult immed-mediately, T-todd!" At the least the reddening of his face was offsetting the pallor it had adopted from the long exposure to the cold. "It is y-you who c-could lay off the ch-chili dogs."

Instead of reacting angrily to Damian's verbal counterattack, Jason grinned maliciously down at the shorter boy, like he knew something that Damian didn't. Dick stepped in between them with an exasperated huff. "Explain Looney Tunes to you?" Dick smiled wanly at Damian. "I would love to, baby bat. Maybe inside through." He shuddered dramatically as if chilled to the bone himself.

"Too bad you broke the computer," Jason said, leaning down slightly to get closer to Damian. "Dickie could have showed you." Bruce didn't miss how Jason glanced quickly at Tim, expecting a reaction to the mention of the younger teen's beloved tablet. His jibe went unanswered by half of his intended targets.

Damian huffed and puffed out his little chest. "I have no interest in seeing something so childish as a show called Looney Tunes." At least Damian's irritation at Jason was warming him up to the point that his chilled stuttering was easing. Even so, there was no reason to continue tarrying outside. Besides, Bruce was eager to avoid another verbal altercation between his various children.

"Let's go inside," Bruce suggested. "Dick, did you and Jason eat lunch?"

"We were waiting for you to come back."

Jason shoved his hands into his pockets. "You know, a chili dog does sound good right now. You didn't happen to see any seedy looking stands during your trek about the town, did you, B?"

"No," Bruce replied. He wished he could indulge his son with the favored food. It would hardly make up for everything his boys had been through, but it could be a temporary spot of brightness for
Jason eyed the door to the house warily and didn't make a move to head back inside as Dick prodded Damian to do just that. "Bummer."

"What?" Bruce asked, worried instantly that something had transpired between Jason and Ella while he wasn't there to protect his child.

Jason made a face at him. "What yourself, old man. I need a cigarette."

"Did something happen?" Bruce looked at Dick for an explanation. "What did Ella do?"

Dick shook his head, followed by a smirk for Jason. "Our reluctant hostess has been on the phone most of the time you've been gone, and has avoided us otherwise. She just took Ms. Kane to run some errands."

Jason scowled at Dick. "I wish her 'auntie' would try to avoid us."

"Why?" Bruce asked sadly. Martha didn't deserve the boys' scorn.


Dick pouted and patted his chest over his heart mournfully. "That's very unkind, little brother. I can read just fine, and besides, what did you just tell Damian? If the shoe fits…"

Bruce's feelings of sympathy for Martha, who was likely lonely and isolated in her life with just Ella for company, surged. "Jason, you don't need to be afraid of Martha. It wasn't her doing that brought us here, and she's eager to get to know you boys."

"I not afraid of a little old lady," Jason stated loudly.

"Ti," Damian scoffed. "I didn't think it possible, but the Red Hood has fallen even further in my esteem."

"Hush. Keep your voices down." Bruce frowned at Jason. He hoped that none of the neighbors had heard the teen's passionate denial. "Jason--"

"Fuck you, Dickface," Jason interrupted. He jabbed his finger toward his older brother's face. "It's not like you don't stand there like a dickless mope and natter unintelligibly when she talks to you. Some golden boy you turned out to be."

Dick's eyes were wide at the outburst. "Jay, I was just teasing you. And yes, it's uncomfortable to be around her, knowing why we're here. I didn't mean--"

"Forget it," Jason said abruptly. He looked angry at himself for admitting to something that apparently Dick hadn't actually been serious about. Bruce's heart ached for Martha, who must have tried to interact with the boys and been shunned for her efforts, whether intentionally or not. As soon as his little ones were warm and fed and she returned, he vowed to seek her out himself to check on her wellbeing. She didn't deserve to be ostracized anew.

Dick didn't want to forget the insult he'd accidentally caused his brother. "I'm sorry, Jason…"

"Just leave it alone," Jason said shortly. He turned away to glare in turn at Damian and Tim. "Did you two little brats get your shit sorted?"
Damian turned his nose up, determined to ignore being called a brat. "I have a better understanding of Drake now."

"Hey, that's good, Dami," said Dick encouragingly, though his own countenance was muted now. "What about you, Timmy?"

"I'm fine," the fifteen-year-old replied automatically.

"I'm glad, but that's not what I asked…" Dick looked to Bruce inquiringly. We'll talk, Bruce mouthed. He didn't want to further burden the young man, but he knew he'd need help keeping an eye on the younger pair while searching for a way to get them home sooner than later.

They finally moved from the front steps into the warm home, with Jason grudgingly bringing up the rear. Bruce asked Jason to help him prepare a simple midday meal, knowing that the teen enjoyed cooking and that he might find the familiarity comforting. It would also give him a chance to speak to his son about his feelings towards Martha. Dick took Damian and Tim upstairs to see them thawed completely and changed into dry pants and socks.

Jason took his time rooting through the cabinets and refrigerator, pulling out things that must have looked good to him. He dropped a skillet more loudly than necessary onto the aged stove and tossed a warped plastic spatula after it. Before Bruce could initiate the conversation he wanted to have, Jason spoke up. "So, the kid looks like a fucked up mess right now," he said conversationally, as if they were talking about the weather.

Bruce sighed. "Clean up your language, Jason. It's just me. You don't have to act all tough right now."

"It's not an act, Bruce."

"Then do it out of respect for my headache," he groused. To address Jason's poorly hidden concern, he said, "I need to get him home, back to where I can control his environment and maybe have him talk to Leslie or Dinah again."

"You sound like an overbearing helicopter parent when you say it like that," Jason said.

"You know what I mean," said Bruce with a small feeling of exasperation. "We're all constantly stressed and he's not getting any chances to cope with what's going on. Hell, I feel depressed and I'm not even predisposed to it."

"Watch your language, old man."

"Don't be cute," Bruce admonished lightly. He let the peace hold for a minute as Jason dropped a chunk of ground beef into the pan and poked at it with the spatula. He waited to speak until Jason began muttering under his breath about how under-stocked Ella's kitchen was after a fruitless search for spices beyond salt and black pepper. "Talk to me about Martha, Jaybird."

"I thought I was supposed to be helping you make lunch, not doing all of the work while you stand there like a boob." Jason let the beef sizzle as he pulled a dozen cans of random vegetables out of the cupboard until he found tomato sauce and kidney beans. "Seriously, woman. How's a guy supposed to live on kidney beans alone? Where's the black, or pinto?"

"I'm your sous chef," said Bruce. "Tell me what you need."

"I think I saw an onion in the fridge earlier. Chop that, and drain our poor pitiful select of beans."

"On it. So… Martha."

"You can file her in the same drawer as Catherine, labeled 'Jason doesn't want to talk to Bruce about these people'."

"Why not?" Bruce kept the hurt and jealously out of his voice. Maybe he could try rationalizing away Jason's objection to talking about tough subjects with his adoptive father. At heart, Jason was logical and could be reasoned with if one respected his tendency to let his emotions run wild first.

"Watching my stepmom waste away was absolute misery," Jason said, his voice tinged with a hint of roughness. "I don't want to talk about it, and I sure as hell don't want to watch someone else go through that kind of torture." Jason scraped at the browned beef more aggressively than needed. "Sometimes, Catherine couldn't remember my name, either."

Bruce smiled fondly at his prodigal son, despite the heartache caused by Jason's last muttered comment. "I'm okay. I worry more about getting you boys home safely than I do about seeing this world's version of my mother pass. I promise."

"Then why is Dick acting so apprehensive around her?" Jason asked confrontationally. He faced Bruce squarely. "The only reason that makes sense for Mr. I-Want-To-Be-Everyone's-Best-Friend to pussyfoot around her like she'd kicked his puppy, is if you were freaking out over whatever illness she's got and what it's going to do to her."

"Jace, son--"

"I know you're more open with him about your feelings, and shit, I even understand why. The guy could make a mime spill his guts. But the rest of us know how to read a person, too, and I don't need you to confide in me to see this is hurting you. And if you and Big Bird can't handle what's happening to her, how the hell am I supposed to? I've been there, Bruce, and I don't want to go back."

"I know, kiddo," said Bruce. He set aside the onion and cutting board he'd unearthed to wrap an arm around the teenager. "It's okay. You don't have to go through this again." He'd do his best to shield Jason from Martha's illness if that's what needed to be done.

"Yeah right," Jason scoffed. "You're going to get close to her and start brooding dramatically about her illness, and then Dick is going to freak out, and I'm just supposed to ignore the two of you turning into basket cases?"

"Your brother may be prone to basket case-ness, but I have never been one," Bruce said. Jason didn't seem encouraged by Bruce's play for levity, but his scowl lessened nonetheless. Bruce squeezed Jason briefly, then let him go so the teenager could focus on transferring the contents of his skillet into a larger pot and mixing the tomato sauce into the ground beef. Bruce set about peeling and dicing the onion. Ella's knives were rather dull and it didn't take long for the mutilated bulb to start affecting him. He blinked back tears and sniffled faintly as the fumes worked at his clogged sinuses.

"See," Jason exclaimed, spinning to shake the spatula at him. "You're already doing it!" A fleck of tomato sauce landed near the collar of Bruce's shirt.

"Doing what?" Bruce asked, alarmed at the outburst.

"Crying over some old woman you don't even know!"

"I'm not," Bruce insisted. "It's this blasted onion." Jason's mouth opened to retort, but the teenager froze before he could utter a sound. "What?"
Jason snapped his mouth closed and then narrowed his eyes at Bruce. "What."

"What?"

"The onion, really?" Jason reached over to turn on the hot water in the sink. "Wimp. I bet Superman doesn't cry over onions. I know Alfred doesn't."

The steam rising from the spray of scalding water helped clear the onion fumes from his eyes and nose. "Excuse me," Bruce said as if offended. "I had a butler to chop my onions. And Superman cries over things a lot less noxious than pungent vegetables."

"I would have thought chopping onions until you were desensitized was lesson one of Batman 101."

"You're such a horrible, mean child," Bruce complained.

"If only I'd known..." Jason smirked. "I could have had fun with that when I first got back to Gotham."

"Horrible."

Jason chuckled. The sound warmed Bruce's heart. For the sake of the boy's improved mood, Bruce decided to forgo urging him to at least be kind to Martha. They continued the meal preparation companionably, chatting about the books that Jason had read recently and those that Bruce thought he might like to try next.

By the time that the chili variation was ready to be served, Bruce could hear the television from the living room. He remembered seeing TV trays in the dated room and decided to help Jason carry servings of the meal to the rest of their family instead of trying to squeeze around the tiny table in the kitchen.

Jason expertly balanced three bowls while Bruce carried two. It was a short trip from the kitchen to the front room. Bruce didn't pay much attention to what Dick and the kids had found to watch until Jason commented on the show. "No way. You actually found this on TV?"

Bruce looked at the small, tube television to see a pudgy hunter declare that it was "wabbit" season. Dick grinned from his seat between Damian and Tim on the wide couch. "Apparently it runs on a channel here known as Cartoon Network," he explained.

"This show is ridiculous," said Damian, looking put out at having to endure the juvenile antics of the animated characters.

"You think so?" Bruce asked. He handed Tim his two bowls of chili and went to retrieve the TV trays. He set up three before prodding his fifteen-year-old to shift closer to Dick. Bruce settled into the spot next to the armrest. Jason sat on the armrest itself after passing lunch to Dick and Damian. "I used to watch this as a little boy. Some of Brucie's act is based on Pepé Le Pew."

"I can see that," said Dick. His grin was brighter than it had been just after the brief misunderstanding with Jason. He blew on a spoonful of chili before eating the still simmering stew.

Jason eyed the action guardedly. "If it's gross, blame Ella. She has zero decent spices," Jason warned the older youth.

"I doubt you could make anything gross, Little Wing," Dick replied. He took a small bite, more out of respect for the temperature than wariness for Jason's skill as a chef. "It's good."
"You're not exactly a trustworthy authority on how good food is," Jason retorted. He took his own bite and made a face. "Ugh, Alfred would be appalled."

"It's not that bad, son," Bruce said after eating a spoonful. Sure, it wasn't as good as what Jason usually made, and about a third as spicy as the boy liked it, but he'd definitely had much, much worse. Bruce settled against the padded back of the couch and wrapped his left arm loosely around Tim, pulling the teenager to rest against his side while he picked at his meal. It was a bit of a stretch from his position to reach his bowl on the tray table, though the struggle seemed worthwhile to the father.

A few minutes later, Damian failed to stifle a laugh at Elmer Fudd's latest failure to lure Bugs Bunny into a trap. "I heard that, Little D. What do you think of the *Tunes*, now?" Dick poked at his littlest brother.

Damian made threatening hand gestures until Dick drew his fingers back into his own personal space. "I suppose if Father found it acceptable in his youth, then it must have some merit." Bruce didn't fail to notice that the boy wouldn't take his eyes off of the screen for very long.

The channel that Dick had found was running a marathon of the cartoon and short films. Bruce wasn't sure if he'd ever sat down with his kids to watch mindless television before, and found that it was an activity that he'd actually like to repeat. Tim relaxed slowly as Bruce kneaded the tense muscles at the back of his neck, until he was a comfortable weight against Bruce's shoulder. Jason moved from the armrest to sit at Bruce's feet, using the older man's shins to recline against. Damian leaned forward, watching the television raptly and no doubt still searching for whatever redeeming quality Bruce had seen in it as a child. Dick probably enjoyed watching Damian more than the show itself, and his sky blue eyes were bright with happiness at seeing his baby brother engaging in an age-appropriate activity. With the exception of Tim, the boys exchanged quips and comments about the show, many of which nearly had Bruce laughing out loud.

About an hour and a half passed before Ella and Martha came home from whatever errand they'd gone on while Bruce was still at the playground with Damian and Tim. Their hostess shook her head at the family's choice of entertainment but kept any comments to herself. Martha opted to join them, though she kept to herself at the far end of the living room in one of the worn reclining chairs. She seemed content to smile mildly at the television, perhaps lost in memories of her late child, so Bruce didn't worry that she felt as apart from the group as she was. The running commentary of the cartoons died down then, which was probably for the best since it was starting to get a bit inappropriate for polite company.

Another thirty minutes after the ladies returned home, the doorbell rang. Bruce didn't pay it any mind, considering that he knew no one else in this world. Ella ventured from her first floor office to answer the door and crisply invite her guest in. As if to play the part of good hostess, she led an older gentleman to the doorway of the living room to make introductions. Bruce's head was bowed as he prepared to feign interest in the newcomer, though he was distracted by Dick bolting up from his seat and nearly knocking over his tray table.

The young man caught it with one hand to keep it from overbalancing, though his bowl still slid off and landed with a plonk on the carpet. Reacting similarly to his older brother, Jason's head jerked back, connecting solidly with Bruce's knee. A second later, Dick was across the room and throwing his arms around the man in a crushing hug that nearly knocked them both over. "Oh my god," Bruce could hear his eldest mumble repeatedly. Having finally gotten a look at the visitor himself, Bruce struggled to detangle himself from Tim, who'd frozen upon recognizing the man, and to step over Jason while simultaneously checking that the collision hadn't done worse than momentarily stun the eighteen-year-old. The delays caused him to be far from second to face the new addition to their parallel life, leaving Damian to tug impatiently.
at the back of Dick's sweater.

"Grayson, step aside," Damian insisted. "It is my turn to greet Pennyworth!"

_to be continued..._

Chapter End Notes

I promise I will respond to every single one of my amazing reviews from Chapter 29 and otherwise. Please be patient with me. :(
Chapter Thirty-One

"Grayson, step aside," Damian insisted. "It is my turn to greet Pennyworth!"

The older man awkwardly patting Dick's upper back certainly looked like the Wayne family's beloved butler. However, after taking a few seconds to study the newcomer closely, Bruce could pick out the small differences. For example, he was a little less gray than the man used to staying up all night while his loved ones fought crime in one of the most dangerous cities in the world. On the other hand, his work as Agent A had ensured that their Alfred kept himself in prime physical condition. This variation of the aged British ex-patriot seemed a bit softer around the edges. Bruce's heart sank at the realization that their savior had not, in fact, come for them yet.

Dick finally gave in to Damian's tugging and stepped back from the surprised visitor. Despite being from a different universe, this Alfred's seemingly unruffled reaction to Dick's glomping was painfully familiar to Bruce. Underneath it though, Bruce could see the discomfort of the older man at the prospect of another uninvited hug from a complete stranger.

To this Alfred's certain relief, Damian didn't lunge forward for an embrace of his own. The eleven-year-old eyed him with a look of stark betrayal and clenched his fists at his sides. "You're not Pennyworth."

The stranger cleared his throat, his eyes darting between the dejected little boy, a red-cheeked Dick who was backing away slowly in embarrassment, and Bruce himself who remained standing next to the sofa. "I am Alfred Pennyworth," he said. "Though I suppose, not the person you hoped for."

"Thank you for coming, Alfred," said Ella in a small voice. The hard look that this world's butler gave her made Bruce wonder at their relationship. Ella had no love lost for Thomas Wayne and it appeared that Alfred, who likely still tended to the last scion of the once great family, had little lost for her in return. There were plenty of people that their Alfred didn't care for, but usually the stoic butler was better about hiding it from the one in question.

"What have you done, Elizabeth?"

Martha rose from her chair as her niece prepared to defend her actions once again. "Alfred, there you are. I've been wondering where you disappeared to. Have the roses bloomed yet?"

"Excuse me, young man," Alfred murmured, patting Damian on the shoulder briefly before stepping around him to meet Martha halfway. He took her hands and squeezed them fondly. "Mistress Martha, the roses are splendid this year."

Bruce absently wrapped an arm around his eldest when Dick came to stand next to him. He spared a glance at the young man's face and was glad to see that Dick was slowly regaining his composure. Like the rest of the occupants of the living room, he watched the newly reunited pair raptly.
"Wonderful," replied Martha.

Alfred studied her for a moment before asking, "How are you? It has been a while, I'm afraid."

"I am well," she replied. "Ella has invited her friend Bruce and his family to visit. We were watching The Roadrunner Show." She grinned at Bruce. "Alfred, doesn't he look just like Thomas?"

"What roadrunner?" asked Damian in confusion. No one responded, distracted as they were by the real life drama before them.

Alfred briefly made eye contact with Bruce. His expression was indiscernible, which left Bruce feeling unsure of how to address the newcomer. After looking away from Bruce, Alfred glanced at Ella and then focused again on Martha. "Indeed he does. I am very interested to meet Elizabeth's guests."

Bruce could feel Dick cringe at the weight put on the last word of Alfred's statement. Jason pushed himself up from the carpet to join Tim on the couch, nearly sitting on top of his younger brother. Damian hurried over to press against Bruce's free side, and the father could practically feel the disappointment radiating from his youngest. Alfred's opinion was very important to Damian in their world, so it would likely crush the boy if he was negatively regarded by this "Pennyworth".

"I didn't invite you here to judge me," Ella said defensively. "You wanted to see for yourself that Martha is well after everything that's transpired recently."

Alfred assisted Martha back to her seat, then turned to face Ella directly. "To transpire implies a chance occurrence, Miss Kane. I am quite certain that your ill-advised use of witchcraft is what brought us to this current situation."

"Yes," cheered Jason quietly. Ella leveled a hateful look at the teenager. Bruce hissed an admonishment at his son to be quiet.

"Oh dear," said Martha, picking up on the sharp rise of tension in the room. Bruce vacillated between remaining rooted where he was and hurrying to his mother's side to comfort her. Fortunately, he didn't have to decide, as Alfred noted her concern as well.

"I am sorry, Mistress Martha," he apologized stiffly. "I fear I am still struggling to come to terms with the gravity of Elizabeth's actions, and it has made me unnecessarily cross."

"Not unnecessary at all," Jason muttered. Bruce was the one who glared at him this time.

Martha looked unsure of what her niece could have done to make her once-butler so irate with her. Unwilling to admit to her aunt how their guests had actually come to stay with them, Ella asked Alfred tersely, "May we speak in private?"

"We spoke at length this morning over the phone," Alfred reminded her. "You promised me Master Thomas' grandchildren. I'd like to meet them now." His clear blue eyes scanned the misplaced family, and Bruce was relieved to see that he didn't seem to be angry with them, as he was with Ella. Bruce supposed that this version of the man was as fond of children as their version. Before Dick had come along, Bruce had been subjected to no small amount of purposeful bemoaning on Alfred's part that there may never be the patter of small feet in the halls of stately Wayne Manor again. Since that fateful night at Haley's Circus, the butler had gone out of his way to cherish the handfuls of rowdy boys and determined girls that Bruce brought home, though he lamented having been denied Damian's infancy.

Ella scowled deeply and waved her hand towards Bruce. "Bruce Wayne and his brats. They're a real
Jason shot to his feet. "Listen, bi--"

"Sit," Bruce ordered, just short of raising his voice. Jason complied angrily, but thankfully without comment. Bruce directed Damian and Dick to join their brothers on the couch, leaving Bruce to stand protectively before them. He doubted that Alfred's keen senses failed to miss any of strain between Ella and Bruce's family.

"Thank you, Elizabeth," said Alfred dryly. "Perhaps you'd like to act your part as hostess and provide some refreshments."

"Fu-- fine," she huffed. "Give me your bowls… who spilled chili on the carpet?" Her sharp blue eyes were zeroed in on the overturned bowl. "I swear to g--"

"Refreshments, Miss Kane," Alfred intoned. "I shall assist the guilty party in rectifying the mistake later."

With a sound of frustrated derision, Ella turned on her heel and stormed toward the back of the townhouse. A measure of the tension left with her, allowing Bruce to relax his shoulders minutely. He sat down heavily on the arm of the couch, thought he kept his back straight out of habit, thanks to their version of old man before him. "Martha, are you well?" he asked, hoping that the altercation hadn't upset her.

"Yes," she replied, sounding a little sad. "Ella seems distressed, though."

"She will be fine," Alfred assured his once-employer. He sat down in the second wingback chair that flanked the small side window, opposite of Martha. "She needs time to come to terms with the seriousness of her actions." He reached over to pat the back of Martha's hand. It was curious to Bruce that she seemed older than Alfred, though he knew that wasn't the case. It broke his heart anew to see the effects of her degenerative illness.

"What has Ella done?" asked Martha. She worried a decorative doily from the end table between her and Alfred with unsteady hands. "She's not in trouble, is she? That poor girl."

At Alfred's pointed look, Bruce explained, "Ella has disguised the truth of our being here from her aunt."

"I see." Alfred faced Martha. "No, my friend. She is not in trouble."

"I see." Alfred faced Martha. "No, my friend. She is not in trouble."

"Good." Martha smiled absently and her twisting of the lace doily ceased.

"Though, I do not condone hiding the truth from you, Mistress Martha. Your visitors are here due to Ella's 'interdimensional control' ability. They are not from our world, but from a parallel universe." Bruce worried that Martha would not believe Alfred's succinct explanation, but she seemed to accept it easily and smiled benignly at the lost family. It made Bruce wonder if she actually understood it, though he trusted this Alfred's judgment over his own when it came to the older woman.

He cleared his throat, ready to change the subject. "As Ella mentioned, my name is Bruce Wayne. These are my sons: Damian, Richard, Timothy, and Jason," he introduced, following the order in which his children were seated on the couch. Dick had an arm around each of his younger brothers, possibly as more of a comfort to himself than them. Jason tugged on the fringe of one of the throw pillows, no doubt craving a cigarette and needing something to do to occupy his hands.

"A pleasure to meet you," said Alfred. "It mends a small portion of my heart to know that there is a
place where the Wayne name endures beyond Master Thomas."

"I am the only one born a Wayne," Damian said quickly, as if that would somehow convince Alfred to consider him more highly than he might have otherwise. "The others were not." Bruce mentally sighed at the reminder of his youngest's insecurities.  

"Oh? Will you tell me how you all came to be Waynes, then?"

Martha sat forward. "Yes. I've been eager to get to know each of you. We haven't had much time to talk so far." She seemed to attribute that to misfortune and bad timing, which eased Bruce's fears that she felt like the boys were avoiding her. "I'm certain that Damian's mother is a charming young lady."

"His story is the most convoluted of them all," Jason pointed out with an amused snort. Dick chuckled into the back of Tim's shoulder, while Tim shook his head wryly and bit the inside of his cheek. Damian leaned forward to scowl at his siblings, with his focus on Jason.

"Boys," Bruce warned. He pinched Damian to reinforce his demand that they not start bickering right now. "Chum, why don't you start?"

Dick coughed lightly to clear his throat and put an end to his snickering. "Are we telling the long or short versions, B?"

"Short, for now," Bruce replied. Admitting the secret of the Batman was difficult for him, even in this strange world where the masked man didn't exist.

"Sure." He lifted his arm from around Damian to rub at the back of his neck. He smiled abashedly at Alfred. "First of all, sorry for… uh…"

"Make no mention of it," replied Alfred kindly. "It is obvious that you are quite fond of for whomever it is that you mistook me. I am sorry that I am not he."

"Th-thanks." Dick's face was still a little pink as he geared up for the telling of his origin story. "My parents were trapeze artists in a travelling circus. During a stop in Gotham when I was twelve, there was an accident during the show and my parents passed away. Bruce was there and decided to take me in."

"I saw myself in you," Bruce added, smiling at his eldest.

"You'll find," interjected Jason sarcastically. "That Goldie here is B's favorite."

"Grayson is certainly less tedious than you," Damian said, still smarting from having his mother insulted by the older male.

"I don't have a favorite," Bruce said, exasperated. "Jason, stop trying to start fights with your brothers."

Jason raised his eyebrows as if to say, "See what I mean?"

"B loves all of us exactly the same," Dick said. "Even though you and Dami cause him the most heartache." He easily ducked his head out of the way of Jason's swat from around Tim, and squeezed Damian to preemptively cut off the youngest's insulted tirade. "You're up next, little wing."

Jason leaned back casually into the sofa cushions and crossed his outstretched legs at his ankles. "Dick terrorized B when he was little, so the old man went slumming in the worst parts of Gotham to
get away from him. He was stupid enough to leave his car unattended, so I jacked the tires off of it. Unfortunately, he caught me in the act and decided to bring me home to give Dick someone else to leech onto. He's been punishing me ever since."

"That is a blatant defamation of character," Dick protested exaggeratedly. "I did not terrorize Bruce, Jaybird."

"I feel terrorized on occasion," teased Bruce.

"Me too," Tim quipped quietly, tilting his head back to smirk up at Dick.

Dick rolled his eyes. "Clearly I'm the favorite, since you all hate me."

"If you could keep your hands to yourself..." Jason goaded.

"I live with a bunch of emotionally repressed apes," Dick complained. "You'd think affection was toxic the way they avoid it," he told Alfred, who smiled faintly in response.

"Only yours," ribbed Jason.

"Timmy, poke him for me," Dick urged, since apparently he was unwilling to let go of the smaller male to do it himself. At Jason's warning look, Tim declined by curling closer into his oldest brother's side.

"How old were you when Bruce adopted you?" Alfred asked Jason, bringing them back on topic.

"He was twelve when I found him, but fourteen when everything was finalized. It was complicated since there was barely any legal documentation for him," Bruce answered. "How old were you, chum?"

Dick made a face at him. "Sixteen when you brought him home. Thank goodness I could move out after two long years."

"Love you, too, Goldie." His oldest sons glared at each other, though there was more heat in Jason's than Dick's, whom Bruce thought was mostly teasing his younger brother. Dick broke the stare first and ignored Jason's victorious grin. His second son slapped the knee of the teenager trapped between his older brothers. "Your turn, baby bird."

Tim jumped slightly and frowned at Jason. "Ow."

"That didn't even hurt," Jason argued.

Before Tim could respond, Damian cut in. "Do not act like such a troll, Todd. The rest of us do not appreciate your barbaric acts." To Alfred, he said, "Drake has not been feeling well lately, and that Ella character is to blame for it."

"Todd? Drake?" Alfred looked between the boys, trying to reconcile the different names assigned to the youths crowded on the couch.

"The 'blood son' attempts to make the rest of us feel inferior by addressing us by our last names," Jason explained dryly. "He's less effective than he'd like to think."

Dick bodily held Damian down in his seat with the arm wrapped tightly around him while the eleven-year-old struggled for freedom. "Jace, that's not true... anymore. It is simply an endearing quirk of Dami's, like how he calls Bruce 'Father' instead of 'Daddy'."
"Endearing my a--"

"Boys, please stop," Bruce interjected exhaustedly. At least Alfred and Martha seemed more amused than appalled at the "banter" between his sons.

"Timothy then," clarified Alfred. "What is your story?"

Tim's entrance into Bruce's life was heavily centered around Batman and the death of Jason when he was Robin. Bruce was curious how the teenager would spin his tale without revealing the family's biggest secret.

Tim took a quick, deep breath. "Our families moved in the same circles. I used to take pictures around Wayne Manor."

Dick rested his chin on Tim's shoulder and grinned warmly in confirmation. "Timmy was our neighbor and after his parents passed away, Bruce brought him home to Wayne Manor. And third time's a charm, right B? You finally have a son who could be trusted to carry on the Wayne legacy."

"I will carry on the Wayne legacy," Damian protested.

"You?" Jason scoffed. "Dami, you're a looser cannon than I am."

"I will end you, Todd!"

"Lil' D, you're kind of proving his point right now," Dick said.

