Foreign Object

by audreycritter

Summary

Bruce Wayne deals with a serious illness, one that threatens the most crucial part of himself. He and the family try to cope with their own fears and expectations about it and then the aftermath. This is written partly as character study, partly as family drama. Originally posted to tumblr.

Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own the characters. I am borrowing them for entertainment purposes and will return them mostly unharmed.

A/N: This is Pre-New 52 in theory, but I'm borrowing loosely from character development as I feel like it, to suit my own purposes. Please feel free to comment with corrections or suggestions regarding characters or situations!
The Butler

The tray is cluttered with trimmed ends of silver suture and bloody gauze, two empty syringes, and antiseptic wipes.

Alfred Pennyworth ties off a stitch and pushes the needle through the skin for the next and final suture. He glances up at the face of the man he is sewing back together, expecting to see him unconscious.

But Bruce is awake, a distant expression on his face.

The sutured gash isn't that deep or serious, but is long and has taken some time to stitch. With the painkillers and the anesthetic, it wouldn’t have been surprising for Bruce to drift off, especially after such a long night. It would have been equally unsurprising if he had brooded darkly, spoken almost incessantly as a way to destress, sighed angrily, or talked methodically about what he was going to do next.

But the emotion emanating from him now is one Alfred cannot quite place, and that worries him. As far as he can recall, Bruce has not actually spoken a single word since pulling into the Batcave. If the silence were coupled with a furious scowl, then that would at least make sense.

But this is just a kind of blankness.

When he dabs medicine on the wound, Bruce hisses softly, but doesn't speak. Alfred tapes gauze over the wound, but Bruce doesn't speak.

And then without a word, he gets up and walks upstairs.

Alfred cleans up the mess left behind and follows him.

The most likely places are the study, the kitchen, or the master bedroom.

It's the bedroom. And it's locked.

He knocks and asks,

“Master Bruce? Would you care for some water?”

There's no answer except that underneath the edge of the door, the glow of light extinguishes. Bruce has turned the lights off.

Alfred Pennyworth is worried.

He goes to bed worried. He wakes up worried. He makes brunch and serves it, while worried.

It is early afternoon when he is walking down the hall carrying a basket full of linens to iron and store, when Bruce is coming down the stairs toward him with that same distant, blank expression and Alfred is starting to worry specifically about mind control, that Bruce falls.

It isn’t a simple stumble from distraction or a trip on a misplaced shoe; Bruce goes down without agency, no hands up to break his fall, and he clatters down the last eight or nine steps and skids onto the floor at the bottom.

Alfred is kneeling at his head, linen basket tipped sideways on the floor behind him, when Bruce
opens his eyes and blinks. Alfred realizes he’s been repeatedly saying Bruce’s name, even though it’s only been mere seconds.

Bruce’s expression goes from disoriented to furious in a single breath. He rolls over, pushing himself up off the ground and onto his feet, rubbing his arm as if to dislodge pain.

“I’m fine,” he says to Alfred.

“No,” Alfred says. “You aren’t.”

But Bruce doesn’t listen.

When he goes out on patrol that night, Alfred does not come down to see him off. He slams some dishes around while washing them, and when he picks one up to rinse it, it slips out of his hands onto the floor, shattering.

He puts his hands on either side of the kitchen sink, gripping the counter’s edge until his knuckles are white. He takes a deep breath.

And then, subdued, he cleans up the shards of plate and throws them away, finishes the dishes, goes down to the Batcave to wait.

Bruce comes back that night, still unusually quiet. Damian is glowering at him and stomps off as soon as they are out of the Batmobile. Alfred chases him down, gets him to bed, doesn’t ask questions.

He worries.

Bruce wakes up in the morning. Alfred brings breakfast to the room, sets it on a table. When he tugs the curtains open across the southern wall, Bruce staggers out of bed and throws up in a trashcan.

There is a brief exchange of fear and worry between them, a slight wisp of expression and facial movement. Then Bruce turns to stone, determination chiseled out of rock. Alfred sees it as denial. But Alfred does not push, does not bring it up-- yet. If Alfred has learned anything in the years of service to the Wayne family, it is patience. He no longer considers it a virtue. It’s a carefully wielded tool. Now that he has accepted his worry, settled into it, it will stop catching him off guard and he can bide his time.

That night, Bruce goes on patrol again. Alfred is grateful for uneventful evenings.

The next morning, Bruce throws up again; this time, he makes it to the bathroom.

Damian sulks around the house all day, lounging with Titus and scowling at everything.

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“Pennyworth,” he demands, while Alfred is making dinner. His voice has the remnant of an older, more arrogant attitude, driven there by his own bad day. “I want you to ask Father why he’s mad at me.”

“He’s not mad at you,” Alfred says calmly, peeling stringy strands from the back of celery stalks.

“Tt.” Damian answers, sitting on a stool. His cat joins him, curled on the smallest Wayne’s lap. “Seems like he is.”

“He’s not,” Alfred says again, turning to him. “Not at you. Keep that cat off my counters.”

This seems to reassure Damian more than longer speeches might have. He nods, petting the cat
between the ears. When Alfred is chopping celery, he is aware that Damian is off the stool, trying to sneak a bag of gummi worms out of the cabinet with the candy stash. Alfred lets him.

Alfred does not go down to the Batcave when Bruce is getting ready to go on patrol that night. He cleans Damian’s room, digging out a horde of empty candy wrappers from under the mattress, dusting the dresser, picking stray LEGOos off the carpet, gathering all the bits and pieces of wire and battery and metal from projects into a small bin.

The first surprise of the evening is when he returns downstairs, to the main floor of the house, to clean the study. Superman is just pushing the grandfather clock back against the wall, a frown on his face.

“Alfred!” he says. “Just the man I wanted to see.”

“What can I do for you, Master Kent?” Alfred smiles. It’s a good surprise. It would be better if Superman didn’t look so pensive. “Tea?”

“No,” he says, looking back at the clock. “Just…well…”

“What brings you to town?” Alfred asks, beginning to polish the desk. The activity seems to put Superman at ease and he collects himself.

“Does Bruce seem off to you?” Superman asks bluntly. “I came up to ask him about something, but he seems not himself. Maybe it’s just me.”

“No,” Alfred says quietly. There is a mix of emotion in him, a relief and a dread, at having company in his feelings and in needing company. “It’s not just you. But as to what, precisely, is troubling Master Bruce, I am unaware.”

“Hm. Alright,” Superman says, watching the night sky out the window. “Well. I’ll swing by again soon. Thanks, Alfred.”

Alfred nods at him. “Go ahead, go out the french doors. No need to go back downstairs. We won’t tell him.”

When Superman is gone, Alfred sits in Bruce’s chair at the desk and leans back, thinking, deciding, resolving. The time for patience has graduated to the time for action. This morning, when they return from patrol, he will use every method in his arsenal to get Bruce to sit, to talk, to get to the bottom of this, whatever it is, hanging over him like a storm.
Two Birds, One Stone

Chapter Summary

The situation continues to escalate.

Red Robin perches on the edge of a billboard, watching the city beneath him. It’s a bit strange to be back on patrol here, all his old haunts. He kind of misses it. It’s been a weird night, though, and that tempers some of his enjoyment. It’s been quiet, for one thing. He’s barely left the rooftops once. He’s not complaining exactly, but he was expecting a bit more action when he got the text message that morning from Damian, lacking its usual derision:

*Father is acting strange. Patrol w/ us tonight? Not certain what is going on.*

The younger boy must have been really rattled to reach out to Tim. He still isn’t sure why Damian didn’t text Dick, instead, except maybe he was afraid Dick would try to talk to Batman directly. Tim just waits, watching, patrolling with them.

The commlink has been fairly quiet all night, but Batman hasn’t said anything. It’s almost one in the morning and he hasn’t spoken a word, not of command or direction. Tim doesn’t know if it was intentional or accidental, maybe Damian’s careful orchestration, that they are now within visual space of each other.

Damian is on a building roughly the same height as Tim’s, standing on the lip of the roof and scanning the streets. He has his hood up and Tim can see the occasional glances up, at the building several away from him. Tim can see Batman up there, on one of the tallest skyscrapers in Gotham—a small black dot against the muted navy sky.

“Robin,” Tim says over the commlink, suddenly, a flash of movement on the streets below.

“Got it,” Damian replies. Then there’s the sound of a gunshot, something loud and powerful, and for the first time that night, Batman speaks.

“No,” he says, and Tim can see Damian freeze on the rooftop, debating whether he should listen or not. He must be really worried, Tim thinks, if he’s actually listening like this. Batman continues, “I’ve got it. Stay back.”

There is something flat in Batman’s voice, something that draws Tim’s eyes upward instead of down to the commotion on the street.

And he watches as the caped figure dives off the building in flawless form.

He goes down. And down.

Tim cannot figure out what he’s doing, why he hasn’t deployed his grappling hook.

“Father?” Damian says, over the commlink. He sounds angry.

And then the diving, caped form is not diving, is not in form—he is falling, out of control, limp against the rushing air.
“FATHER!” Damian shrieks, and he is not angry: He is terrified.

Batman is going past the fortieth floors, spinning slightly now, the cape fluttering above him.

There is no way Tim can make it in time. It is too far, Bruce is falling too fast.

Damian can’t make it in time.

And Tim only has seconds, barely seconds, to make a decision.

Maybe he sounds panicked, but maybe he’s just committed to follow-through.

Because it is not panic, but intellect, that decides for him. He has never done this before. It feels almost like betrayal.

“SUPERMAN,” Red Robin screams, as loudly as he can.

Damian is swinging on the end of a grappling line, getting ready to switch to the next one, even though there’s no way he’ll make it.

Tim doesn’t have time to worry if it will work or not. There isn’t time.

Batman is only two stories off the ground when there is a streak of red and blue through the air and Tim sits down hard on the billboard framework, shaking.

“What is going on? What’s going on?” Oracle is demanding.

“Robin? Robin, what’s your status?” Nightwing is shouting. “I’m on my way!”

Damian has followed the arc of his grappling hook and swung up onto a building. Tim forces his hands to stop shaking. He forces himself to breathe. That was too close. What the hell was that? That was way too close.

He leaps up into the air and swings across the sky to join Damian before he can let himself think any more.

“Someone tell me what’s is going on!” Oracle shouts as his feet hit the rooftop.

Damian is standing, his shoulders hunched, his face twisted in fury.

No, not fury.

Damian is afraid.

Tim reaches him, grabs him by the shoulders, bends slightly to meet him at eye level.

Damian looks like he might spit on him.

“He’s okay,” Tim says, not certain at all that this is true. “He’s okay. Let’s go home.”

Damian chews on his lower lip like he might tear through it.

“I’m there in ten minutes,” Nightwing is saying. “Someone please tell me what to be ready for. Batman?”

“Batman isn’t here,” Damian says fiercely. “Come to the cave.”
He wrenches himself away from Tim but Tim grabs his arm.

Damian is too unsettled to fight him, though he does try to pull away. He’s not trying very hard.

Tim reaches up to his ear, pulls out the small comm. He takes Damian’s out, puts them both in his belt, deactivated.

“Come here,” Tim says. Damian stops pulling, his small body hunched over as he stands in sullen silence.

Tim hugs him.

Tim does not hug often.

Damian does not hug often.

They hug each other precisely never.

But right now, Damian doesn’t relax into the embrace exactly, but he softens, leaning into the older boy, his brother.

“Tt. He’s not okay,” Damian says after a second. “Something is wrong.”

“I know,” Tim says, pressing his chin against the smaller boy’s hair. There is nothing else to say, just the physical need to be grounded, calmed after the unspent surge of adrenaline. Tim needs it, too.

“Drake,” Damian says, stiffening.

Tim lets him go like he’s a hot coal. The moment is over.

“Let’s go,” Tim says. “Where’s the Batmobile?”

“Keep up,” Damian says sharply, leaping off the building without looking back. “I’ll drive.”

Tim doesn’t argue.

They roar into the cave at about 10mph too fast, but Damian drifts the car into park like he’s been doing it all his life. He is so much like Bruce.

When they leap out of the car, they see Alfred and Superman standing close to each other, both of them talking sternly and alternating their pauses.

They are both facing the gurney, where Batman sits, his cowl pushed back. He is looking at the floor.

The sound of Nightwing’s cycle fills the cave as he speeds in and then it is quiet again when he cuts the engine, off the bike at a sprint.

Something in Alfred’s expression, something in Superman’s frown, makes the two older boys stop. Tim’s arm snaps out against Damian’s chest, holding him back.

Damian snarls and tries to shove him away, but Dick takes his elbow and keeps him back. Damian stops fighting.

The three of them stand in a tight group, tense, watching.
Batman gets up without a word, acts as if the other men are not there, goes upstairs with his head still bent over.

Alfred and Superman are shouting now, both of them, but neither follow. They fall silent when the elevator door slides shut. Dick lets go of Damian’s elbow and the younger boy sprints up the stairs.

Dick and Tim exchange looks. Tim is not comforted at all to see that Alfred has put a hand to his own forehead and that Superman is scowling with his arms crossed.

Twenty minutes later, Tim sits at the kitchen counter with Alfred and Superman. They all have tea but Tim is the only one drinking. None of them speak.

Dick is in the hall, on the phone with Barbara. Cass walks through the kitchen, stares at all of them, and then leaves. Tim guesses she’s returning to the cave.

The only other sound is carried across the massive house, down hallways and stairs, by the sheer force of the noise. They can all hear Damian, pounding on the locked bedroom door upstairs with his fists and screaming furiously.

Alfred and Superman make no move to act. They both look a little shellshocked. After another minute, Dick ends the phone call and goes upstairs.

The screaming and pounding stop, and Dick passes the kitchen a few seconds later with the boy draped over his shoulder, insulting Dick but not struggling.

Alfred sighs.

Superman downs the tea in one gulp.

“Keep me updated, Alfred. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Thank you, Clark.” Alfred says. Tim is startled by the familiar address but says nothing.

Superman stands, puts a hand on Tim’s shoulder.

“I’m glad you called,” he says.

Then he leaves and it’s just Tim and Alfred, sitting in the kitchen, like months of Tim’s middle school years on repeat.

“Get some sleep, Master Timothy,” Alfred says, standing up. “I have feeling we’ll all need it soon.”
The Firstborn

Four days go by. Four days without a word, four days of ignored phone calls and texts, four days of a locked door and not a single appearance in the cave.

Dick knows because he’s hung around the Manor for all four of those days, going out with Damian in the evenings, trying to keep him from killing someone or putting them in the hospital.

And four days for someone who measures his life in the seconds from tightrope to trapeze, from rooftop to rooftop, is an eternity.

He knows Alfred has seen Bruce. The old man found a key to the bedroom somewhere and has been taking meals up, staying in the room for long periods of time. Dick has no idea what’s going on. It terrifies him. And he’s angry that no one will explain.

Alfred won’t answer questions. Damian is so on edge that he’s either not speaking or he’s shouting, there’s no in-between. Tim hasn’t come back since that night. Cassandra has been sleeping in hallways. He wouldn’t even be here anymore if it wasn’t for that poor mess of a kid.

Dick is ready to break down the door to Bruce’s room and take Damian in with him. But when he goes to actually do it, he stands motionless outside the door, held back by a sense of dread.

That day is when he gets a group text, from Bruce to all of them— even Jason.

_Cave. 9pm._

Of course they’ll be there.

And they are.

Even Jason.

Dick surveys them, making note of every body, every spot in use across the cave.

Damian is sitting on the hood of the Batmobile, Tim is on a railing by the computer. Alfred is quietly cleaning glass cases with a rag. Steph is pretending to examine her nails, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the practice mats. Cass is sitting behind her, their backs pressed up against each other.

Jason is leaning against the display base for the T-Rex, his arms across his chest. He is the only one wearing his mask. Barbara has come, and she’s rolling back and forth idly in her wheelchair by the medical bay; she’s talking in a low voice to Clark Kent, who is the only non-family there. Dick is surprised to see him. Bruce must have sent him a separate text.

Once or twice, someone tries to ask Alfred a question, but he ignores them or calls for patience.

Dick joins Damian near the car. No one speaks but they are all antsy. The minutes tick by and the atmosphere in the room gradually turns to anger. Dick can feel it rolling off of them, churning in his own gut.

Bruce has been an ass. He’s kept them all in the dark, all waiting, and now it’s 9:28 and he’s still not showing.

Then the elevator doors open and Bruce walks out, in gray lounge pants and an old college t-shirt. He doesn’t make eye contact with anyone. Something about the pallor of his face and the casual
clothes defuses the emotional undercurrent in the cave, shifts it to something else.