"Damian, Jason, cease quarreling immediately," Bruce ordered. "And yes, some days it feels like Tim is the only one who doesn't purposefully try to drive me mad."

"Because he's a mini-you," Jason quipped, sour at being reprimanded. "And you're welcome for an exciting, never dull life, old man."

"I do not purposefully try to drive you mad, Father." Damian pouted. "I am a victim of the circumstances caused by these buffoons." He was not comforted by Bruce resting a hand on top of his head. "I also aim to be a mini-you, until the day I am grown when I shall hold equal esteem to you. Drake shall not be the only one at the head of the Wayne empire."

"Why is 'Drake' the only one who gets to share?" Tim asked wearily, peering at Damian as if trying to understand why he had been chosen over Dick to help Damian run the family business.

"The Wayne empire?" asked Alfred. "The family business is that successful in your universe?" He looked pleased to learn that this part of his employer's legacy also thrived in a parallel universe.

"It's more than a business," said Tim. "Some days, Bruce single-handedly keeps Gotham alive."

Martha looked wistfully at Bruce. "Thomas had such high hopes for Wayne Industries."

"That is certainly impressive," agreed Alfred. He dipped his head in Bruce's direction to acknowledge the younger man's work.

"WE shall be even greater once I inherit, whether Drake is there or not," Damian declared. Tim made a face at the younger boy.

"I'm sure you're both destined for great things, little brothers," Dick cooed, trying to stop the tangent so they could get back on track. "Right, B?"
"Damian and Tim have taken sibling rivalry to the extreme," Bruce explained tiredly. He wouldn't mention the number of times the two had tried to destroy each other. "I seem to be the source of most of it."

"Don't worry, Bruce," said Jason. "If they're not fighting over which of them you love more, they're fighting over Dickie's and Alfred's attention."

"My attention?"

"The truth of the matter is," said Dick. "That without the our Alfred, we'd all be a lot more messed up than we are. He's the glue that holds the family together."

"It has been challenging without him," Bruce agreed. A contemplative silence fell over the living room, something that Bruce knew couldn't possibly last with all four of his sons present. Especially once Ella returned with a tray of drinks and snacks.

xXx

Later that evening, after Nurse Anne had stopped by to check on Martha and Tim, Dick and Jason took Damian for a short walk around the block to spend some of their excess energy. Martha retired to her room and Tim opted to curl up on Bruce's bed, eager for some quiet and extra sleep. That left Bruce, Ella, and Alfred in the living room. They sipped tea, which felt wonderful on Bruce's raw throat. The freshly cleaned spot where the chili had been spilled dried as they spoke, compliments of Alfred's expert advice on removing the stain.

"What is your plan, Elizabeth?" asked Alfred coolly.

"I was not expecting four boys in addition to Bruce when I brought him here," said Ella bitterly. "Not only do they consume incredible amounts of food, but they're unruly and rude."

"For all intents and purposes, they've been kidnapped by a selfish woman," said Bruce harshly. "After being homeless for a week and nearly losing their brother to an illness that could have easily been avoided if he'd had access to his medication, then being made to coexist in a cramped room, how do you expect them to behave?"

Ella ground her teeth for a few seconds while glaring at Bruce. "Obviously, this current living arrangement is not working," she said after she'd unclenched her jaw. "I cannot afford to feed them and pay for extra meds, and I especially cannot pay for accommodations to get them out of my house."

"And conveniently, you're also unable to send us back to our own universe," Bruce groused.

"Don't be an asshole," Ella snapped. She turned to Alfred. "Clearly he's Thomas' son." Neither male was impressed by her opinion of the Waynes' demeanors. "So perhaps Thomas should finally take responsibility for his family and do something to help us out."

"There is little left to the Wayne finances," said Alfred. "Nor should Master Thomas be made to pay for your indiscretions."

Bruce agreed with Alfred - he wasn't Thomas Wayne's son in this world, and his alternate universe father was not the one who'd dragged him and his family through a wormhole - but he felt renewed despair at being unable to adequately provide for his sons. He hated being at the mercy of others. He stared at his lap to hide any hint of his feelings that may shown on his face.

Ella set her teacup down forcefully, rattling the saucer. "I'd anticipate your 'master' to be so callous,
"My preference is to leave you to fix your own mistake," said Alfred, unfazed by her scorn. "Too many times you've used your 'powers' and it's been left to the Kanes to undo the havoc you cause. Enough is enough. Except this time you've trapped children in your mess, and I cannot abide by that." Bruce looked up, a flicker of hope rekindling within him. "I will confer with Master Thomas. Either way, I expect that you will exert every effort in finding a way to send this poor family home without further delay."

Ella merely responded with a short nod of her head and a terse thank you.

"I shall take my leave," said Alfred. Bruce was rather jealous that the older man was headed to a hotel for the night. He walked to the front door with the butler to see him out while Ella escaped to the kitchen. Alfred paused with his hand on the doorknob. "I am sorry for the troubles that Miss Kane has wrought upon you."

"I care little about what happens to me, but I'm desperate to make things better for the kids." It didn't even cause his stomach to twist sourly to admit as much. He had little pride left at this point. "I'll be grateful for anything you can do to help my boys."

"If our Bruce had grown to be like you, your mother and father would be quite proud. As would I." Alfred clasped Bruce's arm briefly. "I would be honored to help you get back home."

"Thank you." Bruce swallowed down the sudden swell of emotion that rose in his throat. Homesickness engulfed him, and he missed his own Alfred greatly. He stood silently by the front door for long minutes after this Alfred left before returning to the living room to wait for Dick, Jason, and Damian to return.

_to be continued..._
Chapter Thirty-Two

A little bit later, Jason followed Bruce into the small guest room on the second floor of the townhouse. Dick had taken Damian into the converted office to reassemble the air mattress that had been pushed aside during the boys’ altercation that morning. The last time Bruce had checked on his second youngest, Tim had been awake but unwilling to rejoin the others downstairs. Instead, he'd opted to continue his occupation of Bruce's bed and hide away in the pages of the novel that Jason had been reading earlier. Now, the book was abandoned on the nightstand, Tim's place held by leaving it open with the pages down while the teenager slumbered.

Jason picked up the book and marked the page with a corner of Kleenex and an irritated huff. "No respect," he complained quietly as he inspected the abused spine of the book.

Bruce smirked to himself as he leaned down to peer into the younger teenager's sleeping face. He absently brushed a few slick strands away from Tim's pale forehead and was relieved that the minute perspiration wasn't from fever. Tim's breathing hitched slightly as his subconscious reacted to the unexpected touch, though he remained asleep.

Jason, book still in hand, moved to Bruce's side to stare down at his little brother himself. "You going to keep him with you, or banish him to the air mattress with Dickie and the brat?"

"Despite the tentative hope I've put into Damian's newfound understanding of Tim, I'm leery of waking up to another bout of 'fireworks'," Bruce replied. "Besides, I'm starting to feel my age with this blasted cold and I don't feel like carrying him across the hall."

"First of all," said Jason nonchalantly, "You could just wake his lazy ass up. In fact, I'll gladly do the honors." Bruce vetoed that suggestion with an exasperated look. Unfazed, Jason continued, "And secondly, is your cold a good combination with his condition?"

"I think we're past the point where I'm a threat to him," Bruce replied. Besides, he was willing to sacrifice some of his own comfort to see to that of his sons. The small bed designated as "his" would be crowded with two of them, but less so than the equally narrow air mattress and three occupants.

"You mentioned that the couch was a casualty to Tim and Damian's spat this morning. Where are you going to sleep, Jaybird?" Perhaps he could stand a night on the floor and leave "his" bed to both of his sons.

"Stop trying to be so noble, you old fart," Jason said. He must have noticed Bruce eying the wood planks. "That fabric dinosaur can't be any more uncomfortable than it was before, and it's worth the backache to not have to share."

"Tim moves less in his sleep than Dick," Bruce mused.

"Hardy har har," Bruce said, not amused. A sudden idea struck him and he had to work to keep the corresponding grin from his expression. Perhaps he could trick Jason into accepting a more satisfactory sleeping surface for the night. He took a seat at the very foot of the bed and leaned back against the wall. "Come here, Jay." He patted the space between his side and Tim's sock-covered feet.
"Why?" The teenager's visage was instantly guarded. Jason was too smart to not be suspicious of Bruce's motives, as he should be since his old man did have ulterior ones. Still, Bruce was confident he could play this off.

"Because I'm your dad and I told you to, and you love me and always do as you are told."

"Have you lost your mind?" Jason asked, sounding a bit like he might be genuinely worried. "You're talking to me, Jason. Not Dickiebird or the runt."

"I know," Bruce replied. "And it'd be a miracle if Dick or the kids ever actually listened to me," he added dryly.

Instead of moving toward the bed, Jason took a step backward. "I don't want to 'talk' to you, either."

The flicker of hurt struck Bruce again, though he was able to put it aside in order to remain mostly lighthearted. "Yes, you've made that clear, mean little boy. Just come sit next to me and bring the book."

"Little?" Jason frowned as he cautiously did as instructed. "You've got barely an inch on me, old man."

"Two inches, and twenty-two years." Jason was close enough for Bruce to grab his arm. He used the appendage to pull Jason onto the mattress, ignoring the way the bed frame groaned under the weight of three males. Jason accidentally smacked Tim with the book as he struggled to regain his balance and find a comfortable position.

"G'way," Tim muttered without opening his eyes, and nailed Jason in the side of the thigh with the heel of his foot.

"Ow, you little fu-- shit."

"Stop it," Bruce admonished while trying to hold back a laugh. He pried Jason's fingers off of Tim's ankle and filled them instead with the discarded book. "Read to me, son."

"Read to yourself," Jason said sourly, still glaring at his younger brother. Bruce wasn't sure if Tim had fully awoken or not. The fifteen-year-old's eyes were closed, but his brow was furrowed now and his mouth set in a shallow frown.

"He didn't mean to kick you," Bruce fibbed. "Come on, then. I'm not ready to sleep, but my eyes are too tired to read myself."

Jason grumbled as he opened the book to the place he'd marked for Tim earlier. "You're a con man, Bruce." Nevertheless, he started at the top of the page, regardless of it being in the middle of a sentence from the previous one.

Tim's features smoothed out as Jason's rich voice narrated the fictional story. Bruce had worried that he'd struggle to stay awake himself, more tired than he'd admitted to earlier even though his plan depended on him remaining alert. However, the chance to be this close to his prodigal child and witness him in his element easily kept Bruce sharp as he didn't want to miss a moment of this opportunity. Jason looked at once older and younger than he was. His earnest joy for reading reminded Bruce of when the teenager had been much smaller, yet the respect with which Jason paid the written word belayed his oft hidden maturity.

Suddenly, Bruce understood their Alfred's badgering for little ones in Wayne Manor. Bruce's mind's eye was filled with the image of Jason reading a bedtime story to his own tiny prodigy, and he
longed for that possible future. He had no doubt that each of his children would be a better parent than he, especially Jason. He'd also heard that grandchildren were much more enjoyable than one's own offspring. Of course, Jason was only eighteen, so Bruce could stand to wait a few years.

Bruce was snapped out of his daydream when Jason stumbled over a word, momentarily tongue-tied. The teenager covered the mishap with a wide yawn and several quick blinks. In a voice rough with continued use, Jason asked, "Enough yet, old man?"

"No," Bruce answered. *Never,* he thought.

"Yeesh," Jason grumbled. He cleared his throat, yawned again, and then picked up at the beginning of the paragraph during which he'd faltered. Bruce was surprised that his son was being so accommodating, especially when Jason's chin dipped closer to his own chest with each page and the narration became progressively more slurred. He wasn't sure what Jason felt he was getting out of this time spent with his father and younger sibling, but Bruce was glad that it was worthwhile enough to hold the teenager's attention for this long.

Bruce discreetly slipped an arm behind Jason and subtly pulled the boy into his side as Jason bravely continued to read. It was getting more difficult to follow the story as Jason's recitation meandered more and more, so Bruce started following along himself. This was apparently a book that Jason had read many times before, as he could 'read' brief passages during his gradually lengthening blinks. When the boy's dark lashes remained fluttering against his faintly freckled cheeks and the words finally petered out, Bruce smoothly took over. His baritone was deeper than Jason's, but Bruce thought he lacked the quality of tone that made listening to Jason read aloud so enjoyable.

Bruce's heavy head rested against Bruce's shoulder as the older man finished the last sentence of the chapter. He closed the book, unmindful of saving their place, and took a minute to enjoy the peace and quiet. He felt smug that despite Jason's justified distrust, Bruce had successfully implemented his plan to see that his second oldest slept on a bed and not a broken couch. Carefully, he eased Jason away from his side and all of the way over. He stood up from the bed to set the book aside. Jason woke enough to scoot himself up the rumpled bedding in search of a pillow, but did not try to give up his place for his adoptive father.

Jason's heavier weight created a dip in the mattress that Tim subconsciously used as an excuse to slide up against his brother's large frame. Bruce was sure that the smaller teenager would be surprised upon waking to find himself cuddling with Jason instead of Dick or Bruce. For his part, Jason threw an arm over the compact ball of warmth, exhaled fully, and settled into a deeper slumber. Bruce regarded them fondly.

A brief knock heralded Dick cracking open the door and peeking inside. "B," he stage-whispered. "Timmy and Jason haven't come to bed yet. Do you… oh."

Bruce hushed him gently before drawing him entirely into the room and closing the door to block the light from the hallway. "I figured Jason could use a night in an actual bed, and you and Damian could use some breathing room," Bruce explained quietly. Dick must have fallen asleep himself, but woken as he was prone to do and noticed the absence of his middle brothers. The young man's hair was more tousled than usual and he looked sleepy.

"What about you?" Dick asked.

"You boys need to stop worrying so much about me," Bruce argued.

"Turnabout is fair play, B," Dick countered. He barely covered a yawn with his hand. "But if you're happy with this arrangement, I'm not going to argue that it's good for Jay and Timmy, too."
"I am." Bruce wasn't thrilled about a night on the hard floor, though he realized he could probably gain a couple of winks on the unbroken couch down in the living room.

Dick didn't have to be tricked into a sideways hug like Jason usually did. He melted into the embrace when Bruce drew him close with an arm around his middle. "Jason's really worried about Tim," Dick commented. "I mean, we all are, of course, but Jason is especially. He won't admit as much, but I can tell." That possibly explained Jason's lack of resistance to Bruce's earlier manipulations.

"I'm going to make sure that Tim is fine. I promise," said Bruce. He kissed Dick's temple. "We're all going to be fine." He expected Dick to accept his words and head back to bed, given how sleepy he seemed. However, the young man merely completed the hug and hummed against Bruce's shoulder when the older man ran a hand up and down the back of his shirt. Concerned, Bruce asked, "Are you all right, chum?"

"I'm taking advantage of you," Dick said, his voice muffled by Bruce's cotton top. "Not being so prickly these days."

Bruce chuckled and squeezed his eldest for a long moment. He then pushed the acrobat to arm's length. "Go back to bed, old son. Kiss Damian for me, and I'll see you in the morning."

"G'night, Bruce."

xXx

In the end, Bruce did sleep on the couch downstairs. He woke briefly when he heard Ella enter the kitchen to brew a pot of coffee, earlier than she normally did. He suspected that she was finally going to go to work, and didn't bother to rouse himself to bid her farewell (or good riddance). It was easy enough to slip back into sleep, and his dreams rewarded him for his discretion.

*He was seated in the middle of a large auditorium, watching a ballet. He couldn't name it, though he had a sense that he knew exactly which show he was attending. All that really mattered, however, was the lead ballerina in her ebony costume.*

*Bruce's heart was full of pride as he watched his only daughter dance across the wooden stage, appearing to float thanks to her effortless grace. Cassandra's silken hair was longer than he remembered, and flowed loosely around her. That should have been unusual for the ballet, but it seemed natural enough to him as he watched, transfixed.*

*As the dance continued, the rest of the audience seemed to fade away. The dancers made their way, one by one, to the wings until Cassandra was the only one who remained. Her form stayed flawless as the music reached a crescendo. Bruce wanted to inform anyone who could hear him that she was his daughter, but he was alone in the sea of velvet seats.*

*Too soon, the solo dance ended and Cassandra melted into a deep bow as phantom fans applauded her. Bruce shot from his seat to give her a standing ovation. His face hurt from the stretch of his smile, but he couldn't stop. The only thing that could temper his pride and enthusiasm was the unexpected crash from backstage.*

*Cassandra snapped to attention, her sharp eyes focused on the curtains. Her costume morphed from fluid ballerina to mysterious Black Bat as she took a step toward the wing. Bruce climbed over the seats to join her, his own form being overtaken by stiff black leather and Kevlar. He felt like he was wading through mud as he tried to follow his daughter who had sprinted into the shadows. He fumbled for his grappling hook, as if that could help propel him through the space faster.*
"Bruce!" The Batman paused, glancing about himself for the source of the shout. He heard it again, but not from the direction of the stage. "Bruce!"

Ella?

"Bruce!"

He snapped awake, his heart racing as adrenaline flooded his system. He didn't know what the threat was yet, but his instincts had him on high alert anyway. Bruce threw aside the afghan that covered his legs and nimbly rose from the couch, ignoring the twinge of pain in his sore muscles. He hurried out of the living room and into the hall, where he could hear pained moaning and frantic soothing coming from the bedroom on the left.

"What happened?" Bruce demanded as he reached the doorway to Martha's room. This universe's version of his mother lay crumpled on the floor between the bed and the dresser while Ella knelt beside her, nearly shaking with nerves.

"She fell," Ella said, sounding panicked. Martha groaned, and called weakly for Thomas. Bruce couldn't see clearly around Ella, but he spotted the hint of red on the older woman's chin and front of her sleeping gown and that was enough for him to consider this an emergency. He swallowed his concern and summoned his Batman persona in an attempt to remain objective. "Call an ambulance," he instructed briskly. He pushed past his cousin so he could assist Martha.


"I meant to use the restroom," she said. She paused to take a deep breath and her face pinched with pain. "I don't… I don't know what happened."

"She must have hit her chin on the dresser," said Ella. Bruce was ready to admonish the younger woman for not doing as he'd told her until he turned and saw that she had her cell phone against her ear. She started speaking again, this time to the emergency operator who'd taken her call.

Bruce looked back at Martha. She was clearly conscious, and her confusion was just as likely due to her worsening mental health as it was to the knock she'd just taken. "Are you hurt anywhere else?" he asked as calmly as he could. He tugged on the sheet of the bed and used it to press against the cut on her chin.

"My… my side," she admitted breathlessly.

Bruce guided her to hold the bloody sheet herself so he could gently press against her side. He drew his hand back as if he'd been burned when she hissed in pain after he made contact with her hip. Ella's sharp, accusatory gaze skewered him, though she held her tongue in order to listen to the instructions that the emergency operator was giving her. Bruce felt too awkward to lift her gown so he could see the damage himself, and he cursed himself for losing his objectivity in the face of an injured version of his mother.

"They're almost here," said Ella. She forced herself into the narrow space next to Bruce. "Auntie, hold on." She patted Martha's foot. "Can't we at least get her off of the floor?" the younger woman asked testily.

"She may have seriously injured her hip," Bruce cautioned. He was afraid of doing more harm than
good if he moved her. "We'll wait for the ambulance to arrive." They could at least try to make Martha more comfortable, however. "Grab her pillow, and a clean towel."

Ella nodded, probably glad for something to do. She rose unsteadily in her pumps. Bruce expected her to reach over the bed or head to the bathroom, but instead she waved in the direction of the door. "Get out of here," she ordered meanly.

"What's going on?" Jason demanded instead of complying with Ella's command. All four of Bruce's boys crowded the doorway. They had probably heard Ella calling for Bruce.

"It's all right," Bruce informed his sons, striving to sound more calm than he felt. "Jay, why don't you make breakfast for everyone."

Martha tried to shift in order to make herself more comfortable, but only managed to aggravate her injuries. "Oh, Thomas," she cried faintly.

"I'm here," Bruce replied absently, his attention divided between her and the boys.

Damian squeezed around his oldest brothers. "Is she dying, Father?" His green eyes looked huge in the pale morning light filtered through Martha's lace sheers.

"Of course not," Ella said, though she didn't sound very convincing. "Leave. Now."

"Listen, you hateful woman—" Damian was cut off by the sound of sirens. They grew progressively louder as they approached the townhouse.

Dick guided his siblings out of the doorway to give Ella space to exit and meet the first responders at the front door. Bruce squeezed Martha's hand as tightly as he dared to give her as much comfort as he could. She refused to let go of his hand as the crew from the ambulance filled the small room, and continuously asked for Thomas.

Bruce remembered the fifteen minutes that it took for the emergency personnel to determine that Martha needed to go to the hospital as a blur. He knew that the sound of her feeble voice calling for his father would haunt him even if they did ever make it back to their own world. Convinced as she was that he was Thomas, Bruce didn't have the heart to let her go in the ambulance by herself. Ella bitterly agreed to drive her own car to the emergency room behind the ambulance and accompanying fire truck.

"Father," Damian whined as Bruce followed the stretcher with Martha on it to the front door. His siblings shadowed him closely.

"Don't worry, kiddo. Your grandma will be okay," one of the firemen told the eleven-year-old, followed by tousling Damian's spiked hair. Bruce grimaced and paused long enough to kneel before Damian and distract him from slaying the audacious stranger.

"I'll be back soon, Dam, I promise," he said. He pecked the boy briefly on the cheek before rising to his full height. "I'll be back soon," he repeated. "Feed the kids and yourselves," he told Dick and Jason.

The last thing Bruce heard before the door closed behind himself and Ella was Jason's impassioned, "Fuck."

_to be continued..._
Chapter Thirty-Three

It had been a measly ninety-three hours since the last time Bruce had set foot in an emergency room, which was entirely too short of a time. The ensuing three hours had been in equally uncomfortable chairs and significantly worse company. He wished that he had thought to take one of his family's two cell phones with him so he could check on his kids. He knew that each of them could take care of himself, and he trusted Dick to keep the peace relatively well. Still, he'd much rather be with one or all of his children than with his anxious, short-tempered cousin.

Ella tapped her foot impatiently in a rapid staccato that set Bruce's nerves on edge. He didn't bother trying to make conversation with her and each time he was forced to address her, her responses had been clipped and her looks icy. He didn't see how any of this situation was his fault, but he was familiar with her defensive habit of blaming someone else for anything that went wrong in her life.

He couldn't even get himself back to the townhome without having to ask Ella for a ride, cab fare, or a bus token. He was angry enough at her to let his pride keep him rooted in the hard plastic chair for a little bit longer. He also hoped that in that time, a doctor would finally update them on Martha's condition.

She'd split open her chin when she bumped it on the dresser, and that would require a handful of stitches. Her worse injury was the fracture in her left hip, which was accompanied by deep, painful contusions all up and down her side. She might have fared better during the fall if she hadn't also suffered from osteoporosis, which Bruce hadn't known previously. He had struggled to bite his tongue and not turn the tables on Ella, scolding her for not taking better care of Martha in that respect.

His pseudo-mother was in surgery now to insert screws in her hip to hold it firmly together and prevent it from breaking completely. Bruce knew she'd be in a wheelchair for a long while, and he hoped that it didn't dim her already fragile spirit further. For the first time since landing in this world and learning that his parents endured here, he felt a little angry at his father. Thomas should be here, supporting Martha. The way she'd called for her husband still echoed in Bruce's mind and tore at his heartstrings.

With a tired sigh, Bruce rubbed his hands over his face and leaned forward to inspect the scuffed linoleum tiles beneath his chair for the fifth time. "That bad?" asked a timid, yet familiar voice.

Bruce's head shot up and for a terrible minute, he thought he was imagining his eldest standing hesitantly before him, looking just as unhappy to be back in a hospital as Bruce was. It could have been his mind playing tricks on him - he'd never seen Dick in those perfectly pressed denim jeans, shiny black sneakers, and bright blue parka before. When he pulled the young man in for a reality-checking hug, the clothes still smelled faintly of department store.

"You took them shopping," Ella said flatly. Over Dick's shoulder, Bruce could see that each of his children sported new clothes from head to toe. He felt happier in that moment than he had about many arguably more important occasions recently.

The Alfred Pennyworth of this world brought up the rear of the little group. He nudged Damian toward Bruce before turning to address Ella. "Providing adequate clothing is one of the primary requirements of taking care of children," he said with no shortage of disdain. Ella scowled and went
back to glaring at her smart phone.

Bruce let go of Dick in time to catch Damian's running hug. He swung the boy into the air and hid his grin in the front of the boy's dark green winter coat until he could control his expression and not let Ella see how obviously he enjoyed Alfred putting her in her place. Finally, he told his youngest, "I like your coat, Dami."

"It is acceptable," replied the child, which was a pretty high compliment from Damian. "Primarily due to its distinct lack of abhorrent yellow sponges wearing square pants." Damian looked pointedly at Jason.

Jason smirked and maturely stuck his tongue out at the baby of their group. His black cargo pants and fleece-lined leather jacket looked comfortable, but most of all warm. Damian squirmed to be put down and Bruce grudgingly complied, even though he knew that Damian was going to confront his brother. To Damian's immense ire, Jason completely ignored his diatribe and brushed past the preteen to stand next to Bruce. "This world's Alfie is good for new threads, but not for supporting one's other needs," he said in a stage whisper.

"Indeed," said Alfred, though with fondness instead of scorn. "I merely informed young Mister Jason that while his father might condone his unhealthy habit, I do not and will not support it."

"You asked for cigarettes," Bruce realized incredulously. Jason looked at him with boredom, as if there was nothing wrong with the request. Bruce huffed out a wry laugh and looked at Alfred. "I don't condone it, and thank you for putting your foot down." The older man dipped his head graciously.

Bruce sat back down in his chair, then reached over to tug on the front of Tim's dark red ski jacket. "Let me guess - you wanted Jitters." He smiled softly up at the teenager.

Tim slid into the seat next to Bruce and pulled at a loose string dangling from the cuff of his new coat. "I guess Café Jitters doesn't exist in this universe."

Jason turned to Alfred. "Bruce condones fifteen-year-olds drinking coffee," he tattled. Alfred raised an eyebrow as he regarded Bruce.

"I do no-- I don't anymore," he protested, nearly missing how the corner of Alfred's mouth turned up slightly. "No more," he said sternly, bopping his second youngest on the nose. Jason snickered while Alfred shook his head with tempered amusement.

"I need it," Tim insisted. He dipped his head slightly in order to look up at Bruce through his thick lashes. "It makes me feel better." Bruce thought that maybe one cup here or there couldn't hurt the child too badly. After all, if it was going to stunt Tim's growth, it already had. The coffee from the vending machine tucked into the corner of the waiting room wasn't completely terrible…

"Oh my god, he's falling for it." Jason snickered loudly.

Bruce jerked out of his train of thought and cringed at how weak his conviction had been just then. Tim snapped his head around to glare. "Jason!"

"Drake's habits are not nearly as vexing as yours, Todd," Damian said, still miffed at being ignored earlier.

"Drake's habits are not nearly as vexing as yours," Jason parroted back in a nasally voice.

Damian's frowned deepened. "Do not be so juvenile, Todd. You are embarrassing Father and
"Pennyworth."

"Not you? Shucks." Jason laughed and braced his palm against Damian's forehead so the child's shorter arms couldn't reach him with tightly balled fists.

Ella stood up suddenly from her seat. "Can't you people ever be quiet?" She stalked away toward the receptionist, likely determined to figure out how much longer she had to endure her "guests".

Damian and Jason immediately stopped their roughhousing to watch the woman angrily depart. "What the hell is wrong with her?" Jason asked. Bruce frowned at him for swearing.

"She really hates us," Tim said in a small voice. He slouched further in his seat.

Dick sat down next to Tim and wrapped his arms around the smaller male in a backwards hug. He looked up at Jason from where he'd rested his chin on Tim's shoulder. "Her aunt is in the hospital after being taken away in an ambulance. I'd say she's a bit stressed," he said evenly.

"Don't defend that bi--"

"Jason," Bruce interrupted.

"And you are being kind of loud for a hospital waiting room," Dick continued.

Jason huffed and sat down in the last open chair next to Dick. "I still think it was uncalled for."

Damian crossed his arms over his chest. "I concur with Drake. That woman clearly despises us."

"Come here, baby," Bruce said, feeling exhausted all over again. He dragged Damian into his lap so that Alfred could have the seat Ella had abandoned. He patted Tim's knee with his closer hand. "Nobody hates or despises you. We can be a little more respectful of the other families, it's true. And Dami, don't refer to females as 'that woman'. It's rude."

"She's rude," pouted the eleven-year-old.

"We finally agree on something, brat," Jason chimed in. Damian huffed, clearly not pleased with that development.

Alfred cleared his throat in order to change the subject. "I apologize for my impudence in taking the boys from Ella's home without your permission. I thought you might not mind seeing them in fresh clothes."

"No apologies needed," Bruce replied. This man was clearly not their Alfred, but the sense that Bruce could trust him implicitly still remained. He probably should be more careful around familiar strangers. On the other hand, he was confident that if this Alfred had had any impure motives for his children, Dick and Jason could have handled it.

"We got real food, too," Damian said. "It wasn't the same as Pennyworth's cooking, but it sufficed for the midday meal."

"I also treated them to lunch at a respectably healthy establishment," Alfred elaborated. "I am aware of the state in which Ella keeps her pantry."