Dick swallows, hard. This is not going to be good.

Damian edges closer to him, across the hood of the car.

Bruce sits at the computer, taps a few keys. The large screen fills with an array of x-rays. Brain scans. Bruce’s brain scans.

The room is absolutely silent, except for the humming of the computer fans. Out of the corner of his eye, Dick sees Jason stand, step forward, take his mask off.

There is a white irregular shape nestled against the brainstem at the top of the spine.

The chair spins.

And now, Bruce looks at each of them. He makes eye contact with Dick first.

“it’s a tumor. A pilocytic astrocytoma. It’s probably not cancerous but there is a chance. A biopsy is the only way to know,” he says. “I have surgery scheduled for six in the morning tomorrow. I wanted to tell you each in person. I’m taking an indefinite leave.”

“How long have you known?” Clark is the first to speak. He’s an outsider, but older, closer to Bruce in some ways. He sounds a little angry, the edge of earlier emotions creeping back in.

“Since yesterday,” Bruce says, no trace of apology.

Clark seems appeased or placated by this answer, his ire fading again.

“How long have you suspected?” It is Jason who speaks, his voice hard. Dick turns to him, expecting him to explode in the next second.

Dick himself feels like his mouth is missing. He can’t find a way to say any of the hundred questions he wants to ask.

“A week,” Bruce says. “That’s all.”

“Fricking frack,” Jason says quietly, shaken past actual swearing.

“There are details to sort out,” Bruce says, turning back to the computer. “I’m going to talk to each of you tonight. No patrols. I’ll be in the south study. Expect a text.”

Before Dick even registers that Damian is moving, the younger boy is on his feet on the hood of the Batmobile, his arm extended.

A batarang hits the dead center of the computer screen and the screen crackles, a shower of sparks spraying down. Bruce throws the chair back, on his feet, and when Dick grabs for Damian, Damian leaps out of reach and takes off running.

“Let him go,” Bruce says, reaching for a switch and turning off the damaged monitor. “I’ll find him. Let him cool down. Clark? I don’t want to keep you.”

Clark looks across the room at Alfred first, then Bruce.

“You’re not keeping me,” he says levelly. “I’m staying.”
Bruce turns abruptly for the elevator, calling over his shoulder as he steps into the darkened lift, “Keep your phones on.”

Dick cannot find his tongue but he can move the rest of him.

He sprints. He launches himself up the platform, over the railing, and slips inside the elevator just as the doors close.

They stare at each other for a moment, Dick breathing hard even though it wasn’t physically difficult to make it across the cave.

“You have every right to be angry,” Bruce says. “But I didn’t know how else to handle this, except to shut everyone out for a few days.”

The elevator hasn’t moved yet.

“Bruce,” Dick says, still struggling for words. He has known Bruce so long, he cannot imagine how hard it was for him to announce something of that magnitude to everyone at once like that, or at all. It seems to emphasize how serious it is, how quickly things are moving.

Dick tries again, realizing: Bruce and Damian are so much alike.

“Bruce, no one is angry with you about this.”

Bruce pushes the button to get the elevator moving.

“I am,” he says. He puts a hand over his eyes and exhales. “I’m infuriated.”

Dick wants to shout at him, to make him see how ridiculous this is. He’s angry at him for being angry. But he stops himself, he thinks again of Damian. He closes his eyes, he opens them.

“Bruce,” he says, “It might be selfish, but I could really use a hug.”

The elevator doors slide open and for a moment, Dick thinks Bruce is going to ignore him, walk off. But Bruce pulls him into a bear hug, their first in Dick doesn’t even know how long. And after a minute, Dick realizes Bruce is crying, his head bent against Dick’s shoulder.

“You’ve gotta stop bottling it up,” Dick says after a minute, his arms still wrapped tightly around Bruce. “Pace yourself a bit.”

Bruce pulls back, rubbing the back of one hand against his eyes, a rueful half smile on his face.

“We’re a mess,” Dick says. “We probably all need therapy.”

“ Probably,” Bruce agrees, sighing. His expression darkens. “I know you hate it, but will you do something for me?”

“Yes,” Dick says, shoving his conflicted feelings about the cape and cowl aside. “And I don’t hate it. Not since Damian. And it’ll be good for him. He’s going to need a distraction.”

They’re walking through the halls now, almost to the south study.

“It’s going to be a long night,” Bruce says, sounding weary already.

“Do you need anything?” Dick asks, stopping at the threshold of the room.
“Find Damian. Don’t try to bring him inside. Just…let me know where he is.”

Dick nods.

Bruce pulls out his phone, sits on the couch away from the desk.

Dick watches him for a minute, as he types out a text. He looks the same as he did two weeks ago. It’s hard to believe anything is really wrong. And somehow that makes it worse.

“Bruce.”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

“I know,” Bruce says, looking up from the phone. “I love you, too. Always have.”

And then Dick leaves, so Bruce doesn’t have to see him cry.

They have *boundaries* to maintain, after all.
Cassandra Cain’s first language was motion. Even now, she knows she does not think the ways others think. There are words in her mind mixed with the pictures these days, and she feels like she is an orphan of communication: she no longer has a mother tongue.

*Aphasia,* Tim called it. The inability to find words, to speak them at the right times. Sometimes she can find the words but she forgets what they mean, they are just bits of sound. Other days, she can see the picture of what she wants to say and she cannot remember the names of things.

It is getting better, easier.

But still there are times when someone says *peach* and her mind is a swirl of pale orange with bursts of red, the yellow slivers on the edge of a silver knife, the microscopic field of fuzz soft under her finger, but she cannot remember *fruit* or *delicious.* She wishes she could share her brain.

And there are times when she stands outside in the garden at dusk and she can hear Alfred saying, “*The trees look grand tonight,*” to Damian, but she does not know what they are looking at and cannot find the picture—her mind is the shape of the letters, a T and an R and an E and an E. They are black printed forms devoid of purpose, mere lines and curves and white spaces. She wishes she could share their brains.

And then again there are times like tonight, her spine pressed against Stephanie’s spine, her neck curved to look at the computer monitors that are a flood of black and blue and white and gray. Shadows and shapes of radiation, the folds of everything transmuted to flat images. A dangerous strange spot.

In this moment, her heart aches for the language of her childhood, even with all the curses it bears. She sees the scans, she watches the set of Bruce’s jaw, the set of his shoulders, Jason’s foot moving forward, the arc of Damian’s young arm, the way that Alfred turns to statue at the glass case with a rag in his hand. She wishes she knew what it meant. It is like foreign characters to her, the bold shapes of letters and the spikes of color getting in her way.

Stephanie cusses, her body rigid, and Cass knows it means an emotion instead of an object.

Dick runs and she knows it is to hope and not to danger, by the lift of his chin.

But it takes too much *time.* Too much *thinking.*

She stares at the scans on the undamaged screens. She memorizes the feeling of them, considers their shapes. She imagines the brain in motion, where each part goes when a head is slammed against a wall, how each part moves when a skull is drilled with metal, the compression and fragmentation of the white and the dark invaded by a bullet.

Cass closes her eyes. She translates the scans to pink, to gray, to pulsing purple and red and blue. And where the scans have a spot, she has a blank. She doesn’t remember the word for it, she has no frame of reference for the hue or the hardness of the edges or the composition of its reality.

*Phone,* he had said. And she pulls hers out of her hoodie pocket. It is set to silent. Others are talking but she is still. Steph has not moved, but her spine has curved away. Cass knows by the whisper of movement, by the rhythm of her breathing, that Steph is texting. She is typing fast, her thumbs flying, words falling from brain to hands to screen at a pace that makes Cass’ head hurt.
Who is she texting? Who is she telling? Cass cranes her head, sweeping first to one side and then the other.

Tim.

Jason.

And probably others, distractions.

Cass looks down at her own phone. Her body aches to move, to run. The lock screen is a cupcake. It says “cupcake” on it. It has eyes, black lopsided dots on white circles. Steph picked it.

Normally, it makes her lips curl up into a smile, languid and happy. The intersection of word and picture makes this always funny to her. She’s never left feeling like she doesn’t get the joke.

No one else has left the room since Bruce and Dick climbed onto the box moving upward, the cables and the steel, the glowing button and blood-splattered carpet that Bruce will not replace. The elevator.

She looks up at the scans again. Barbara is there now, at the desk, her head bent to peer upward. Cass leans her back into Steph’s, a gentle nudge, a warning. She stands and walks away, climbs the stairs, joins Barbara. Cass sits in His Chair, next to the older woman.


*He is thirty eight,* she thinks, seeing the flicker of birthday candles and the crumbs of yellow cake.

“Hey, kiddo,” Barbara says to her after a moment.

“Hi,” Cass says, not taking her eyes off the scans. The letter O is in her head now, and it has sneakers, it is holding a doll. A kid. She giggles and then puts a hand over her mouth.

*It is not the time,* she tells herself, caught off guard.

Barbara does not look offended. Barbara is *nice.* Cass looks at her. Her eyes have the shape and color of sunset on the beach, blue-green water, white foam, rimmed with red light. It is an upset color.

She knows.

She hugs Barbara’s neck, leaning against her as they look at the monitors.

“Thanks, Cass,” Barbara sniffles, patting her arm. “It’s a lot to take in.”

“It’s a little,” Cass replies, staring hard at the small and awful spot. “But little can be dangerous.”

Barbara nods. “Yeah, it can be.”

From across the room, Superman speaks.

He is wearing glasses, a thin tie, a buttoned shirt with rolled sleeves. He reminds Cass of English teachers in high school shows she watches. He moves, crossing one ankle over the other as he leans against the railing, the palms of his hands pale on gray against the bar. She knows he is called Clark. But his body is always Superman to her, even when he tries to hide it.
“Can you take those down?” He calls to Barbara. He sounds irritated. He looks away from them and in the bend of his cheek against the black of the cave beyond him, he means fear.

The others look at him.

“Perhaps it would be a wise idea, Miss Gordon. I am not sure Master Bruce intended to leave them there,” Alfred says, backing him up. They are linked in their movements, the power and the quiet. They are working together, Cass sees, like a thin cord of purpose. What is the word, the word that is not an action but a thing? Partners. When did this happen?

Barbara closes the scans and Cass feels the void of their missing story.

Now she is irritated.

But then her phone buzzes gently against her hand.

It is a text that is not text. It is a picture.

The study, a soda on a tray.

And then emojis. Two bats.

She smiles. He is her favorite.

She sends a heart, running shoes, a straw.

Cass walks to the elevator.

“Cassie! Did he text you?” Steph shouts from the practice mat.

“He did,” Cass says, waving her phone without looking back.

The study door is cracked open. She slips inside and closes it behind her. He’s sitting on the floor, in front of the window that looks out on the sculpture garden.

When she sits down, he grins at her, but it has a tiredness in it.

She slurps soda through a straw. There’s a piece of paper by his hand, names handwritten in a slanted scrawl. Hers is first. Dick’s is lower down, but crossed off already.

“I want to make sure you understand,” he says, the lines around his eyes serious. “The surgery itself is dangerous. I could die.”

“That is always true,” she says, blinking at him. It is. They are dangerous people. He could die at any time. The word “die” is a swirl in her brain of linen shroud, of fallen leaves, of empty paths through barren trees. It is not the worst word.

“Oh, Cass,” he says, laughing. “What would I do without you?” He does not laugh often. He leans back on his arms, propping himself up on the floor. His posture says comfortable. The way his throat moves against the skin of his neck says nervous.

“Be sad,” she says, smirking at him. “All the time.”

She sucks air and melted ice up through the straw. It is sweet in her mouth, against her teeth.

“There’s also a chance that I will wake up and not be the same,” he says, somber again. “I could lose
memories. My personality might change. I could forget how to talk. The brain is so delicate.”

Delicate. Her pictures for this are all fragile things. Snowflakes. The thread of lace curtains. The f-holes in old violins, at the orchestra he took her to see last summer on the river, where they could watch in the dark from the war memorial statues.

She imagines his brain as a bit of snow, melting away.

“If you forget how to talk,” she says, “I will teach you again.”

Because she can talk. She just doesn’t always know how to think. It is the code-switching between picture and word that troubles her. But she knows from experience it can be learned, to talk, to speak, to connect.

“You know why I called for you first?” He asks. “Because I knew you’d know what to say.”

And even though every day is a day he might die, she is sad more than usual in this moment. She considers him carefully.

“If you are changed,” she says slowly, thinking hard, his brain now a piece of music switching from major to minor key along a staff, no longer a melting bit of snow, “I will find you again.”

She puts the empty glass down and scoots closer to him. She nudges him with her elbow. He nudges her back.

“I told the others no patrol, but that’s because they won’t be safe tonight. I’m not so worried about you. Go run. Watch the city for us. Text me anytime.”

She leans her head toward his and he bumps his forehead against hers.

“It might get crazy around here,” he warns her. “Come home anyway. Eat and sleep.”

She puts her head on his shoulder and she knows what he means when he says words to her, she can see in her mind the picture he has put there: worried faces, angry voices, the smell of sterile bandages and frustrated footsteps in the hushed hallways. A fridge she is welcome to open anyway, a bed made with the dent of her head in the pillow.

Still a nest for her, even if everything is different.

She sits up, holds her phone, taps the screen.

She sends a high five.

He looks at his phone and taps.

It’s a heart.

She springs to her feet, craving motion, momentum.

“Cass,” he says, as she bounces on her toes by the window, ready to fly across the lawn. “Be safe.”

“You too,” she says. And then she tugs open the window and leaps out, her heart broken and not broken. What is the word, the taste of sour candy, of coconut curry with peppers golden yellow and fire orange?

Bittersweet.
There it is.
The Prodigal

The world is wound tightly around him, the tension of rubber bands hugging a cork core. Jason taps his foot at a rapid staccato after Cass leaves the cave.

He knows he makes them nervous. He knows he is driving up the anxiety level in the room. He almost doesn’t care. But he sees Alfred across the room, quietly cleaning the glass case that holds his old suit. And he pulls his foot back from the floor, props it against the base he’s leaning on.

Jason Todd has no illusions. He knows he is a violent man. But he suspects the others assume he is a tornado of rage inside, long litanies of curses filling his thoughts.

But Jason is cultivated. He feels out of place among Bruce’s society crowd, he always did, always will. But his is a personal cultivation. The swearing comes easily, naturally now, because it is both a relief and has an effect on those around him. He likes the impact.

On his interior, though, he is constructing this image of himself, a mix of nature and nurture. He does not always have a perfect handle on it, but he’s working on it. He has a thousand teachers.

His inner self is full of the literature of the ages. Bruce was the one who first collected books with him, the clothbound editions of history’s wisdom fodder for his growing, hungry mind. And this is why the chasm between the two of them astounds him so much.

They have both read so much of the same work, so why did Bruce walk away from it with such cowardice concerning death? Does he not see that the greatest stories of every culture are about warriors? Men who do what must be done. They are bloody, scarred, and bold. Jason doesn’t know if he counts himself among them, exactly, but they had nameless men who followed them into battle. He’s comfortable counting himself among them.

Bruce is an idiot, blind to his own type. He is Alexander, commanding a troop to march off the cliff to prove their obedience and taking a city without any bloodshed, except for his own broken soldiers down in the ravine. But that was one castle. It only worked because Alexander fought before, he fought after, he was willing to go all the way.

All the things that Bruce should be, could be, populate Jason’s mind like restless players. He is Aragorn, swooping in with the Army of the Dead to save his city Gondor. He is the Duke of Wellington at Waterloo, he is Odysseus fighting his way to Ithaca, he is King Arthur holding Briton against the Saxons, he is Sun Quan sinking the fleets at the Red Cliffs.

Or he could be. But he chooses not to.

Some days, it seems like Jason is the only one in this damn family who understands that when you have a war on drugs, a crusade against crime, that people have to die. Better the other side. That what wars and crusades are.

Only an numbskull joins a battle and insists on losing.

Jason isn’t a leader, he doesn’t think of himself in those terms. He is far from the patriarchal figure gathering family and inspiring loyalty. But he is willing, willing to admit who and what he is.

A warrior.

He is Macduff killing Macbeth, doing what he must to get Malcolm on the throne.
He is not a beast, driven by bloodlust or a thirst for chaos. He has a heart. He’s precise, he’s artwork, he’s got soul.

And it’s killing him right now.

All the grand framework for understanding his place in the world is crumbling and he’s so frustrated with himself for being such a fucking cliche that he could scream or cut his own heart out. After all, the best literature is full of drama.

But it’s the fact that he’s sitting in the shadow of a T-Rex in the basement lair of one of the most dramatic men on the planet, and of all the stories he’s read and poems he knows by heart, from *Praying Drunk* to Shakespeare’s Sonnet XXXVI, the thing that keeps thundering through his mind with all the force of a Welsh gale is Dylan Thomas’ damn poem about his own damn father dying, *eff it all to hell*.

Fricking frack.

*Do not go gentle into that good night*, his mind says, as he looks around the room.

*Rage, rage, against the dying of the light*, it continues (and he knows he’s cultivated and maybe a little unstable, it’s a classic human paradox; he’s in good company).

*And you, my father, on that sad height*, his brain says, and he turns and slams a fist into the T-Rex’s base.

He stalks off toward the exit of the cave. He doesn’t even know why he stayed this long. It’s his job to make big exits, that’s why they keep him around, so he might as well do his job.

Then, against his leg, his phone buzzes and plays a bar of “In the Hall of the Mountain King.”

He takes a deep breath and pulls it out, unlocks the screen. The message is from Bruce.

*What do you think you’re doing? Get back here. Come up.*

He keeps walking, out the cave, past his bike.

He walks down the road curving out of the hillside, he climbs the bank through the trees and undergrowth, stumbling over briars in the dark and swearing.

Jason straightens, throws his head back, sighs explosively. And then he starts walking again, up out of trees and into the open field.

Cass runs across the lawn thirty yards from him, flying low to the grass like a raven through the night.

*What a magnificent creature. Wish him luck, boys*, he thinks.

He forces himself to step, one foot in front of the other, his heart and stomach sinking into his boots as he goes.

So he takes his time, goes slow. He wants to put it off, he wants to get it over with.

And then he is there, standing outside the tall study window, looking in at Bruce.

Bruce is sitting on the couch, feet up on the coffee table, a book in his hands.
He wants to throttle him, tell him what a waste he’s made of his life and the chances he’s had to really fix things in this town.

He wants to shake him, tell him to stop acting like such a loner, doesn’t he know how many of them he’s saved?

Jason almost turns to go.

“Come in, Jason,” Bruce calls to the window, without looking up from the book.

Jason goes in.

He stands on the edge of the rug for a minute, feeling antsy, running his finger along the edge of the gun holstered to his thigh. He looks around the room for computer screens, wondering where the feed for the cave cameras goes to.

“How’d you know I was leaving?” He finally demands, curious despite his better judgment. It’s probably on Bruce’s phone.

“I assumed you already had,” Bruce says without bitterness.

“What the hell do you want?” Jason asks, feeling wounded and not sure why. It wasn’t a bad guess. It was seconds away from being the right one. “Are we going to sit and have a heart to heart? Any we have is likely to be literal, and I don’t think Alfred would appreciate it on the rug.”

Bruce closes the book, marking his place with a slip of ivory note paper.

“No,” he says, after a moment. “I want you to do two things.”

“And then I can go home to Kansas, Great Oz?”

Bruce continues as if he hadn’t interrupted.

“Disarm yourself. All of it. Put it on the desk.”

Jason begins to scoff at this but Bruce keeps going, not giving him a chance.

“And then pick out a book. I don’t care what. Anything you want. Then sit and read with me.”

And Bruce returns to his book.

This request catches Jason so off-guard that he falls silent, all his protestations crumbling to dust.

For a long time, he doesn’t move. And then he walks to the desk and starts pulling weapons out of their sheaths and holsters and dropping them on the desk’s polished surface. He gives them a few inches to fall, enjoys watching each nick and scratch form under the metal corners and edges.

He keeps one gun, the most visible one. It makes him feel better. It will make Bruce feel uneasy. He needs it.

At first, he plans to pick a title just to get under Bruce’s skin. What is this, anyway? Some weird goodbye? The guy isn’t dead, might be fine by this time next year. He’s such a drama queen. Jason isn’t even sure why he stayed.

But he is lulled into distraction by the library. It’s been a long time, too long, since he’s had a comfortable run of it. He could find a copy of *The Brothers Karmazov*, pick up where he left off at
home. But he doesn’t feel like it.

What he does feel like reading is further down the shelves. He’s not even sure he’s going to find it until he sees it, the slim volume nestled in among longer works. He plucks it off the shelf, runs a thumb across the title: *La Hojarasca*, by Gabriel García Márquez. It sort of figures that Bruce would have it in Spanish. He gently opens the cover, bending the spine.

It’s a first edition.

There is a chair in the corner back here. Jason is so tempted to sit there, to keep the distance between them. He can taste how much he wants it and it tastes like bourbon on the rocks.

The book is still open in his hands. Why did he pick this one? What was he thinking?

He looks over at Bruce, quietly reading like it’s just any other evening. Except they don’t have evenings like this, they haven’t in a long, long time. And something in Jason shifts, the faint taste of bourbon souring in his mouth.

The couch creaks faintly under his weight, as he sits next to Bruce. Not too close, but close enough.

“Where did you find this one?” He asks, flipping through the pages until he gets to the story he has been thinking about.

“Christie’s in London,” Bruce says, turning a page in his own book. Jason looks sidelong, trying to catch the cover of whatever Bruce is reading.

It is *The Living Reed*, a Pearl S Buck novel Jason has never read. He has a vague memory that it is about someone traveling, maybe a spy.

Jason turns his attention to his own book and gets lost there. He reads the first story, goes to the next. And then the next. He loses all track of time, leaning forward, as if into the pages. The language flows over him and he falls easily into the Spanish, the rhythm of it in his head.

When he finishes the last sentence, he is suddenly aware of the passage of time. It is a short book, it couldn’t have been long, but longer than he meant to sit.

He closes the book and looks over. Bruce is still reading, but his brow is furrowed as if it is requiring effort.

Jason stands and stretches. He takes a step toward the corner shelves and Bruce stirs behind him.

“Jay,” he says, “keep it.”

*Rage, rage, against the dying of the light*, Jason thinks and he is annoyed. He turns to refuse, to say he won’t take it.

Bruce is sitting forward on the couch, pinching the bridge of his nose as if they are already deep into an argument. But they aren’t, not yet, and Jason knows it is a different kind of headache.

“Okay,” Jason says, mild and calm. “Thanks.”

He steps to the desk, starts strapping weapons back onto his body, into the suit. When he has snapped the button on the last holster, he casually says,

“Rage, rage, Bruce. Adios.”
And then he leaves without looking back, the Márquez first edition clutched in his trembling hand.
The Blood

The wind flutters the leaves of the oak tree Damian Wayne is perched in. He is tucked in between two branches that grew thick and entangled early on, his legs pulled up to his chest. His hood is pulled close around his face and his fingernails dig into his palms until they leave crescent shapes in the bronze skin, reminders of another home in more than one way.

“Tt,” he spits out at the world around him.

He is not a child.

He’s going to have to stop acting like a child.

But he doesn’t climb down from the tree.

They have been treating him like a child.

At least they have left him alone.

The tree is on the far side of the manor lawn and he cannot see the house from where he sits. It makes it easier to pretend he is away, somewhere wild and empty.

There is so much he does not miss of his former life.

But he does miss the sand between his toes, chilly in the morning before the sun rises. It is not like the sand of the Gotham harbor, wet and course and full of bits of shell. The sand he misses is fine, a dust of smoothing grit. He misses the hot desert winds and the relief of shade and stone. He misses it more than the streets of London, more than the forested hills of China.

He has lived too many places to be a child. He remembers his childhood and this is not it.

Father sometimes remembers that he is closer to a peer and treats him as such, but then he will also turn without warning and order him around, saying things like: “You’re just a little boy.”

Tt. Damian is little. He is not a boy. He is a man, with the skills and thoughts of a man, trapped in the shape of a boy’s body. Little boys do not know the things he knows.

Grayson and the others are eager for their childhoods. Drake has a shelf of toys, toys, in his apartment. The others watch cartoons together, forgiving infuriating plot holes and impossibilities and then going out and buying sweatshirts or water bottles with the colorful characters.

“Ahmaq,” Damian says fiercely under his breath. They are idiots. Childhood is not something to revisit, to enjoy. Tt. Childhood is something you survive. And Damian did. He has finished that part of his life. He doesn’t understand why the others insist on trying to keep him there.

It is most infuriating when Father or Grayson say that, “You’re just a child,” when he is doing something they don’t like. They do not realize the incongruity of what they say. Father cannot control him, bend him to his own will, and Damian is the child for not bending? No, it is men who hold their ground, who risk upsetting others. Children are timid, eager to please.

Damian is not a child.

He is an irate man, sitting in a tree, waiting in a child’s body, to do what he decides he wants to do next.
What he wants to do is stand atop a dune and see the stars, to lie and track their movements across an inky sky. Even here at the Manor, away from Gotham, the light pollution dims the heavens and the stars are distant specks. He can, through the leaves, make out the sword of Al-Jabbar, but he wants to see Resha and Dabih. He wants to see them without a telescope, with his naked eye.

But wishing, wanting, does not make truth. Wishes are the food of the weak. He tears his eyes away from the sky with a growl, glares at the bark of the tree beneath his bare toes.

A movement across the lawn catches his eye and he looks up from his study of the brown bark, places where the lighter, weathered wood matches the brown of his own feet.

It is Father, walking in the faint moonlight, directly toward him.

Damian tenses.

Father has not spoken to him, alone, in almost a week.

He did not trust him. He left him in the dark. They have wasted time.

When he steps beneath the tree, looking up, Damian does spit.

“Khāk to saret,” he hisses. Dirt on your head.

If his Father were a normal father, the sort on TV or at playgrounds or in the grocery store when he goes with Alfred, then he would stand at the trunk of the tree and plead with Damian to come down.

But Father is not normal.

Wordlessly, registering only mild surprise at the insult and spittle Damian has rained on his head, Father grabs a low branch and swings himself up, moving easily through the limbs of wood until he is sitting beside Damian.

The past four nights of patrol have been with Grayson. He has seen little of Father since…since Drake called for the Alien. And Damian could have made it in time, if he’d only started sooner, if he’d only realized…

He looks down again, leaning out to see the grassy lawn below him. He would not fall. He would never fall; he isn’t a bèndàn. But he is suddenly aware of how many hard and jagged branches there are for a body to hit on the way down. He glances over at Father.

“I’m not going to fall, Damian,” he says.

“Tt.” Damian says, leaning into himself and wrapping his arms around his legs.

His heart is seized with the conviction that Father is upset with him. And he is an ahmaq for not knowing it sooner. It is little wonder that Father has not spoken to him in days.

He did not catch him. He let him fall.

And then, like a petulant child, he destroyed a monitor.

He has failed him.

Damian glares at the branch of the tree, the grooves in the bark like bottomless fissures in the dark shadows. He wishes, like a weak thing, that one would swallow him up. That he could rest his head against the bottom of a towering ravine, hidden from the world and from his shame.
And then Father’s hand reaches out and he flinches.

The hand stays, in the air, for a moment, and then moves again, pushing Damian’s hood back, lifting his chin. He looks sideways, his face skewed in disgust. With himself. He does not want to look at Father.

“Bas,” his Father’s voice says, gentle in the wind that moves the leaves. *Enough.* “I should have opened the door and let you in. I shouldn’t have gone out that night. It’s not your fault.”

And now Damian can look at him, his lip trembling. It betrays him.

“I didn’t mean it,” Damian says, sniffling. “I don’t want you dead.”

“I know,” Father says. “It’s okay. Will you suffer the indignity of me putting you to bed?”

Damian considers, feeling torn between wanting to be a child (maybe he understands Drake’s toys, after all) and not wanting to give ground here. He is *not* a child.

“For me?” Father adds.

Damian nods.

“Tt. I will allow it,” he says.

Father leads the way out of the tree, and at the bottom, he stretches out an arm to help Damian down. Damian ignores the arm and leaps easily onto his feet, the grass cool between his toes. It’s almost as nice as sand.

Despite his solo landing, Father is not so easily swayed. He snags Damian out of the beginning of a run across the yard and swings him up onto his shoulders.

“I did not say I would allow this,” Damian protests, but he does not struggle to get down.

Inside the Manor, Father takes him to the kitchen and sets him down on a stool.

“Salty or sweet?” He asks, one hand on the freezer door.

What Damian wants is hummus. Hummus sharp with lemon, with chickpeas only coarsely mashed after stewing all day on the stove. Garlic so strong it burns his tongue a little and tahini with grit in it. But he has given up on American hummus.

“Sweet,” he says.

Father puts a bowl of lemon sorbet in front of him, twice as much as Pennyworth ever serves. Titus has heard the sounds in the kitchen and trots in, looking hopeful.

“Are you having any?” Damian asks suspiciously, his spoon held aloft. Titus’ head is on his knee and he scratches his ears with his other hand.

“No,” Father says, sitting next to him and patting Titus’ back.

“It’s not drugged, is it?” Damian asks, making a face at the sorbet. “To make me sleep?”

“You get that paranoia from me,” Father says, looking at his hands. “No. It’s not drugged. I can’t eat anything tonight.”
And there is a cold, sharp spike of fear through Damian’s chest, more frigid than the sorbet that is now on his tongue.

*Can’t.*

Father doesn’t usually use a word like this in regard to himself. He always frames things in words of choice—*won’t, don’t want to, will not.*

It drags up the detail Damian has spent all night avoiding, staunchly not thinking about, the thing hanging over all other things like a thick veil.

He clinks the spoon against his teeth, trying to ground himself.

“Tt,” he says. Father says nothing, but pats Titus some more.

When he has finished the sorbet, he grabs Titus’ face and rubs the dog’s jowls in both hands, scratches that impossibly soft spot under his toothy chin.

“If you die, you aren’t coming back this time,” Damian says, and it is not a question.

“No,” Father says, “I won’t.”

“Is this when you promise you won’t die?” Damian asks sulkily. He is *not* a child. He knows the script as well as any adult. Despite this, his traitor of a lower lip is trembling again.

“You know I can’t promise that, Damian,” Father says.

Damian *wants* to be a child. He wants to be lied to, protected, sheltered from this villain he cannot fight with katana or batarang or fist.

“But I’m here right now,” Father says, standing, picking him up into a hug. He carries him upstairs, Damian’s head against his neck, and Damian wants to be put down immediately, he never wants to be put down ever again.

He’s put down anyway. He brushes his teeth, pulls the hood of his sweatshirt tight around his head until only his face is peeking out. He climbs into bed that way, while Father pulls back the blankets. And he lets himself be tucked in.

He is trying so hard to not be a child. He is trying so hard.

But he is furious, too, that when it might actually matter to him, Father is not insisting on it. He wants to be gathered up, to be told everything will be okay, to have the chance to scorn it himself. It is being denied him, in this offering of the truth.

When Father leans over to place a rare kiss on his head, Damian turns away.

He can hear him, standing there, still bent over but not trying again.

“*Duset darem,*” Father says quietly, putting a hand on Damian’s shoulder. Damian clenches his teeth, fighting himself. He pulls his shoulder away, slowly.

Father turns the light off, leaves the room.

Damian breathes in and out, in and out, in and out with his jaw aching from the tension.
I am not a child I am not a child I am not a child.

Father is at the top of the stairs when Damian tears out of the room into the hallway. Father catches him when he leaps and they sit on the top step, Father holding him, until he falls asleep.
The Seeker

The laptop casts a faint glow on Tim Drake’s face, darkening the circles under his eyes with shadow. He clicks, clicks again, and again. There are thirty two tabs open to read through.

It helps, to feel busy. The tabs range in depth from the Wikipedia summary of pilocytic astrocytoma tumors and the variations thereof, to Lancet research abstracts about new treatment methods being explored.

There are macrophotography and rendered images of the stringy cells, vibrant purple and pink. The origin cells are synapse-like, white-gray brain cells named for the Latin word for star but looking more like mutant spiders to him.

The tabs eat the time away, waiting in the cave. He’s not certain any of them were specifically told to wait here– Bruce, after all, only said to keep their phones on, to stay off patrol– but they’ve all been waiting here anyway.

At some point, not long after Cass went up, Stephanie came to join him and then convinced him to sit with her on the gurney on the medical platform. He brought his laptop with him and she watched for a few minutes, then sighed at him,

“What are you doing, Tim?"

He didn’t answer. She didn’t press.

Now, she’s lying back on the bed, her feet against his shoulder, watching something on her phone. He’s clicking through tabs, scanning and absorbing and processing.

There are a few for alternative treatment centers, diet changes, mineral therapy. He doesn’t linger on those, but bookmarks them just in case.