"Despicable," Jason agreed.

"Thank you," said Bruce with heartfelt sentiment. "I… we appreciate your help."
"As I said last night: I cannot abide by the mistreatment of children." Alfred reached over to adjust the collar of Damian's button down shirt that peaked over the lapel of his coat. Damian endured the mothering patiently.

"We found some stuff for you, too. Dick thought he could guess your size close enough," Tim said. Dick leaned his head tiredly against Tim's. "The size of your… suit hasn't changed much recently," he explained.

Bruce smiled warmly at the young man. "Thanks, chum."

"You still haven't told us what happened." Dick sat up a little straighter. He tightened his arms around his younger brother when Tim scooted closer to him. "We heard Ella yelling for you, and then the ambulance whisked Martha away."

Bruce hated to recall his ailing mother sprawled on the floor as she had been. Still, he knew his sons cared for others, and persisted in worrying about him. "She fell trying to get out of bed this morning. She bumped her chin on her dresser, and fractured her hip. She is in surgery to repair her hip right now."

"I'm fine, Jason. Dick." Bruce made firm eye contact with both of his older sons. "I promise." Bruce could practically feel Alfred's curiosity at the exchange, though the man's face betrayed none of it.

"It's okay to cry, Father, when people leave you. That is what Grayson taught me."

"I'm not going to cry, baby," Bruce said with a strained laugh. "She'll be fine. She's not dying." Even so, he hugged close the warm little body in his lap.

"Heavens no, she is not dying," said Alfred, reinforcing Bruce's statement as if the very idea was preposterous. "Come now, I can't imagine you want to spend all afternoon in the ER waiting room. I heard about young Timothy's adventure earlier this week. Alfred looked at Bruce briefly before addressing the boys again. "With your father's permission, we'll catch a show or visit the park."

"You'll come, too, Father?"

"You can change into your new clothes," Tim suggested. He reached over to clasp one of Bruce's hands between his own.

Bruce glanced over to where Ella was speaking to someone who actually looked like a surgeon. She hadn't broken down in tears yet, so Bruce let himself hope for good news. "Martha might be out of her surgery now," he said. He squeezed Tim's fingers. "I'd like to visit her as soon as she's awake. You boys should go with Alfred and enjoy some positive company."

"You guys go," Dick said. "I'll wait with Bruce." He released Tim and prodded the younger male to stand.

Jason seemed fine with the idea until Damian's face scrunched up with the promise of a possibly tear-laden protest and Tim's brow creased deeply. "I want to stay with you, too, Father."

"I don't mind waiting," Tim added. He resisted Dick's pushy hands with an annoyed pout.
"Jay," Dick urged, looking expectantly at his younger brother after giving up on getting Tim to stand.

Jason leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. "The kids want to stay with their dad," Jason argued. "Maybe I do, too."

Alfred stood up regally. "A hospital is no place for healthy young men. Besides, I am only just beginning to know Master Thomas' grandchildren and I have not yet had my fill of you." He reached for Damian's hand. The boy reluctantly let himself be pulled out of Bruce's lap and to his feet. Their Alfred had done too good of a job training his young masters for the boys to outright defy even this version of the beloved butler. Jason huffed and stood on his own as Dick once again pushed Tim out of his seat. "All of them, Richard," Alfred intoned.

"But…" Dick looked beseechingly at Bruce.

Bruce had to swallow thickly before denying his eldest. "I'm fine, chum. Go on."

"Someone has to keep the demon squirt in line," Jason grumbled. He hauled Dick to his feet by the older youth's upper arm.

"Will you at least call once in a while?" Dick asked in a last effort to stay in contact with Bruce. He materialized the cell phone that Bruce had been missing before the kids arrived.

"Of course," Bruce agreed. "Have fun, and behave."

His family had just exited through the revolving door to the ER when Ella finished speaking with the doctor and started making her way back to where Bruce sat. He rose to meet her, and to stretch his stiff legs. "Aunt Martha is out of surgery," she reported curtly.

Bruce felt impatience swell inside him when no more information was forthcoming. He really did not want to deal with his cousin, but had no other choice if he wanted to learn of Martha's condition. "How is she?"

"They completed the surgery, with one minor complication." Ella hugged herself and looked anywhere but at Bruce.

"What complication?" Bruce barely regretted his irritated tone of voice.

Ella skewered him with a hateful sneer. "They fractured her hip in another location trying to insert the pins, so they had to put in a plate!" Ella burst into tears. "Fucking damn it all to hell!"

"Shh," Bruce admonished, keenly aware that all of the other patrons of the ER were now staring at them. "Sit down." He tried to guide her into a chair without actually touching her. He'd never been good with females in distress, even in his Brucie guise, and the only woman he cared to be around when she was upset was Selina Kyle. He felt completely out of his element.

"Why can't Fate just leave us alone?" Ella asked, followed by more harsh sobs. "Hasn't Martha suffered enough?" She finally sat down and buried her face in her hands while her shoulders shook raggedly. Bruce hovered uncomfortably and tried to ignore the mix of irritated and bemused looks he was getting. He was just about to break down and call Dick to beg the kids - Alfred, really - to come back and handle this for him, when a nurse approached wearing a sympathetic expression.

"Miss, your aunt is awake if you'd like to see her now."

Bruce sent up a quick prayer of thanks for the timely save. "Come on, Ella. Pull yourself together for
Martha.

Ella sniveled and glared up at him with red-rimmed eyes. "Don't tell me to pull myself together, asshole. You're just like your heartless father."

The nurse looked at Bruce suspiciously. He clenched his teeth for a moment before saying as calmly as he could, "We're cousins. May we please visit Mrs. Wa-- Kane, now?"

"Uh huh." The nurse gave him one last look before motioning for them to follow her. Clearly she believed that they were related, though Bruce wasn't one hundred percent sure that was good or not. He took a few steps after the nurse, then paused when Ella remained in her seat, clutching her purse to her chest.

"Ella."

He could see her jaw tick before she forced herself to her feet. "I'm coming. Leave me alone." She wiped at her cheeks as she shoved past Bruce to catch up with the nurse.

The ride in the elevator to the floor for the Intensive Care Unit was awkward. Ella continued to sniffle as she unsuccessfully tried to distract herself with her phone. Bruce stared at his reflection in the mirrored walls of the cab and attempted to ignore the curious looks that the nurse was giving the supposed cousins. For once in this terrible multiverse, Bruce was glad to be completely unknown. He was sure that his Brucie persona would take a bad hit back home if anyone saw him acting so callously toward an upset female.

The doors finally slid apart on the correct floor and Bruce resisted the urge to bolt from the claustrophobic space. Once again Ella lagged behind them. He was anxious to see how Martha had fared during her operation, so he left her to tarry on her own. The nurse directed him to the private room where Martha rested and told him that he had about fifteen minutes. Bruce didn't waste any time as he made his way to the side of Martha's bed.

She blinked tiredly at him, unable to muster much of a facial expression due to the lingering anesthesia and the bandages over her chin. "Hi, Moth-- Martha," Bruce said softly.

"Bruce," she acknowledged faintly. He was surprised that she remembered that he wasn't Thomas.

"How are you feeling?" he asked. He laid his large hand over her petite one. It was distressingly cool.

"Fine." She glanced about the room. "Where is Ella?" It seemed to take a lot of effort for her to form the words and Bruce guessed that she probably wouldn't even last their allotted fifteen minutes. He wouldn't begrudge her the much needed rest.

Bruce glimpsed toward the empty doorway. "She'll be here in a moment." Ella had a lot of gall to accuse him of being heartless when she couldn't even put down her phone long enough to come see her aunt. "Can I get you anything, Martha?"

"I'm a bit thirsty," she said.

"Of course. I'll find you some water." Bruce squeezed her hand gently. He left the room quietly in order to find both Ella and the nurse that had brought them upstairs. He located Ella immediately. She loitered just out of sight next to the door jamb. "She's asking for you," Bruce informed her coldly. "Maybe you should get over yourself for once and--"

"Shut up, jackass," Ella snapped and the fire was momentarily back in her narrowed green eyes. It
was quickly drowned by a mix of anguish and fear that Bruce silently chided himself for missing before. "Is she… does she seem like herself?"

Bruce let some of the tension out of his shoulders and took a cleansing breath. "She's going to be fine, Ella. She's asking for you." He reminded himself that the older woman in the hospital bed was not actually his mother, whereas she was Ella's aunt. He shouldn't feel hurt if Martha wanted to see her niece - or Thomas - more than he. Ella took a moment to fortify herself and then squared her shoulders to march bravely into the room. Bruce wandered over to the nurses' station to let them know that Martha had requested a drink. Instead of heading straight back to his pseudo-mother's side, he decided to let Ella have some privacy with her. Just as she tended to bring out the worst in him, he likely egged her to terrible behavior too and Martha didn't deserve that. Besides, he'd have plenty of opportunities to visit in the near future.

He returned just before they were informed that Martha needed to rest and they could see her again once she was moved out of the ICU in a few hours. From the look on her face, Bruce thought Ella might have resisted if Martha hadn't already fallen back to sleep. She was noticeably tense as they exited the room. When Ella veered toward the ICU waiting room instead of the elevator that would take them back to the first floor, Bruce realized he would have to address her, despite her bad mood.

"I need to go back to the townhouse," Bruce informed her.

"Why?" Ella demanded, stopping in the middle of the hall.

"I need to check on the boys," he replied.

"Alfred can take care of them," she said. "He seems taken enough with the little monsters." Her tone was bitter and Bruce instantly felt his compassion for her fade back into his more customary ire.

"First, they're not monsters," Bruce corrected her. "And second, they're my children. I am responsible for their well-being and I need to make sure they have everything they need."

"Well, Martha is my responsibility and I'm not going to abandon her in a hospital, Bruce."

"She's sleeping right now, Ella," said Bruce, trying to sound more rational than fed up. "And we can't visit for a few hours anyway. If you want to just drop me off and then come straight back here, fine."

"Ugh." Ella pulled car keys out of her purse aggressively. "I regret you very much."

"The feeling is mutual."

The ride in the elevator, walk through the parking garage, and drive back to Ella's neighborhood was completed in a tense silence. He had worried that Ella would change her mind and keep him stranded at the hospital when he called Dick to confirm their actual location. Fortunately, the kids hadn't felt much like exploring so Alfred had taken them back to the townhouse to wait for their father after only a brief visit to a public park.

Ella had just turned onto the second to last street en route to her home when she finally broke the silence. "People recover from broken hips all of the time."

It was easy to tell that she had said so for her own benefit, not Bruce's. "Yes." A brief glance confirmed that her cheeks were flushed and her eyes glassy again. "She'll need your help more than ever now, Ella, but she can overcome this. Martha Kane is a strong woman."

"How will I be able to take care of her?" Ella's knuckles whitened as she throttled the steering wheel
during the turn onto her road. "I have to work sometime. I wish I could afford to stay with her all
day." She was quiet for a second. "Martha is the only member of the family who doesn't despise me." Bruce banished the immediate thought that she might try being less despicable if she wanted the
family to like her. He knew she was hurting, too. "Look, I know I've made mistakes, and I'm sorry,
but-- What the hell?!"

Bruce startled at her unexpected outburst. He quickly followed her line of sight and mentally cringed
when he realized what had set her off this time. Ella threw her car into park once they were in the
driveway and shot out of the driver's seat. "Get the fuck off of my roof!"

"Ella…"

She didn't want to be placated. "The last thing I need is loose shingles causing a leak!" she shouted
in Bruce's face as Jason flipped her the bird from where he and Dick were reclining near the peak of
her roof. "How in the world did they even get up there?!"

Bruce could think of plenty of ways. He kept them to himself. "Just go inside," he insisted. "I'll
handle this." Ella threw her hands up in the air and then marched toward her front door. If this were a
cartoon, Bruce was sure he'd be able to see steam billowing from her ears. He craned his neck to see
the boys once she'd slammed the door hard enough to shake the frame of the house. Dick was
already on his way down, more likely to see his father than because he felt guilty about making Ella
mad. Jason looked pissed and like he wanted to stay up there all night just to spite their host.

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose.

to be continued…
Chapter Thirty-Four

Chapter Notes

It's been crazy around here lately with the wedding and getting ready to sell my house, so taking a break to write was definitely what I needed. I wanted to delve a bit deeper into what Tim's been going through, to hopefully give some insight as to why he has been acting the way he has and gain him back a little favor. :)

Chapter Thirty-Four

"Jason, please come down," Bruce asked for the tenth time. He hugged himself for warmth against the quickly cooling evening air and adopted the most pitiful expression he could muster for the teenager's benefit. His throat was starting to ache again and his nose was primed and ready to start running. He very much wanted to go inside.

"I like it up here," his second son countered. "It's peaceful and I can hear myself think."

"That's true," said Dick. The young man's commentary wasn't helping to get Jason to cooperate. Bruce glared at him. His eldest didn't look as cold as Bruce felt, but Dick was still rubbing his own arms and rocking back and forth on his feet to generate body heat.

Since his mean look wasn't having any effect on Dick, Bruce turned away and walked towards a wooden porch column with peeling paint that proudly held up the corner of the front awning. "If I try to come up there to get you, I'll probably fall and break my neck and you'll have to live with the guilt of orphaning your baby brothers again." He tested the sturdiness of the column (it wasn't), and then craned his neck to catch sight of Jason again.

The familiar face, framed by windswept reddish-brown hair accented with white, peered over the edge of the gable rake. "You of all people, B, would not fall off of this shitty roof and break your neck."

"Maybe I'm out of practice."

"Not in two weeks."

"Fine, then I'm out of patience. I can't go inside until you come down and my head cold is flaring up again." He eyed the wood column warily. "I will come up there to get you."

"You might dislodge some shingles."

"That would be bad," Dick said. "Ella might spontaneously combust."

"Would it really be spontaneous?" Jason pondered. "She's pretty close as it is."

"Ella might finally combust," Dick amended.

The column literally shifted a fraction of an inch when Bruce pushed against it. The awning groaned. Bruce nonchalantly stepped away. "Dick, do you have anything helpful to say? Like something that
might convince Jason to give his old man a break?"

Dick shrugged. "Maybe. But right now I kind of want to see you try to climb that wobbly column."

Bruce frowned deeply at his eldest. So this route was clearly not the way that his sons had taken to get themselves onto the sloped roof, and now he was being mocked because his cold was impairing his ability to strategize. "You know, you're not up on the roof right now, chum." He took a menacing step toward his eldest.

Dick's teasing grin didn't falter. "You're right. I guess I should go inside and see if Alfred has any more of the real hot chocolate left that he promised to make Dami."

"Fuck yeah," Jason cheered. The rest of his body appeared at the edge of the roof.

"Jason, do not--" The teenager pushed himself over the decorative trim of the roof, touched briefly on the unhappy awning, and did a forward somersault to lessen the impact of his landing on the hard driveway. "Jump," Bruce finished lamely.

"You taught me that move yourself," Jason reminded Bruce.

"I already knew it," Dick stated, referring to his training as an acrobat. Bruce swatted at him in exasperation.

"Someone might see you," he reminded Jason. A street rat-turned-billionaire's son shouldn't be able to perform the same stunts as one of Gotham's elite vigilantes.

"See me and what? Be utterly amazed?"

"You're a terrible child," Bruce complained lightly. Jason laughed. Eager to finally be able to get out of the cold, Bruce herded the pair to the front door. "Get inside." Bruce made sure to lock the front door after himself. The warmth of the tiny foyer felt heavenly after his extended time outside. For all of his bravado, Jason seemed happy for the heat, too. His sons trailed him as Bruce followed the sound of Ella's voice and the smell of chocolate to the kitchen in the rear of the townhouse.

"… rude and disrespectful and they're driving me crazy," she finished saying as Bruce entered the space. Alfred sported a chagrined expression as he poured melted dark chocolate from a pot into a series of mismatched mugs. Ella had her hands on her hips where she stood in the middle of the small room. At the tiny table, Damian glowered hatefully at the frustrated redhead while Tim stared morosely at his hands, curled into himself to the point that he looked as small as his younger brother.

"You brought us here," Bruce reminded her angrily. There was no doubt in his mind that she was venting to an unimpressed Alfred about his children.

Alfred cleared his throat, cutting off Ella's bitter response. "Perhaps it would be best if Mister Wayne and his sons came to visit Master Thomas until you have discerned the way to send them home."

Alfred turned to Bruce. "Would you be ready to leave first thing in the morning?"

"What? No," Ella protested. "I need-- I mean, Martha needs Bruce here. She'll want to see her son."

"You've gone out of your way to make us feel unwelcome despite the fact that you brought us here," said Bruce. "Perhaps a change of scenery could do us all some good." Truthfully, he was torn between staying with Ella to serve as a constant reminder of how she'd messed up, and going to stay in Thomas Wayne's larger home with a version of the family's beloved butler. He didn't want Ella to become complacent and forget how urgent it was that she send him and his family home soonest, but the looks of suffering on his kids' faces was nearly more than he could bear.
Alfred carried two mugs of hot chocolate to the dinette table and set one before each of Tim and Damian. Damian immediately drew his in close to blow away the aromatic steam in an effort to cool it enough to start drinking. Tim didn't acknowledge his serving, too focused on destroying the hem of his new shirt with anxiously scratching fingernails. Alfred tsked worriedly and looked pointedly at Bruce. "The boys have already expressed interest in the idea of visiting the peaceful woods of upstate New York."

"Hell yes," muttered Jason from behind his dad.

Ella clenched her fists and glared at Alfred. "Of course they would. They know you. They like you. But I can't-- Martha can't do this on her own. The whole point of bringing Bruce here is so he could be with his mother!"

"Ella, this situation has become toxic. You're overwhelmed by a houseful of guests--"

"Because they do irresponsible things like climb on the roof. You do realize that's dangerous, right? Mr. Father of the Year." She rolled her eyes.

Dick cleared his throat and stepped up next to Bruce. "Ella, Jason and I--"

"Speak for yourself, Goldie."

"… are sorry for worrying you by catching a breather on the roof. We know to be careful so we weren't in any danger and we didn't hurt the shingles." He offered her a reserved yet warm smile that virtually never failed to make even the most furious of adversaries rethink if the charming young man really deserved his or her wrath.

"We don't need your input, thank you," Ella said harshly. "Can't you see that the adults are talking?"

"Fuck you, lady," Jason snapped when Dick was too speechless to respond himself. Bruce grabbed him before he could take another step toward their hostess.

"No," Bruce said firmly. "Take the kids and your hot chocolate and wait for me in the living room." He physically turned Jason to face the doorway to the hall and nudged him in that direction. "We'll gather our things to head upstate after Alfred and I have had a chance to finalize the plan." Jason grumbled as he stomped down the hall.

Dick finally shook his head to clear his stupor and shot Ella a pitying look before holding his hands out to his youngest siblings. Damian and Tim both shot out of their seats like fires had been lit beneath them and flew to Dick's sides.

"Don't forget your treat," said Alfred encouragingly. Just like their butler, this version of the man was very good at hiding his true feelings around his young charges, though Bruce could tell he was seething on the inside. Damian reluctantly let go of Dick's hand to take the tray full of steaming mugs. The three departed quickly and Bruce missed their presences instantaneously.

He ruefully looked over to his cousin when he heard her sniffle. "You'd rather see your alcoholic bastard of a father than spend time with your sweet mother who needs your help?" Ella sneered through the tears that were once again dripping down her cheeks.

"I will kindly ask you to not speak of Master Thomas in such a way again, young lady," scolded Alfred, free to express his ire now that the children were gone.

Her emotional blackmail wasn't going to affect Bruce. "This is not a choice between my mother and father, Elizabeth. It's a choice between relationships that you invented for your own benefit, and my children's well-being. In fact, it's not even a choice at all."
"Can't you try to understand me? This is a very stressful time. I'm sorry I'm too tired to pretend to be everyone's favorite aunt. I need help to take care of Martha." She scrunched up her nose as if she'd eaten something unpleasant. "Can… what if Alfred took the kids and you could stay here until Martha is on the mend?"

"Absolutely not," Bruce answered without needing even a moment to consider the idea.

"You let Alfred cart them all over town today," Ella argued.

"The boys will go nowhere without me," Bruce said harshly.

"What about Martha?"

"Do you honestly think I would abandon my children in favor of a virtual stranger?" Bruce struggled to keep his voice at an indoor level.

Ella dragged herself over to the dinette set and sat down heavily in one of the chairs. "I don't… of course I didn't think you would choose Martha, and we're all unhappy with the kids being in this house." She cupped her face with her hands and braced her elbows on the table. "Martha is all I have. She is the only one who cares if I exist or not. I'm not… not strong enough to see her like this. What if she doesn't get better? I don't want to be alone again." Her last statement was barely audible.

Alfred smoothed his hands down the front of his suit vest and held his chin high. "Miss Kane, my recommendation is for you to draw yourself a hot bubble bath and take the time you need to come to terms with Mistress Martha's unfortunate accident. One from which I am most certain she will recover. Then you will dress yourself in warm, comfortable clothes in order to return to the hospital to be with your aunt. You might also consider how you will adjust to Mistress Martha's new handicap, as she will most certainly rely on you when she returns home. I daresay you will hardly find yourself feeling lonely when that time comes."

Ella took a deep breath and nodded. She rose stiffly from her seat. "Will you still be here when I return?" Ella asked Bruce.

"It depends on how long you're gone," Bruce said, with no intention of being kind. If his callous response affected her, Ella hid it well. She walked past him with her head up, despite the exhaustion that was evident in every line of her body. Bruce waited until he could hear her footsteps on the stairs before turning to Alfred. "Is your offer true? I know we'd be an imposition, but I need to get the boys away from her."

"Of course it is a true offer," said Alfred. He pretended to be offended at the implication that he'd make false promises.

"It is easy to see the effect her negativity is having on your sons, and she's highly strung without exuberant young men underfoot all day."

"Some peace and quiet in the woods does sound nice," said Bruce wryly.

Alfred smiled softly. "Shall we see what trouble the young ones have stirred up in the living room?" Bruce laughed weakly and nodded for the older man to precede him out of the kitchen.

Bruce hadn't actually thought his sons would have gotten up to anything in the short fifteen minutes they were unsupervised. Therefore, he was immediately exasperated to find them crowded on the couch, his fifteen-year-old practically bent backwards over its arm with Jason's hand fisted in his dark hair.

"Noooo," Tim whined, struggling against the bigger teenager's hold around his waist from his
position across Jason's lap. His face was quickly turning red. Then Tim giggled breathlessly a moment later, halting Bruce's intervention.

"See?" Jason teased, tickling his brother mercilessly. "I told you that you need a haircut. Otherwise I wouldn't be able to do this."

Tim barked out a laugh when Jason dug his fingers deep into the smaller boy's side. He tried a different tactic to gain his freedom. "Ow, ow, ow!" He left his sides unprotected to reach for Jason's fingers in his hair.

"I'm not hurting you, you little faker." Jason's fingers danced over Tim's belly.

"Jay… Jace, stoppit!" He giggled more as Jason continued his assault.

"Admit that you need a trim and I will."


Dick hummed from his place on the cushion next to Jason. "I like hearing you laugh, baby bird."

"M. Not." Tim retaliated by pressing his socked foot against Dick's face.

"Oh, you want more?" the eldest asked. He grabbed Tim's ankle and tickled the underside of his foot.

"Trait-or!" Tim laughed under the combined onslaught until he started to cough thanks to the awkward straining of his neck.

Damian climbed onto the couch between Dick and Jason's knees to push their hands away from Tim. "I think you've proven your point, Todd."

"Have I?" Jason smirked when Dick hauled Damian into his lap for a crushing hug. The eighteen-year-old let go of Tim's severely disheveled hair and rubbed his hand absently up and down Tim's heaving side as the younger man worked to regain his composure while sprawled across Jason's legs and the arm of the couch.

"Grayson, unhand me at once," Damian demanded without much heat. Dick declined to acquiesce to his littlest brother's request. Bruce finally made his presence known by clearing his throat. Three sets of blue eyes and one set of green snapped to him immediately.

"Father." This time when Damian squirmed for freedom, Dick released him. Damian moved quickly to Bruce's side. "I want us all to go with Pennyworth," Damian said. "I hate Ella."

"You don't hate her, baby," corrected Bruce. He reached down to smooth Damian's spiked hair. "But I'd understand if you don't like her very much."

"Then I don't like her very much."

"Me, too," agreed Dick.

"Me three," said Jason.

"You sound stupid when you say that, Todd," complained Damian.

"You sound stupid every time you open your mouth," countered Jason smugly.
"Boys," Bruce warned tiredly. "If you want to go with Alfred, then we need to get ready and go to bed."

Damian pouted. "I wish to leave now, Father."

Jason took issue with bedtime. "It's way too early for bed, old man."

Bruce wholeheartedly disagreed with Jason. He was exhausted and his head and sinuses ached. "Tim and I are going to bed. The rest of you can stay awake - quietly - but be advised we will make an early start tomorrow, and it's a very long drive. That's why we can't leave right now, Dami."

"I'm fine, B," said Tim quietly and a little defensively. He wasn't very believable.

"Upstairs," Bruce said, clapping his hands together and then gesturing toward the hall. His sons grudgingly rose and trudged past him. Tim repeated his claim of being fine to Jason, who merely draped an arm across Tim's narrow shoulders as they continued out of the room.

Alfred began collecting the empty mugs. Bruce moved to help him. "I will plan to arrive at seven sharp," said the older man. "It will be a tight squeeze, but the discomfort may be worth reaching a better destination."

"Can we…" He paused, unsure. Alfred raised an eyebrow in encouragement for Bruce to finish his question. "May we stop to visit Martha briefly on the way out?" He was worried about the older lady's health and didn't want to leave abruptly without saying good-bye.

"Yes. It would be highly improper to leave without any kind of valediction," said Alfred knowingly. "Let me finish cleaning this up, my boy. I can let myself out as well. You have more pressing matters to attend."

"Thank you," said Bruce. He dipped his head, then turned to follow his children upstairs.

The guest room was empty when he peeked inside, so Bruce crossed the upstairs landing to the office. Dick had cajoled the rest of his siblings into donning what appeared to be new pajamas. Tim's small grin was nothing if not forced as he watched the older two boys banter from his seat at the foot of the air mattress. Bruce wasn't the only one not buying the teenager's act. Damian's keen green eyes watched his brother critically as if trying to make sense of the jarring transition from brooding to laughing to brooding again. Bruce understood that Jason's attempts to draw Tim out of his own head had worked in the moment, but a few minutes of light-heartedness wouldn't be able to keep his son's demons at bay for long.

"What do you think?" Dick asked, throwing his arms wide to show off the matched pajama top and bottoms. The midnight blue cotton clothes looked comfortable despite their newness. Bruce mentally thanked Alfred again for his attention and compassion for the lost young men.

"Dashing," replied Bruce lightly. He hoped he did a better job of conveying joviality than his eldest, whose own smile was thin at the edges. He vowed to make time for a one-on-one with his first Robin once they made it to the cabin, and to see that the young man had space to take care of himself without feeling like he had to maintain a happy façade for his siblings.

Jason tried to push Dick over onto the faded couch. The acrobat managed to keep his balance and smirked triumphantly at his younger brother.

Bruce, deciding to ignore them for now, looked down at his third son. "You ready for bed, kiddo?"

"I can stay in here," Tim said. "You need a good night of sleep."
"I want to talk to you," Bruce replied, dropping all pretenses.

"I'm fine."

Damian climbed to his feet. "May I join you as well, Father?"

"Not tonight, Dami," said Bruce kindly. His youngest seemed to at least appreciate Tim's need for privacy, though he wasn't thrilled to stay behind.

"Go on, Timbers," Jason said. "We're going to put the brat on the broken couch and there ain't room on the air mattress with me and Goldie for you."

That was enough to distract Damian, though Bruce wasn't sure if that had been Jason's intention. "I will share with Grayson," the preteen insisted.

"How about we let 'Grayson' choose who shares with him," Dick said dryly.

Bruce was sure that the three of them could figure out their sleeping arrangements without his help. He held out a hand to Tim, who took it with a long-suffering sigh and allowed Bruce to pull him to his feet. Bruce left the door cracked open a couple of inches once they were without.

Tim was quiet as they made the short walk to the guest room. Inside, however, he resumed his assurances that he was well, even though his voice was shaky and had a desperate edge to it. "I'm fine, Bruce. I'm handling it. Some coffee would help--"

"Kiddo, you sound like you're about to start bawling," Bruce interjected.

"I don't 'bawl','" Tim denied.

Bruce found his own set of new pajamas folded neatly on top of the bedcovers. They weren't the silk that he preferred back home, but he wasn't going to complain about a generous gift. Tim unhappily curled up in the wingback chair and hid his face in the worn upholstery while Bruce quickly changed. Instead of bothering to tediously nag his child into lying on the bed, Bruce simply picked Tim up and placed the teenager there himself. Tim lay stiffly on his back as Bruce slid under the covers.

"You're going to get cold," Bruce said.

"I'm fine," Tim said, followed by a short sniffle.

"I know you're not, kiddo. You can talk to me. I want you to."

"I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to think about it," Tim said. "I just want to go to sleep." Tears leaked out of the corners of his eyes as he resolutely stared at the ceiling.