He skims the .pdf brochures written for patients, for families, about what to expect after surgery, what to expect during radiotherapy, what to expect during chemo.

They say asinine, insultingly basic things like,

*Take your prescribed medicines on time.*

*Call if you develop a high fever.*

*Get plenty of rest.*

*Offer to bring meals or clean the house.*

He reads them anyway.

Some of the tabs are blog posts, survivor’s stories, ranging from dense paragraphs without punctuation or narrative form to bulleted, numbered lists of takeaways.

He makes mental notes. Steroids make you hungry, it might be days before things are not a constant fog, it can take six weeks, four months, a year, five years to feel normal again– or never.

After getting sucked into a blog written by someone’s mother, ending with a eulogy and dedication
to future research, he leaves blogs behind and climbs into the technical.

Profiles of surgeons, hospitals involved in trial research, articles written for and by doctors. He starts to see advice for how to talk to patients, how to prepare them for the stuff that didn’t make the brochures.

Loss of memory, paralysis, numbness, aphasia, personality changes. The one that scares him the most is the article that notes patients may emerge from anesthesia speaking and then profoundly lose language hours later.

“Tim,” Steph’s voice cuts through his growing panic, she kicks his shoulder gently. “You’re breathing weird. Stop it. What’re you doing?”

She sits up and looks at the screen. He sees her phone—she has a make-up tutorial paused.

“What the hell, Tim,” she exhales. She shuts the laptop screen and he just barely moves his fingers out of the way in time. “Stop.”

“I was working,” he says, glaring at her.

She presses her fingers into the tense muscles along the back of his neck. He wants to shrug her off but it feels so good.

“Lie down with me,” she says. “We’ll watch something.”

It has been a long time, it feels like, since he and Stephanie dated. It feels like another lifetime, their long history one belonging to somebody else.

Reluctantly, he moves the laptop to the floor and stretches out on the gurney, on his stomach. She flops down next to him, offers him an earbud. They are shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip, head to head, with her phone propped in front of them.

She is Steph. She can’t have changed that much. He expected her to feel like a missing part of him, returning, comfortable and familiar next to him. But she doesn’t. Not a stranger, exactly, but a different creature. She smells different than she used to, her arm is harder than it used to be. There’s more muscle, packed densely under her skin, and it doesn’t give against his arm the way he remembers.

“Whatcha wanna watch?” she asks, tapping a finger on the Netflix app.

Nothing, he wants to say. But he knows she’s trying hard to distract him, to help.

“I don’t care,” he says, shrugging. His body is still but he feels jittery down to his bones.

“Something stupid it is,” she says, navigating with swipes across the screen. The music comes through the earbud while Tim is distracted and he realizes she’s started an old sketch comedy they used to watch together.

“Steph,” he says, three minutes in. He hasn’t even managed a smile. He feels dead to it. “I can’t watch this.”

“It doesn’t hurt him if you laugh,” she says without pausing the show. “And it doesn’t help him if you mope.”

Tim gives it his attention for a bit longer. He steals a look at her. She isn’t laughing or even giggling,
but occasionally a grin flashes across her face. She meets his gaze, mid-grin, and it fades.

“You’re gonna be alright,” she says, finally tapping the screen to pause.

“You don’t know—”

“I didn’t say he was or it will be, I said you. You are going to be alright.”

“I don’t know if I care about me right now,” he says. “I don’t know if I have the energy.”

Steph leans over and kisses his cheek. It is short, friendly, intended to be comforting. And it might be working.

He drops his head against the sheet, next to the phone, and she starts the show again. He can’t see it, but he can hear the dialogue through the one earbud he’s wearing and he can picture it in his head. The next punchline gets a smile out of him, a small one.

They stay that way for a while, her watching and him listening, their bodies meeting down the middle of the bed. They could be an inch or two apart but they aren’t.

When the credits roll, she stops the autoplay and says,

“Tim, if you aren’t even going to look, I’m going back to my YouTube subscriptions.”

“Go ahead,” he says, not lifting his head.

He listens to angsty pop music mixed with a self-deprecating woman talking about eyeshadow palettes. He listens as a girl who cannot be more than thirteen years old reviews half a dozen lip gloss samples she got in the mail. He listens to a calm, elderly woman explain how to do a Greek revival hairstyle, and she keeps saying “grip the strands, now, grip the strands” which somehow seems so absurd to him that he starts quietly laughing.

Steph elbows him hard and he sucks in the laughter and sighs instead. He pulls the earbud out and tosses it to her, across the screen of the phone, and just lies down instead.

A minute later, he is motionless but wide-eyed. She’s playing with his hair, kind of absently.

“Steph, I can’t do this,” he says, turning his head to pull his hair away from her. On the downside, now he’s facing her, close to her neck. There’s a small curve of a black shape tucked beneath her collarbone. “Is that a tattoo?”

“Which one?” Steph asks, craning her neck to look down at herself. “Oh, yeah. The rabbit.”

“Huh,” Tim says.

“It was on my Instagram like seven months ago,” Steph says.

“I must have missed it,” he says. He pushes himself up on his elbows. “I need to go talk to Dick.”

“Wait,” she says, sitting up suddenly. “I need to… I was wondering…” she puts her head in her hands and speaks through her palms, her voice muffled. The earbuds still dangle over her shoulder. “Should I even be here? I mean, I’m not… I’m not a Wayne.”

Tim blinks.

She had been trying, in her own way, to make both of them feel better. And he was just a mess, self-
absorbed and spiraling.

“Did he send you a text?” Tim asks.

“What? No, not—”

“I mean earlier. Did you just come with Cass or did you get a text?”

“I got a text,” she says, tugging a lock of her hair and spinning it.

“Then you should be here.” Tim says. He touches the tattoo, this foreign part of her, on impulse, with just the tip of his finger. “And thank you. For trying to help.”

She smiles and he stands, stretches, picks up the laptop and tucks it beneath his arm.

Tim wants to find somewhere to hide, maybe a room upstairs, and open the laptop back up and start going through tabs again. But it feels like a black hole waiting to swallow him and he doesn’t know where to begin. He needs more specific information, stricter boundaries than the landscape of Google and EBSCO.

He wants to talk to Dick or at least be near him, to find solace in his company. But he doesn’t know what he would say, he doesn’t know how he could comfort Dick in return.

And he is trapped, in front of the cave computer, frozen. A flightless bird, not sure where to go. Where can he go, where he is not too alone, where he is not a burden? He closes his eyes against the world and as if on cue, his phone vibrates in his pocket.

Your turn.

Maybe Tim should dread it, should drag his feet as he goes. But he is so relieved to know where to go, to have intention, that it is not until the moment he is outside the study door, his hand raised to knock, that it slams against him like a surging ocean wave.

It is textbook fight or flight. His feet itch to take off running down the hall, his arms ache to shove the door open and rush in.

He has to catch his breath.

Then the smell drifts under the door, curls up to meet him.

Coffee.

It’s like a homing beacon. It does not wash away the disaster this night is, the weight of the situation, but it is a small comfort and a calming routine, a ritual. It settles him.

He knocks and pushes the door open.

Bruce is sitting at the desk, looking exhausted. But he nods at Tim as if he is relieved to see him, motions to the seat next to him at the desk.

There is a spread of files and papers.

And there is a mug of coffee, still steaming, on Tim’s side of the desk. It’s sitting on a piece of note paper that sticks to the bottom when Tim sets his laptop down and picks up the cup. He peels it off and sets it back down, a ring of coffee on the paper.
“Don’t worry about it,” Bruce says. “Couldn’t find a coaster.”

Tim sips the coffee and looks over the files on the desk.

“What are we doing?” He asks, ready to work. A distraction is what he’s needed.

“Medical files,” Bruce says, flipping one open to a chart densely filled with slanted handwriting. “My own.”

Tim’s eyes widen as he looks at the papers. It isn’t what they say– he hasn’t processed that yet. It’s their existence in front of him.

“Why?” He asks, looking at Bruce, who is sorting through notes in one slim file.

“Because I know you, Tim. I know you’ve already started doing research.”

Tim looks down into his coffee.

“Am I that predictable?”

“You’re dependable,” Bruce says, handing him a paper. “Start here. I’ve found a good surgeon. He has a team with experience. But on the chance that things don’t go well, I want someone else to know these files inside and out, to know where to go next.”

Tim takes the paper.

It’s the initial diagnosis, dated yesterday. Or two days ago, since it’s after midnight now.

“They worked really fast,” Tim observes, reading it over.

“I pay them to.”

They lapse into quiet. Occasionally, Bruce will hand something to Tim, point out something specific. He has done his own research, printed out papers he feels are relevant. At least one is a paper Tim has open in a tab.

Tim finishes his coffee– and it was good coffee– and gathers one pile into a neat stack.

“Thank you,” Tim says. He needs this, to have something to do.

“I have one stipulation,” Bruce says, stacking files. There isn’t really a lot. It’s a small stack, dense with information. “Don’t lose yourself in this.”

Tim stares at the empty mug. He looks at Bruce.

“Okay,” he says. “Not promising. But I’ll try. You’re going to have to come out okay tomorrow, though, or all bets are off.”

“You already brought me back once, Tim,” Bruce says, his smile weary and sad. It’s his eyes. The smile is contradicted by his eyes.

“So I can do it again. I’ll do whatever you need.”

Bruce stands abruptly, knocking the bottom edge of the files against the desk to straighten them out, gathering them together in clean lines.
Tim stands more slowly and holds out a hand for the files.

Bruce hugs him, one arm tight around Tim’s shoulders. Bruce’s hugs are solid, the kind that calm Tim when his mind is freaking out. They are also rarely offered and Tim himself doesn’t think to ask, doesn’t know how much he needs one until it is there.

“I don’t deserve you, Tim,” Bruce says.

“I think you underestimate the value of your contributions,” Tim replies, grinning for the first time all night. He misses the two of them working together. Their minds were like whetstones, one for the other, and he’s never felt as sure of himself as he did when at Batman’s side on a chilly rooftop or in front of the cave computer. He thinks of the two of them as unsolved equations, balancing the other while they sorted out the variables and looked for a solution. Those moments were his wings. His heart aches for the loss of it, the way he imagines other people miss middle school band camp or their first summer of freedom with a car: It is an artifact of another time, a season he will never get all the way back.

“There’s more coffee in the French press in the kitchen,” Bruce says. “It’s yours.”

Tim knows a dismissal when he hears one.

“See you tomorrow, Bruce,” he says, the files balanced on his laptop. He takes the empty coffee mug and lets it dangle from a finger. “Or later today. I don’t know. Whenever. I’ll be there.”

“Get some sleep, Tim,” Bruce says, walking with him to the door.

“Bruce?” Tim stops, his feet like lead. “There’s something that isn’t in the files. Maybe it’s the wrong thing to ask.”

“Go ahead,” Bruce says, his brow just slightly creased. He’s curious.

“How does it feel?”

And he knows Bruce will hear the distinction, that the man who helped him hone his skills of observation and precision will hear what he actually asked. He is not asking how are you doing, how are you holding up? He’s asking exactly what he said.


“Hmm,” Tim says, mulling this over. “Okay.”

Out in the hall, he knows he should go sleep. But it’s still early, relatively speaking, for him. There’s coffee in the kitchen. He has work to do, preparations to make for every outcome. It’s what Bruce would do, and Tim learned from the best.
The cave is too quiet without her earbuds in. She’s okay with the quiet of empty spaces, but there are still like three other people down here and none of them are talking to each other.

And she’s part of the problem.

She puts her earbuds back in and starts another video.

Honestly, Stephanie Brown only moderately cares about the make-up. She likes looking cute, might find some new stuff to try, but she isn’t obsessive about it. But YouTube videos? Find just that right mix of voice cadence and underproduction and sound, and she’s got tingles up and down her arms, on her scalp. It’s not sexual— it’s just pure relaxing.

And it’s cheaper than therapy. And she needs to have a way to relax. Maybe relax is the wrong word.

De-stress.

Steph will take any de-stressing she can get.

Especially tonight.

So, back to liquid foundation comparisons it is.

She sits cross-legged on the gurney, aware that it is maybe a morbid choice of location. She misses Tim, but he’s so cagey these days. What she wants is to be friends, to check on him, to talk; he always seems like he’s terrified that any second they’ll fall into each other’s arms and make each other miserable.

After a bit, even the YouTube videos aren’t cutting it. It’s been a weird, long night, hours drifting by in a haze. It feels like Bruce made the announcement just minutes ago and then kept them there for weeks. It’s just like him. Honestly.

She feels a little guilty for feeling this way, but okay, not guilty at all. She feels bad for him, bad for everyone else by association. But it just figures that even in grief or stress, he’d be trying to exert control.

She’s stuck around anyway, but maybe that wasn’t really for him. Maybe it was for herself, to prove that she could care about him and still decide for herself what to do. It just happens to be the thing he asked. But she could change her mind.

Steph hops off the bed and rolls her shoulders, one at a time.

She could go talk to Babs. But Babs is playing a card game with Clark Kent, neither of them talking. She has no idea what they are playing and zero desire to interrupt.

Alfred must have gone upstairs— he isn’t anywhere in the cave that she can see.

She doesn’t know if they ever found Damian. Nobody has come back to the cave after leaving tonight. It’d be one hell of an opportunity to pick them off, if someone was so inclined.

A walk would be good. And she could look for him, just in case. What an awful thing to find out at eleven years old. And his coping skills are basically nil for options that don’t involve stabbing or
smashing things; thus, the broken giant-ass monitor that will cost more to replace than two years of her rent.

Steph leaves one earbud in, one out, so she can distract herself and pay attention at the same time. She starts an old playlist, summer music from the year before, full of furious percussion and beaten chords.

It’s a few minutes of walking outside the cave before she’s made it around the hedge of trees and undergrowth on the hill and can pick a path up to the back yard.

This place is huge. The size always astounds her. She hikes up the slope to where the ground levels out and goes first for the copse of ancient trees. The crowns tower over her when she reaches them, casting darker shadows on shadowed ground.

No sign of Damian, no sound. Out working a case, he can be pretty silent, but around here his little ti noise is like echolocation, a tiny natural tracking device for a tiny little bat of a boy.

Plus, no Titus.

She roams the grounds, listening to bitter Nordic women sing on top of bass guitar and piano. Still, no sign of him. Maybe he’s in bed. She hopes he’s in bed. That poor kid.

hey u did u go home? She texts Jason, wondering about him, too, now. She’s also desperate to talk to someone and the others feel off the radar to her. She matches how she knows he will text: low key, abbreviations.

nope at bar. Jason replies. sans accessories. did he summon u yet?

Her walk has turned into ambling now, across the night-black field of trim grass.

nah not yet. just killin time. prep me. what will he say? suspense level: 100+ gonna leave if not soon, b/c feeling like afterthought.

The song changes to one that annoys her and she skips it.

She sends Cass a heart and a kitten and a hamburger.

If she’d known she’d be here all night, she would have brought some textbooks. There are papers she could be writing, assignments she could be finishing.

idk we just read? fucking weird. id stay and hear him out tho

books?? Steph replies, with a couple of gasping emojis. to each other???

no. alone. he was chill. gtg finish this beer it’s screaming my name

And when he ends the conversation abruptly, avoiding further discussion or chances to bitch and moan about it, she knows he actually didn’t hate whatever time he’d spent with Bruce. And maybe it won’t be awful for her, either.

She keeps walking. Cass doesn’t reply.

Alone, out here with just her music and the night air, the worry and frustration start to churn inside her. She’s held them at bay all evening and now 2am is rolling around and she’s been just sitting and waiting. She doesn’t even know if he plans on talking to her. She could have been working on school stuff. But there are four hours left.
Four hours until a man she once idolized, whose symbol inspired her, who has saved her, used her, challenged her, dismissed her, trained her, worked with her, manipulated her, respected her (maybe not in that order) goes under the knife.

And for what? A brain tumor? It’s literally like the dictionary definition of irony, look it up, there’s a diagram and a picture: *Batman has brain cancer.* It’s ridiculous, it makes perfect sense, it makes absolutely no sense at all.

She’s angry-walking now, her pace picked up, and she rounds the corner of the sculpture garden to the pale gray concrete around the pool and stops short.

There’s a muted blue glow of the underwater safety lights along the sides of the pool. And at the far end, sitting, his feet dangling into the water, is Bruce.

She’s already stepped too far out, driven by the length of her strides, to slip back and pretend she wasn’t there. He hasn’t moved or looked in her direction but there’s absolutely no way he hasn’t noticed her, knowing who he is.

“Shep,” he says. “I was just about to text you. Come sit.”

Steph pauses the music, kicks off her sneakers, and joins him, dipping her bare feet into the chilly water.

“What were you listening to?” He asks, nodding to the earbuds around her neck.

“Did anybody ever find Damian?” She asks, surprised at how sharp her voice sounds.

He regards her for a moment, something serious and somber in his expression.

“I did,” he says, looking at the water. “I put him to bed a few hours ago.”

“Good,” she says sternly. It seems like something that would be Alfred’s job. But she thinks of the message from Jason. He had asked her about music.

Steph trails a foot in circles in the water. She takes a deep breath. She doesn’t owe him an answer, but she’s willing to give one.

“I was listening to a playlist, just stuff from last summer.”

“Can I hear it?”

Steph studies him for a moment, trying to figure out what he’s doing.

“What are you doing?” She finally asks. “Music, reading with Jason, putting Damian to bed? Why now? Why not all the time?”

*Because he has a brain tumor, Steph.* her own brain says, but she still feels like the question is valid.

He sighs.

“Because I have good intentions but I’m a shitty dad,” he says. “I drive all of you away, I push you too hard. But I don’t know what the hell I’m doing. I’m just trying to keep everyone alive.”

This is the best she’s heard from him in years.

Steph holds out an earbud.
He takes it, slips it into his ear.

She unlocks her phone and navigates not to the playlist, but to one of her favorite albums from the year before. She presses play and he winces reflexively.

“Too loud?” She asks, finger already on the volume. He shakes his head. She leaves the levels alone.

They sit at the poolside, listening for a long time. It feels loud in her head in the quiet of the night around them. She likes the contrast. She glances at him once, and he’s just sitting with his eyes closed.

They’re on track six when he speaks.

“Steph,”

She pauses the music.

“I’m changing my will. I’d like to appoint you as Damian’s legal guardian if I’m dead or incapacitated.”

He meets her wide-eyed gaze. His face is calm, unphased.

“Clark and Barbara will sign it tonight as witnesses if you’re willing.”

“What the fuck, Bruce?” She demands, scrambling to her feet. Water pools around her on the concrete. “What about Dick? Why would you…I’m not…” Steph cannot find a string of words she wants to say. She finally just blurts out: “His mom is still alive!”

“He’s disowned him,” he says, and she can see that he is tense. “Not legally, but that’s a gray area as it is. She can’t ever have him back.”

He’s standing now, facing her. She spins away, hands on her head.

“Dick!” She shouts, and then she looks at the house and lowers her voice. “It would kill him. And I’m in school! Alfred can help him.”

“Alfred is getting old,” Bruce says. “And he’d never be able to control Damian, not really. And I’m not asking you to take over. Dick is his brother, of course he’s going to be involved. I just want you to help. I know I’m asking a lot.”

“I don’t think you do know,” Steph says, frowning. A scar across her stomach aches. Or maybe it’s just psychological. “Or you wouldn’t ask.”

Bruce puts a hand on her shoulder and she looks up at him.

“Steph,” he says, and her mind stops racing. “I’ve given this a lot of thought. He needs a sister, or a mom. Especially if I’m gone.”

She pulls away from him, paces up and down the pool side.

“He has a mom,” she repeats. “She might change. Some do.”

“She’s an assassin. That’s all she’ll teach Damian to be. But if she did change, I’d want someone who loved Damian there to help him see that, to make sure it was real. Somebody with experience.”

Steph stops pacing. She looks over her shoulder at him, standing there in his t-shirt, his lounge pants
with the cuffs rolled to keep them out of the water, his face tired and pale in the light from the pool.

He trusts her.

This isn’t a test.

This is his kid, the baby.

She turns to him.

“Dick will be furious.”

“I know. He’ll hear it from me.”

“I won’t quit school.”

“You shouldn’t. Dick can take care of him here. He’ll just need some help. You won’t even have to tell your parents until you’re ready, if ever. We can keep it private.”

Steph covers her face with both hands and exhales.

“Okay. Yeah.”

She thinks about Damian, needing coaching and prodding to smile. Damian, who she went out looking for tonight. She would be an awful mother. But at least she’d try to be a decent sister, or aunt, or whatever. She knows this, without thinking about it, really. She’d at least try to do her best.

For Damian.

Bruce can go to hell. Or not. Maybe not. She’s not sure.

“I’ll get Clark and Barbara,” he says, pulling out his phone, standing in the spot where their feet dripped all over the gray turning it dark charcoal.

She sits and puts her shoes back on.

“Steph,” he says, and she looks up from the laces. “Thank you.”

“I’m only saying yes because you’re not going to die,” she answers, standing and rolling her earbuds into a little figure eight. “That’s the deal.”

“I’ll do what I can,” he says faintly.

She tucks the earbuds in her pocket.

Steph hears a soft thud and snaps her head up, on the defensive.

There is no attacker, though. Bruce is on the concrete by the edge of the pool, inches away from falling into the water.

“Shit,” she exclaims, sprinting the distance in a few long strides. “Bruce?”

She bends over, shakes his shoulder.

Whatever this is, it is not was she was expecting the night to be. She realizes now that while Tim was panicking, reading over hundreds of things on the internet, he was at least aware of how serious it is and thinking in those terms. She has been assuming, she realizes now, that Bruce would just deal
with it, maybe have a close call, and then be fine. Like always.

Bruce stirs, shakes his head, stands.

“Not a word to Clark,” he says, rubbing his arm, not looking at her. “Or anyone.”

He leads the way inside and Steph fights a sense of terror. What has she gotten herself into?
Clark Kent stands by the cold fireplace, hands in his pockets, and watches Stephanie Brown.

The teenager keeps casting furtive looks at Bruce, her eyes wide with something like shock. He can hear how fast her heart is beating. Barbara Gordon asks her more than once if she’s okay, if she’s sure, and every time Steph says, “Yes, absolutely,” and then avoids looking at Bruce for the seconds that follow.

Barbara is capping a pen after signing the document on the desk and Steph Brown is as white as a bleached sheet.

When Babs gives the girl a smile, the returned smile is weak, watered down. They leave the room together, Babs encouraging her to come with promises of smoothies in the kitchen. Steph looks back once at Bruce, when they are almost through the doorway. Her expression is one of nervous dread and then a flash of anger.

Clark observes all of this and is troubled by it.

Bruce leans back in the office chair and sighs, the papers still out in front of him on the desk. Clark’s signature is on all three copies.

In all the hours of the night Clark spent waiting, keeping Barbara company, making careful plans with Alfred, he thought of a dozen different things he wanted to say to Bruce or ask him about.

But now, he’s distracted from all those things by some observations:

- Stephanie’s face.
- Jason stomping into the cave to get his bike and muttering cuss words like a child throwing a tantrum, trying to get attention.
- Tim’s laptop being confiscated by Alfred, the boy sent to bed, when Clark and the butler found him in the kitchen falling asleep while typing.
- Dick’s total absence; the man isn’t even answering Barbara’s texts. She repeatedly expressed worry to Clark.

“What are you doing, Bruce?” Clark asks, hands still in his pockets, his voice and brow both knit with concern. “To these kids?”

“They aren’t kids,” Bruce replies. “Not all of them.”

“C’mon, don’t be pedantic. You know what I mean,” Clark says, shrugging his shoulders. He doesn’t want to let it go. But he also doesn’t want to be threatening. He can only imagine what Bruce must be feeling, and he knows it.

“I’m not being pedantic,” Bruce says, opening a drawer at the desk, hunting for something. “What you said was actually incorrect. Most of them are adults.”

“Alright,” Clark says, raising a hand in surrender. Bruce seems like he’s teetering on the edge. “Adults. But you’re their father. They’re looking to you. So what are you doing?”

“I’m looking for the paper clips,” Bruce says, rummaging beneath small boxes and notepads.

Clark resists the urge to take the bait. But even under the circumstances, it’s hard. By great effort, he
stays calm and keeps his voice level.

“You’re scaring the hell out of them,” Clark says, sitting down in a chair across the desk. Maybe if he’s not standing it’ll help.

The desk drawer slams so loudly and suddenly that Clark jumps.

“What do you want me to tell them, Clark? That everything will be fine?” Bruce demands, scowling darkly.

“No! No,” Clark says, adjusting his glasses. “But the midnight meetings? The farewells? Damn it, Bruce. If you needed to keep them off the streets for a night, I can understand, but maybe just put on a movie or something, hang out with them. All these final requests and warnings are scaring them to death. It’s like you’ve already given up.”

“If I had given up,” Bruce says, his voice like ice, low and cold, “I wouldn’t be going in for surgery.”

He stands up, stalks away from the desk, but doesn’t go far. He stands in front of the bookshelves and Clark can see how much he’s struggling to maintain control.

Clark wouldn’t be surprised if Bruce’s hands were slick with sweat. The man’s heart is racing like a Ferrari. It makes Steph’s heart rate seem like a stroll in the park.

In all his observations, he had not anticipated how afraid Bruce would be.

Bruce pulls a book off the shelf, flips through it like he’s searching for a passage he wanted to read.

“Bruce,” Clark says, changing tack. He was scolding before, challenging, but now he tries to sound firm and kind. Maybe Bruce is too overwhelmed to remember the figures. “I looked over the notes with Alfred. The probability of success, even complete recovery, is pretty high, comparatively speaking.”

For a moment, Clark thinks Bruce is actually taking the words in. But the same instant in which he realizes that Bruce’s anger is swelling, it explodes in a roar.

“Don’t talk to me about fucking probabilities, Clark!”

Glass shatters behind the desk and there is a soft thud outside. One tall window is partially gone and the book is on the lawn outside, surrounded by shards of glass.

Bruce is breathing hard, his expression a furious dare. He wants a reaction.

“I just think it would be helpful if you weren’t focused on the worst case scenario,” Clark says gently. It’s almost easy to stay calm now, thinking of Bruce as a terrified animal. Maybe a bit demeaning, but he’s going to work with what he’s got right now, before the library ends up in rubble.

“It’s a tumor that is pediatric in over eighty percent of known cases,” Bruce growls at him. “I think I’m pretty firmly in the poor odds camp.”

“I understand–”

Clark never gets to finish.

“You understand? What in hell could you understand about this, about any of it? Don’t sit there and
tell me you understand. This is the opposite end of the spectrum of your understanding. What could you ever possibly experience that comes close to this? And don’t say Kryptonite. Your body heals itself, Clark. If I’m lucky, if I’m extremely lucky, I’ll be drugged out of my mind for weeks to even start to get back to where I should be. So don’t you dare sit there and tell me you understand.”

The shouting fills the air in the room, carries down the halls. Clark sits in the chair, upper body and head turned to watch Bruce pace and stand and throw a bookend across the room. He lets it all wash over him. He hopes it isn’t waking up Damian, or any of them.

And maybe it should hurt, the words being hurled at him. But what hurts is the fact that he can’t fix this.

When Bruce stops, still scowling, Clark stands.

He steps right in front of Bruce, puts a hand on the man’s shoulder, and waits. When Bruce looks him straight in the eye, defiant to the last, Clark speaks:

“I’m sorry. I am so sorry that you are going through this.”

Bruce’s shoulders sag and he pinches the bridge of his nose, his fury ebbing away.

“I shouldn’t take it out on you.”

“It’s alright,” Clark says. “That’s what I’m here for. I’m just glad you didn’t snap at one of the kids—” he stops, abruptly.

“Kids,” Bruce says. “I was being pedantic. They’re kids.”

“I was worried for Jason, to be honest,” Clark says with a rueful smile.

“Heh,” Bruce says with small frown. “He would be the one to worry about. It doesn’t take long for one of us to start something.”

“How did it go tonight?” Clark walks across the room, leans and picks up the thrown bookend. “He was pitching a fit when he came to get his cycle but it seemed half-hearted.”

“I think it went well,” Bruce says, walking to the window and peering out at the broken glass. “I know it was selfish. I just wanted to see each of them one more time, just in case.”

“It’s okay,” Clark says, joining him at the broken window. “Maybe you knew what you were doing after all.”

The broken glass scattered through the green grass glints in the light spilling out from the room.

“Alfred’s going to be pissed,” Bruce says, crouching and picking a dangling piece of glass off the window frame. “I’m sorry I yelled at you. I didn’t mean—”

“Oh, yes, you did,” Clark interrupts. “You just feel awful that you said it out loud.”

Bruce looks at him.

“Clark, you’re—”

“Too pure for this world,” he says, grinning. “Lois tells me.”

Bruce laughs, a real and deep laugh.
“You’re a good friend,” he says, standing, the broken piece of glass still pinched in his fingers. “Thank you for being here.”

The laughter is a sweet relief, but Bruce is waning. Clark can see the exhaustion all over him.

“I can melt all this down,” Clark says. “But it’s going to scorch the grass.”

“Do it,” Bruce nods, flicking the piece from his hand out into the yard.

Clark knocks his fist against the glass still set in the frame, pushing them outside with the other pieces. He climbs out and gets the book and holds it with his glasses while he burns the shattered panes into ashes, leaving deep tracks of blackened earth all outside the window. Someone can take care of the yard later, but at least nobody is going to slice their feet to ribbons walking through the lawn. He climbs back into the room and studies the empty frame for a moment.

“You have any sheet plastic?” He asks, without turning. “Maybe some duct tape?”

“Duct tape will ruin the wood varnish,” Bruce says. “Leave it. I’ve already put in a request for my secretary to take care of sending somebody. Alfred doesn’t need more work to do.”

Clark turns to see Bruce on the couch, thumbs flying across the surface of his phone.

“What’s your story this time?” Clark asks, leaning against the arm of the couch.

“Hm?” Bruce says, distracted. He looks up. “Oh. Just the truth. It’ll make stock drop a bit, but it’s good for cover. Dick’s going to wear the cowl for a while.”

Clark crosses his arms and contemplates this bit of information.

“Are you letting it leak or are you going to use a press release?”

“I don’t even know. I sent an email to my PR guy a few hours ago. I’m just going to let him deal with it,” Bruce turns the screen of his phone off.

Words are Clark’s thing. Not his only thing, of course, but his other thing. He knows every reporter of note in Gotham city, at least via byline, and he knows what kind of attention this will stir in the city. He knows what details will drive up the media frenzy and what phrases will function as a deterrent. The Wayne Enterprises PR manager probably does, too, but this is something he can actually do, something he can help with.


“You might not want to, after what I’m about to ask,” Bruce warns, but doesn’t elaborate.

“Spit it out,” Clark says impatiently. “I don’t think it’ll change my mind, though.”

“I want you to tell the League. Before it’s in the papers.”

Clark blinks. He had considered, of course, that they would need to know, but…

“Do you even know me?” Clark asks, laughing a bit. “Did you forget that sharing news is the thing I picked a career in? Not all of us like being secretive. Yeah, I’ll let them know. And I’ll write the press release. Let your PR manager know that a friend is insisting.”

“I’m starting to feel like you don’t appreciate how serious this is,” Bruce says, but he sounds relieved.
“I do,” Clark says, sobering abruptly. It suddenly feels important that Bruce knows he does understand, that he’s not being flippant. “My best friend has a brain tumor. And this is how I’m coping.”

They regard each other for a moment.

It is easy for Clark to forget how human Bruce is. If he compiled a list of evidence, of notes, as if outlining a piece for the paper, it would be difficult to reconcile him with the concept of fragility.

- He has fought aliens, off-world, and lived.
- He has battled demigods, and lived.
- He makes semi-regular trips to space with minimal ground support, and lives.
- He has lived outside of time as it is known or understood, and lived.
- Anecdotal, see: Gotham City criminal history and Arkham Asylum breakouts.

But he is human. And a realist, at that. Clark understands that this is how they are different. This is potentially the last conversation they will ever have and Clark has been keeping that fact shut out of his mind like shutters locked tight against a prairie blizzard. And he knows that all Bruce has been thinking about, all night long, is that every single thing he does could be the last for him.

Even now, Clark finds he cannot and will not let it have space in his head for more than a few seconds. He can deal with the aftermath when the facts are in, but for now, he needs the comfort of better possibilities, whether or not that makes him weak. And he desperately, desperately wants Bruce to at least dare to hope. Because what else can you do, except look to the east and wait for the dawn to break? To know that it will come? If on some dark future day the sun does not rise, then you figure out what to do with what you have left, but until that day...has it not always risen before?

“You’re going to be okay,” he says, trying one more time. Clark knows he cannot promise this. He also knows they have saved entire cities together, entire worlds, and the odds were never with them.