"It's gotten worse just today," Bruce said. "I know how to tell when you're lost in your own thoughts, Tim. You've been checked out every time I've seen you today. You don't have a case or homework to use as an excuse this time."

"I just..." Tim fell silent, worrying his lower lip with his teeth.

"What are you thinking about, kiddo?" Bruce reached over to run his fingers through Tim's silky hair (which was getting to be rather long) and got caught on some tangles. "Sorry," he apologized quickly when Tim flinched.

"It's Jason's fault," Tim said.
Bruce settled for simply smoothing his hand over the dark locks. "He's worried about you. Just like the rest of us."

"Even though he's an ass, it did help for a minute," Tim replied quietly. "I stopped thinking for a minute."

"Stopped thinking about what?" Bruce asked softly. He had a good idea of what was running through the teenager's mind, but he wanted to know for certain from Tim himself.

"I know it's not true," Tim whispered, losing a few more tears. "I know it. I try to stop it. But it's still there, over and over and over." He coughed faintly, then sniffled and turned his head to the side, away from Bruce.

"What?" Bruce shifted so he could prop himself up on one arm and see his son's face.

"You're just an ungrateful little shit who breaks everything. A horrible child, fighting like an animal, terrorizing old ladies. You've fallen back into the ranks of the intolerables. We should have left you at the hospital and CPS could have had you. Our care has been wasted upon you. Can't you ever be quiet? You're rude and disrespectful and driving me crazy." Tim took a shuddery breath and crossed his arms tightly over his chest. "I can't make it stop."

Bruce had a lump in his own throat. He remembered most of those statements from the past few days, though what he remembered seemed to differ a bit from Tim's interpretation of the hurtful words. His heart hurt to know that words his own children had carelessly thrown about were echoing through the teenager's thoughts. It was minor, though, compared to the fury he felt hearing Ella's words parroted back at him, altered as they were.

He drew the shivering youth into his arms, wishing with all of his might that he could somehow take his child's pain and destroy it. Bruce almost missed hearing Tim's quiet complaint that he couldn't breathe. "Sorry," Bruce whispered, loosening his arms. He hadn't thought he was squeezing the boy too hard.

"No," Tim corrected him. "It's... I feel empty. Hollow." He inhaled shakily. "Like, literally. Physically. Like I'm just an empty shell that's been scraped clean from the inside. It's hard to breathe when it feels like you have no lungs. My chest aches from missing its heartbeat."

"Just slow down, kiddo," Bruce soothed. "Take smaller breaths. Don't try so hard."

Bruce, in his quest to make Batman perfect, to know everything, had studied mental disorders extensively. He'd been to the pit of emotional hell multiple times, but he always emerged with a stronger desire to overcome, to win against whatever odds were stacked against him.

However, he knew that for some, the sheer amount of willpower that it took to fight back the negative thoughts, to hold on to the truth amidst the pervasive lies generated by one's own thoughts, was exhausting. Any physical manifestations of the disorder were in addition the mental fatigue. It was when that person became too tired to fight anymore that the dangerous desire to just stop hurting took hold.

Bruce didn't believe in giving up. He didn't know how to. Tim was a fighter, he had no doubts about that, and Bruce trusted that his son wouldn't cede the battle for a long while. But he still needed help, and Bruce vowed to give him every kind of support there was. "How can I quiet your thoughts right now, kiddo?"

"I wish I had my tablet," Tim said wearily. "It was my best escape."
"I'll get you another one."

"With what money?"

"That's not for you to worry about."

Tim made a skeptical sound, followed by a tired sigh. "Can you just… talk to me? About anything else."

Bruce knew that it wasn't going to be easy to keep the boy focused fully on a conversation. One of Tim's greatest strengths was his ability to multitask, allowing him to engage in dialogue while still letting his mind wander to other topics. The father would have to get creative to capture his attention completely.

"Okay. Let's strategize." He paused to think for a moment. "Imagine you're sucked into a different world--" 

"Really?"

Bruce realized the coincidence of his premise belatedly. He forged ahead anyway. "Not a parallel universe, but a completely different world. Like… Mid-earth, for example. You like those movies."

"Where? Do you mean Middle-earth?" Tim peered up at Bruce suspiciously. "You want me to imagine I've been transported into Tolkien's Lord of the Rings? Which are books, by the way, not movies."

"They're movies. The last one, uh, Return of Argon? Won a bunch of awards." Bruce bit the inside of his cheek to keep from grinning when Tim's scowl deepened. Bruce had read the series himself as a young man, and he made sure to keep up on pop culture so he wouldn't miss any references made by the bad guys that could be the difference between solving a crime or missing a vital clue. Besides that, he was interested in what his children were into even if he wasn't the best about showing it. But if feigning ignorance was getting Tim focused on correcting him instead of remembering all of the hurtful jibes bouncing around his head, then Bruce would happily play the fool.

"One, it's Return of the King, and secondly, the king is Aragorn, not argon."

"Does it really matter?"

"Yes."

"Okay, okay. So you're in Middle-earth with Aragorn who's just returned as king. The nation of Osgiliath decides to attack. How do you prevent a war?"

"Bruce. Wow." Tim launched into an impatient harangue on how Osgiliath was a city, not a nation, and Gondor's actual neighbor to the north, Rohan, wouldn't decide to attack for many very good reasons. Bruce easily fell into the role of devil's advocate, coming up with more and more outrageous scenarios that had Tim alternating between lecturing him about his embarrassing lack of knowledge of all things Tolkien, and actually giving great consideration to strategies and maneuvers to counter Bruce's schemes. They continued for a well over an hour until the teenager finally drifted off in the midst of an in-depth explanation of the politics behind the ouster of Gondor's king and why he had to return in the first place.

Long after he was breathing deeply and evenly, Bruce watched his son sleep. Tim's dark lashes fluttered as he dreamed about elves and orcs, and his chapped lips were parted slightly as he snored faintly. His heavy head was pillowed on Bruce's bicep. Bruce was certain that he'd soon lose feell
in his entire arm, but he didn't mind enough to move just yet. Right now he might not have access to dietary supplements, prescription medication, or counseling to aide Tim in his battle against depression, but he could make up fantastical scenarios ad infinitum in order to help his beloved child cope.

to be continued...
Chapter Thirty-Five

Hello everyone! I'm finally back. The wedding was great, the honeymoon was a blast, and we're in the new house with the old ones sold. Whew! It's very nice to finally be able to get back into the groove of writing, now that I have some free time again. I definitely didn't give up on this story, and fully blame all of the crazy life changes for the long delay before this chapter. It's fairly long, which hopefully makes up a for the wait a little bit. Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Five

Bruce had heard Ella depart for the hospital not long after his family had settled in for the night, though he never heard her return. The house was too quiet for him to think that she had come home while he slept. He wondered if he might find her at the hospital in yesterday's clothes when he arrived to tell Martha good-bye. His thoughts for their belligerent host were merely passing, however, as he was quite preoccupied with getting four sleepy young men ready to pile into Alfred's sedan.

Jason yawned widely and nearly lost his balance when Tim took offense to being used as a prop and moved out from under the older boy's elbow on his shoulder. "It's way too early," the eighteen-year-old complained once he was standing upright again.

"We need to make a pot of coffee," Dick said. He rubbed at his eyes.

Tim perked up slightly at that idea. He latched onto his oldest brother and looked up at Dick with wide eyes. "Yes, please."

Dick blinked a couple of times while trying to focus on the eager face. "I don't think you're supposed to…"

"I love you, Dick."

A drowsy smile spread over the eldest brother's face. "Aww, I love you too, baby bird." He threw his arms around Tim in a messy hug, much to the younger male's chagrin. Bruce almost let out a chuckle as Tim's scheme backfired on him.

Damian scowled. "Drake only claims to love you so you'll give him coffee."

"That's not true," Dick insisted, despite the struggles of the fifteen-year-old to escape his brother's clutches. "Timmy loves me all of the time."

"No one is making coffee here," said Bruce, happy to end the debate. He was worried that they would cause Alfred to be delayed. "Alfred will be here any minute."

"I wish that our Pennyworth were here," said Damian in a small voice. "This man is adequate, but he is not the same."
Bruce mentally sighed before reaching over to squeeze Damian's shoulder. "We'll see our friends and family back home soon. I'm equally eager to see Cassandra again, as well as the rest of the girls."

"I wonder how Cass is doing," Dick mused. "I'm glad she's not here with us, but I miss her." Tim settled into Dick's loosened embrace at the thought of his sister. Jason frowned deeply, though he didn't give voice to his thoughts.

Damian leaned against Bruce's side since his favorite family member was otherwise occupied. "Cain is completely capable of surviving independently." He added as an ill-disguised aside, "Unlike some of you."

"Say that again when I'm not too tired to kick your ass, brat," Jason grumbled.

Dick straightened up and stretched his arms to the sides, allowing Tim to finally move to a safer location. "Dami, it's not about being able to find food, shelter, or clothing. I bet Cassandra misses us very much and is quite lonely in that drafty old mansion by herself."

"Tt." Damian glared down at his feet.

Bruce heard a car pull into the driveway. Ready to be done with their stay at Ella's townhome, he pushed open the front door and motioned for his sons to precede him through the portal. He pulled the door closed behind himself and hurried to catch up with his boys on the short walkway to the driveway. Through the driver side window of the now familiar car, he could see Alfred's mouth moving as if he were speaking to someone. Bruce assumed that he was on a phone call through the car's Bluetooth system. Whoever was on the other end was surely getting a smart lecture, given the dour look on Alfred's face.

All of that evaporated into a neutral-come-pleased expression when the older man noticed Bruce and his boys approaching the vehicle with their meager possessions. "… find your compassion, Master Thomas," Bruce overheard right before Alfred ended the call and then opened his door to greet the family. "Good morning, children," he said warmly.

Bruce forced a cheerful smile of his own and swallowed his concern over what that phone call may have entailed. "Good morning." His boys remained silent, causing Bruce to glance worriedly toward them out of the corner of his eye. None of them sported happy expressions and they had stopped at the edge of the driveway to huddle around Dick. Unfortunately, it appeared that Bruce wasn't the only one to catch the muffled end of Alfred's conversation.

"Is it?" asked Alfred, noticing the same reticence in Bruce's sons that their father had. It was a complete change from their interactions just the day before. "Did something happen? Is Ella here?"

"I… uh, no," Bruce stammered. "We…"

"Were you talking to Old Man Wayne?" Jason asked bluntly. Of course they were all too observant to have missed the implication of Alfred's directive to their future host, thanks to their diligent training and naturally keen intellects.

"Master Thomas? In fact, I was. He is preparing for your arrival as we speak." Alfred's smile seemed less bright than before.

"He doesn't want us to come," Dick said stoically. He protectively drew his littlest brother closer to himself.

"Good heavens, Richard, why would you--"
"No," his eldest interrupted, sounding defeated. "We're just going from one place where we're unwanted to another."

Alfred dropped his pretenses and adopted a serious mien. "You are absolutely wanted, my boy. Even if it is just by me right now. But do not fret. Master Thomas will quickly come to realization that he needs you, be assured."

Bruce subtly moved to stand between the butler and his sons. "Maybe this isn't such a good idea." He hadn't even considered that his pseudo-father hadn't approved of Alfred's offer to take them somewhere better than Ella's home until the woman figured out how to send them back to their universe. He could not – would not – intentionally put his children through more emotional strife than they'd already suffered these past two weeks.

"Honestly, I'd rather stay here, with the devil we know," Jason said. "My dad was an alcoholic, so I know how ornery they can be."

Alfred cleared his throat. "You don't know me," he admitted. "I am aware of the fact that what little affection you may have for me is based on the relationships you enjoyed with my doppelganger in your universe." He held up his hands suppliantly. "I am not too vain to admit that I am naught but an old man who has relished the time spent with young ones that should have been mine to care for in a better world."

"Actually, I doubt any of us would be 'Waynes', including the demon spawn, if B's parents hadn't been murdered."

"Jason…" Bruce hoped his long-suffering tone was enough to stop that poisonous direction of conversation. If he were honest with himself, he didn't actually know what to say. To deny the teenager's statement would probably be a lie, though Bruce liked to think he still would have cared for those who needed his help. His parents had been compassionate, after all. On the other hand, he could not possibly imagine anyone else as his sons and daughter instead of those that he had, and he wouldn't trade a single one of them for the possibility of a blood relation.

"That is beside the point, young man," said Alfred. "You are the dearly beloved children of Bruce Wayne in your world, and as such I firmly believe that in any universe you would be wholly wanted by the Wayne family."

"Except this one," Damian said with a scowl.

"Including this one," corrected Alfred. He motioned to the sedan. "Come. Allow me to drive you to the hospital so you can visit with Mistress Martha. There you can ask her yourself how she feels about your presence in her life. You might also ask her opinion of Master Thomas. At that point, if you're not convinced that you will feel welcome in my home, then I will bring you back here and return upstate on my own."

Bruce didn't know what to do. His own selfish fear of being rejected by a version of his father was heavily influencing his feelings. If what this Alfred said was true, then staying with Ella would be denying his children the chance to be in a healthier environment while they remained trapped in this universe. If Alfred was wrong, then he could subject his children to even worse conditions.

“Come, Father,” said Damian. He left his circle of brothers to step up next to Bruce. “Pennyworth does not seem deceitful, and I grow quite weary of the ‘devil we know’."

Bruce was grateful to let someone else make the decision as to whether they should go or not, but he couldn’t completely disregard his other sons’ feelings. Dick’s expression clearly showed his aversion
to the idea. Tim was worrying his lower lip and looking down at his new sneakers. Jason scowled as he stared into the middle distance.

“May we have a minute?” Bruce asked Alfred. The older man nodded. Bruce patted Damian’s shoulder. “Wait here,” he instructed softly. Damian made a face but didn’t argue. Jason tugged on Tim’s sleeve as Bruce walked towards his three older boys, leaving the father’s path to his eldest unobstructed. “A word, chum?”

Dick followed Bruce wordlessly back into the townhouse. They stopped in the foyer. Bruce turned to face Dick. “We won’t go if you’re completely opposed to the idea,” the father said softly.

“You can’t put this decision on me,” Dick argued. He shifted his weight anxiously from foot to foot.

“I’m not,” Bruce insisted, having not expected that response. “I mean that I won’t make a decision in spite of your feelings, Dick.”

“I don’t know what to do, Bruce!” Dick exclaimed. “Staying here is slowly killing my little brother, but what if going is worse?” He hugged himself miserably.

Bruce hated seeing Dick, his typically bright ray of hope, looking ready to tear apart at the seams. He stepped forward to wrap the young man in a firm embrace, unable to bear watching his son pitifully trying to comfort himself. Dick latched on to him tightly.

“Everyone is going to be fine, chum. I promise. I’m going to take care of you all.”

“I’d rather go back to the homeless shelter and work a street corner than watch my younger brothers self-destruct in a loveless house.”

“No.” Bruce said emphatically. He held Dick even tighter, shifting one large hand to cup the back of his son’s head. The overgrown, silky black locks spilled through the gaps between his fingers. “You’re the one I’m worried about, old son.”

“I want to go home so badly I can barely stand it,” Dick mumbled into Bruce’s shoulder. “The sun may shine brighter here without the endless smog, but I’ve never felt so hopeless in Gotham City.”

“I know, Dickie.” Bruce squeezed his eyes shut against the burn in the back of their sockets. “Gods, I know.”

“The kids need me to be strong. I’m trying—“

“You don’t have to be the strong one, Dick,” Bruce interrupted. “That’s my job. After all, I’m the goddamn Batman.” He chuckled wetly at his own joke. Dick’s disjointed sounds, on the other hand, didn’t sound much like amusement. “Come on, old friend,” Bruce murmured. He rocked them gently from side to side. “Shhhh.”

Bruce didn’t want to delay too much longer, but he’d give his eldest the minute that he needed to regain his composure. “Do you remember the hunting cabin in upstate New York?” Bruce asked after a few moments of quiet. “I’m pretty sure I took you there a few times when you were about Tim’s age.” He didn’t wait for Dick to respond to the basically rhetorical question. He vividly remembered long weekends spent in the wilderness with his rambunctious ward, before Dick had grown old enough to learn to resent him for being an emotionally repressed ape. He knew Dick was much too sentimental to forget those happier times. Unfortunately, he’d never taken the others. Jason was gone too soon, and he’d been too busy by the time Tim and Damian came along.

They’d have to go as a family once they were back in their universe. He knew Cassandra would love
the quiet beauty of the national park surrounding them. He even imagined Barbara Gordon and Stephanie Brown there, though Barbara and Tim would likely equally bemoan the lack of reliable internet up there.

Bruce tilted his head to rest his cheek against Dick’s soft hair as he continued to shift minutely from side to side. “The cabin will have room for us to spread out. You boys won’t have to be living on top of each other twenty-four seven, and if you don’t want to see Thomas Wayne, then you won’t have to. The fresh air will do us all some good, and I bet the snow’s deep enough already for us to hike over to Billy Bob’s sledding hill. Do you think Dami’s ever been sledding before?” Bruce felt a real smile tug at the corner of his mouth when he envisioned his little desert baby half-buried in a snow drift. Damian would either loathe or adore the activity. “Do you remember sitting in front of the huge stone fireplace with mugs of Alfred’s dark chocolate cocoa? You would always sit so close to the flames that Alfred used to fret you’d set yourself afire.”

“He’d nag me that it wasn’t necessary to cook oneself when there were plenty of fleece blankets to keep the cold away,” Dick said faintly. “And then he’d read to us from the Grimm Fairy Tales book. I think Jason would have appreciated that more than I ever did.”

Bruce relaxed his arms and took a half step backwards so he could see his eldest’s face. “What do you think, old son? Is it finally time that your little brothers get to experience the hunting cabin?”

“You’re doing a terrible job making me feel less homesick,” Dick groused. “And it might be worse there than here, but we won’t know until we try, huh?”

“No, we won’t.” Bruce tugged on a lock of Dick’s hair that was hanging in his eyes. “You know, Tim’s not the only one who could use a trim.”

Dick blew the hairs away from his forehead with a short burst of air. “Maybe so, but Timmy’s the one who is adorable when he gets all huffy at being reminded to get a haircut.”

Bruce grinned. Tim wasn’t the only one of his children who could be adorable, but he kept that opinion to himself. “Shall we?” He motioned toward the front door.

“Yeah.” Dick followed Bruce back outside.

Bruce’s mirth faded quickly when he sensed the distress coming from the rest of his sons at the far end of the walk. He quickened his pace to where this world’s Alfred Pennyworth grasped Tim by the chin and appeared to be coaching the teenager through breathing exercises as a worried Jason and red-faced Damian looked on. “What happened?” the father demanded.

Tim pulled away from Alfred at the sound of Bruce’s voice, but instead of running to his father, the fifteen-year-old brushed by him in order to hug attack Dick. “Woah, baby bird,” the acrobat said, though he didn’t miss a beat when it came to hugging the smaller boy back.

“Please don’t be upset, Dick!”

“The kid almost had a panic attack when you took Dickiebird inside,” Jason explained. “Alfred talked him down, thank fuck. Is this related to you-know-what?”

“Maybe,” replied Bruce, inferring that Jason meant Tim’s currently unchecked depression. He squeezed Damian’s fingers when the child took his hand. He look over at Dick and Tim. “Chum?”

“It’s fine,” Dick replied, his voice free from any negative tremors. Bruce’s fears that Dick would be immediately overwhelmed by Tim’s desperate neediness after his own emotional break a few minutes ago were minutely calmed. Dick grinned lopsidedly. “Apparently everything feels wrong in
the world when I’m not at my best.”

“Fucking Golden Boy,” Jason grumbled.

“Please refrain from using such language, young man,” Alfred corrected patiently.

Bruce let out a breath he hadn’t been aware he was holding. As wrecked as he may be feeling right now, Dick would never stop loving being needed. Bruce decided to cease worrying about his eldest for a few minutes. “We’d still like to take you up on your offer to visit Dr. Wayne.”

“Hopefully he doesn’t find our presence as distasteful as that Kane woman,” Damian said.

“He will not, even if it takes him some time to realize it,” said Alfred confidently. “To the hospital?”

“Joy,” Jason said dryly. “Can we put Damian in the trunk?”

“Todd, do not be so ridiculous.”

“Seconded,” said Bruce. He ignored Jason’s rude hand gesture, since he was pretty certain that the teenager didn’t mean it.

Instead of the baby of the family, their few possessions went in the trunk. The sedan was a classic style, with a bench seat in the front as well as the back. Dick and Jason claimed the back window seats, forcing Tim to take the middle. The fifteen-year-old didn't seem to mind too much, given that he was able to stay huddled under Dick's arm. Damian sat between Alfred and Bruce in the front.

“I shall take a turn driving if you become fatigued, Pennyworth,” the eleven-year-old stated as the butler shifted the car into reverse.

“My opinion on the matter of the unlicensed driving has not changed since yesterday, Damian,” replied Alfred. The boy tutted, but otherwise dropped the subject.

xXx

The drive to the hospital was too short in Bruce’s opinion, as he fretted over how to say good-bye. He wondered if Martha would be saddened by their departure, and worried about her well-being if she was released into Ella’s care before Bruce returned. His frazzled cousin would likely be overwhelmed even with her houseguests gone.

Alfred dropped them off in front of the visitor’s entrance and advised that he would park before joining them. Bruce and his boys trekked through the lobby toward the elevator bank and crowded into one of the cars. On Martha’s floor, the doors slid open to reveal faded pink walls and scuffed linoleum flooring. Just outside of the elevator core was that floor’s smaller waiting room. Bruce immediately noticed Ella’s hunched figure in one corner of the space, and she was indeed dressed in yesterday’s clothes.

“Ella,” said Bruce after moving to stand before her. “Why don’t you go home and sleep for a few hours?”

“I’d rather be here,” the woman replied in a gruff voice, without looking up at him. “Are you still going to stay with Thomas Wayne?”

“Yes.”

If possible, her demeanor become even sourer. “Fine.”
“Take care of yourself, Ella,” Bruce said. “Martha needs you.”

“That’s nice and hypocritical of you.”

Bruce bit back a caustic reply and settled for shaking his head silently instead. He left her there and returned to his sons. “Jason, she’s way out of your league,” he commented off-handedly as he passed the flirtatious eighteen-year-old en route to Martha’s room.

“What’s that supposed to mean, old man?” his son sputtered, offended, as the nurse he'd been speaking to tittered in the background.

“It means that you are not worthy of her attention, Todd,” Damian explained imperiously.

“You don’t even know the first thing about women, brat,” Jason replied.

“Boys,” Bruce chided before a fight could break out. They fell quiet, though it was probably due to having reached the threshold of Martha’s door than out of deference to his authority as their father. The quartet of Robins waited in the hall while Bruce checked that the older lady felt up to having company.

Martha looked away from the soap opera on the blurry television mounted in the corner to greet Bruce with a pained smile. “Hello, Bruce.”

He was glad that she was of clear enough mind to not confuse him with his father. “Good morning, Martha. I brought the boys to see you, if you aren’t too tired.”

“Oh, I would love to see the children,” Martha replied. “Is… is my hair all right?”

It was sticking up in every different direction possible. “You look beautiful, Martha,” Bruce said. He turned slightly to call for his kids.

Dick came first, ever the fearless leader. “Hello,” Martha greeted warmly.

“How are you feeling, Ms. Kane?” Dick asked as he stepped up to the side of her bed. Unlike how he’d immediately reached for Barbara’s hand when she’d been hospitalized by the Joker, Dick refrained from making physical contact with Martha.

“Grandma Wayne, darling. And I don’t care for hospitals,” she answered candidly. "It's so nice to be with family, though." Her small smile melted into a faint frown. "I had such a terrible dream." Watery blue eyes stared up at Bruce.

"A nightmare?" Bruce asked with concern.

Martha's expression dropped even further and she took a deep breath. "I dreamed that you had died as a child, Brucie. In a dark alley behind a movie theater." She sniffled quietly, then forced herself to smile again. "It's silly, though. You're here now, all grown up and so handsome just like your father."

Not so clear of mind, then. Bruce cleared his throat awkwardly.

Martha turned slightly to gaze at Dick, whom she must consider her oldest grandson at the moment. “How are you, dear?” She then looked past Dick to where Jason, Tim, and Damian hovered awkwardly next to Bruce, each with a complexion a shade paler than usual. “You all look exhausted. Have you not been sleeping well?”
Bruce tried to hide his own cringe as his boys stared back at Martha as if she had completely lost track of reality. Unable to think of anything constructive to say himself, he blindly swatted at his closest son in hope of getting one of them to speak up instead. An insulted squeak followed the contact with the back of his hand, and then, "Todd snores like a lumberjack," Damian stated hurriedly from his place just hidden behind his father.

The teenager in question rolled his eyes but refrained from commenting. Bruce, at least, appreciated Damian speaking up and his attempt to mask the true reasons for the boys' unhappiness. They didn't need to burden Martha with the tension between the family and Ella, or confuse her any further.

Martha smiled weakly. "Thomas snores something atrocious. I keep earplugs in the nightstand. Poor soul. It gets worse when the weather is foul. His allergies always flare up in the dampness."

"We'll keep that in mind," said Dick uneasily.

"We're going to visit him, with Alfred," elaborated Bruce when Martha's brow furrowed in confusion.

"Oh, how nice. Thomas loves children, and he'll be thrilled to see his grandkids again. He always used to tell me that he couldn't wait until Brucie grew up and started his own family, especially after they'd get back from some male bonding adventure. He had such great hope for Bruce. We always knew our boy was brilliant, with a heart of gold. We know he's going to change the world."

Bruce coughed into his fist to try to clear the lump forming in his throat. He hoped that his true parents, in their universe, would have felt the same if they could see their little boy now. His heart panged as he felt their loss acutely. He missed them very much in that moment. He tried to distract himself by glancing down at Damian, who'd taken his hand a few minutes earlier. Green eyes, framed with thick, dark lashes, returned his gaze when the boy sensed that he was being watched. Bruce completely understood the sentiments that his mother of this world was describing. His own heart expanded as he imagined everything that Damian could accomplish in his hopefully long life. Bruce looked up then to take in Dick, with his arms wrapped around himself self-consciously as he listened to Martha. His eldest had already proven to be more of a man than Bruce ever imagined himself being, and the father had no doubt that the young man would continue to amaze him. Next was Tim, whom Bruce considered a gift that he didn't deserve and he worried often that he was only holding the boy back. And finally, he found Jason. The lump in his throat grew as Bruce was struck with how so, so grateful he was that his son had been a given a second chance to show them all just what kind of diamond in the rough that he was.

Until then, Jason had hovered closest to the door and furthest from the ill older woman, without saying a word. He had one arm draped loosely over Tim's hunched shoulders as the younger teenager watched them all through the fall of dark hair partially obscuring his blue eyes. Jason finally spoke up now, with all of his usual tact. "Why does Ella dislike Thomas Wayne so much?"

"Jace," Bruce said lowly. The distraction from longing for his deceased parents was welcome, but not thanks to a rude question. In the rough indeed.

"No," Dick said in protest to Bruce's reprimand. "I'm wondering the same thing."

Martha sighed, but otherwise didn't look offended by the blunt question. "Most of my family does not approve of my love for Thomas. The Wayne family has a checkered past, it's true, but so do the Kanes. Still, they cannot look past their prejudices to see that Thomas is a caring man, a doting father, and a wonderful doctor. He hasn't drunken to excess once since Bruce was born."
Jason’s muffled snort didn’t seem to register with Martha, and the eighteen-year-old missed Bruce’s look as he rolled his eyes. Tim glanced between his father and Martha warily, as if he wasn’t sure what to make of her idle comment. In the context of the truth of Thomas and Martha’s separation in this universe, and Ella’s vehement dislike of the older man, Bruce could empathize with his son’s unease. He would keep a very close eye on things when they reached the cabin. He reminded himself again that he trusted Alfred’s judgment.

Martha held out her wrinkled hand to Bruce’s eldest, which Dick took tentatively after a few moments of hesitation. "I'm so glad that Bruce has you boys. He is truly blessed."

"I'm sure he doesn't feel that way all of the time," Dick joked, though his voice lacked any humor.

"No," said Bruce. He tightened his grip on Damian's hand. "You are all very good at being naughty and disobedient, but I never stop feeling blessed that you're all in my life." He made sure to make eye contact with each of his boys. "We should get going. It is a long drive to upstate New York."

"Will you tell Thomas when you see him?" implored Martha, still holding Dick's hand. "That I miss him, and love him, and that I'll see him soon?"

"I… Okay."

"Thank you, darling."

xXx

Leaving the hospital, piling into Alfred's sedan, and completing the long drive to his family's hunting cabin was a blur in Bruce’s mind. He did manage to sleep for a few minutes here and there, which helped the trip go by more quickly and contributed to the blank spots in his memory. Awake now, he grew more nervous with each mile they drove. What if Thomas was as bad as Ella made him sound? What if he despised Bruce and the boys? How could Bruce bear his father's scorn, even if the man wasn't really his father?

The cityscape melted into rolling hills, then morphed into mini mountains that were thickly wooded. The sky grew progressively darker thanks to an incoming fall thunderstorm. Signs of civilization become few and far between, leaving Bruce to start thinking about contingency plans if he had to get himself and his family out of a bad situation in the middle of nowhere. Had he made the right choice in bringing his sons here? Should he have listened better to Dick's misgivings and not talked his eldest into leaving Ella's? Was he biased and selfish for thinking that his alcoholic father couldn’t possibly be as despicable as Willis Todd? Should he ask Alfred to turn around now and take them back to the crowded townhome?