Bruce closes his eyes.

Clark knows him, knows he will protest, he will fight for his right to be pessimistic until he’s dead or proven wrong. Sometimes it takes weeks after a success for him to admit that they pulled it off, and it’s always a reluctant admission. Clark didn’t want to end things tonight on this note, on another argument, but he is idiotically and stubbornly hopeful and persistent. He has to be. It’s who he is.

They sit for several minutes in silence.

Finally, Bruce just says, “Thanks.”

It’s simple acceptance of something Bruce knows could be a lie. It should be encouraging that Bruce is letting himself be reassured or comforted.

But honestly, it worries Clark more than a fight.

“I’m going to go,” Bruce says, standing. “Walk or sleep, I don’t know.”

Clark knows he’s asking to be left alone and he absolutely does not want to let him be. He wants to insist on keeping him company for the last few hours. But he also senses, despite his own wishes, that Bruce needs solitude. This is something he cannot protect or spare him from. He’s done all he can.

He wants to hug him, the way his Pa hugs him when he needs it. But they are different, when it comes down to it. Their friendship is built on all the things they have in common and all the ways
they recognize their differences, the tension of a good human interest piece.

Clark holds out a hand to Bruce and Bruce shakes it, his grip strong and unfaltering.

Words are Clark’s craft, the one he chose instead of the one he inherited. He should be able to say something, to tide them over, to assure Bruce he still honestly believes things might be okay, it’s not just something that he’s saying. But he finds he is not certain enough anymore, to insist, and words fail him.

Clark lets him go.
The exhaustion was supposed to be a shield. He thought if he wore himself down enough, it would hold him through the morning. In theory, he would be too tired to dwell, to examine his feelings, to feel.

But they do not need to be examined like a laboratory experiment.

And it is too late, when he finds that he has made a terrible miscalculation and the exhaustion is not the shield but the deep cracks in the levee.

It was such a long night.

It was such a selfish, awful, beautiful night.

Their faces when they saw, really saw, what it was in front of them on the screen will haunt him. He doesn’t deserve it, their concern, their outrage, their fear.

But then those moments, with each of them, are like a life raft. Stephanie Brown was right, with her indignation. Why does he always put off just being with them?

Dick asks for a hug and he almost comes apart then, just barely scraping himself together. But he does and that hug sustains him.

He holds.

He pours soda over ice, taps out pictures to sweet Cass, drinks in the diamonds of her hard-won words, watches with an ache in his chest as she sprints across the yard into the night.

He holds.

He coaxes Jason in, pretends not to notice the gun like a scorpion between them on the couch, gives him a book he hunted down solely because it reminded him of a kid ripping tires off the Batmobile.

He holds.

He climbs a tree rough under his hands, touches the face of this prickly boy that is his own boy, scoops sorbet, perches on a stair in a dark hallway as Damian falls asleep on his chest with the boy’s chin dripping tears he won’t acknowledge, carries him back to bed.

He holds.

He presses a steel filter down on coffee grounds and steaming water, looks over medical records with this young man who continually astounds him, hugs the thin and capable shoulders of a son who has saved him twice, countless times, already.

He holds.

He dips his feet in icy water, tucks an earbud in and listens to the favorite music of a daughter that will never be his own, swallows his damn pride and asks a thing he should never have to ask.

He holds.

He pours out fury and rage upon a best friend, breaks a window, apologizes, clings to offered hope.
like a lifeline, hates that he needs it so much.

He holds.

And the exhaustion is like a fog in which he cannot get his bearings. He is spent, emptied out on the hours of the day. He should be hungry, thirsty, but he registers no needs.

He holds.

He goes inside a bedroom in an empty wing of the house, far from the company of others or the rooms in which they sleep. He locks the door.

He holds.

He stands in the middle of the room, closing his eyes against the universe crashing down around him, he pushes himself up against the things he does not want to dwell on.

It is his brain. His mind. He might lose it all.

He could wake up in twelve hours and the newspapers will say that he has a long road to recovery, give occasional updates, celebrate when he goes to dinner at a restaurant, and never know that his life is gone.

He might never be himself again. He might struggle for the rest of his life to say two words together, be reduced to tantrums about what he eats for lunch when he doesn’t remember what he wants or what it’s called.

He risks waking with tremors that never stop, vertigo years of training can’t overcome, migraines that never ever go away.

Death would be easier.

He forces himself to face it, to look every fear in the eye.

The nausea, a companion every morning now, crests at the point where it is unbearable, catching him off-guard in its suddenness. He makes it to the bathroom just barely, pukes nothing but water and bile for long minutes, his hands braced against the cold porcelain.

Just as he thinks he’s reached a moment of relief, the headache that has been drifting in and out all day and all night explodes across his field of vision like a red hot piston.

His mind.

He might wake in twelve hours and never really wake again.

“Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck,” he’s gasping already, tears running down his face, unbidden, unwanted, traitors.

And on the bathroom floor of a disused room in his parents’ house…

…he breaks.

It floods out of him in a wordless roar, a tempest of sound and salt. His eyes are stinging, the core of him quaking like a jackhammer.

This is not a tornado, tearing down furniture and curtains and flipping tables and smashing picture
This is implosion, sucking in like a black hole. He caves in on himself, kneeling on the tiled floor. It is a breath and a deep animal sob, a gasp and a groan, again and again and again, and chaos in his mind. It is like blacking out without the relief of sleep.

He can feel how ugly it is, the snot and the tears, and the flushed face and beads of sweat.

His throat is raw and his lungs are empty but the tempest will not let him go. His head is flaming oil inside and his muscles are like drawn bow strings that will not release.

He is cold he is lost he is fucked this can’t be real this is not happening he’s never going to be himself again he is lost he is cold he is on fire.

There cannot be a god there has to be a God there has to be a point there has to be something he wants to sit and do crossword puzzles he wants to have a morning just a fucking normal morning.

He’s going to leave them all alone.

All of them.

Alone.

The thing that brings him back to himself is the crack and the sharp stinging. He’s been bashing his fist against the tile floor over and over again without knowing it, and now a tile and his knuckles have split, blood pouring out on the white.

He stares at it mutely, in horror, his breathing still coming in uneven gasps. For a brief second he thinks it is somehow blood from his head, a confused panic at the implausibility.

The bathroom door swings open, without hesitation. He sees the tips of black shoes and then Alfred crouches down beside him, a gentle hand on his back.

Slowly, he lifts his head, his breathing evening out. He still feels like he is in shock, rattled, uncertain if it will slam into him again; he can feel it surging.

Then there are long, gentle fingers on the side of his face, a palm against his cheek. He closes his eyes and leans, just slightly, into the touch.

“There,” Alfred’s voice says softly over the thundering still ringing in his ears. “Master Bruce.”

There is so much affection and a complete absence of scorn in the name. He sighs, feeling like a child.

“Tsk,” Alfred says, looking at Bruce’s hand. “Let’s get this cleaned up. Can you stand?”

Bruce answers by standing. He is so tired. He lets himself be led to a chair in the bedroom.

“We have to be off in thirty minutes,” Alfred says from the bathroom. He comes out with a damp towel and sits in a chair opposite Bruce. He takes up the hand again—Bruce feels like it isn’t part of him until it starts to sting again—and starts dabbing blood and specks of tile away.

“If this is broken,” Alfred says, blowing gently to move a miniscule shard of tile off the skin, “they might want to postpone the surgery.”
“It’s not broken,” Bruce says, flexing his hand. It is sore but somehow not in pieces.

Alfred already has gauze and antibiotic ointment.

Bruce is stone while his hand is bandaged; he doesn’t move, he doesn’t speak, he barely breathes. He wraps himself in silence, trying to find a center again. He feels like a desert with no landmarks. He wants to stay lost there and he’s afraid of being lost forever.

The faucet in the bathroom is turned on and Bruce blinks. Alfred is bent over, scrubbing the tile with paper towels.

“I’ll clean it,” Bruce says.

“No, you won’t,” Alfred answers, still scrubbing. “You will sit there and collect yourself and get a moment’s rest.”

The older man stands and washes his hands, dries them on a towel, reenters the bedroom. Bruce is focused on the concrete details.

“Do you still intend to have Miss Gordon drive you?”

Alfred stands in front of him with his hands on his hips, his white sleeves rolled to the elbows, looking much the way he does after a long day of spring cleaning.

“Yes,” Bruce says without nodding.

“Very well, then,” Alfred says, looking him over like he’s a project to be tackled. “Let’s get you ready.”

It is taking a great effort to be upright, to be awake and not just lie on the floor and sleep. For once in his life, Bruce is grateful for Alfred’s direction. He feels as if he cannot manage the order of things.

“I’ll fetch a change of clothes while you shower,” Alfred says. “Then we will go find Miss Gordon.”

The shower does more to ground him than all his previous mental efforts, and he emerges from the bathroom with damp hair and clothes without blood on them.

There’s a box on the chair.

“What is this?” He asks, looking over to Alfred. The older man is spraying stain cleaner on blood spots on a t-shirt.

“It’s a gift,” the older man says without looking up. “Open it.”

The box is plain white, thin cardboard. It is not tied or wrapped or taped. The concrete facts of things are still helpful to him, so he studies it for a minute.

Bruce lifts the lid and inside is folded black fabric. With a bemused expression, he touches it. It’s one of his capes.

“It’s a blanket,” Alfred says, standing beside him. “Made with a certain material, as you’ve no doubt recognized.”

A corner lifted reveals that it is backed by soft gray fabric, but trimmed down the edges even on the backing with the smooth, silk-like black.
“I will not do either of us the disservice of pretending I have not had qualms about certain choices you have made, aspects of your life,” Alfred says quietly.

Bruce looks over at him, imagining the time that must have been stolen in the past several hours, in the laundry room with the sewing machine fitted with titanium needles, the older man’s mouth full of pins and thread wound around his finger as he hand-finished final stitches.

“Regardless of my hesitations, when you wake today, I think it is of the utmost importance that you remember who you are. And it is who you are.”

Bruce is cut to the heart.

“I can’t take this, Alfred,” he says, unwilling to look at the older man. It is too dangerous, dancing around the strict lines that separate his life from his life, making either of them possible. And to be completely honest, he doesn’t want to think about it. He doesn’t want to be reminded of what he is losing, probably forever.

If Alfred is wounded, his voice does not betray it—much.

“Very well, sir. Perhaps when you return home. Shall we find Miss Gordon?”

He has hurt him. And Bruce is annoyed that Alfred didn’t consider that he might not want to think about it. Annoyed that Alfred has put him in this position. And it’s exhausting. Any good the shower had done him is gone, vanished in the wake of understanding that even while he’s going down, he’s hurting someone near him.

“I’ll find her,” he says. “I know you have other things to do for the day.”

And he leaves.
Barbara Gordon is eating a granola bar when her phone buzzes in her lap. It’s been a crappy night and she has no appetite, but she is practical. The last thing they need is a car wreck on the way to the hospital because she’s shaky from hunger, while driving the man who isn’t allowed to drive because he might black out.

The message is from Dick, and she fumbles the granola bar, almost dropping it, to pick up the phone. She crams the entire second half of the bar in her mouth so she doesn’t have to deal with holding it.

*Hey, sorry I missed all your texts. Kept eye on Damian then crashed hard in old bedroom. Out like a wee babe all night. You ok?*

She grins, a weight off her heart. She was certain he’d been out doing something stupid. It’ll make it easier to talk to Bruce, knowing Dick is okay, without the distraction of that worry. She suspects Bruce will be in a mood, understandably, and there are some things she needs to say anyway.

The fact that she’s planning on saying them even if he’s scowling is what makes her different from the younger crowd. She’s not put off by Bruce’s sour attitudes or threatened by his anger. She’s respectful of them, sure, but it’s been a long time since she’s walked on eggshells around him.

A good thing, too, because whoo-boy does she have a bone or two to pick with him. But not until they’re on the road and he can’t change his mind about who is driving.

She replies to Dick’s message,

*So you woke every three hours to eat? B/c I hear that’s what wee babes do. I’m ok. You? Getting ready to drive B.*

There are footsteps coming down the hall.

*Ah!! need to get dressed still in bed should i come down? Wait 4 me!!!*

The footsteps belong to Bruce, as she suspected. He’s alone and his hand is bandaged and he looks like a ghost. She expected Alfred to be with him, to see them off, but the butler is nowhere to be seen. Well, this isn’t great.

*No. Don’t come down. B is -. Cya soon @ hospital. Get deets from Alf.*

“Hey,” she calls, gently to Bruce. “How ya doing?”

“I’m…” He trails off, stopping in the foyer. He had almost said ‘fine,’ she can tell just by the look on his face.

“Let’s go,” he says instead, walking past her out the front door.

Barbara follows him out to the car and doesn’t rush disassembling her wheelchair and packing it behind the passenger seat. He’s standing a few feet down the drive, watching the lightening sky. She takes her time on purpose, trying to decide if she can even talk to him now. She’s worried. He’s acting like a shell, instead of the churning mess of anger and terror she expected.

Bruce climbs in the car after she calls for him and she puts the car in gear, pulling away from the front steps, still musing. She needs the distraction so she doesn’t start talking too soon, before she’s
figured how to handle what she needs to say, if it’s even worth it. He doesn’t seem like he’d hear anything.

She sneaks a glance at him, trying to be discrete, and he’s looking at his phone. It looks like he’s reading a text message, and she forces herself to look back at the road and not be nosy.

“Wait,” Bruce says roughly. She slams on the brake because he’s already opening the door, stumbling out of the just-stopped car saying, “Be right back.”

“Bruce!” She leans over the passenger seat as he sprints back down the hundred yards of driveway they’d been slowly rumbling down. He doesn’t slow or turn.

Barbara growls and slams a hand on the steering wheel. She switches the gear and reverses down the driveway and back to the steps. She slams the stick into park and then waits.

He jogs down the steps a few minutes later with a white box in his hand and climbs back into the car. She could burst with joy. She’s never been so happy to see the perturbed expression of fury and intention he’s perfected. The ghostly hollowness is gone.

For the second time, she pulls out down the driveway.

By the look on his face and his posture in the passenger seat, he can handle whatever she has to say. And she does have some things to say, some curated thoughts she’s been collecting all night.

Her relationship with Bruce is not like the rest of the family’s. Somewhere, over time, Barbara has stopped being one of the kids and has become a peer. Even Dick is still navigating that journey and she isn’t sure he’ll ever make it all the way. After all, a son is a son, and Barbara has only been like a daughter. She has her own father to hide things from. And for the younger squad, the boundary lines are drawn in separate, wandering places.

Somehow, she’s ended up in the middle. Privy to the kids’ opinions and heartbreaks, able to talk to Bruce like an equal. And that’s why it is falling to her to deal with this, after spending half the night on her phone, texting Jason, texting Tim, trying to get Dick to answer, checking on Cass, confirming with Alfred that Damian was in his bed, gently handling Stephanie’s frustrated and confused ranting, complete with tears, in the kitchen over a mango smoothie. And since she knows from Clark that Bruce got to vent, and that vacant look isn’t in his eyes anymore, it’s time to set some things straight.

Because damn it, if she was going to be the squad mom, she was going to be the squad mom. All the way.

They’re ten minutes into the drive when Barbara is almost ready to start talking, figuring they are far enough away now that they can’t risk going back to find another driver. She’s not afraid of him, but she is practical. Unfortunately, he must have the same idea, and he beats her to it, without preamble.

“Barbara, I need you to take care of them,” he says. “All of them. If I’m not here to do it.”

She glances at him and her mentally prepared script falters. There’s just an edge of that vacant look returning.

“You really think you’re going to die, don’t you?” She asks him quietly.

“No,” he says, looking out the car window, his hands gripping the white box on his lap. “I think it will be worse than that. Which is why I need to know you’ll keep an eye on everyone.”

Barbara stops the car, skidding into park on the shoulder of the wooded road. Her script is back. It’s
time to chase that damn ghost away.

“What are you doing?” He asks sharply, startled. He looks at her and then he’s looking around, to see if there’s a threat.

“We’re stopping so I can use my hands while I talk,” she says.

“Barbara–”

“Don’t Barbara me,” she says, pointing a finger at him. “Keep an eye on them? Take care of them? What do you think I already do? I’ve spent all night putting out your little fires. I’m not mad at you, Bruce, I’m mad for you, that you’re doing this to yourself and to them. It’s not like you to just give up.”

“I’m being realistic,” he says, frowning.