And then it was too late. The dried leaves scattered over the gravel drive crunched as Alfred carefully navigated the sedan up a narrow, steep hill and then parked in front of a well maintained cabin that stood proudly in the middle of the small clearing.

"Fucking hell," swore Jason. "Of course the bloody Waynes would consider a mini-mansion to be a 'cabin'."  

"Language, Jason," chided Alfred, though the small quirk of his lips belied his amusement at the teenager's reaction to his new temporary home.  

"Did you think that a Wayne would live in a dilapidated shack, Todd?" asked Damian arrogantly. His little nose was once again turned skyward. Bruce tweaked it, earning a scowl of his own.

"It's a little different than I remember," Dick mused. "And don't worry, Jay, it's not nearly as large as
"Figures that you'd bring fucking Goldie here and not the rest of us," Jason groused as he climbed out of the car and stretched his large frame. The rest of the car's passengers followed suit.

"It's not because I didn't want to..." Bruce started, though he gave up defending himself when Jason waved dismissively at him and continued to survey the log cabin structure. The teenager didn't seem that put out.

"Father, I have to pee," Damian informed him. He pointed at the front door, expecting Bruce to lead the way. Fortunately, Alfred heard him as well and shooed the entire family toward the wide porch that wrapped around three sides of the cabin. Bruce wrapped an arm around Tim so that the two could walk up to the home together, bringing up the rear of the group.

The dark sky overhead finally cracked open under the heavy weight of its stored moisture. Alfred ushered them inside before the heavy rain started coming down. The three youngest looked about themselves curiously, while Dick pointed toward the third door on the left. "May I use the restroom?" Damian rushed to his brother's side, demanding to be allowed to go first.

"Will you make your famous Italian subs? You know, the ones with prosciutto instead of pepperoni?" Jason asked. Bruce raised an eyebrow while Alfred nodded accommodatingly. "What? I'm hungry."

"It is no trouble. Any other requests?" Damian opened his mouth, but Bruce quickly cut him off.

"Thank you, Alfred," Bruce said. "We'll just wait in the office." A hand on Tim's back got his quietest son moving toward the open doors to the room which in Bruce's universe had held a large teak desk and numerous hunting trophies. In this world, it had been converted into a sparsely furnished receiving room.

Bruce took a seat at one end of a small couch. Tim squeezed in next to him. Jason hadn't followed them into the sitting room and Bruce suspected that he'd rather joined Alfred in the kitchen. In their world, Jason was the only one allowed in Alfred's sacred culinary domain, given that he was actually able to produce edible food more often than not.

"What's your dad like?" Tim asked. He scratched nervously at the inseam of his slacks where it curved along the inside of his bony knee.

"It's been over thirty years since I last saw him," Bruce replied in a low voice. He curled his fingers around Tim's smaller ones, drawing the teenager's hand away from its anxious destruction of the new pants. "And a lot of terrible things have happened since then."

Alfred appeared then, with Dick, Damian, and Jason in tow. The butler looked mildly amused as he listened to the brothers banter. Bruce was glad to see that his patience for Bruce's boys was a constant in this universe as well. The tray of snacks set on the coffee table looked delicious and even Bruce found himself reaching for a mini-Italian sandwich. Jason took three right off of the bat. "I have informed the master that he has guests," said Alfred. "He will join us shortly."

The family enjoyed their late snack and listened to Dick regale his younger brothers and Alfred with stories of when he was younger and Bruce had brought him to this very cabin in their universe. Thanks to Dick's animated storytelling and Jason's quips about Bruce's favoritism, the dim room
echoed with laughter, impassioned denials, and intermittent rumbles of thunder. Bruce hardly realized that forty-five minutes had passed until he glanced at the antique glockenspiel clock above the stone fireplace and saw the time.

His second son followed his line of sight and noticed the same thing that he had. "So…" said Jason. "Is Mr. Wayne going to make an appearance today?"

"My apologies," said Alfred. "I shall remind him."

Bruce’s mirth and good humor evaporated immediately. He cleared his throat to dislodge his disappointment when he realized that Thomas Wayne did not intend to meet the man claiming to be his son from a parallel universe. He stood and held up a hand to stop Alfred from tracking down his errant employer. "Perhaps he's busy and this is a bad time," he said. "Boys, we should get ready for bed."

"We just got here," Jason argued. "And it's still early."

"I'm sure that Alfred is tired from his trip and the long drive back, and would like some time to himself," Bruce replied. "Alfred, thank you for your hospitality."

"B…" Dick looked sadly at the older man.

"No," insisted Alfred. "I shall retrieve him. And even if he will not speak to you right away, you are still welcome in this house."

"Thank you, old friend," Bruce said. "Still, it is not my intention to antagonize my fa-- Dr. Wayne, so--"

"I will remind him of his guests, and his manners," interrupted Alfred. "Excuse me." He left the family alone then.

Bruce sighed. Damian left his seat next to Dick in order to plop down on his father's lap. Bruce hugged him loosely with one arm and wrapped the other around Tim. Jason rose in order to pace in front of the fireplace, his features set in a scowl. Dick picked at one of his fingernails, being careful not to accidently make eye contact with Bruce in case he wore an "I told you so" expression.

Had Bruce made the right decision?

to be continued…

Chapter End Notes

Thomas Wayne is not going to be another Ella. He just needs a minute to accept that a universe exists where his son is alive, has kids of his own, and is somehow here to visit him.

Thank you for reading!
Chapter Thirty-Six

Each morning since they'd landed in this parallel universe, day had broken a little cooler and the sun had taken a little longer to warm the dry air. Today wasn't any different, and the effect was magnified by being further north and higher in elevation. Two weeks ago, Bruce wouldn't have even noticed the bite of the crisp air as he went about his business as the Dark Knight. Now, the memory of nearly freezing in an abandoned building while homeless sent a shiver down his spine and the forty-year-old had absolutely no intention of leaving the heated interior of the cabin.

Overnight, what little humidity there was in the air had tried to sneak into the temperate rear sun room, like frosty fingers creeping over the glass window panes as they searched for a way inside. Said tendrils of ice retreated now, resigned to failure but certain to try again the next night. As the glass cleared, Bruce was able to see more and more of the small backyard where his eldest and youngest were braving the bitter cold. As far as Bruce could tell, Damian's lips hadn't starting turning purple yet, and Dick was so lost in his exercises that he probably didn't fully register any discomfort. Bruce was glad that the young man was able to lose himself in the physical release of his gymnastics. Dick needed to relieve stress, and going back to his roots always seemed to help him.

Damian had been copying his older brother until about a quarter of an hour ago, and only Bruce's trained eye could see the child's lack of grace and balance compared to his brother. After stopping, Damian had settled in to keep Dick company as the twenty-two-year-old contorted his body into even more complicated forms.

Tim probably would have stayed close to Dick as well if the young man had chosen a warmer activity. Jason had given him a better option until Dick came back inside. The two teenagers had met up in the tiny room serving as a makeshift library. With care that few would attribute to the Red Hood, Jason had selected one of the valuable books and curled up in the living room to read in front of the fire. Bruce's collection at home included many first editions of classics, so he'd been glad to see that those remained with his family here, too. Tim took the chair opposite from Jason and toyed with a first generation tablet that Alfred had purchased for Thomas on a whim nearly a decade ago.

The entire time that Bruce and his displaced family had been at the cabin, there had been no sign of Dr. Wayne.

Bruce shifted his weight to his other leg when his right started to cramp and allowed himself the luxury of sighing forlornly while no one was around to witness his moment of weakness. Is this how he'd made his own sons feel in the beginning, when he was so busy being Batman that he'd unintentionally left them feeling unwanted after long hours alone with only Alfred for company? Of course, being ignored by Dr. Wayne was better than being openly scorned ala Ella, though neither made him feel very good about himself.

Outside, Dick and Damian moved to the side yard where a fallen tree was at about the right height to work as a makeshift pommel horse. His boys were creative enough to find ways to utilize their surroundings to their own benefit. The corner of Bruce's mouth quirked up as he watched Damian try to work the numbness out of his chilled limbs in order to instigate a one-upmanship contest with Dick. Already warmed, Dick taunted the boy by performing a series of Olympic caliber moves while
balancing on the scratchy trunk.

The competition was well underway about thirty minutes later, and Bruce had yet to grow bored of watching Dick just barely outmatch Damian, clearly holding himself back in the process. His youngest's frustration was obvious, since Damian would also recognize that Dick wasn't trying his hardest, and that he was losing in spite of that. Bruce's smile grew as he watched his sons, and he wished that he had realized previously how enjoyable it was to do so. Always before, he'd had something more "important" to do than spend time with his children outside of training or the Mission.

The hair on the back of his neck stood up suddenly. Bruce held himself completely still, moving only his eyes as he sought out the source of his unease. A shadow in the shape of a man barely registered in his peripheral vision.

Relaxing slightly, he turned to regard the stranger fully. Despite Martha's confusion and inclination to call Bruce by his father's name, and numerous people's claims that he was the spitting image of the man, facing his pseudo-father wasn't like looking at an older version of himself in a mirror. The grief lines were deep in Thomas Wayne's face, and his complexion was mottled by years of alcohol abuse. His hair was more salt than pepper and thinner than Bruce remembered it being from old photographs. His form was slightly hunched, easily leaving Bruce (and probably Jason, too) taller than the once well-postured man.

Bruce cleared his throat uncertainly. He didn't quite know how to address the older man, who'd been like a ghost in his own home since they arrived the night before. "I…"

"My son is dead."

Bruce snapped his mouth shut, hurt by the blunt statement and dismayed by the rough tone in which it was delivered. Bruce remembered his father's voice to be rich and wholesome, not sounding worse than Batman's gravelly timbre. At least he no longer had any doubts about Dr. Wayne's opinion on his home being invaded by a family of misplaced strangers. He pulled on his years of experience to adopt a stoic expression and spoke without any inflection in his own voice. "Yes," he agreed.

Thomas walked a few steps into the room, heading directly for a crystal decanter set that sparkled beautifully in the morning light. He stared at the empty container for a moment, cursed Alfred under his breath, and then regarded Bruce again, his yellowed eyes critical.

Bruce rarely felt the urge to squirm under another man's gaze, but he found himself having to greatly resist doing so now. "Martha asked me to tell you that she misses you, and still loves you." There, his promise was fulfilled.

"She's better off without me," Thomas replied angrily. Bruce didn't get the sense that the emotion was wholly directed at him. The older man shuffled forward as if he weren't sure that he wanted to prolong the conversation despite having more to say. He coughed dryly before speaking again. "The books in the library are valuable. Tell your kids to stay out of that room."

Bruce forced down another pang of disappointment and fear that he'd made the wrong decision in bringing his family here. "You'll not meet a young man with a greater love for literature than Jason," he replied defensively. "He'll treat the books with the respect they deserve." Thomas snorted in disbelief, but didn't reiterate his demand. "I don't see myself meeting that one," he said instead. He looked about the room dodgily, like he was looking for an escape route. When he caught sight of Dick and Damian through the wide window, he quickly turned his face away. "Alfred is a sentimental old fool. He shouldn't have brought you here. There's nothing good that can come of you being around me." His self-deprecating words
surprised Bruce. Thomas made it sound like his aversion was due to the fear of negatively influencing the next generations. Bruce had imagined that his pseudo-father would not want the reminder of his loss staring him in the face, nor the inconvenience of young, energetic guests.

"Nothing good was coming of being around Ella," Bruce countered after his introspective pause. "So even if you choose to avoid us, we're better off here. Unless you ask us to leave." Ella deserved to be inconvenienced for her role in everything. Thomas did not. And Bruce still stubbornly hoped that he could connect with a version of his late father.

"I don't want you here," Thomas stated.

Bruce's heart lurched at the declaration. At least none of his children were within hearing range. "Fine," he said after a few seconds to find his composure. He didn't know where they'd go, but…

"My son is dead."

"My father is dead," Bruce snapped, composure be damned. The blatant rejection hurt, and no one else was here to accuse him of reacting childishly. "I know I'm not your son, and you're not my father. I don't want me here, either. But we're stuck, Dr. Wayne." He had to take a step back when he realized he had started to loom.

Fire burned in Thomas's pale blue eyes, though it flickered out after a mere second. The older man shuffled over to sit on one of the padded whicker chairs made to mimic outdoor seating. Bruce preferred to remain standing for the time being. Thomas's hands seemed to shake as he settled into his seat, and his gaze drifted to the crystal decanter again. Liquor hadn't magically appeared within it, so Thomas grudgingly looked at Bruce instead. "Ella meddles too much."

"I've noticed," Bruce said dryly. He was no longer in the mood to keep speaking with Thomas.

"She's better for Martha than I am." Thomas sounded bitter.

"I don't think so," Bruce disagreed, just to be ornery. Really, he was starting to think it was a tossup.

"I let her baby boy die," Thomas said, full of emotion. His hands shook a little harder.

Bruce anger broke like a wave against a jetty, until he was left with only pity for the older man. He could see that Thomas was being prickly in a misguided attempt to protect himself and those around him from being hurt. Bruce understood that sentiment. Like father, like son, after all.

Bruce, however, had a trip through a wormhole to credit for his change of attitude.

"You are as much to blame for your son's death as I am for my father's," Bruce stated sympathetically. Despite the Mission that had overtaken his life, Bruce never blamed himself for his parents' deaths. He knew that he was merely a boy against a hardened criminal with a gun. His vow had been to avenge their deaths and prevent other sons from witnessing the murders of their mothers and fathers, not to punish himself for failing to keep safe his own.

Thomas worked his jaw tensely while staring at the worn Turkish rug under their feet. Bruce sat down heavily in his own whicker chair, no longer feeling the need to tower over his adversary. The silence wasn't completely uncomfortable as Thomas chewed over Bruce's words, and he could still see his sons performing complex gymnastics routines through the mostly clear glass. He almost forgot that he was sitting across from this universe's version of his father until the man spoke with a broken voice. "How old were you?"

Bruce focused on Thomas. "I was twelve. It was my birthday." He knew the same was true of his alter ego in this world, except that young Bruce had died instead of Thomas and Martha.
"How old is he?" Thomas asked, gesturing weakly at the window without looking through it.

"Eleven," Bruce replied, knowing somehow that Thomas meant Damian, his only biological pseudo-grandson. Bruce watched his sons for a minute. Damian must have admitted defeat at least to himself, and was now trying to knock Dick over as the older boy boastfully showed off his skills. Dick was laughing, and Damian's eyes glittered with happiness though he pretended to scowl with all of his might. "Richard was also twelve when his parents were murdered in front of him." Sometimes, it hurt more to think of the deaths of John and Mary Grayson, especially when Bruce could see the loss haunting Dick.

"Do yourself a favor and make sure you don't let that boy out of your sight until he's thirteen."

"I plan to keep an eye on him until he's thirty," Bruce quipped, picking the age because it played on the number three and not because he ever planned to stop worrying about any of his children, no matter how old they got. "Would... would you like to meet them?"

Dick was especially good at piercing through Bruce's self-loathing in order to make his father smile again. Surely he could do the same for Thomas.

Thomas's answer wasn't immediate, though it sounded final. "No." He stood abruptly, making sure to avoid looking out the window. "I'm no good. Spare your children the poison of my presence." He turned away and walked purposefully toward the door.

"Wherever he is right now," said Bruce, unsure of this man's opinion on the afterlife, "he doesn't blame you for what happened. I wouldn't."

"He doesn't have to," Thomas said as he paused just before the threshold. Then he was gone.

xXx

A tiny bunny-eared television with a black and white screen sat at the end of the kitchen counter. It crackled away, half static and half picture, seemingly aware that it was old, outdated, and that no one expected much more out of it. Bruce hardly paid it attention, distracted as he was by Tim's enthusiastic and in-depth report of everything that he'd managed to improve on the decade old tablet with only spotty Wi-Fi to assist him. Jason sat across the kitchen table from him, immersed in a fragile copy of Alice Through the Looking Glass despite Bruce's claim that the boy would take the utmost care with the priceless novels. Jason wasn't being reckless with it, but that didn't change the fact that his half-eaten dinner of steak and mashed potatoes smothered in gravy was in the perfect position to catch the book should it escape the teenager's grasp.

Dick and Damian worked on their desserts and hot cocoa at the far end of the table. Before the meal, Dick had suggested a board game as their evening entertainment, to which his brothers had made a big deal of grudgingly agreeing. Fortunately, with the eldest as one of the ones prolonging dinner, the rest of the family didn't feel guilty about diving into their preferred means of entertainment in the meantime.

At the kitchen counter, Alfred discretely made up a plate to be reheated later for if Thomas Wayne ever ventured downstairs for supper. Wiping down the spotless countertops brought the butler close to the television, where he paused to listen with a deepening frown. His worried countenance made Bruce give the newscast his full attention, causing Tim to fall quiet beside him.

"... chance of snowfall exceeding fifteen inches in some locations, with more possible in the coming days," the weatherman reported. "Temperatures will stay in the single digits through the rest of the week, then drop below zero early Saturday morning."
Alfred noticed Bruce watching the television as well. He coughed to clear his throat and managed an almost convincing smile. "It's a good thing we stocked up on groceries."

"If we have to go all Donner party, I vote we eat Damian first. He's got the most baby fat," Jason said, his eyes never leaving his book.

"I do not have baby fat, Todd!"

"It wouldn't make sense to eat Damian. He consumes less than the rest of us, and would yield the least meat."

"I eat more than you, Timothy," Damian said. "And I am less scrawny. But otherwise, I concur. It does not make sense to eat me, as I am more valuable alive than dead."

"Then who do you propose we eat, runt?" Jason teased Tim.

"I vote we don't eat anyone," said Dick around a mouthful of bread pudding.

Tim shifted uncomfortably. "I mean, from a purely rational and in no way emotional sense, it would make the most sense to eat…" He trailed off and started chewing on his lower lip. Bruce smirked and poked the teenager in the side to make him squirm even more.

"We're not eating Father," said Damian. "Therefore, the next logical choice is Todd."

Alfred looked completely appalled by the morbid direction that the conversation had taken. Bruce swallowed a laugh. "Boys, enough. I agree with Dick, and my vote is worth more than all of yours combined."

"Whatever you say, Boss Man," Jason quipped. "So after Bruce is gone… Damian?"

"Shut your face, Todd!"

"Jaybird," Bruce said with a frown. The teenager merely smirked and went back to reading.

The sensation of being watched tickled Bruce's sixth sense. He ignored the feeling. If Thomas wanted to creepily spy on the family that he refused to be a part of, Bruce wouldn't say anything unless one of his children complained.

Dick pushed his empty dessert plate toward the center of the table and leaned back contentedly in his chair. "That was really good, Alfie - I mean, Alfred. Thank you."

"Of course, Richard," replied the butler. "You might retire to the den if you'd like to set up your game. I shall finish in here."

"We can help clean up," Dick offered.

"Nonsense," said Alfred. "It's mostly done anyway."

"Fine, but only if you join us in the den afterwards."

"Or save yourself while you still can." Jason stuck his tongue out as Dick frowned at him. Fortunately, it didn't take long for Alfred to agree to join them. He still seemed thrilled to have a houseful of people to care for, and had not yet had his fill of the "grandchildren."

The Waynes rose from the table as a group. "Prepare to be handily defeated, Todd," taunted Damian, pointing at the older boy across the table.
"Sure thing, squirt," Jason replied. He stretched nonchalantly. "Have you ever played Sorry before? Because I'm pretty sure that word isn't even in your vocabulary."

Damian glared. "Do not be ridiculous. Of course it is. Here is an example: you will be sorry that you ever crossed me, cretin."

Tim hummed appreciatively. "That was actually pretty good, Damian."

"Thank you, Timothy," said Damian, without averting his harsh gaze from Jason.

"Traitor," complained the eighteen-year-old.

"I'm not," Tim defended himself. "I'm just commenting, in a rational and in no way emotional sense, that Damian burned you well."

"I think you need to feel the burn of my knuckles against your scalp, runt," Jason threatened lightly. Tim inched slightly in Dick's direction while keeping a wary eye on Jason.

"Children," interrupted Bruce, feeling fondly exasperated. "Get out of the kitchen." He pointed at the door to the hall. He could no longer sense Thomas' presence, so he doubted any of his sons would accidently encounter the reclusive man.

Later that night, Bruce excused himself to use the bathroom as Dick energetically cleared away the most recent game in order to set up a new one. His brothers playfully bickered over the remaining options, each claiming that another had some unfair advantage. Alfred played referee when he thought that the insults were becoming too mean, while keeping a wary ear on the small radio he'd set up on the sideboard.

Bruce expected to find Thomas Wayne loitering in the shadows, having felt the older man's gaze throughout the gaming marathon. Bruce really did need to use the restroom, so he merely nodded in acknowledgement and turned in the opposite direction of his pseudo-father. When he returned, their absent host still lingered, hidden just out of sight of the loudly bantering boys. Bruce suddenly remembered that the master bedroom was directly above this room. "Are we disturbing your rest?" he asked.

Thomas grunted noncommittally.

Bruce mentally sighed. "You know, the boys are pretty tough. They can probably withstand your 'poison' long enough to at least make your acquaintance."

Thomas listened to the controlled chaos for a few seconds almost wistfully, then took a step backward, away from the doorway. "I can't. They are better off not knowing me," said Thomas before disappearing down the dark hallway. Dejected, Bruce rejoined his family, feeling more burdened than he had before he'd taken the short break.

"B?" asked Dick after his father had reclaimed his seat. His brow was furrowed slightly in concern.

Bruce summoned a grin and shook off his melancholy. "What game are we playing now?"

Jason and Tim exchanged a look while Damian side-eyed the empty doorway. Dick grabbed the box for The Game of Life and shook it over the coffee table. "Come on guys," he said with forced cheer. "Dami, you'll like this one. You get to have kids and put them in your little car."

"Why would that appeal to me, Richard?" the boy asked belligerently.
"I want the green car," said Tim as he made grabby hands at the box. Dick set it down and pulled the top off so they could all see the meticulously sorted pieces.

Damian eyed his brother speculatively. "Green is my color, Timothy. You shall be yellow."

"Whatever," the older boy conceded easily. He snagged the baggie of cars out of the box and took the yellow one for himself. "You're welcome, Dick."

Damian huffed when he realized that he'd been played. He accepted the green car and then stated, "Richard shall be--"

"I want the blue car," Jason demanded, stealing the bag from Tim. His grin for Damian was wolfish.

"Todd!"

Dick rolled his eyes and pushed Damian back onto his pillow seat. "The color of the car doesn't matter." Jason pulled out the red car and stuck a pink figure in the driver's seat before handing it to his older brother. "You're such an asshole," Dick complained with long-suffering. He took the piece anyway, refusing to let Jason antagonize him.

"Boys," Bruce warned.

"Here you go, B," Jason said, handing Bruce the white car with another pink driver.

"Thank you, son." Bruce didn't care about the pieces he was given. He just liked hearing Jason laugh at his own perceived witiness.

xXx

The next morning, Bruce shivered as he forced himself out from under the thick quilts layered over the guestroom bed. The frost may have actually succeeded in finding a way into the cabin this time. He hurried the few steps across the smooth wood planks to where he'd kicked off his house slippers the night before, then snatched his dressing robe from the hook on the back of the door. He slipped out of the room and made his way down the short hall to the pair of wood plank doors belonging to the two largest bedrooms on the first floor. He arbitrarily entered the one on the right, where two twin beds on opposite walls held his bookend children. Damian was completely hidden under his mound of covers, without even a speck of dark hair to be seen. Dick was more visible, though he did have his covers pulled up to his chin.

Despite the cold, his boys looked peaceful enough for Bruce to leave them alone for now.

In the room to the left, Bruce found only the top of the bunk bed to be in use, though its occupant was quite unhappily awake. "Jason, please close the window," Tim whined from his cocoon of blankets.

"You need to check this out, Timbers," Jason said instead of doing as requested. "The snow is up to the windowsill!"

"I'll take your word for it," Tim groused. He squeezed his eyes shut and pulled his fleece cover over his head. At the sound of the window sliding shut, he peeked out again. "Thank you, Jas--" He was cut off by the handful of heavy powder that was rubbed into his face. The anguished cry was enough to get Bruce to step in before his sons woke up the rest of the house.

Bruce caught Jason in a backwards hug and slid one of his icy hands under the teenager's long-sleeved tee to press against the small of his back. "Fucking hell, B, did you sleep outside?" Jason demanded as he tried to escape his father's grasp. Bruce dragged his fingers up Jason's spine in
punishment for swearing.

"No." He finally relented and let Jason go. "It looks like we got more than the projected fifteen inches." He peered through the heavily frosted window at the endless expanse of white beyond. It didn't glitter like he'd come to associate with fresh, undisturbed snow, given the dark gray sky that promised more snowstorms in the near future.

"No shit, Sherlock," Jason said. He pushed open the window again, eliciting a tortured Jay-son! from his younger brother. "You better get up and find your snow pants, baby bird. I'm having a really hard time resisting the urge to toss you through this right here window."

Tim did get up, but he didn't stop to search for his new winter gear. He slid down the rails of the ladder to his bunk, skidded past Bruce on his way out the door, and a handful of seconds later Bruce heard the door to Dick and Damian's room slam shut.

Bruce scratched at the back of his head as he debated whether to check on his tortured son or not. When he didn't hear any further commotion from next door, he assumed that Dick had accepted the invasion into his bed graciously. "I haven't seen snow like this since I was your age," Bruce commented, leaning down to peer at the drift that was certainly even with the sill of the window. A dusting of flakes toppled into the room when a gust of wind breezed past.

"So, like five decades ago," Jason teased.

"I, too, suddenly have the urge to toss someone through this window," Bruce said, grinning toothily at his son.

"Hells yes!" Jason scanned the room until he located the thick wool socks that were halfway under his bed. "Dickie claims there's a badass sledding hill not far from here. I can't wait to bury the kids in a snow bank."

Bruce chuckled. "Maybe after we've helped shovel a path to the front door. I don't think Alfred will be keen on us climbing through the windows."

Jason moved over to the closet where he retrieved a wool sweater and intentionally faded jeans. "Do you think--" The rest was lost as Jason pulled the sweater over his head.

"What?"

"I said, 'do you think Old Man Wayne is going to spy on us?' While we sled, like a creepy alcoholic stalker."

Bruce wasn't surprised that the boys had noticed. "I don't know. The hill is a little bit of a hike, and I don't recall there being many good places to skulk."

"Funny." Jason dug through the closet again for his winter coat once he'd finished zipping his pants. "What the hell is his problem, anyway?"

"He thinks he's a negative influence. He doesn't want to corrupt his kinda-grandkids."

"I wish Willis had felt that way," Jason said offhandedly. "Did he tell you that, or did Alfred?"

"He did."

"Well, at least he's made contact with one of us." Jason looked at Bruce squarely. "The next time you see him, can you kindly tell him to fuck off?"
"Jason!"

"I said kindly."

"Son--"

"It's unnerving, Bruce!"

Bruce held his hands up in a placating gesture. "Okay. I know. I'm sorry. It's just... I think he wants to get to know us, but he's... afraid." Bruce suddenly understood why Alfred claimed that Thomas needed the boys to help him overcome his reclusiveness. Jason crossed his arms over his chest, unmoved by their host's plight. He stared at Bruce pointedly. "I'll talk to him," Bruce agreed unhappily. He had no idea how to tactfully broach the subject with Thomas.

"Good, or I'll have to step up where you won't, once again."

"I'm going to bury you in a snow bank," Bruce muttered as he followed Jason out of the room. Maybe he could get Alfred to talk to Thomas...

*to be continued...*

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think.
Chapter Thirty-Seven

The snow started coming down softly again as the lost family of five trekked through the deep drifts to find the sledding hill that Bruce and Dick remembered from the hunting cabin in their universe. Neither Alfred nor Thomas had wanted to venture out into the vast whiteness, and if not for the fact that the rest of his family was going, Tim probably would have stayed indoors as well. The teenager kept pace with Bruce, half of a step behind him, and glared balefully at the fat falling flakes. Ahead of the pair, a three-way snowball fight erupted.

Bruce wasn’t too concerned about anyone getting hurt, given that, "This crap is shit for making snowballs," Jason complained. It did seem to take a lot of muscling to get the powder into spherical shapes, just for the ball of crumble apart a few yards after being thrown.

Damian was similarly frustrated. "Why is it not working, Father?" He clapped his hands together to knock the snowy dust from his gloves.

"The snow is too dry to pack well," Bruce replied. "It's better when it's wetter."

"This doesn't look very promising for making snowmen, Little D," said Dick as he discretely tugged on the collar of Damian's winter coat so he could dump his glove full of snow down the back of the boy's neck.

"Richard!" Not only could Damian not efficiently form snowballs to hurl at his older brother, he also struggled much more than his taller sibling at darting through the deep snow. Damian's face was turning red from the cold and his frustration as he fell further and further behind his laughing brother.

Bruce glanced to the side at Tim when he heard the teenager chuckle quietly. He didn't want to distract Tim from his mirth, so he settled for smiling fondly without comment.

By the time that Damian caught up with Dick, he'd burned up all of his anger thanks to fighting the deep snow. He panted slightly with his hands on his knees. Dick retraced his steps, though wisely stayed out of range from a surprise attack. With a sunny smile that threatened to melt all of the accumulation, Dick said, "I know! We can make snow angels."

"What are we, twelve year old girls?" asked Jason.

"They're pretty," Dick countered. "Don't you have an eye for beauty, Jason?"

Jason's response was to tackle his older brother into a deep snowdrift lining the edge of the path where the trees had stopped the wind from blowing the flakes further into the forest. The two wrestled until Dick's speed and flexibility won out over Jason's strength. Dick whooped as he climbed out of the bank, leaving Jason unsuccessfully trying to brush off of his face the powder
coating him from head to foot. Apparently deciding that it was a lost cause, Jason forewent shedding the snow and started climbing out of the snow pile himself. He was just about to rise to his full height when Bruce and Tim reached his location. Bruce casually shoved Jason's shoulder, sending the teenager face first back into the drift.

"Oh, it's on, old man," Jason promised once he'd wiped the snow from his eyes. Bruce dragged Tim in front of himself and held onto the fifteen-year-old securely when Tim protested being used as a human shield.

"I was only fulfilling my promise, Jay," Bruce stated, unable to keep the grin off of his face.

"Little Timmy isn't going to protect you. He has his own date with a snow bank."

Tim tugged futilely at Bruce's arm braced across his chest. "Let me go, Bruce!" His struggles intensified as Jason stalked towards them.

Their salvation came in the shape of a newly angered eleven-year-old, just as Bruce had predicted it would. "You will not lay a finger on Timothy," Damian insisted, stepping in front of Jason. "He is in a delicate state right now--"

"Hey!"

Jason's grin was feral as he stared down at Damian. "You're looking rather free from snow, brat. I can fix that for you." He made to grab Damian, who swiftly jumped to the side and tried to turn back quickly in order to confront his larger sibling. Unfortunately, the deep snow had other ideas and Damian lost his footing instead.

"I hate snow!" Damian yelled as Jason pounced on him before he could scrambled to his feet again. "Father! Richard!"

A few yards up the path, Dick beamed brightly at the antics of his family members. Tim finally freed himself from Bruce, distracted as the older man was by laughing at Damian and Jason, and hurried to the eldest brother's side. "This whole family is crazy."

"Isn't it wonderful?" Dick crushed Tim to himself in a bear hug. Tim probably kept his protests to a minimum, lest he end up buried in snow himself.

Once Jason and Damian were as coated with snow - inside and outside their winter gear - as they were going to get, they agreed to a wary truce and allowed the family to resume their trek toward the sledding hill. Bruce picked up the rope to the old wooden sled that had been abandoned when all of the shenanigans had started. It had belonged to this world's Bruce before he passed away. Alfred had looked a mix of saddened at the reminder of the lost child and happy at the thought of young ones using it once again when he'd retrieved it from storage. A cheap plastic sled was tied to the top of it.

"Here it is!" Dick called from up ahead. He flung his arms wide, which still didn't quite do the large hill justice.

Damian snagged the sled from Bruce. "I shall go first."

"You and me, Little D," Dick agreed. He grabbed Damian's hand to drag him toward the top of the hill.

Jason made a face at the plastic sled, but then shrugged and called over his shoulder, "Come on, runt."
"You go ahead. I just want to watch," Tim replied.

Bruce nudged the younger teenager toward the older one. "You'll have fun, kiddo."

"Fun for the ten seconds it takes to make it to the bottom of the hill. What about the twenty minutes it's going to take to climb back to the top?"

"Details," said Jason. "It's either sled or get buried in the snow, Timbers. Your choice."

"Bruce," Tim complained, looking up at his father.

"Go," Bruce encouraged him. "Play."

"This is no game, old man," said Jason seriously. "This is war, and we're about to compete the hell out of Dickie and the demon. Aren't we, Timmy?"

Tim threw his hands up. "Ugh, fine." He stomped after Jason for a few steps, before settling into a less energy-demanding gait through the deep snow. Bruce followed them so that he could act as the referee and do the countdown to start the race.

Dick positioned Damian between his legs and gripped the reins of the sled. "I shall steer," Damian stated.

"Let me," Dick denied him. "I've done this before. You can drive next time." Damian huffed unhappily but must have seen the logic in his oldest brother's statement.

Tim eyed the snow, the hill, and the plastic sled distastefully before declaring, "I'm sitting in the back." He sat down cross-legged at the rear of the sled. Jason shrugged and sat down in front of him with the advice to hold on tight.

Bruce pulled off his red knit cap and waved it in the air. "On your marks… Get set… Go!"

Both Dick and Jason pulled their legs onto their respective sleds. Jason, without any sort of steering mechanism on his plastic toboggan, had his arms free to push off with which gave him and Tim an extra burst of speed to start. He gave a battle cry as they pulled slightly ahead, accompanied by a middle finger for Dick and Damian.

"Faster, Richard, faster!"

Tim ducked his head down and gripped the back of Jason's coat, cleverly using the older boy's large frame to shield himself from the spray of snow as they cut the first paths through the powder.

"See you at the finish line, losers!" Jason taunted.

"You're going down, Jaybird!" Dick retorted. He tugged on the reins to the wooden sled to redirect it toward the plastic one.

"Drive in a straight line, you imbecile. Don't swerve!" Damian complained.

"Stay in your lane, asshole!" Jason shouted when the wooden sled veered within inches of his. He reached over to shove at his brothers.

"What's the matter, Jason? Can't handle a little friendly competition?" Dick taunted around a laugh. He pushed back.

"No, no, don't make us crash!" Tim protested, swatting at Dick's arm while the eldest gripped Jason's
coat by the shoulder, having been unsuccessful at knocking the larger youth over.

Damian was now apparently on board with Dick's tactics and gave his own high pitched battle cry. "Prepare to be destroyed, Todd!"

Jason managed to wrest free of Dick's hold and retaliated by grabbing Damian by the back of his parka and hauling him completely off of the wooden sled and throwing him into the snow alongside their tracks. Damian squawked furiously as he flailed while unburying himself from the snow where he'd been abandoned.

"Oh, that's not fair," Dick said, his smirk dangerous. He threw his arm out again, but instead of trying to push Jason off track, he grabbed Tim and pulled him clear of the plastic toboggan instead. Tim rolled a few more feet down the hill before coming to a stop in the trail of compacted snow left behind the sleds. Once sitting, he threw his mitten covered hands up in exasperation.

"Now it's on, Dickie," Jason promised with a Cheshire grin. The two steered their sleds away from each other and both hunkered down to make themselves as aerodynamic as possible. From his vantage point at the top of the hill, Bruce couldn't tell who won the race in the end.

He held his arms out to his furious younger sons as they trudged over the crest of the hill. "This is all your fault, Father," Damian complained as he huddled in close to Bruce's warmth.

"How so?" Bruce asked gamely.

"You adopted those morons."

"Agreed," Tim mumbled, his face hidden against Bruce's jacket. Bruce chuckled and squeezed them tightly. After a few seconds, Tim turned his face so he could see his younger brother. "Hey, Damian. Want to plot our revenge?"

"I like the way you think, Timothy."

Bruce wisely declared himself a neutral party as Tim and Damian plotted. By the time his older sons made it back to the top of the hill, solidly coated in powder snow, whatever his two youngest had planned so far was kept to themselves. He suspected that they might be waiting for Dick and Jason to let their guards down before striking, especially if their scheme needed a little more attention to the details.

"Did you see our impressive victory, Dami?" Dick asked, slightly breathless but still beaming fully at his abandoned partner.

"You barely beat me, which is almost like a victory for the runt and I, considering how much worse our sled is," Jason countered. "Right, Timbers?"

Bruce discreetly raised his gloved hand to hide his chuckle as Tim and Damian leveled Jason and Dick with identical deadpan expressions. Fortunately, Damian could rarely stay mad at Dick for long, so eventually the young man wore his brothers down enough that they all decided to take advantage of the new sledding tracks and do a few more runs down the hill. Bruce was perfectly content to remain at the top and watch his sons get to enjoy what should have been a regular activity for them. His high spirits were dampened as he considered how it was their vigilante activities that often left them little time to simply be boys and play around in the snow.

The flurries that had been falling lazily since they ventured outside started to pick up, quickly escalating to another thick blanketing. Bruce had had enough of the chill anyway and he was glad for the excuse to put an end to his kids' newest game. "Dick, sleds are not meant to be ridden
standing upright," he said.

"People snowboard all of the time, B," Jason argued as he tested the steadiness of the wooden sled under his booted foot.

"On snowboards, yes," Bruce replied. "Don't even think about it."

"How is this any worse than what we do nightly at home?" Dick asked, though he looked less convinced that the plastic sled would hold up as well as the wooden one.

"Dick, you have young, impressionable little brothers who should not be taught to do reckless, dangerous things." For his part, Tim didn't look altogether convinced that Dick's idea to stand up while sledding was a great one, either, but Damian seemed to be seriously considering how to successfully make it to the bottom of the hill to show up his brothers.

"You taught them how to jump off of skyscrapers with only a grappling gun to catch them," Dick rejoined smugly.

That was something Bruce was starting to regret, now that he had had a glimpse into what a normal childhood might have looked like for his sons and daughter. "We need to head back, anyway. It's starting to snow again and I don't want to get lost outside in a blizzard." He wrapped an arm around Tim, whose nose and cheeks were bright pink from the cold. Little Damian's lips were starting to turn purple.

"Whatever," Jason conceded as he clapped his hands together to get the blood flowing to his fingertips again. "Next time." Bruce frowned. There would be no next time for perilous stunts.

The trek back to the cabin felt twice as long as it had on the way to the sledding hill. The new storm practically obscured the sun, making it darker than usual for the late afternoon. The wind gusts increased in intensity as well, cutting right through their layers of clothing as if they weren't even there. Bruce made sure to keep a firm grip on Damian and instructed his other sons to walk in front of him. Tim stayed close behind his older brothers as their larger forms protected him slightly from the wind.

Bruce's eyes stung with snow and he could hardly feel his face by the time he finally saw the faint lights of the cabin up ahead. He would never admit it out loud, but he had started to worry that they'd gotten off track somehow. He was very grateful to stomp up the steps to the wide porch… where he nearly lost his footing on a camouflaged patch of ice. Thankfully, he recovered just in time to save Damian from a painful face plant on the slick wooden steps. Eager to get inside, Bruce didn't waste any time setting Damian back on his feet. Instead, he carried his youngest into the warm interior and waited for Alfred to close the door behind them before finally letting Damian go.

"My goodness," said the older man. "It's really coming down out there. The weatherman is predicting another six to twelve inches." Alfred frowned as he took in the state of his guests. "Hurry and strip out of your snow pants and coats, then change into dry clothes. I'll start some hot chocolate."

"Coffee?" asked Tim, looking up hopefully at Alfred.

"Hot chocolate," said Bruce as he tugged Tim's hood down over his eyes. "But coffee sounds wonderful to me," he added in a low voice strictly for the butler's ears. Alfred nodded knowingly.

"If you don't mind, take your wet things into the utility room," Alfred requested. Bruce and his boys were eager to be dry and warm again, so they quickly followed the Brit's instructions. Dick turned on
the warm water in the laundry room sink to help them thaw out their fingers.

By the time they returned to their rooms to change and then regrouped in the kitchen, Alfred had a pot of dark chocolate cocoa simmering on the stovetop and was just putting a fresh batch of cookies into the oven. "Perhaps when you're finished with your warm drinks, you might help me decorate these cookies," he told the boys. Bruce was hit with a pang of nostalgia, though at home the cookie decorating usually took place in late December rather than mid-November.

His Robins settled in around the rustic wooden table in the eat-in portion of the kitchen. Alfred handed out the first two mugs, warning their recipients that they were very hot. Bruce helped himself to the pot of coffee that had just finished brewing. He took the open seat next to Tim as Alfred returned with the second round of hot chocolate. Finally, he made his own mug and joined the family at the table.

"Did you have fun sledding?" Alfred asked, smiling warmly at the boys.

"It is a passably fun activity," said Damian. "I would prefer if it were warmer, of course."

"Maybe you wouldn't have felt so cold if you'd ever had to drag the sled back up the hill," Jason said.

Damian turned up his still-pink nose. "That is a mere drop of the penitence you owe me."

Jason grinned toothily. "For what? Tossing you off the sled?"

Damian scowled. Bruce rescued his coffee mug from the sticky fingers of his fifteen-year-old. Dick laughed brightly and Tim pouted. Jason launched into a wildly exaggerated retelling of their sledding exploits.

After correcting yet another claim of Jason's to which Damian took personal offense, the eleven-year-old stood up with his empty mug. "Mr. Pennyworth, may I refill my drink?"

"Allow me," said the once-butler as he pushed his chair back from the table.

"Nonsense. I am perfectly capable of retrieving my own beverage," Damian argued. Alfred shrugged and bid Damian to help himself while keeping in mind that the pot was quite hot. "Do not worry, Mr. Pennyworth. I am adept at fending for myself."

Bruce rolled his eyes, though he couldn't keep a fond smile off of his face even as he had to physically push Tim's hands back to their own place setting. "You mentioned six to twelve inches?"

he asked Alfred. "How often does the snow plow make it up here?"

"Not often enough," Alfred replied. "The snow is especially troublesome when there are back-to-back storms. I will likely have to clear the driveway myself should we have need to go out within the next couple of days."

"You'll do no such thing," Bruce argued. "I can think of four fit young men who'd be eager to repay you for all of your kindness by shoveling some snow out of the way." Both Jason and Dick nodded in agreement that they'd be happy to help. Bruce folded his fingers around Tim's when they inched too close to his coffee cup and rested their conjoined hands on the table.

"We do have a snow blower, though the help would be appreciated even so," Alfred said.

They were all startled when the power suddenly flickered out. Bruce jumped up at Damian's pained hiss and the sound of shattering porcelain, nearly taking his knee out on the leg of the table.
"Shit," Jason swore.

"Damian, are you all right?" Bruce asked worriedly as he blindly tried to reach his son. The way was made a little easier to navigate when the spread of candles in the table centerpiece flickered to life. Bruce fortunately managed to avoid stepping on any of the broken mug or quickly spreading cocoa as he scooped his baby up into his arms. "What happened?"

Damian clutched his left hand to his chest. "I missed the mug with the ladle when the power went out," Damian reported through clenched teeth. "It was a foolish mistake."

"Darn it," Bruce said. He changed directions to head for the sink. "Dick, help me."

His eldest was immediately at his side, clearing the few items on the counter away from the sink so Bruce could set Damian on the cool granite. "Let me see, Dami," Bruce encouraged quietly. He carefully rolled up Damian's sleeve so it wouldn't get wet while he guided Damian's hand and wrist under the tepid water. Damian's breathing was artificially even as he battled through the pain.

The lights turned back on, filling the cabin. Bruce blinked a couple of times to clear the spots from his vision. Now, he could see the redness of Damian's scalded skin clearly. It certainly looked painful. Alfred reentered the kitchen. The faint scent of gasoline wafted in after him.

"Is he burned badly?" Alfred asked. "Let me..." He trailed off as he made his way to the base of the stairs. "Master Thomas!"

"You don't need to bother him," Bruce said. "If you just have some salve--"

"Master Thomas is a doctor. He can certainly help," Alfred insisted. "Master Thomas!"

Bruce was more than capable of tending to the injury himself, as would have been Alfred in their own universe. Each of his sons also knew how to field dress burns. Still, the idea of his father, a bona fide doctor, looking after his son was appealing to Bruce. He hoped that the older man would come out of hiding to help them.

"Fa-father," Damian panted. "I am sorry about the mug."

"Don't even worry about that," Dick chided gently. Bruce could tell that his eldest was keeping a wary eye on the stairs as their reluctant host attended to Alfred's summons.

"Shhh," Bruce soothed, hugging Damian as if the miniature assassin desired that kind of comfort. Damian actually leaned into his father's embrace. His right hand curled into the wool of Bruce's sweater.

For a moment, Dr. Wayne looked like he would refuse to come any closer to the cluster of strangers in his kitchen, each staring at him like a ghost who'd physically manifested before them for the first time. However, he took a deep breath and then walked hesitantly toward Bruce and Damian. Thomas cleared his throat awkwardly once he reached Bruce's side. "May I see the burned area?"

Dick shifted out of the way, moving to stand on Bruce's other side. Damian stared at Thomas distrustfully for a good ten seconds before finally pulling his arm from the spray of water and holding it up for the doctor to see. Thomas raised his hands, though he stopped short of actually touching Damian. The slightly wrinkled appendages shook marginally.

"It's okay," Bruce said softly for both of their benefits. "We'd appreciate your help," he said to Thomas. Thomas held his gaze for a couple of seconds before breaking eye contact to inspect the burn. He was infinitely gentle as he manipulated Damian's lower arm, as if he were handling a
"A newborn kitten."

"Is he going to live, Doc?" asked Jason irreverently from where he sat with Tim at the table, hovering somewhat overprotectively about the younger teenager.

"Shut up, Todd," Damian snapped.

As annoying as the comment had been, it achieved Jason's purpose in cutting through the tension building thickly in the small kitchen. Bruce shot the eighteen-year-old a look that he hoped properly conveyed the mix of thanks and irritation that he wanted to convey. Thomas released Damian's arm and glanced about the room, pausing the longest on Alfred. The butler nodded encouragingly from his place next to the oven from which he'd just rescued the cookies.

"It's a second degree burn," the doctor explained, his voice gravelly like Batman's, from disuse and alcohol abuse. "I'll be right back. Put his hand back under the water."

While they waited for Thomas to return, Bruce asked, "How long can the generator run?"

"We just had the fuel tank refilled at the beginning of the season and haven't had need of it until now. We will be fine for up to a week, though I'm certain that power will be restored before then."

Bruce looked at each of his sons. "Still, let's do our best to use as little electricity as possible."

"I'll start a fire in the den," offered Alfred. "I'm sure we have more candles stashed around here, too."

Thomas returned with a clean towel, antibiotic ointment, and non-stick bandage. He washed his hands quickly, then took Damian's arm to inspect the burn once more. "How is the pain?" he asked.

"It is more tolerable than before," said Damian.

"You're being really brave about this, Dami," Dick cooed at him.

Damian flushed in embarrassment. "Do not be ridiculous, Richard. It is but a flesh wound."

"Oh my gosh!" Dick exclaimed, oblivious to the way Thomas's head snapped up in surprise at the loud outburst. "Did you just quote Monty Python?" Damian's cheeks pinking further.

"I didn't know you watched Quest for the Holy Grail," Tim said.

"Tt," Damian scoffed. "It does me no good to be unaware of the things about you and Fatgirl natter incessantly."

"I'm so proud of you, Lil' D," Dick gushed. "Not for being rude to Stephanie, but for taking an interest in your brothers' hobbies."

Damian was distracted by Thomas turning off the sink water and carefully patting his arm dry. The doctor carefully applied a thin layer of the antibiotic ointment over the blistering area, then loosely wrapped the bandage around Damian's hand and wrist. "Can he have ibuprofen?" Thomas asked.

"Yes," Bruce replied. "Thank you."

"I... you're welcome."

Alfred returned and remarked happily at the sight of the skillfully applied bandage. "Have you been introduced to the boys yet, Master Thomas?"
"No." Thomas didn't exactly sound like he wanted to meet them, either, but Alfred continued anyway.

"Bruce's eldest is Richard," Alfred said, patting Dick on the shoulder.

"You can call me Dick," the twenty-two-year-old offered warmly, never one to act overtly shy around strangers.

"'Cuz he is one," Jason chimed in.

"That's Jason," said Dick. "You could call him an ass, but he doesn't always respond."

"Boys," Bruce scolded tiredly. He moved away from the counter to give Damian room to jump down. He headed for his forgotten cup of coffee. He was dismayed to see that it wasn't nearly as full as it had been before the lights went out. A suspicious glance confirmed that Tim's mug was nearly overflowing with dark liquid. It smelled like his cocoa had mysteriously morphed into a mocha. Exasperated, he admitted defeat and consoled himself that he could always refill his cup. "This is Tim, and Damian is my youngest."

"It's nice to finally meet you, Dr. Wayne," said Dick.

"Likewise," replied Thomas, sounding uncertain. Bruce didn't blame him.

Alfred picked up a dish towel and waved it in the direction of the den. "Go, all of you, and get to know each other better in the warmth of the fire. I will clean up in here."

"I will help you, Mr. Pennyworth," Damian said.

"I am quite fine, dear boy. You should keep your hand elevated anyway."

Thomas looked uncomfortably about himself once again. "I have things I must attend to. Excuse me." With that, he quickly made his way back upstairs. Bruce sighed and shook his head before making his way over to the coffee machine.

_to be continued..._

Chapter End Notes

Not the greatest chapter to date - for some reason it didn't flow as easily as some of the others, so I apologize if it's a bit choppy. Helpful feedback would be much appreciated if you have some.
Chapter Thirty-Eight

The next morning, Bruce was awake before the sun thanks to an early night and the sense of foreboding that had snuck up on him in the small hours before dawn. His mind drifted to each of his boys before settling on his daughter. Every time he thought about Cassandra, the knot in his gut felt tighter. He wished that he had some way of knowing how the young woman fared, alone as she was in Gotham City. Surely she and Alfred were taking care of each other, but that did little to ease the worry that Bruce felt. He wished that he could see her for himself.

In order to get his mind off of things that he couldn't control, Bruce silently left his room. He headed directly for the kitchen, where no signs of Damian's accident from the night before remained. Before putting his youngest to bed, Bruce had unwrapped and inspected the burn again. Perhaps they had all overreacted a bit in the heat of the moment (Dick would be so proud of his father's pun). While certainly painful due to the scalding temperature of the beverage left to simmer for too long, the burn was likely only a bad first-degree. To that end, he'd left the wound clean and unwrapped. A few more ibuprofen pills and Damian would be just fine.

Bruce helped himself to the leftover coffee grounds from yesterday, of which there were plenty to brew half of a pot for the single drinker. While he waited for the machine to finish, he shuffled through the stack of newspapers meant to be recycled the next time that the outdoor bins were easily accessible. The most recent edition was a couple of days old since the paperboy had wisely avoided braving the deep snow. It was Bruce's best option at the moment to distract himself, so he spread it open on the kitchen table.

With his black coffee ready to drink, Bruce settled in at the head of the table and idly glanced through the classifieds. No multibillion dollar corporations were seeking well-intentioned yet slightly irresponsible CEOs, though a couple of the trade companies looking for help peaked his interest minutely. Surely the residents of the sleepy little hunting community of upstate New York didn't need rocket engines affixed to their pickup trucks, but Bruce was pretty handy at changing oil and brake pads, too. He might actually enjoy the straightforward, yet important work of an auto mechanic and the starting hourly wage was infinitely more than he was currently making. He just needed to find a way to overcome his lack of proper identification. A smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth as he imagined what Damian's imperious mother might think of her "beloved" covered in oil and grease up to his elbows on a daily basis.

Bruce hadn't realized that nearly an hour had passed while he imagined himself as a middleclass, single working father. The dim light of dawn now hovered at the southern horizon. His half-drunk coffee was cold. The presence of another registered in his peripheral vision.

"Good morning," Bruce greeted. He cleared his throat after the roughness of his own voice grated at his ears.

"Good morning to you," replied this world's Alfred. "I am sorry to bother you, but Master Thomas has requested your assistance in the library." There was a hint of smile in the older man's expression that triggered Bruce's curiosity. Gamely, he pushed back from the table and stood.

"Of course." Bruce followed Alfred to the small room that served as both a library and home office.
for Thomas Wayne's occasional work as a doctor to his remote community. When they entered the
room, they found Thomas standing tensely before his desk. His wrinkled brow was further lined by
his pensive expression as he alternated between eying the papers waiting for him on the writing
surface, and the Victorian-style loveseat across the room.

Alfred's mirth grew as he took in Thomas' discomfort. "I have summoned your rescuer as requested,
Master Thomas."

Thomas' frown deepened into a scowl at his butler's teasing. Bruce was similarly not amused, though
for a different reason. He strode across the small room to kneel beside the sofa as his pseudo-father
complained that he had work to do and did not appreciate his study being invaded. From the look on
the man's face when they had entered, Bruce would have thought that Thomas was plagued by an
infestation of rodents, not a lost little boy who'd wandered out of his room sometime after Bruce had
checked on his sons earlier. Bruce ran his fingers through the dark bangs obscuring the teenager's
eyes as the youth slept.

"I'm sorry that he inconvenienced you," Bruce said, purposefully aiming to strike at what little
empathy he knew the man still possessed. He didn't know if he succeeded, but Alfred's countenance
immediately mellowed.

Bruce was loathe to wake his son, who appeared to have finally found enough peace to sleep after
what must have been a fitful night. Hopefully the boy would be able to rest again easily once
relocated to a less public room. "Wake up, kiddo," he coaxed, patting Tim's pale cheek lightly.

Thomas crossed his arms over his chest, tucking his hands under his armpits. "Would he not be
distressed to awaken and find a strange man in the room with him?" he asked defensively.

"You're only to strange to him because you refuse to interact with him and his brothers," Bruce
replied. Maybe he was being too harsh and his snark was uncalled for. Or, maybe his feelings were
hurt by a version of his beloved father outright rejecting the grandchildren that Bruce himself had
personally chosen.

Bruce forced his expression to neutralize as tired blue eyes fluttered open. "How'd you sneak past
Jason?" he asked in a warmer voice. Tim made a disgruntled face in response, still trying to shake off
the cobwebs of sleep.

"That couch is not fit for lying on," Thomas said. His insistent tone was likely meant to implore the
others to forgive him for being cold and aloof, as if he truly couldn't help himself. "I should know, I
have… slept upon it enough times and always regret it in the morning."

Passed out, you mean, Bruce thought angrily. It didn't matter - Tim was awake now, rubbing wearily
at his eyes with one hand as he pushed himself into a seated position with the other. The borrowed
tablet that he'd taken to carrying with him everywhere in the house like a stuffed animal slid from his
lap and onto the stiff cushion of the couch. Yes, this piece of furniture was probably not comfortable
for sleeping, but Bruce didn't believe that the doctor's excuses were the real reason that he wanted the
teenager moved from the room. "Come lie down in my room, kiddo. You'll be more comfortable,"
Bruce said.

"Where…" Tim finally noticed Thomas and Alfred watching him with conflicted expressions. "Oh.
I'm in the way again, aren't I?"

"No, you're not," Bruce stated a bit more forcefully than he meant to. He tugged on Tim's arm to get
the teenager to stand. "I want you with me right now. Come on, grab the tablet." Bruce bunched up
the blanket that Tim had brought from his bunk and tucked it under one arm. He wrapped his free
arm around his son. Over the top of Tim's head, Bruce leveled Thomas with a disappointed look. They were halfway to the door when Thomas cleared his throat. "I… If you alert me when the youngest one awakens, I will check his burn."

Bruce didn't feel satisfied knowing that his pointed barbs had actually struck their intended target. He ignored the metaphorical olive branch. "Do not trouble yourself. I can take care of Damian myself." He guided his son from the room.

"What's the matter?" Tim asked in a whisper once they were in the hallway. Back in the library, Bruce heard Thomas inform Alfred that he needed a drink. The butler crisply replied that he certainly did not.

"Nothing," Bruce answered succinctly. He guided Tim toward the small bedroom that Bruce was using. "What's bothering you? How come you're out of bed?"

"I couldn't sleep," Tim muttered. "I didn't want to wake Jason, so I tried to distract myself with the tablet in another room."

"Nightmares?"

"No, just…" Tim sighed.

"It's okay," Bruce soothed. They entered his room. Bruce closed the door after nudging Tim toward the rumpled bed. "I'm sorry to have to wake you up when you'd finally found sleep." Tim crawled onto the mattress and lowered himself down stiffly near the middle. "I would have preferred to leave you be."

"It's fine," Tim said. He curled up around Bruce's spare pillow.

Bruce sat on the edge of the bed so he could card his fingers through Tim's hair. "Do you think you can sleep again, kiddo?"

"No," Tim's face scrunched up and he knocked Bruce's hand away so he could pull on a fistful of his own hair. "Why can't I just stop?"

"Shhh." Bruce untangled Tim's fingers and entwined them with his own. "You're not alone, and you're not unwanted. I love you more than I ever thought I could love another person, and I want you with me, always," he promised, addressing the teenager's most common concerns.

The door to the room unlatched and swung inward, revealing a sleepy redhead. "Hey B, you seen…" Jason trailed off after seeing Tim for himself. He scratched at his chest through his t-shirt and yawned. "Right. Okay."

"How'd he slip by you?" Bruce asked, annoyed that Tim had been left to struggle with his depression alone. Truthfully, Bruce was annoyed with himself for failing in just that way, but he was easily falling back into his bad habit of shifting the blame to others.

And supersensitive Jason was exactly the wrong person to deflect on. "Because you taught him how to be a sneaky little bastard, that's how. What the fuck is your problem?"

Bruce raised his hands apologetically as Tim groaned and pulled the pillow over his head. "I'm sorry, Jason. I'm a little angry, but not at you. And it's not your responsibility to keep track of your brothers, it's mine."
"You're not mad at the kid, are you?" Jason wasn't over his offense just yet.