“No, you’re being defeatist, just because you can’t control it. You’ve spent all night trying to reassemble some control through everyone. But being out of control and the worst outcome happening are not the same thing. And your panic is making you sloppy. Why didn’t you tell Stephanie that you just wanted her to have a place in the family?”

“I did,” he says defensively. “That was the whole point. It is her place; she’s good with him.”

“No, you didn’t,” she says, punching him lightly in the arm. “You did not once utter the words ‘I’d adopt you if I could, I want you to know you belong here.’ And she’s not a mind reader, she’s freaked out and mad that the last thing you did was give her another impossible task.”

“Damnit,” Bruce says, putting a hand to his forehead. “I didn’t mean…”

“I know,” Babs says, forcing herself to use a kinder tone. “Which is why I’m talking to you and telling you now.”

“I needed to prepare them,” he says, his voice small. It almost derails her, makes her consider giving up the speech she’s worked on all night and just telling him it’s okay. But no, he was so close to completely checking out. It’s tough love time, and Babs knows it. He needs to remember this later.

“You needed to let yourself have some hope, to find it in them, instead of just issuing orders. You needed to let them know you loved them. But you didn’t say it once, did you?”

“Just to Dick,” he says, closing his eyes.

“Look at me!” She says, shaking his shoulder gently. “I’m not trying to be the bad guy here. I’m trying to be a good friend. Do you remember what you told me when I was in the hospital? You said I couldn’t ever let this be an excuse to give up and pity myself. Well, you don’t get to use this as an excuse to be an oblivious asshole.

“If you don’t wake up, what they need from you is to know you loved them. Not a final list of instructions. And if you do wake up and you’re still you, you don’t get to shut down and do this alone. You will let those kids record you saying stupid things while you’re high on painkillers. You will let them hang out at the manor while you stumble around and stuff your face with food because of steroids. You will let them get something good out of this. You know how to laugh with them and engage with them when you’re feeling good, and now you’re going to learn how to do it when you feel like shit. You will want to shut down. You will want to close everyone out, I know you and I know traumatic surgery. But we’re not going to let you and you’re just going to have to deal with it. And I will come kick your ass if I need to.
“And final item of business: This car isn’t moving another inch until you sit there and text every single one of them ‘I love you.’ And some explanation to Stephanie might go a long way.” She exhales loudly. “I’m done now, thank you for listening.”

Bruce just looks at her for a long time, his expression impossible to read. But it’s not ghostly, she can tell that much.

“We’re going to be late,” he says, but it sounds more like an observation than a complaint.

“Then you better get typing.”

After a second, Bruce pushes the door open and climbs out, leaving the white box on the seat. His phone is already in his hand.

Barbara puts her head on the steering wheel, letting herself have a moment of victory and relief. It went way better than she had expected. She knows that him shutting down or shutting her out were real risks, but loving someone honestly is risky. Squad moms take those risks, and despite their age difference and the differing life experience, the one person he needs right now is a mom.

**Squad Mom.** It started as a mental joke, but now she’s feeling like she needs a new costume.

When she lifts her head, he’s still facing away from her, leaning against the hood of the car. She cranes her neck to check, to make sure he’s not just sitting there, but he still has his phone out and his fingers are flying, faltering, flying again.

Now she just has to hope to God the kids don’t die of shock.

Her phone vibrates in the cubby under the radio. She picks it up.

*I love you. Thanks.*

She hopes she doesn’t die of shock.

Babs looks up again, to make eye contact, to tell him she appreciates it even if she uses a nod instead of words, but he’s got the phone up by his ear, his head turned to look across the wooded hill along the shoulder where they’re parked.

She tries not to eavesdrop, but she can catch snatches of what he’s saying through the thin windshield, in the early morning stillness of the empty road.

He’s talking to Stephanie. Babs would think it was just a voicemail, but it’s punctuated by pauses and once he looks back at her with a frown of frustration that fades when she shrugs at him.

When he hangs up, he pockets the phone and then stays there, leaning on the hood.

“C’mon,” she says after cracking her door open. “We gotta go. Don’t make me crawl out there and get you.”

His shoulders jerk and she knows she got a laugh out of him, even if it was a brief one. Humor is her best option to defuse some of the emotional turbulence.

They are another few minutes down the road, speeding a bit to make up for lost time, when she asks,

“Why did you ask me to drive you? You know I can’t reach the pedals. Sorry. Bad joke.”

Bruce is leaning back, his eyes closed.
“I thought you’d be sympathetic and quiet,” he says.

“Well, you’ll never make that mistake again,” she grins. “It’s like you forgot who I am.”

“Never again,” he says. “I didn’t think you were the kind to kick a man when he was down.”

“Between my back and your fighting skills, this is literally the only time I get to kick you. Emotionally. While you’re down.”

“You kick hard,” he says. “I expected, if anything, a ‘you have to keep fighting’ speech. I was braced for that one.”

“We don’t need you, Bruce,” she says, looking over at him for a moment, the car idling at a stop sign. “We’ll be okay. We have been before. But we want you. That’s why you should put up a fight.”

The lane is clear and she takes the turn. They’re in Gotham city limits now and early morning traffic is picking up. Babs jabs a finger at the radio and lets the Gotham morning weather report fill the car. It’s exactly six in the morning and they’re still ten minutes out, but she knows hospitals, she knows how long they’ll keep him waiting anyway. It’ll be okay. Not ideal, but okay.

By the time they get to the hospital, she can tell something in Bruce has shifted. His expression, his movement, his language-- it all seems dissociative and she understands, she doesn’t try to shake him out of it. She sticks with him through admissions, as he chats easily with the hospital staff, disarming and convincing. The white box is still tucked under his arm.

When they take him back, he’s still talking, making the nurse laugh as they walk.

Babs gets coffee from the cafeteria and returns to the waiting room on the operating floor. It’s going to be a long day.

“Miss Gordon?” an older orderly finds her at the window, looking out over the hospital parking lot, people-watching. “Are you Miss Gordon? Mr. Wayne told us to let you know they’ve set aside the third conference room, up on the fifth floor, for family and friends today. He wanted to know if you’d pass it along. Also, he’s prepped for surgery and just waiting now, if you’d like to come sit with him.”

Babs almost declines, not wanting to disrupt his charade, uncertain how much he needs it or how long it will last. But no. Squad Mom forever. She nods.

“I’ll take you back,” the orderly says. “It’s probably going to be about an hour.”

Bruce is asleep when she gets to the room, the TV turned on to a news channel. She parks herself next to the bed and watches the news for a few minutes. The news ticker at the bottom of the screen announces that the CEO of Wayne Enterprises is having emergency surgery. It seems surreal.

A nurse waves her over from the doorway and Babs goes to her, leaning in to hear the nurse’s whisper.

“Honey, does he understand? How serious this is? We thought he might be drunk. If he’s been drinking, you should tell me. He says he wasn’t but it’s really dangerous to lie about something like this.”

“No,” Babs shakes her head, meeting the nurse’s concerned and warning frown. “He knows. He hasn’t been drinking. I promise.”
The nurse stares her down for a minute, and then apparently satisfied, returns the nod.

“Okay. We’ll be back in about twenty minutes for him.”

Babs returns to the spot by the bed and starts to take her phone out, to let the others know about the conference room, to distract herself. He’s asleep anyway.

Then she looks at him. Watches his face. The news station on TV is playing a morning show, the dialogue in the background one about the benefits of eating avocados every day. She hasn’t tried speaking to him since she came into the room, he seemed so deeply asleep, and it’s no wonder, after the night they’ve all had. He’s had busier nights, and she has too, but there are different kinds of exhaustion.

But now, watching him, she wonders.

She puts her hand by his hand, offering without words.

He takes it.
Alfie, old boy, Alfred Pennyworth tells himself, there are things to do.

But he gives himself another moment.

In all his many, troubled years of service to the Wayne family; in all the heartbreaks and resolutions; in all the aftermath of close calls; there were few moments of greater consolation than the one he had just experienced.

He relives it, just one more time, in his mind, before he goes to work.

He had been standing in the empty room, the box abandoned on the chair. He only allowed himself the indulgence of weeping because he was certain Bruce had already left the Manor.

It wasn’t about the bloody blanket. Alfred wasn’t so foolish or sensitive a man to cry over refused gifts, especially when the gift had been such a gamble from the beginning.

It was the conviction forged through the night, finalized by the look on Bruce’s face in the dim bedroom, that Bruce had already given up.

After the hushed conversation in the master bedroom, the silent drive to the emergency room for scans, the meeting with an neurosurgeon who had cleared an hour in his schedule to see them immediately, Bruce had been resolution itself. Purpose and intention, planning details and contingencies and temporary measures— they were all in a locked drawer in the study.

But when his eyes met Alfred’s after his final collapse, that was when Alfred knew he was looking at a dead man. Even if Bruce survived the surgery— and the chances were very high— it would be the act of giving up that would change him irrevocably.

Giving him the gift had been a last ditch effort and it had failed. No one would make the connection between Batman and a black blanket on Bruce Wayne’s hospital bed, not unless they were looking.

Bruce didn’t want to remember. He had already left himself to die.

Alfred shouldn’t have let him have the night. He should have sent him to bed. His judgment had been clouded by trust and affection; Clark Kent had the right idea. Privy to the information hours before the others, the alien had taken one look at Bruce in the cave and sent Alfred a text message almost immediately:

Sedate him right now. Don’t let him have a chance to think.

The message had angered Alfred, especially in light of Clark’s tact and wisdom in so many other details as of late. But he had been right.

So Alfred stood and he wept. He was a sentimental old fool. He had others to take care of, things to do. And Bruce, or whoever he was on the other side, would need him.

Just as he had failed a second time to tell himself to leave it off, a faint sound had stirred hope. The sound of footsteps, familiar footsteps, hurrying— no, running down the hall.

The door slammed inward and Bruce was standing there. And when his eyes met Alfred’s, there was no smile there, but it was like a burst of sunshine, a bright and brilliant beam. One look and Alfred
Maybe it wasn’t that significant in the grand scheme of things. He was a sentimental old fool, after all, as he had just been telling himself.

Something had happened in the past twenty minutes, some monumental inner shift, and Bruce had come back for himself.

He embraced Alfred in a rough hug, looked him straight in the eyes once more, then had taken the white box and left, all without a word.

And now Alfred stands in the room, his heart warm with the fierce assurance, perhaps an intuition, that Bruce is going to be perfectly alright. The certainty floods him now that it will not be a matter of if Bruce recovers but when, and Alfred will be there to see it happen. And this is an actual comfort to him, because unlike Bruce, Alfred is not a stranger to faith.

One more moment. That’s all he can afford to steal. It’s nearly six as it is, and there are so many details to tend to. He is grateful Clark Kent insisted on staying to help, but even with the work divided there are things that must happen, that he is responsible for.

Almighty and everlasting God, who art always more ready to hear than we to pray, and art wont to give more than either we desire, or deserve; Pour down upon us the abundance of thy mercy;

Alfred runs the words through his mind, his lips barely moving, his eyes closed. And then he leaves the room and begins the tasks of the day. St. Paul admonished prayer “with every breath” and Alfred has much practice at praying as he works. It it his interior scaffolding, a quiet refusal to let the darkness or chaos of his world consume him. Because if not God, what else? What purpose?

There are those, he knows, in his years of private devotion and attending the local Anglican service when he has a day off, that cannot reconcile the existence of a good God with the evil of the world around them. He can sympathize. But through all his night watches, dwelling with Bruce on the brink of madness and horror, he has developed a slightly different perspective.

The rampant malice of the world is so pervasive that he is astounded by the survival of good. Without aid, how else could it hold against the selfishness, the corruption, the deceit that stirs and tugs on every heart? The real wonder of the world is that it has good at all, knowing the souls of men and how quickly they turn to harm. Yet there is beauty and that is the impossible thing.

And of impossible things, who is he to speak? He lives in a world where aliens walk and men return to life, who is he to say that this miracle of Christ dying to redeem His own cannot be true? It is within the narrative boundaries of his world, that a God would give himself for those He loved. This is not too difficult to accept. It has echoes across all of time.

So Alfred works and when he needs to, he prays, and it holds him against the absurdity and agony of the world. For now, now that he is past the absolute despair that consumed him when Bruce first left the Manor, his surety of surgical success runs so deep and firm that he prays in thanksgiving, and also not for himself, but for the others.

Forgiving us those things whereof our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things which we are not worthy to ask, but through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, thy Son, our Lord.

The kitchen sink has a few dishes near it, all washed and waiting to be put away. The blender has a sticky smear in one corner and he sets it back to soak while he walks the Manor before preparing a light breakfast. He isn’t sure who is still at home and he wants to collect their locations, to be aware
of who will be here or there and what they will need, before they themselves are fully aware of it. It is what he does. And for the first time in days, in a week, he has the capacity and time and peace to devote himself to it.

Alfie, he tells himself as he climbs the steps and notices the dust on the floor between the balusters, you’ve let yourself go.

It’s tempting to stop right there, to go back and get a rag and wood soap, and fix it. But he forces himself to keep walking. It can wait. There will be time. Somehow, knowing that it will be alright makes it easier to keep walking. There will be time.

He reaches the main bedroom hallway and surveys it. How proud Martha Wayne would be. He doesn’t say it often to Bruce because it is more a wound than a balm, but she would be. Alfred remembers her as she was, young and pretty and charitable. If he closes his eyes, he can still see it—the easy way she carried young Bruce on her hip, the kisses she stole when the boy was old enough to squirm away. The way she laughed at Thomas when he entertained them with invented stories of his day. And the shadow in her expression when Bruce pleaded for a brother, her teasing him a mask for the pain of doctor’s visits and useless pregnancy tests that Alfred would secret away so not even Thomas would know. She was so protective of her boys, of their hearts.

So he aches for her not being here to see, and it is not an uncommon ache. He knows she does see, somehow, but for her to be here in the hall to see what her son has gathered.


And more empty rooms that Alfred suspects, to his own chagrin and delight, will eventually be used.

God our creator, we thank you for the gift of this child, entrusted to our care.

He prays that a lot, about Damian. It’s a coping mechanism.

He walks the hall, listening at each door for movement, for breath.

Dick is home and awake.

Jason is not there.

Tim is home and asleep.

Cassandra is home and asleep, but not in her bed. Under the desk?

Damian is home and just waking.

He knocks on the door gently. It will be better to keep the boy with him as much as possible. He has a history of bolting during stressful situations. One of Clark’s jobs is to retrieve him if Damian does run, but Alfred would prefer to spare Damian the embarrassment of being collected against his will.

“Go away, Pennyworth,” the young voice carries through the door.

Alfred goes in.

“Good morning, Master Damian. We will be leaving for the hospital in an hour.”

“Why? Is my father doing poorly?” Damian demands, scowling, sitting up in bed. Titus is next to him under the covers giving Alfred an apologetic look. For once, Alfred doesn’t scold about the dog being on the good sheets.
“Because,” Alfred says, tugging the curtains open, “When normal people are in surgery, their families wait at the hospital for news.”

“That’s stupid,” Damian says, climbing out of bed and pulling the curtains closed behind Alfred. “You can’t do anything there.”

“You can keep one another company,” Alfred says. “Instead of being alone. You are going. Come assist me with breakfast.”

In the kitchen, Damian seems to be settled by the task of viciously chopping onion for omelets.

Alfred checks his phone for messages from Barbara. There are none, but he has his own to send. He sends the text en masse to the group, each name tapped off the contacts list. It’s been quite a while since he’s had reason to text them all at once.

_Hospital, no later than 9AM. I expect Wayne family dress or else. Breakfast at Manor in fifteen minutes._

There will be eyes on them today. He doesn’t know if they will be thinking clearly enough to remember.

As he and Damian make the omelets and coffee, his phone begins to buzz with incoming texts.

The first is from Cass, all those little pictures she likes to use. A dress, an apple, a hospital building. And then a few seconds later, lipstick, a bikini, and a sports car. Her idea of a joke. Alfred smiles. He loves that girl. He gets Damian to show him again where the pictures are, while the boy rolls his eyes. He sends her a smile and an egg.

_where is the iron?? Can’t find it. Khakis need help SOS from Dick._

_Linen closet. Please do not burn the house down._ he answers.

did i leave my blue shirt here b/c can’t find anywhere? is coffee from Tim.

_You’ll have to be more specific. Wooden buttons? Yes, there is coffee._ he sends.

_fuuuuuuuuck so hungover help me don’t tell B_ from Jason.

_Language. Please hydrate, take four tylenol, eat almonds. Do not drive. Will send car. Your secret is safe. Wear sunglasses._ he answers.