"No! Of course not. Absolutely not." Bruce resisted the urge to squirm as Jason studied him suspiciously. He nearly breathed a sigh of relief when the eighteen-year-old's keen teal eyes finally shifted to focus on his younger brother. Bruce's reprieve was short lived, however.

Jason's gaze snapped back to his father. "Did the 'good doctor' do something to him? Is that why you're pissy at me that Timmy was wandering around by himself?"

"No." Bruce didn't like the patronizing look Jason was giving him. Unfortunately, it was a look he'd seen on all five of his children's faces, and even a few times on Barbara's and Stephanie's. He had no idea from where they'd learned it - he'd never seen Alfred regard anyone in such a manner. "Don't look at me like that." He stood up, feeling a little less uncomfortable now that he was slightly taller than Jason. Instead of ceasing to judge him, Jason's cocked eyebrow only raised further.

Tim sat up on the bed, his dark hair in wild disarray thanks to the static caused by the pillow. "I'm going to go bother Dick."

"Stay here with me," Bruce argued, happy for the diversion. Jason dropped his utterly condescending look in order to regard his brother as well.

"Not while Jason's giving you the Bat-dad Glare of Eternal Disappointment," Tim said. "It's bringing up bad memories."

Bruce sputtered. "I do not--"

"All. The. Time. You fucker," Jason informed him, though his tone was lighter than his words.

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose as he grumbled, "Language, young man."

"Language, young man," Jason mimicked in a nasally voice. He sat down heavily on the bed, making it bounce slightly, and then wrapped his arm around Tim's neck in a headlock. "Next time you're in a funk, wake me up, baby bird."

"Jason, be careful with him," Bruce admonished tiredly. He knew that Tim wasn't easily breakable, but the teenager's recent struggles with his physical and mental health had tied the father's heartstrings in knots and he couldn't help resisting any threat to his son's wellbeing.

"You still haven't told me what happened," Jason said. He let Tim sit upright again as his piercing gaze remained fixed on Bruce.

"Nothing."

Tim apparently cared more for keeping the peace between Jason and Bruce than between Jason and Thomas. "I couldn't sleep so I went into the library to work on the tablet. I must have fallen asleep in there, and I think it made Dr. Wayne mad."

"He wasn't mad, he was concerned for your comfort," Bruce said. He was ashamed that he found himself repeating the same weak excuses that he'd condemned from his pseudo-father a mere thirty minutes ago, but he brushed aside his irritation at himself. Protecting Tim's feelings was more important than the truth, he rationalized.

"That's not true, or you wouldn't be so on edge," Jason rebutted, eying Bruce critically once again.

"Don't accuse me of lying," Bruce complained. He wasn't lying, anyway. He was hedging.
"You're the one who trained us to recognize when someone is concealing the truth," Tim said.

"Argh!" Bruce covered his face with his hands. First Dick, then Jason, and now sweet little Timmy. "Stop using the helpful, life-saving skills that I taught you out of a genuine concern for your continued existence to torment me!"

It was quiet for a few seconds, and then, "You must have skipped a couple of those life-saving lessons for me," Jason quipped.

Bruce gaped at him. "Jason!"

From next to the cruel eighteen-year-old, muted giggles escaped Bruce's fifteen-year-old. Bruce maintained his dumbfounded expression as he turned his head to look at Tim. The boy failed to muffle more snickers behind his hand. Jason didn't even bother to try to hide his mirth. Bruce didn't fool himself into thinking that Tim had magically broken out of his depressive spell, but the brief moment of happiness raised his spirits just the same.

If this was what had caused the feeling of dread that had woken him much too early this morning, Bruce figured that he had gotten off easily. Now, the feeling had vanished with his sons' banter. With a resigned, yet fond sigh, he shook his head. "I'm going to make breakfast. Come with me to the kitchen."

His middle sons followed him through the quiet house. They took up seats at the kitchen table. When Tim's nose twitched at the scent of the stale coffee, Jason patted his arm and shook his head. Bruce casually dumped the rest of the old brew down the sink and left the carafe to be cleaned with the rest of the dishes he was about to dirty. "What sounds good?" he asked once he'd opened the fridge to eye the contents inside.

"Do you need help?" Jason asked skeptically.

"Do you need help?" Bruce asked in a high voice, returning the favor of Jason's earlier mocking. In his usual timbre, he said, "No, I can handle scrambled eggs and toast, thank you. Brat."

"But I want eggs benedict with homemade hollandaise sauce," Jason said sweetly. "Exactly like Alfred makes it."

"Even you don't make it exactly like Alfred," Tim informed his older brother.

"Thank you, kiddo," said Bruce. He shot Jason a look.

"When you make the scrambled eggs, can you make them fluffy instead of soupy, and not toast the bread until it's just shy of turning to ashes?"

"If that's what you prefer, Timmy," Bruce said dryly, feeling betrayed. He pulled the eggs, milk, and cheese from the refrigerator. It took him a couple of minutes to find a skillet and spatula, though he eventually succeeded. As he prepped the pan over the heated stove, he idly listened to his sons talk to each other now that they were done being mean to him.

"You know," said Jason, sounding almost uncertain. That was strange coming from his brashest son. "You can wake me up if you're not feeling well. You don't always have to depend on Dickiebird or B, and you really don't have to deal with it on your own."

"I know," said Tim. "But if I bothered one of you every time I got down, you'd never get any sleep, either." Bruce frowned and concentrated on not stirring the eggs too much.
"We're pretty used to not sleeping by now." Jason's chair scraped slightly on the tile floor as he shifted in it. "After I finally started to calm down from my swim in the pit and Talia's machinations, I was pretty depressed, too. Not only did I feel like I'd lost my family, but I'd failed to exact my revenge, too."

"I made you feel that way," Tim said sadly.

"No. You were the easiest one to hurt, being so small and trusting and fucking idolizing." Bruce knew that Jason regretted his actions after returning to Gotham City, even if his compliance with Bruce's no killing rule was still grudging at best. Still, Bruce hated what his son had gone through alone, and wished he could get Jason to talk to him about it. "Anyway," said Jason more evenly. "The point is that I've felt the things that you feel right now. I probably understand better than B and certainly better than Dickface."

"Dick's struggled, too," argued Tim. "You're not the first one to be replaced." Bruce nearly bit his tongue in an effort to not shout that none of his sons had been replaced, ever. He would make that point clear later, but not in the middle of Jason finally opening up to someone within Bruce's hearing.

Jason continued as if he hadn't heard Tim. "I spent many days and nights wishing that I'd never come back to life. Sound familiar?"

"Maybe," Tim hedged.

"I pushed everyone away: Roy, Kori, fucking Dick Grayson who would not leave me the hell alone no matter how many times I tried to put another hole in his ugly face. Can you tell me why I did that, Timbers?"

"'Cuz it's easier to cope with feeling alone when you're actually alone," Tim said in a small voice. "And because Roy can be really irritating."

Jason laughed. "What'd he ever do to you?"

"I'm yours and Dick's little brother, which for some reason means that I'm required to be picked on by your jerk friends. So I got it double from stupid Roy Harper." Bruce made a mental note to have words with Oliver Queen once they were back in their own world. He ignored the fact that Queen had little influence over Arsenal anymore. He'd seize any opportunity to have words with his "ally".

"Well, in the future you tell me when the older kids are picking on you. No one's allowed to bother you or the demon. That's a right reserved for only me and Dickie."

"Thanks. That makes me feel a lot better." Jason chuckled at Tim's sarcasm.

"What special right do you and I share, Jaybird?" Bruce looked over to see his youngest and oldest entering the kitchen just as he decided that the eggs were as good as they were going to get. Both seemed to have fared the night better than the rest of their family. Dick was smiling as he leaned over the back of Jason's chair. Damian moved to Bruce's side to take the plates that his father had just pulled down from one of the cabinets.

"None," Tim insisted as Jason said, "Torturing the kids."

Dick's grin widened. "Oh, my favorite pastime." He moved to stand behind Tim's chair so he could bend down and press a wet kiss to the teenager's cheek while hugging him tightly.

"Nyah!"
"I'm not that annoying, am I?"

"Jason, help me!"

Dick shifted to the side without letting go of Tim, and proceeded to sit on Jason's lap. "Hey! There are plenty of other chairs. Get your ass off of me," Jason complained. Dick released Tim so he could sit more fully on Jason. "What the hell is your problem?"

Dick draped an arm around Jason's neck. "Did you forget, little wing? You're my little brother, too."

"Okay, stop goofing off," Bruce chided. "Breakfast is served." His children all shifted to sit in their own chairs.

Before taking his first bite of nearly perfectly fluffed scrambled eggs, Tim bashfully looked over at Jason. "Thanks for telling me about your troubles."

"Anytime, runt."

"Timothy," said Damian sourly from his seat next to the older boy. "We have an accord. Stop cavorting with the enemy."

xXx

The morning dragged by slowly after Alfred helped them clean up from breakfast. Bruce found himself sleepily watching one of the three channels that the television's bunny ears managed to pick up through the newest storm that promised to bury them under even more snow. Dick dozed against Bruce's shoulder and Jason was lost in the pages of a mystery novel borrowed from the now vacated library. Bruce didn't know where Thomas had disappeared to, nor did he care to find out. Tim and Damian were safely tucked into Bruce's bed, napping and out of the way from any apprehensive hosts.

The local news was on, and all that the anchors spoke about was the extensive disruption that the snowfall was causing. Most of the roads were impassable despite the county's best efforts to plow them. It didn't matter that the stores were unable to restock basic necessities like canned goods and water since none of their customers could reach them anyway. Bruce was glad that it never snowed so much in Gotham City, so Cassandra and their Alfred were likely not so inconvenienced by the weather.

The sound of cautious shuffling drew Bruce out of his musings. He craned his neck to see Thomas vacillating near the foot of the stairs. While Jason didn't lower his book or shift his position, Bruce knew that his son's sharp gaze was focused on the doctor as well. Thomas rubbed at the back of his neck before taking a step forward and motioning toward the television. "I wish to see the news as well."

"And you want the rest of us to clear out so you can have the room to yourself?"

"Jason," Bruce hissed, eager to take the high ground despite having thought the same thing himself. Thomas' jaw ticked. "No. I… there is plenty of room for all of us, as long as you don't mind the company of an old man."

"It's your living room," Jason groused before going back to his book. Thomas awkwardly entered the sitting area and perched on the front edge of the chair matching Jason's.

Bruce found it difficult to not take pity on the universe's version of his father. Despite his family's
frosty reception so far, he couldn't help but see the older man through glassed tinted rose by his memories of his own father. Plus, it seemed to Bruce that Thomas must have regretted his earlier reaction to one of his guests and was trying to make amends for it now. "This is some storm we're having."

"Yes," said Thomas, latching on to the peace offering. "I haven't seen snow like this since you… since my Bruce was ten years old." The memory of his late son instantly dampened the man's mood. "We made a whole army of snowmen in the front yard, until we were so chilled that we could hardly hold the mugs of hot chocolate that Martha made for us."

Dick straightened from his slouch against Bruce's side, awoken by the fresh conversation. "Do you remember that, B?"

"Not exactly," Bruce replied. He wasn't surprised that his childhood in this alternate universe wasn't precisely the same as the one he'd lived. "But I do recall making plenty of snowmen with my father when he wasn't at the hospital or WE."

"You should make a snowman with Dami someday. He'd like that." Bruce's gut clenched with the same regret that he'd felt the day before while his children were sledding. He nodded in agreement, not trusting his voice not to crack if he tried to speak. All of his kids would have benefitted from a more normal childhood, not just his youngest.

"Damian looks so much like my Bruce did at that age," said Thomas wistfully. Bruce was encouraged by the man's sentiment, until Thomas continued speaking. "It hurts to look at him."

"Please don't tell him that," said Bruce, frustrated again.

"No, of course not." "Maybe you could try to get to know Damian as your grandson, and not think of him as Bruce's ghost," suggested Dick. Bruce was thankful for his eldest's unending desire to help and bolster his family's relationships.

"It is not a simple thing to move on from the death of your child," Thomas replied, as if offended by Dick's suggestion.

"I suppose alcohol helps," Jason snarked. Bruce closed his eyes in dismay.

Thomas sat up straighter in his chair. "I'm not proud of many things in my past, but I'll not suffer impertinent guests to admonish me in my own home."

"Jason's father was an alcoholic," Dick blurted out before the rising tension in the room exploded. "He's got plenty of scars to show for it. While his comment was rude and uncalled for, surely you can see why it's a sensitive subject for him."

Thomas didn't respond verbally. He did settle back into his seat, though a deep frown remained etched onto his face. Leery of rocking the boat any further, Bruce shifted forward and prodded Dick. "Come on, let's go check on your brothers." He motioned for Jason to rise as well.

Thomas' frown twisted into a remorseful grimace. "Don't leave on my account," he said. "I am unused to having company and my social skills have suffered because of it."

"So after days of avoiding us like the plague, suddenly you want to be friends? What changed between earlier this morning and now?"
"Jason, why?" asked Dick, exasperated.

"Because he already thinks I'm impertinent, so why not ask the hard questions?"

"I regret that I made the young man--"

"His name is Tim."

"Tim feel like he was intruding," finished Thomas, staring at Jason. For all that his pseudo-father was acting contrite and humble right now, Bruce remembered Thomas Wayne being a proud man, which could be dangerous when combined with Jason's combative nature. Bruce didn't think it would take much for Jason to push too hard.

"Wait, what happened?" asked Dick, looking between his brother and their host in confusion.

"I'll tell you what happened," Jason replied.

"Dick, Jason, stop," Bruce ordered. "Jason, you weren't there and you don't know what happened. It was a misunderstanding and everyone is fine."

"Why are you defending him?" Jason demanded.

"Because our only alternative right now is going back to stay with Ella," Bruce reminded him. Jason scowled and crossed his arms over his chest.

"According to the news, we're not going anywhere," Dick muttered.

"All of the more reason to be civil," Bruce said. He felt a headache forming in his temples. The sharp, jarring sound of the telephone ringing didn't help. It rang twice more before stopping, after Bruce assumed that Alfred had answered it from another location in the cabin.

"Saved by the bell," Dick said dryly.

Alfred joined them a few minutes later, his face pale and pinched as if he were about to deliver bad news. "Miss Elizabeth wishes to speak with you, Bruce."

"No, speak of the devil," Jason corrected his brother.

"What's wrong?" asked Bruce.

"There have been complications during Mistress Martha's recovery. She does not fare well."

*to be continued*...

Chapter End Notes

Please check out this adorable picture of Tim from the library scene by Alreem. :)

https://imgur.com/a/IUzbj
Chapter Thirty-Nine

Chapter Notes

In case you missed it at the end of Chapter 38, please check out this adorable picture of Tim from the library scene by Alreem. :)  
https://imgur.com/a/IUzbj

Chapter Thirty-Nine

"There have been complications during Mistress Martha's recovery. She does not fare well."

Bruce was out of his seat before he consciously thought to stand. He hurried past the pensive butler, nearly bumping the older man as he made his way toward the closest telephone. He snatched up the receiver and almost smacked himself in the face with it due to his haste. "Ella?"

"Bruce." The woman sounded exhausted. Bruce was by no means particularly happy to hear her voice again, especially since he knew that she would be delivering bad news, but he wished for her sake that she sounded better.

"What's wrong? Alfred said that Martha was unwell."

"Unwell is an understatement," Ella replied. Her voice caught at the end of her response, and she followed it with a muffled snuffle. "You need to come back."

Bruce felt the sickening ball of dread from early that morning forming in his stomach again. "Ella, we're buried under feet of snow. I don't... we're stuck."

Ella, hardly one to be rational during a time of strife, was biting in her response. "She might not have much time left." Bruce's anger at his helplessness and Ella's lack of understanding rose with the swelling of the rot he felt in his gut. "She deserves better than to pass away alone in an impersonal hospital room."

Bruce took a moment to reign in his worry by reminding himself that sometimes Ella exaggerated. "Tell me what's going on," he demanded impatiently.

"Aunt Martha is experiencing complications from the hip replacement surgery."

"That could mean any number of things. Please be more specific." He very much despised dealing with his pseudo-cousin. His headache throbbed in agreement.

"Well, it started with an infection," said Ella curtly. "But now the doctors are saying she's at a high risk for blood clots."

Ella didn't have to elaborate any further for Bruce. He knew that if a clot formed in Martha's leg, it could eventually break loose and travel to her heart or lungs. The last thing that his mother needed was cardiac or pulmonary issues. An even worse case scenario would be a piece of the clot making its way to her brain and resulting in a stroke.
Bruce gripped the phone so tightly that he heard it creak within his grasp. He forced himself to calm down. He couldn't just jump to conclusions. "Just a risk?" he asked carefully. "None have actually formed?"

"Not that we know about," said Ella. She was beginning to choke up.

"If nothing's actually wrong yet, don't panic. Actually, don't panic even if something is wrong."

"That's easy for you to say!" Ella dissolved into a rant about Bruce not caring about Martha nearly as much as she did. Bruce was tempted to bang his head against the wall in frustration.

A hand landed on Bruce's shoulder, startling the man. He spun around quickly, assuming that one of his well-intentioned children had followed him. Instead, he found Thomas standing behind him. The doctor looked as worried as Bruce felt, despite having been estranged from his wife for so long.

"What is it?"

"Infection and possibly blood clots," Bruce reported quickly. Into the phone he said, "Ella, please calm down."

"Do they have her on blood thinners? Is the infection at the incision, or due to the implant itself?" asked Thomas. Bruce repeated the questions to Ella.

Ella must have heard the second voice in the background of the call. "Is that Alfred?"

"It's Thomas," Bruce corrected. "Ella--"

"That selfish bastard has no business interfering with Aunt Martha. What would he know about her condition?"

"He's a doctor." Bruce regretted raising his voice at her, but not enough to apologize. "What about blood thinners or the location of the infection?"

"I don't know. I need to go home. I need to look through my books, and--"

"No!" Thomas startled at Bruce's emphatic denial. "The last thing Martha needs is your inept meddling with magic, Ella."

"How dare you," she snapped.

"How dare I? I dare because that's exactly what dragged me and my boys into this universe."

"I didn't have to call you, you know. I'm doing you a favor despite how ungrateful you've been to me."

One, two, three, four... "Let me talk to the surgeon," Bruce requested, ignoring her spite.

"They won't talk to you. You're not family here. In case you forgot, in this universe you're dead."

Ella's choked sob was interrupted by the dial tone signaling that she'd hung up on him. Bruce barely refrained from throwing the receiver through the wall.

"Father, I need to speak with you--"

"Go find your brother," Bruce snapped without thinking. Within the few seconds that it took for him to realize that he'd just taken his anger at Ella out on his youngest son, the damage was already done. Little Damian would have looked adorable, as rumpled as he was from his nap, if not for the stormy scowl twisting his expression. Before Bruce could apologize, Damian did exactly as he'd been
instructed. Bruce dug the heel of his palm into his forehead just above the bridge of his nose. "Damn it, Ella."

He tried to call Ella back, but she ignored his call to her cell phone three times in a row. Despite what he'd told her not to do, Bruce found himself starting to panic as he imagined all of the horrible things that could happen to the kindly older woman who would have been his mother in a better world.

"Let me try," said Thomas, gently taking the phone from Bruce.

"She's definitely not going to want to talk to you."

"Nor I with her." Instead of punching in the ten digit number for Ella's phone, Thomas simply hit zero for the operator. Bruce looked at him incredulously as he asked to be connected with the hospital where Martha was admitted. "I was Martha's husband once upon a time. They might talk to me."

Bruce was surprised that Thomas wasn't as upset about this as he was. After all, he actually knew this version of Martha intimately. "How can you be so calm?"

"I'm a doctor," Thomas replied. The corner of his mouth quirked upwards momentarily. "These are the sorts of instances when it's most important that I remain calm and collected." Well, Bruce supposed that he was glad for the older man's composure now, even if Thomas wasn't capable of mustering the same courage when faced with his "grandsons".

Thomas, though he was able to speak with a nurse working in Martha's area of the hospital, didn't learn much more than Bruce had gotten from Ella. The young lady did, however, inform him that any family who wished to see Martha should probably come as soon as they were able. Bruce's heart sank after Thomas repeated her advice. He looked forlornly through a window, where fat flakes of snow continued to fall heavily. They never should have left Ella's. He shouldn't have abandoned his moth-- Martha.

The sensation of tears pooling in the corners of his eyes caused Bruce's barely maintained composure to crumble. He was angry; angry at himself for not being there for Martha when she was so ill, angry at the snow for burying them on the side of a mountain, angry at Thomas for choosing whiskey over his wife, and angry that he could do nothing about any of it.

"Excuse me," he said, Batman's growl tainting the edges of his words.

"Bruce--"

Bruce ignored Thomas. He left the man standing beside the hall telephone as he strode furiously back through the living room toward the foyer. "B?" Bruce shook his head, hoping that his son would take the hint and leave him alone. He made sure to avoid looking at Damian, unable to deal with his guilt for being short to the boy. The walls and ceilings of the cabin seemed to be bearing down on him, making his skin prickle and his breathing difficult. He hoped that outside he might be able to calm down enough to think straight.

He had to pause in front of the hall closet in order to retrieve his parka and boots. Unfortunately, this gave his eldest the opportunity to catch up to him. "Where are you going, Bruce?" Dick asked. When Bruce didn't answer, Dick reached over to grab the older man's arm.

Bruce shook him off. "I need a few minutes. Okay? Leave me alone for a few minutes." Unlike Thomas, Dick recognized the gravel roughening his father's voice.

"What are you going to do?" Dick sounded almost accusatory, like he expected Batman to start
raining hell on people who didn't deserve his greater wrath, cowl or no. Just like he'd done after
Jason died.

"Find somewhere where I can hear myself think!" Bruce suppressed a cringe at his volume. Surely
the whole house had heard his shout.

A lesser man might have shrunk back from him, but Dick merely scowled. "Fifteen minutes, and
then I'm coming to find you."

Bruce barely managed to stop himself from saying something that he knew he would greatly regret
once his temper had cooled. Instead, he said nothing at all. He let the slamming of the front door
speak for itself.

At first, Bruce wasn't quite sure what to do with himself now that he was outside in the snowstorm
by himself. He stomped down the steps and into the drifts that were as tall as his waist. Walking was
difficult, which only served to fuel his frustration and anger. Hurling a few poorly compacted
snowballs into the whiteness didn't help nearly enough. Bruce looked about himself, searching for
any kind of answer to the questions burning brightest in his mind. What do I do? How do I help
Martha? How do I fix this?

His gaze quickly jumped over the picture window at the front of the cabin where four worried faces
were framed, to land instead on the plastic shovel half-buried in one of the snow banks near the
porch steps. A sense of direction struck him. He was Batman. A snowstorm couldn't keep him from
helping someone in need.

The snow seemed to fall as quickly as he threw it out of the way, building towering piles of the
powder and making very little progress in clearing the path away from the cabin. So he shoveled
harder. He tossed the snow further off to the side. He did it faster. He… he… he couldn't breathe.

Bruce dropped to one knee, panting raggedly as sweat poured down his face and neck. He braced
himself with one hand on the shovel while his other pressed against his chest where his lungs burned
from dragging in the frigid air. "Damn it. Get up. Stop being so weak. Martha needs you."

The shovel was suddenly ripped from his grasp. With his balance upended, Bruce barely managed to
catch himself on his hands and knees instead of collapsing all of the way to the icy ground. He had
no chance to block the open-handed slap that stung worse than usual thanks to the chilled skin of his
cheek. "What are you doing, you idiot?"

"Martha needs me."

"We need you! And you're out here shoveling snow in a blizzard like a maniac! For chrissakes,
Bruce, you look like you're having a heart attack, you selfish asshole!"

"I'm not…" Bruce dropped to sit haggardly on the ground. Dick dropped to his knees next to him.
The twenty-two-year-old's eyes were glistening with unshed tears. "I'm not, chum. I'm okay."

"Tell me what's going on or I'll punch you for real this time."

Bruce gave himself a few seconds to try to catch his breath. Breathing was a little easier, now that he
had something else to focus on. He frowned as he regarded his eldest. "Dickie, you're not wearing a
coat. Or shoes."

"Possible heart attack, remember?" the younger man snapped irritably.

"You should be wearing shoes."
"I'm wearing house slippers!" Dick was usually so easy going and cheerful that it was simple for Bruce to forget that his first Robin had a temper to rival his own sometimes. "Focus, Bruce. What's wrong with Martha?"

"I am focused," Bruce argued. "It's barely zero degrees out here. You need to go back inside."

"I'm not going in without you."

Bruce summoned his most terrifying Batman glower, the one known for making Superman reconsider opposing his teammate. "You will do as you're told, young man."

A mocking grin twisted Dick's mouth unpleasantly. "Make me."

"Fine. I will." Bruce surged to his feet and hauled Dick up off of his knees with a fist around the young man's arm. Once they were actually heading back toward the cabin - Bruce storming and Dick being dragged like the insolent youth he was - Dick didn't put up much resistance. It wasn't until they were both back inside the warm interior, shucking off their wet outer layers, that Bruce realized that his miserable child had tricked him. "Damn it, Richard."

"Suck it up, old man." Dick flipped their roles so that he was now the one towing Bruce through the house and into the man's guestroom. "Feel free to start talking whenever you want," Dick said after he'd locked the door. Bruce appreciated the privacy, and would have appreciated it even more if he were alone to deal with his grief and aggravation.

"I don't want to talk to you." "I don't want to burden you any more than I already have."

"Too bad. You can't keep your feelings bottled up. I know you too well for that."

"Let me deal with this my way. Dickie, please."

"Sure, I'll let you deal with this your way as soon as you tell me what this is." Dick crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the door.

_Maddening, stubborn, infuriating boy… _"Martha has developed an infection from the surgery, and she is at a high risk for blood clots."

"That doesn't sound good." Dick's mulish expression softened.

"It's not. She… the nurse told Thomas that we should make plans to visit her as soon as possible." His anger rushed out of him, leaving plenty of room for worry and grief to take its place. Bruce sat down heavily on the edge of the bed. Dick moved to perch next to him, close enough that their legs touched. Knowing that it was futile to try to claim any kind of personal space around his eldest, Bruce gave in and wrapped his arm around the younger man. He had little hope that Dick actually would leave him alone to cope with his feelings in solitude.

Dick happily leaned into the half hug. "Don't people get infections all of the time? Why can't they give her antibiotics?"

"I'm sure they have," Bruce replied. Fatigue from his ill-advised exercise was quickly overtaking him. He swallowed a yawn. "But if it's inside of her where the replacement joint is, it might only be treatable by replacing it again."

"Ouch."

A painfully familiar sadness crashed over Bruce. His heart ached like when he'd stood over his
mother's grave as a twelve year old boy. "She's so frail. I would not want her to have to go through surgery again." He wiped the back of his hand across his eyes. Dick twisted so he could wrap both of his arms around Bruce's torso. "I should have the chance to save her," Bruce mumbled. "Since I was denied as a child."

"She's not gone yet, Bruce. There's always hope."

Bruce shook his head. He preferred to make his own destiny rather than to wait for fate to ruin his life. "We'll see. But are you happy now? I told you what is bothering me."

"Of course I'm not happy." Dick frowned deeply. "You're my dad and you're hurting so badly. I worried that this would happen, ever since you started bonding with Martha."

Bruce squeezed him tightly. "I know. You warned me, and you were right." If those weren't Bruce three least favorite words to utter, he didn't know what were.

"I guess," said Dick. He smirked cheekily. "You know, B, if I am a maddeningly obstinate asshole, I learned it from you. I wasn't like this before you adopted me."

"Of course you did," said Bruce wearily. This time he couldn't stifle his yawn. "Ugh, I'm so tired."

"You should take a nap. Forget about all of the things that you can't control for a while," Dick squirmed out of the embrace and slipped from under Bruce's arm. He pushed on Bruce's shoulder until the older man flopped back on the bed.

Thinking that a nap did actually sound good, he shifted on the bed until his head finally landed on a pillow. "Maybe I will." As he closed his eyes, Bruce was suddenly struck with the desire to not be alone. The bitter isolation of his own mind would only result in him growing panicked once again.

"Can I get you anything?"

"Just one thing." He reached up and grabbed Dick's wrist. A short tug brought the twenty-two-year-old down to the mattress next to him. In order to prevent escape, Bruce slipped his arm around his son's waist.

"Now you're really worrying me," said Dick. Instead of struggling for freedom like his brothers might have, Dick shifted until he found a comfortable position with the full length of his back pressed against Bruce's chest. Dick hugged Bruce's arms where they crossed over the younger man's chest.

"You've always been my strength when I lose my own," Bruce said. He held his first sidekick - his first son - securely, and dared to let his inner turmoil break against the rock that was Dick Grayson.

xXx

Bruce had no idea how much time had passed when he blinked open gritty eyes. He rubbed at the crusty tears on his cheeks with one hand. He remembered drifting for a while as he relived heartbreaking memories from twenty-eight years ago, though his pain had been buffered by sound of his oldest son's even breathing. He could still hear Dick breathing, though it was further away now.

"Chum?"

"I'm still here. 'Cause to be honest, B, you're kind of ripe smelling right now." Dick was seated at the small desk under the frosted window.
"I was shoveling snow."

"I remember." Bruce supposed he deserved the younger man's dry tone.

He probably also deserved the way that his muscles screamed at him as he sat up. "Damn it." He stopped for a breather once he managed to get his legs dangling over the edge of the bed and his head supported by his braced arms. "Don't get old if you can help it."

"Forty's not that old," Dick teased.

"Please tell Jason that the next time that you see him." Bruce managed to stand up and cautiously started stretching. There was a reason that he tried to never slack off of his training regimen. He seemed to backslide quickly when he was idle for too long.

"Are you okay?"

"Just sore."

"I mean emotionally... emotionally okay for you. Which is not great, but better than earlier."

The worry was still there, and his anger threatened to return on the tails of his frustration now that he was less tired. It was a conscious decision to not go right back outside and confront the storm again. "I'm fine." Dick rolled eyes.

"Thank you for staying with me. It looks like I've been out for hours."

Dick shrugged. "This whole family is prone to nightmares, especially when we're stressed and emotional. I didn't want you to be alone in case this brought back bad memories." Bruce preferred to be the one guarding his sons' sleep, but he appreciated Dick's concern. Thankfully he hadn't dreamed about that dark alley behind an old movie theater.

A sharp knock on the door drew both of their attentions. Dick jumped up to answer it, no doubt running interference between the rest of his brothers and their father. Bruce frowned. He was done hiding, and he owed Damian an apology.

"Is everything all right?" Dick asked in a low voice. "Bruce needs a little more time to chill in peace."

"Everything's fine, but we need to go soon," said Jason, hidden from Bruce's view by the barely ajar door.

"Go?"

"Yeah, go. Before it starts snowing again. Is B even awake yet?"

"Yes, but--"

"What's going on?" Bruce stepped up behind Dick and pulled the door fully open. "Jason?"

The teenager's face was red from cold, and somehow pinked further when he looked at Bruce. "We, uh--"

A distant voice called down the hall. "Jason, shall I start the truck or not?"

"I'm asking!" Jason shouted over his shoulder in response to Thomas' question. Bruce's happiness at the two apparently interacting was overshadowed by his confusion.
"The truck?"
"Yeah, you know: a two-ton beast fueled by gasoline. Usually has four tires and a steering wheel."
"Why are you blushing?" Dick asked.
"I'm not! Shut up, Dickhead."
"You did something nice for someone, didn't you?" Dick smirked at his brother.
"You left me alone to babysit. We had to do something to keep from going crazy with wor--boredom."
"Did you take Damian and Tim outside in the storm?" Bruce demanded.
"It stopped storming a couple of hours ago," said Jason defensively. "Just get ready to go before Asshole Senior leaves your sorry asses here."

"Jason."
"Sorry not sorry." The teenager turned and marched back down the hall. After he turned the corner and moved out of sight, Bruce heard him say, "Alright squirts, to me."

"We do not answer to you, Todd," Damian denied.
Bruce sighed and prepared himself to deal with the rest of his kids. Dick placed a hand on his arm. "Take a quick shower. I'll go play referee." Shamefully eager for the out, Bruce nodded his agreement.

When he emerged from the bathroom twenty minutes later, Bruce found all of his children, Thomas, and Alfred waiting expectantly for him in the living room. "Finally," his pseudo-father huffed. "Alfred, where are my keys?"
"I still don't think this is a good idea, Master Thomas," said Alfred as he passed a key fob to the doctor.
"If you think this is a bad idea, be glad you don't know about all of the terrible decisions that he makes," said Jason, thumbing over his shoulder in Bruce's direction.
"Indeed."
"What's going on?" Bruce asked. His sons were all dressed in their outerwear and had their snow boots on. Thomas was likewise warmly attired, though Alfred wore his customary indoor clothes.
"Father," said Damian stoically. "Are you feeling rested now?"
"Yes." Bruce dropped down to a knee in spite of his sore muscles and took Damian's mitten-covered hands in his. "I am sorry that I was short with you earlier, son. It was not you that I was frustrated with."
"Of course not. It was that infuriating Ella." Even so, Bruce noticed Damian's tense countenance visibly relax. Damian twisted their hands so that he was holding Bruce's. He used the grip to tug his father back to his feet and toward the front door. "Come. We are going to visit Ms. Kane."
"But the snow…"
Once the snowfall ceased, these fine young lads took it upon themselves to clear the drive while you rested," explained Alfred. His expression was filled with a mixture of pride and fondness for the boys.

"That should have taken hours," said Bruce, stunned. He looked between his four precious boys. Dick beamed widely at the generous initiative of his siblings. Jason did his best to look supremely inconvenienced. Tim's small smile was hopeful, and Damian looked rather proud of himself for impressing his father.

"Indeed. Of course, a lot can be said about determination to help a loved one, strength in numbers, and… a snow blower." Alfred's chiding smile brought a grateful grin to Bruce's face.

Damian pulled on Bruce's hand again. "We know how much Ms. Kane means to you, even if she is an odd old woman and not actually your mother. It was my strategic planning that allowed us to finish so precipitously."

"Like hell it was," Jason argued.

Bruce let Damian lead him forward. He wrapped an arm around Tim as he and Damian passed. They stopped in the foyer so Bruce could find his own coat and boots. The father cleared his throat around the lump that had formed after learning what his sons had done. He made eye contact with each of them. "Thank you."

Tim hugged him briefly about his middle. "You're welcome."

"Let's go," said Dick, clapping his hands together. "Dami, do you have your mittens?"

"Yes, Richard," said the eleven-year-old flatly. He held up his hands as evidence.

"Your hat? Your scarf? Your fuzzy socks?"

"Richard!"

Bruce tuned them out. "Alfred, are you not coming?"

The butler frowned sadly. "Alas, I prefer to weather the storm from the safety of this cabin. I shall try to follow you as soon as possible. If you'd be so kind, a call to let me know you've arrived safely would be much appreciated."

"I'll call you as soon as we park at the hospital," Bruce promised. He clapped Alfred warmly on the shoulder before giving in to his children's prodding to head outdoors.

Outside, Thomas waited with an idling back SUV, which would have been much more comfortable to ride in than the sedan, had Alfred known he would be coming back with five guests. "Hurry up. It's going to start getting dark soon."

"I'll drive," said Jason before Damian had a chance to do the same.

Thomas blocked his access to the driver's door. "I shall drive. It is my car, and I am used to these conditions."

"I'll drive, because you're an old fart and you probably can't even remember the last time Alfred didn't chauffeur you."

"You don't have a valid driver's license."
"Do you?"

Bruce stepped in between them. He was eager to get going now that he understood the plan. "I'll drive, for all of the reasons previously stated." Thomas seemed to find that compromise satisfactory. He actually looked somewhat relieved to not be responsible for all of the passengers.

Jason on the other hand... "B, you are both an old fart and without a valid license."

Bruce pushed Jason toward the rear door. "Dickie, did you not tell him?"

"He doesn't listen to me," Dick called from inside the warm interior of the vehicle.

Once everyone was settled in their seats, Bruce took the time to adjust the seat and mirrors. In the passenger seat, Thomas unfolded a worn map of the area. His sons started up a game of who could tell the most outrageous story without accidently giving away their secret lives as vigilantes. Strangely, despite his very real worry for Martha, Bruce felt a measure of peace. He smiled at Thomas as he shifted the SUV into drive. The older man smiled back.

*to be continued...*
Chapter Forty

Chapter Notes

What? An update?! :)  
A lot of dialogue in this one. Thomas hasn't gotten quite as much screen time as Martha, so this is meant to catch him up a little bit.

Chapter Forty

The boys had done a great job making a path for the large SUV and clearing the end of the long driveway, but the roads were still covered with snow. Where a few daring drivers had plowed through anyway, the bottom of the tire tracks were filled with ice. Bruce suspected that a thick layer of ice coated the ground beneath the snow, leftover from the thunderstorm that had heralded the colder weather when they first arrived. It took all of Bruce's considerable skill and most of his concentration to keep the vehicle going in the direction that he wanted it to.

They finally reached the interstate after an hour and a half of excruciatingly slow driving. Thankfully, the snow had not fallen quite as thickly at the lower elevation and the NYSDOT had successfully treated the pavement to remove most of the ice. Bruce kept a close eye on the spray kicking up from the cars ahead of them - or more importantly, the lack thereof which could indicate black ice - but otherwise settled in for the many-hour drive back to the hospital near Pleasanton.

Since his navigational assistance was no longer needed, Thomas folded up the map and stowed it into the glove compartment. "There is a restaurant in a small town a couple of hours from here that we used to enjoy during our vacations at the cabin," he said. He sounded almost hesitant to mention it. Bruce suspected that it was a place filled with good memories of an unbroken family that the bereft father was leery to dredge up.

"That will work well for a late dinner," Bruce replied. He didn't want to add any more delays to their trip, but they all needed to eat and he couldn't push Thomas as hard as he would have pushed himself, or even his sons.

Thomas cleared his throat and glanced quickly into the rear of the vehicle. He could probably only see Tim, who had won the bucket seat behind Bruce's. Bruce glanced in the rearview mirror himself. After the boys' conversation had died out, they'd each found individual ways to entertain themselves. Tim's face was highlighted in blue by the screen of the borrowed tablet while next to him, Jason was bathed in a soft yellow glow from the overhead cabin light as he finished the book he'd started earlier in the day. Dick and Damian on the rear bench were cast in shadows, though it appeared they were now talking to each other in low voices.

"So, you run Wayne Enterprises back in your universe," Thomas said.

"A man named Lucius Fox does most of the running of the company," replied Bruce. "I'm merely the owner and president of the board."

"But you are doing well for yourself." Thomas regarded him keenly. "Alfred mentioned that you and the boys had each ruined some very nice suits when Ella brought you over."
"And a Bentley Mulsanne Speed," Bruce said wryly. Thomas made a sound halfway between derision and appreciation. "Yes, the company is doing very well. We recently acquired a pharmaceutical and medical company that we rolled into our biotech division, and we've managed to synthesize a few groundbreaking vaccines and medications. Right now the big push is cancer research." Bruce paused to swallow around the lump that started forming in his throat. "But the division closest to my heart, and the one I spend the most time overseeing, is the Wayne Foundation."

"The Wayne Foundation?"

"It's our charitable wing," Bruce said. He sighed and tapped his thumbs on the steering wheel. "We were at a fundraising gala for the Martha Wayne Foundation the night that Ella brought us here."

Thomas smiled softly at the thought of a charity being named for his ex-wife. "She would be happy to have something good named for her."

"I like to think so," said Bruce. "Many orphanages and public schools are funded through her foundation, among other outreach programs. Obviously it's important to me, given that I and three of my children were orphaned."

"Of course." Thomas grew introspective and turned to look out of the passenger side window.

Bruce, not wanting to be left alone to dwell on thoughts of his parents' murders as he was prone to do when reminded of them through their charities, changed the subject briefly. "The Thomas Wayne Foundation supports medical researchers as well as funding a number of free clinics throughout the poorer parts of Gotham City." He bit his tongue before mentioning that he had always imagined that his father would have wanted to help the less fortunate as well, rather than turn to alcoholism in the face of his demons.

"This all confirms my beliefs that this world would be a better place had my Bruce lived and I perished in his place. Look what good you have done for your Gotham City, where mine no longer exists."

Sickness at the memory of standing in that dark alley as his parents bled for a string of pearls twisted in Bruce's gut. "What good I have done has always seemed to pale in comparison to what I imagine my parents could have done." There were plenty of critics who considered Batman to be a plague on Gotham City, not a savior. His own surrogate mother, Dr. Leslie Thompkins, had said as much to his face on multiple occasions. Usually she was angry with him for the suffering of his own children in the shadow of the bat. There was no worse example than what the Joker and the League of Assassins did to Jason. "I have made plenty of terrible mistakes."

"They seem to love you well enough," said Thomas, motioning toward the back seats of the SUV. "And it is clear that you care deeply for them. In my long, lonely life, I have realized that there is little more worthwhile than nurturing a family."

Bruce was better at sacrificing than nurturing his family, but he'd promised himself that would change when they finally made it home. "There wouldn't be any good in me at all if not for them."

Thomas nodded, likely thinking about how his own life might be different if his son hadn't been murdered. "What made you decide to adopt instead of starting a family of your own?"

Bruce smirked as he recalled meeting each of his children for the first time. None of them were actually happy occurrences, but he could look back on them with a degree of mirth now. "Alfred - my Alfred in our universe - always complained that I was a very serious little boy. Losing my parents
at the age of twelve didn't help. I had no interest in anything but wiping crime completely from Gotham City. That included anything serious like meeting a girl and getting married. I actually… didn't think I'd live very long, to be honest. All I cared about was finding the man who murdered my parents and bringing him to justice. I was pretty reckless in my late teens and early twenties.

"Then I turned thirty and the board at Wayne Enterprises started pushing me to put more effort into building a positive imagine in the media. So I took a vicious journalist on a date to gain her favor, and conveniently the greatest show on earth was in town."

"You took your date to the circus?" Thomas shook his head in amusement.

"It was fun," Bruce said defensively. "Until the end, anyway. It was halfway through the trapeze show when a line snapped and both aerialists fell. The third member of their troupe was their twelve-year-old son who'd just finished a quadruple flip and was waiting for the trapeze to swing back to him. Watching him watch his parents die put me right back in that alley. I felt like I was looking into a mirror. When I found out a few days later that he'd been left behind with Gotham City social services after the circus moved on to their next stop, I knew I had to help him find the justice that I was still seeking myself.

"I thought it would just be for a couple of weeks until a foster home opened up, but three months passed before the bloated system could handle one more orphan. By then, I had grown much too attached to the little imp to even consider leaving him to such an uncertain fate. So Dick became mine, and he's been pushing me to be a better man ever since."

"It's easy to see how close the two of you are," said Thomas.

Bruce snorted sardonically. "I have messed up so badly with him. Thank goodness he's too smart to listen to my bullshit most of the time. I had no business trying to parent another human being, and by the time he was seventeen, he was so fed up with me that he moved in with friends just to get away from me. I am eternally grateful that he eventually forgave me and came back home after a few years."

"You know," spoke up Jason, drawing Bruce's eyes to the rearview mirror. "Dick can be quite the prick, too, when he puts his mind to it."

Bruce rolled his eyes. "Yes, I was mad at Dick, Dick was mad at me, and Jason decided to help by stealing the tires off of my car when I was working in the Bowery one night."

"You were the idiot who drove a million dollar car into the seediest part of town."

"Anyway," said Bruce. "I caught him in the act, made him put the wheels back on my car, and then marched him straight to the nearest boys' home. I knew he needed help, and I knew I was the last person that could give it to him. My colossal failure with Dick was proof of that."

Thomas turned in his seat so he could see Jason. "I can imagine you being bold enough to tire jack a rich man's car."

"You don't know the half of it," said Jason with a smirk. Bruce agreed. It wasn't just a rich man's car, it was the Batmobile.

Bruce continued his story. "The boys' home was run by a terrible woman. Jason refused to stay with her and when I found out why, I agreed with him completely. Unfortunately, there was no better option. That's when I got serious about funding the Martha Wayne Foundation. I couldn't stand to see Jason's potential wasted on a life of petty crime, so I decided to try to be a better parent to him.
than I was to Dick."

"Were you?"

"Hell no," Jason laughed meanly.

"No," Bruce agreed darkly. "Less than two years after I adopted him, he was kidnapped. I... I searched for months." Bruce had to pause to summon his composure. The lump in his throat was back with a vengeance. "Eventually the police declared him dead and closed the case."

"Bruce..." Thomas reached over to clasp the younger man's shoulder.

"So I understand how you felt when your son was murdered," Bruce said grimly. "I got Jason back, and that feeling still haunts me." It was quiet for a few minutes. Bruce kept his eyes focused on the road. His knuckles were white due to his tense grip on the steering wheel. The atmosphere in the car became thick, until Bruce was struggling to think of anything to break the silence. He was just about to spurt out the first thing that came to mind when Thomas cleared his throat.

"What about a life partner? I doubt you've attracted any shortage of attention, especially if the company is doing as well as you say. Raising four boys on your own isn't easy."

The first visage that came to mind belonged to a sultry female cat burglar, and the second was the power-hungry terrorist that had gifted him with Damian. "And a daughter," he corrected. Bruce smiled wryly. "I find that once they get to know me, most respectable women opt to keep their distance."

"I can't imagine why. From what I've seen, you care deeply for your family. You even seem to handle Ella with some measure of respect."

"I, uh... don't always have my priorities in the correct order," Bruce admitted. He thought back on the many times he had let the Mission come before his loved ones and even Wayne Enterprises. "I am very busy, and I while I devote most of my time to important things, this little trip has made me realize that I don't give enough time to the most important things in my life."

Thomas stared at his folded hands in his lap. Eventually he said, "I, too, did not always put my family first. Obviously the drinking, but even before that I often missed important milestone because of my work."

"You were a skilled and accomplished doctor," Bruce said. "More people than just Martha and Brucie needed you."

Thomas' expression grew darker. "I scheduled an evening appointment on my son's birthday. If we had been able to go to the movies on the day of, he would probably still be alive."

"It's not your fault," Bruce insisted. "I don't know the truth of what happened here, but if it's anything like what happened in my universe, it would not have mattered what night of the week you were walking down that alley." Thomas looked over at the younger man in surprise. Bruce nodded dourly. "My parents were not the victims of a random mugging. That son of a bitch waited for them, at the behest of the man who paid for their murders."

"I'm so sorry," said Thomas in a tight voice. "I--"

"Forgive yourself for what happened. Martha still loves you deeply. You're the one keeping the relationship broken."
"I know…"

Bruce took a deep breath and cleared his throat. "Anyway, between being too busy to date properly and having been burned by Damian's mother, I haven't put too much pressure on myself to find a wife."

"There's no one who interests you?"

"There's one." Bruce chewed on his lower lip as he thought about Selina Kyle. "She's beautiful and free spirited. She makes me laugh. But she also does things that I strongly disagree with, and I don't know that she's quite ready to step into the role of mother to five headstrong brats."

"Dick and Jason are adults, are they not?"

"They're still my sons, and they'll be welcome in my home for as long as they want to be there."

"Of course. I didn't mean to imply otherwise. Simply, maybe the role of mother is not as demanding as you may think." Bruce disagreed - his eldest sons were sometimes more needy than their younger siblings, but perhaps his father did have a point about how much they'd rely on anyone for mothering. Bruce hummed as if he would give the thought some consideration. "Tell me more about this beautiful, free-spirited woman that's captured your attention. It's important that I know if she's good enough for my son and grandchildren."

Bruce chuckled, filled with warm feelings for his father of this world. He candidly launched into a heavily censored narrative about his tumultuous romance with Gotham City's infamous cat burglar. He had lost track of where they were on the interstate until Thomas reminded him of their planned pit stop.

"This is the exit for the restaurant," Thomas said, pointing at the blue highway sign previewing the food establishments coming up. Bruce carefully navigated toward the family-owned eatery that his parents had never stopped at during his youth.

The parking lot was rather full, especially given the quantity of spots sacrificed to piles of plowed snow. The number of cars could be a sign of how good the food was, though Bruce didn't like the idea of any delays if they couldn't be seated right away or the service was slow. He swallowed his concern as he turned off the skillfully parked SUV and prepared to squeeze out of the vehicle and into the tight space between the neighboring pickup truck. He managed to escape without dinging the rusted bed of the truck and moved to wait near the front bumper. He found himself scanning the establishment out of habit, looking for danger or suspicious activity. He didn't see anything concerning, but that didn't stop him from being momentarily startled when he was hugged from behind.

"I think you're an okay father," Tim whispered cheekily once Bruce had dragged the teenager around to his front. "Even if you are in love with Catwoman." Bruce hummed doubtfully after drawing his son in for a proper hug.

Fortunately, Bruce's fears weren't realized when they were able to be seated right away, despite their large party of six. The wide circular table probably could have sat eight comfortably. Two of the unused chairs were immediately borrowed for other tables. Bruce expected Dick to be martyred by his brothers and made to take the spot on Thomas' opposite side from the one Bruce selected. To his surprise, Jason voluntarily sat next to the doctor.

"You holding up okay, B?" asked Dick in a quiet voice after sitting down next to Bruce.
"I'm fine, chum," Bruce promised. He patted the young man's knee under the table. A developing altercation across the table pulled his attention away from his eldest. "Damian, you will not cut any of your brothers, especially with something as ineffective as a butter knife. You do not have to order off of the kid's menu if you don't want to." Bruce shot Jason a disappointed look.

Jason smirked while Damian muttered about the benefits of his katana for skewering imbeciles. Thomas looked taken aback, but the corner of his mouth quirked up in amusement at Bruce when the younger man caught his pseudo-father's eye.

All of the boys were hungry enough to quickly decide what they wanted to eat and were ready to order when the waitress returned with a round of waters. Bruce rarely had dinner in a restaurant that wasn't accompanied by a perfectly paired wine or craft beer, but he'd strongly encouraged his children to forgo any overpriced beverages considering that Thomas would be footing the bill for this meal.

That didn't deter his third son from strategically ordering a combo off of the all-day breakfast menu that included unlimited brewed coffee. "Timothy, no," Bruce scolded. To the waitress he added, "He'll have the orange juice instead."

"I retract my earlier statement," Tim stated with a scowl. "You know, there are a number of studies that prove coffee is actually good for people."

"For adults," clarified Thomas. Tim's eyes widened briefly at being addressed by the reclusive Wayne. He then settled into his chair to pout, apparently too uneasy to argue with the near-stranger than he would have been with Bruce.

Jason draped an arm over the back of Tim's chair. "When we get back to our world, we'll make a coffee and cigarette run, runt." Bruce choked down his annoyed reprimand, knowing that Jason was trying to provoke him for some unknown reason. He knew that the horrible teenager had been listening when Bruce confided to Thomas about how distraught he'd been when Jason was lost. When Bruce failed to rise to the bait, Jason tried a different method of tormenting his loving father. "So, Dr. Wayne. Brucie here is very tight-lipped about his childhood, and Alfred is too proper and British to be a good source of blackmail material. Surely you have some entertaining stories about your son that might reflect something this old toad got up to."

"Jason." Bruce couldn't believe the teenager's nerve. Thomas Wayne had turned to alcoholism and seclusion to cope with his son's murder. The old man had admitted during the drive here that he blamed himself. Dredging up old memories could only send the doctor back to a dark place. To make matters worse, the rest of his rotten children had perked up in interest.

"It's okay," Thomas said after clearing his throat awkwardly. "I... I should focus on the good memories anyway." Bruce started to wonder what else had transpired between his sons and this version of his father while he was locked away in the guest bedroom. "Let's see." A soft smile crossed his face as he remembered his only child. "Brucie loved animals. He was always finding wounded wildlife and bringing it home for me to treat."

Four pairs of eyes turned to look at Damian. The eleven-year-old colored slightly at the attention, then raised his nose haughtily and scoffed. "Clearly Father also understands that the company of animals is typically preferable to that of humans."

"You are fond of animals too, Damian?" asked Thomas.

"Fond is a bit of an understatement," said Dick in the voice that meant he thought Damian was being adorable and therefore Damian thought he had to react with unnecessary violence. To Bruce's relief,
Damian merely jerked his head to the side when Dick tried to ruffle his hair.

"We live in a zoo," Tim chimed in. Thankfully, he seemed to have recovered from being denied his favorite drink.

"Tt. If we lived in a zoo, Father would have allowed me to foster the litter of tiger cubs that ended up being shipped to Metropolis when Gotham's severely underfunded facility could not properly care for them."

"What would you do with tiger cubs, Dami?" asked Dick.

"Train them to attack Todd."

"You've already trained your damned turkey to attack anyone in sight," Jason complained.

"You threatened to eat him last Thanksgiving!"

"Boys!" Bruce glanced around, hoping that his rowdy children hadn't bothered the other diners. "No one is going to eat the turkey." Secretly, he wouldn't be too upset if it did mysteriously disappear one day.

"Would not a dog or cat make a better pet for a young boy?" suggested Thomas.

"What, not a cow?" Jason rolled his eyes.

"A cow?"

"Damian does have a pet cat and dog," said Tim. "They're really not so bad."

"All of my companions are immensely preferable to you cretins." Damian crossed his arms over his chest and glared at his brothers.

"They're just teasing you, Dami," soothed Dick. The twenty-four-year-old looked back over to Thomas. "So Brucie was an animal lover?"

"Yes, quite. Except for bats. The poor thing found them to be quite terrifying, and it didn't help that our property had an expansive cave system that hosted a large colony of fruit bats."

"You were afraid of bats?" Jason asked Bruce in a deadpan tone.

"I know this story," Dick said. "Why else do you think the whole of Gotham City fears bats now?"

Bruce sighed. "Yes, I was afraid of bats. I got over it."

Damian studied his father almost hopefully. "Did you really like animals when you were a boy, Father?"

"I still do," Bruce assured him. "But they require much more care than I have time to give. It pleases me that you are so doting to your pets." Damian sat up straighter and gloated about receiving praise from his father.

"What's the weirdest thing Brucie ever brought home?" asked Jason.

Thomas tapped on his chin as he thought. "Nothing too weird, though he once brought home a nest of field mice and let them escape inside the house. Our head maid nearly quit over the incident." Their food arrived then, so story time was interrupted as they confirmed that they had everything
they needed and the waitress promised to bring a pitcher to refill their water glasses. As they dug into the comfort food, Thomas continued. "Brucie very much wanted a dog. We agreed that he could have one once he turned thirteen, as long as he proved that he was ready and willing to take care of it. Over a year before that time, he already had a presentation ready explaining the care of a canine and had picked out a name."

"Ace," said Bruce in a small voice.

"Ace was named for the dog you never had as a child?" Dick looked at Bruce sympathetically. Bruce smiled through the sad memory and squeezed Dick's arm.

"Yes, Ace," said Thomas. "I would give anything for the chance to go back in time and get the dog for Brucie as soon as he asked for it."

"See, Father. You should not deny me when I wish to adopt an animal," said Damian. Bruce shook his head and glanced toward the ceiling. Given the fact that Damian had a cow, turkey, and demon dragon bat in addition to his cat and dog, Bruce figured that he had been more than lenient with his youngest's love of animals. They did not need a trio of tigers.

Dick smirked and decided to help by changing the subject. "What other hobbies did little Brucie have?"

"He was a prolific reader," answered Thomas. "He was interested in so many topics that sometimes it was difficult to keep the library stocked with enough variety to cover all of his academic pursuits."

"So a nerd like Timbo," Jason teased.

"I was going to say a bookworm like you," Tim retorted. "I do my research online."

"The internet didn't exist when B was growing up," Jason argued. "In fact, I think the printing press had barely just been invented. He's lucky he had books for his nerdy endeavors."

"The printing press was invented in the 1450s, Jason," Bruce frowned sadly.

"The fact that you know that proves my point," Jason replied smugly.

Tim redirected the course of the conversation back to where it had veered off-track. "I know the internet became commonplace during Bruce's lifetime. What I don't understand is how anyone functioned without it," he said.

"Books," said Bruce and Thomas simultaneously. Bruce ducked his head as his older boys chuckled at them.

Tim huffed. Damian glanced at the slightly older boy and then turned to scowl at Jason. "I'm sure that Father spent his time reading worthwhile pursuits, instead of wasting his time with fairytales. Isn't that right, Dr. Wayne?"

The doctor looked discomfited for having been pulled into the boys' debate, but responded nonetheless. "Well, in many cultures important life lessons or histories are taught through the use of 'fairytales'. So I would not consider them unworthy of one's time. Brucie's interests did lie in more scientific areas, however. He was especially fond of flipping through my old text books and popular mechanic magazines."

"I did like the Grimm Fairytales," Bruce said. "My mother thought they were a little too dark for a child, but Alfred used to read them to me when my parents were away. Those stories were a comfort
to me after they died."

"That would explain some of the rather morbid ideas Brucie would come up with," mused Thomas absently.

"Books aren't just for learning," said Jason, glaring in turn at each of his younger brothers. "A well-written story can take you on an adventure and help you forget about the shithole that your real life is." Bruce's raised eyebrow at the coarse language went unnoted.

"Why are you mad at me?" Tim asked petulantly.

"Show some respect for the printed word. Not everything useful has to come from a glowing computer screen."

"I did not-- I respect books!" Tim pointed his fork at Jason's face. "You have an e-reader!"

"Timmy, shhh," Dick soothed. "Indoor voice."

Tim slouched in his seat to sulk anew. "I hate you all."

"Boys..." Four sets of eyes focused on him, though none of the corresponding expressions seemed very repentant. "Finish your dinners. I'm eager to get back on the road. We still have a long drive ahead of us." Fortunately, they were mostly done anyway. Bruce insisted on a stop in the bathroom before they left, especially once the waitress returned with a round of waters in Styrofoam travel cups.

His sons were still horsing around, trying to splash each other while washing their hands, when Bruce escaped the clean but cramped men's room. He found Thomas waiting just outside of the entrance. The older man had his face turned skyward, from where new snowflakes drifted sparsely to the ground. "Dr. Wayne?"

His pseudo-father looked at him with a wistful smile. "I'm imagining a world where none of the Waynes die in a bleak alley. One where Martha and I are able to enjoy our grandchildren, squabbles and all."

Bruce's heart ached briefly as the image of such a universe flickered through his mind as well. He squashed down a brief pang of regret, since there was no question that he had to return to his own parallel universe. He forced himself to ignore the fact that thanks to Ella, such a world almost existed right then and there.

_to be continued..._

End Notes

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