_Am I exempt from Wayne family dress? I’m considering full goth today._ from Stephanie.

_No. You are family. Please do not wear black lipstick. Black fingernails permissible._ he sends.

_I am right here. You didn’t have to text._ from Damian.

_Your clothes are hanging on the left side of your closet. Please shower after breakfast._ he sends anyway.

Alfred flips omelets between messages, not paying attention to much else for the few minutes of fielding the incoming texts. The coffee has finished brewing but Alfred wants, needs, some tea. When he turns from the stove to the counter behind him, he blinks in surprise.

There are two cups of Earl Grey, both with lemon, steam still drifting off them.
Damian is cleaning a knife in the sink and very pointedly not looking at Alfred.

“Thank you,” Alfred says to him. “I was just feeling the need of a cup.”

“Tt,” Damian answers sourly, stalking by and taking his own tea with him.

*God our creator, we thank you for the gift of this child, entrusted to our care.*

Alfred puts the platter of omelets in the warming drawer and stands, sipping his tea. His phone buzzes again and he slips it out of his apron pocket, expecting another minor wardrobe crisis.

It’s from Barbara.

*Conference room 3, 5th floor. They just took him to OR.*

And despite his rooted assurance that Bruce will come through mostly unscathed, his heart still skips a little beat. He finishes his tea and takes off the apron, reminding himself gently that he, too, will need to change.

“Help yourself,” he says to Damian. “Omelets are ready.”

“I don’t eat eggs,” Damian snarls from the stool. “I thought you’d remember.”

“To the eternal regret of us all,” Alfred says, hanging up his apron.

The boy waits half a beat and then says, a bit more mildly,

“I will eat a yogurt.”

Alfred nods at him and leaves the kitchen.

Down the hall, there’s murmuring coming from the south study. He raps on the door with two knuckles and then cracks the door open.

Clark is sitting at the desk, a laptop open in front of him. There’s plastic sheeting taped around the corner window with blue painter’s tape. Alfred is not surprised that a window is broken, but he is relieved it’s not duct tape.

The murmuring has escalated to rapid talking pouring from the laptop speakers, now that the door is open and the sound is unmuffled. Clark’s eyes are on the screen but he looks up briefly at Alfred, just poking his head into the room, and waves him in, then holds up a hand.

Come in, stop there.

Alfred shuts the door behind him.

“Should we come? What should we— how long has it— can we do anything – I’ll be there in – how does this happen?” the cacophony of distinct, interrupting voices from the laptop suddenly makes sense. Of course it does. It’s the Justice League.

“Nobody is coming,” Clark says over the noise. “Hold on.”

There’s a tap of a button, then Clark looks at Alfred.

“It’s muted. What’s up?”
“Is that secure?” Alfred asks first, driven by his second-nature adherence to Bruce’s strict rules.

“It’s mine,” Clark says, as if this answers the question. Then, after a second, “Bruce set it up.”

Alfred relaxes.

“Miss Gordon just messaged. They’ve taken him into surgery. We’ll be leaving soon. Would you like breakfast?”

“I think I’m going to go eat with Lois. I’ll meet you there,” Clark says. “Unless you need anything else.”

He looks at Alfred for a moment.

“There’s something else,” he says, and it’s not a question.

“Master Jason is going to need a ride,” Alfred says, a touch of apology in his tone. “And I’m reluctant to send one of the children. Tension might run a bit high.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Clark says, his attention already drawn back to the laptop screen. “I’ll get him.”

Alfred nods and also notes the turn of Clark’s mouth, pulled down at the edges in a way that is far more like Bruce than himself.

“He’s going to be alright,” Alfred says, gently.

“How are you so sure?” Clark asks, half-closing the laptop screen, searching Alfred’s face.

Apparently, Alfred realizes, Bruce’s own doubt must have been contagious. There is a despair in Clark’s eyes that was not there a few hours ago. He searches his mind for a moment, trying to think of how to word his own feelings and how deeply he is convinced of the outcome.

“‘The sun rises and the sun sets,’” he quotes with a small shrug, thinking of the familiar passage. A bit out of context, perhaps, but the sentiment is what springs to mind.

Perhaps, as he belatedly remembers the nature of Clark’s relationship with the sun, he should have anticipated it having a slightly more than average impact.

The expression on the alien’s face is first one of shock—eyes wide, surprised, bewildered. Then he smiles, not fully at ease but far closer to it. There is the hurdle of the day, after all, and even Alfred in his calm has his own small worries, still.


Alfred leaves the room, shutting the door behind him. He feels his pocket for his phone and finds that he has left it in the apron. There are probably half a dozen new messages to respond to, additional cries for domestic help. But perhaps not. Now in the hallway, he can hear the noise of argument and clattering plates from the kitchen.

*Alfie, old boy,* he tells himself, *Keep them alive until he comes home. That’s the goal.*
The Loose Cannon

Jason Todd sits on the kitchen floor of his apartment and stares at the phone in his hand. What has he done? What does it mean? He grasps for threads to tie things together and make sense of them, but his head is too muddled. It’s still pounding. He isn’t sure how exactly he got home. He lost count of the shots the bartender put in front of him when he waved and growled, “Keep ’em coming,” and slapped a wad of cash down on the bar.

The vinyl flooring beneath him is weirdly warm. There’s an open bag of almonds next to him, fallen from his hand when he sank to the floor. He should eat some. If Alfred says they’ll help, then they’ll help. But he still cannot tear his eyes off the screen. He was on the couch when Alfred texted; he replied and began following Alfred’s instructions before trying to do anything else. He had water. He had tylenol. He found that he did, in fact, have almonds. And then he checked his phone again.

Unread messages from Steph could wait. There was one from Bruce.

_I love you, Jason_ is all it says. By itself it would be a bit staggering, but it appears to be in reply to a message Jason sent over an hour ago. A message he must have typed while drunk. And now he cannot tell if Bruce’s message was intended as sarcasm or warning or sincere sentiment or…what. Because Jason’s message, that he absolutely does not remember typing-- okay maybe he remembers kind of-- is just:

_fuck you, bruce, do not go gentle into that good night_

Like, what the hell does _I love you, Jason_ mean in reply to _that_? Is it a thank you? A farewell?

“Get up,” Jason tells himself. “Get dressed.”

But he doesn’t move. His head hurts so much. He’s already had water but he feels like he could drink a lake. The lights in the kitchen are off at least, so that’s nice. Maybe if he just puts his face against the floor, right there, where it’s cool from the vent, he can get up in a minute and--

The pounding at the door startles him awake and he shouts angrily as he comes to and almost pukes because of the shout and the pounding on the door that is out of sync with the pounding in his head.

“Coming!” he yells, to make one of the poundings stop.

He staggers to his feet, leans on the counter for a minute, and steps over the bag of almonds to go open the door. He hopes it’s Alfred. He hopes it’s Tim. Please, don’t be Dick. Or anybody with Damian. At all.

It’s Clark Kent.

And he looks pissed.

Jason drops his head against the door for a moment and then forces himself to undo the chain lock. He tugs the door open, wincing at the light from the hall. He leaves the door and walks back into the dim living room and sits on the couch. He can feel the tension mounting in his limbs and it takes all his mental energy to not throw up, not cry, not start shouting defensively.

Clark steps into the apartment and shuts the door. He doesn’t speak to Jason, but lays something on the table as he goes by. Jason opens one eye to look. It’s a hanging garment bag. He sighs.
God bless Alfred.

There are sounds coming from the kitchen and Jason drags himself to his feet and makes it as far as the door jamb before he needs to lean against the wall. Clark turns from the sink with a glass of water and hands it to him.

“Drink,” he says.

Jason does, pausing halfway through to press his lips together and wait for a wave of nausea to pass. He finishes and Clark takes the glass from him. Jason wishes he’d just start chewing him out already, get it over with while Jason isn’t in the position to start much of a fight. If Clark waits too much longer, he just knows he’s going to go down swinging.

“Get dressed,” Clark says instead of the lecture. “Everyone else is already there.”

He leaves Jason and steps out on the balcony. He’s making a phone call.

Jason wants to die again. He absolutely does not want to be awake for any of today.

With the second glass of water, the sleep on the kitchen floor, the medicine, his headache is fading just enough for him to start moving. The almonds have been moved up to the counter and he grabs a handful of them, forcing himself to chew and swallow while he gets the garment bag.

In his bedroom, fastening the belt that came with the pressed dark brown khakis, he is such a mess he almost cries. For all his exterior, his heart feels so fragile. Alfred’s kindness is continually his undoing. And now he’s swinging rapidly the other way, furious that he almost cried over fucking khakis and bitter that he has to deal with Clark’s ire, and by the time he finds a pair of sunglasses in the top drawer of his dresser, the swarm of hornets in his gut is an indistinguishable mix of hangover and rage.

There is nothing stable in the world; uproar’s your only music, he thinks of Keats in consolation, grabbing his leather jacket from the end of the bed.

Clark is still on the balcony, on the phone, when he steps back out into the living room. He grabs a book from the shelf and shoves it in his jacket pocket, not even bothering to see what it is. He just wants a defense for later, a shield to hold in front of his face if he’s going to be stuck in a room with everyone. He doesn’t want to go. He’s absolutely going, no question.

“Ready?” Clark asks succinctly, closing and locking the balcony door. “I thought we could take your bike.”

Jason lowers the sunglasses, dealing with the sunlight from the sliding glass window, to give Clark a fixed stare and raised eyebrow, dripping with every ounce of condescension he can muster. It’s worth the needles of pain at the front of his head.

“Do you mean the Red Hood cycle?” he asks, sliding the glasses back up.


“You came to pick me up without a car?” Jason laughs. Being derisive is like self-medicating. It chills him, in a delicious way.

The severe scowl Clark gives him in reply, uncowed by Jason’s scorn, reminds Jason that he was the one who screwed up, it was him getting blackout drunk that put them both here. The guilt spills back up like an oil geyser, staining everything it touches, even his own anger. Jason’s relief vanishes and
he’s left seething at the loss.

“I’ll call a cab,” Clark mutters.

Jason comes very close, dangerously close, to telling Clark to eff off and refusing to go.

They wait in silence, they ride to the hospital in silence. Even the cabbie picks up on the tension and doesn’t try to talk to them. Once, right outside the hospital, Clark opens his mouth and makes a noise like he’s going to say something, but then he doesn’t.

Jason hopes he doesn’t try again. He’s feeling a bit better now and not so much in the mood to let a stern talking-to drift over him without a fight.

They step off the elevator onto the fifth floor and Clark stops suddenly, a hand on Jason’s elbow. Jason jerks his arm away but stops walking.

“What?” he demands, irritated. A man with a leather messenger bag is standing outside the conference room door, talking on his phone. He hangs up and raises a hand to knock on the door.

“Ben Whitlock!” Clark calls, his voice changing, striding forward. Jason follows. “What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same,” the man replies, stepping back from the door without knocking. “But I’m guessing we’ll have similar answers. I’m a bit surprised to see the Planet so far out, though. This isn’t exactly your guy.”

Jason hangs back, watching, trying to decide if he should just take off down the hall or go ahead into the room.

“I’m not here for a story, Ben. You gotta leave these kids alone. I’m just a family friend,” Clark is pleading and it’s freakish to Jason. It doesn’t mesh with his idea of him anymore than the blinding scowl from earlier does. Clark is leading them down the hall, around the corner from the conference room. Jason trails them.

“Kent, c’mon, a family friend? Really?”

“I swear to you. I won’t print anything without letting you know first.”

“Who’s this guy?” Whitlock nods at Jason, and Jason glares at him before he remembers he’s wearing sunglasses.

“He’s nobody. He’s security, works for the family.”

Jason’s heart drops into his boots. It catches him off guard. He wants to be angry but it’s still a breath or two away, coming in on the next wave of the tide. For an instant, he just feels absolutely abandoned.

It’s not like Clark owes him anything. But to be tossed aside, not even worth an excuse of friendship or…and there’s his anger, swelling fast, almost taking him down into the murky sand as it crashes into him.

“I dunno, Kent,” Whitlock is saying, wheedling. “My editor is going to have my ass if I don’t have something for her. This is a big deal for Gotham. He’s like the city’s pet darling.”

Jason is going to lose it. He’s going to punch somebody. He’s going to deck Clark, even though he
knows it won’t do anything.

He turns abruptly on his heel and walks away. He doesn’t need this.

“Hey,” Whitlock calls after him, ignoring Clark for a moment, “What do you think? You think they can handle a few questions about dear dad? That younger one was an asshole last time I talked to him. I don’t think he gives a shit. I know everyone loves Wayne, but do you think the kids are just in it for the money?”

“Ben! What are–” Clark begins but Jason barrels down the hall like a steam engine and slams his bare fist into Ben Whitlock’s face.

Ben Whitlock drops to a knee, holding his jaw, his messenger bag falling to the floor.

Jason is screaming at him, fighting against Clark’s arms holding him back before he even processes what happened.

“Get off the floor!” Jason hears his voice as if from far away. His head still hurts. His sunglasses are on the floor. Some deep part of him has overridden his façade and the words spill out unmarked by profanity. He’s literate, he’s scripted without writing, he’s fierce language like a sword. “If you don’t get up, I will string you from the ceiling by the tendons in your legs, I will pour acid on your throat so it drains over your eyes and mouth. I will–”

“Enough,” Clark says sharply in his ear, twisting Jason’s arm until it nearly breaks.

“What the hell,” Whitlock says without standing. “You said he works for them?”

He’s not talking to Jason or looking at him, he’s afraid. Good. Or not good.

Jason explodes from Clark’s grip when it loosens and Clark grabs for his arm again, his hand like iron.

“Sit,” he says, pointing to a chair along the wall. Jason throws himself into it with a roar of frustration, slouching back, one hand to his head.

He’s really screwed things up now. He could run, but he has a feeling Clark would find him. A holding cell in GCPD was not how he was planning on spending his day.

“God, Ben, why would you say something like that?” Clark sounds exasperated, genuinely angry, no longer pleading or mild. He offers the other man a hand, plants himself between Whitlock and Jason. Whitlock’s lip is dripping blood on the hospital floor. It’s good this is an out of the way hallway, for meetings and conferences, free of patients.

“I was trying to get a reaction,” Whitlock grumbles. “But not like that. I’m suing you,” he says to Jason, around Clark. “You and your company. You need help.”

“Ben, I lied to you,” Clark says, picking up the bag. “You aren’t suing anyone.”

“Like hell I’m not,” Whitlock shoots back, tipping his head and trying to hold back the blood with his fingers. “I knew you were here for a story.”

“No, I’m a family friend. But he’s not security.”

“He’s not?” Whitlock glances around Clark again.

“Look at him. He’s a kid.”
Whitlock and Jason’s eyes meet for a brief second and Whitlock pales even more than he already had. His blood is crimson ribbon against his face.

“You don’t…”

“He’s one of Wayne’s foster kids, Ben. I was trying to protect him from prying eyes. You absolutely have to drop it. I’m sorry. He shouldn’t have hit you, but if you ever tell anyone I will make sure they know what you said to him first, while his dad was in surgery. And I’m going to be a bit fuzzy with details, like whether or not you knew before you said it.”

“And I always thought Lane was the tough one,” Whitlock says with begrudging admiration.

“Alright, I’ll drop it. I don’t want CASA after me. But you’ll let me know if the Planet is going to print a piece?”

“Wait for the press release like everyone else, Ben.”

Whitlock shoulders his bag and stops in front of Jason.

“Sorry, kid,” he says, uneasily. “Good right hook. I’m sorry about your foster dad.”

Jason doesn’t answer.

When Whitlock is gone, Clark sits down next to Jason.

Jason is in shock. He has no idea what’s going on. He’s sick with dread now, all anger drained away into a blankness of misery.

“I’ve wanted to do that for years,” Clark says. “But Lois will never let me. Ben Whitlock is the scum of the earth.”

A speech like this sounds profoundly violent coming from Clark. Jason looks at him, surprised.

“Oh, he doesn’t care about you,” Clark says in response to the look. “He only knows it would make him look bad.”

“You could have let him call the cops,” Jason mumbles. “I would have been out of the way all day.”

“Why?” Clark asks, now sounding surprised himself. “What good would that do anyone?”

“You told him I was nobody,” Jason spits out. “It’s clear you’ve wanted me out of your hair since the moment you showed up at my apartment. I get it, I do. I’m a disaster and I can’t even keep it together for one night. Did you feel bad? Is that what changed your mind?”

“Aww, shoot, Jason.” Clark loosens his tie and leans back in his seat. “I didn’t even think…I’m so sorry. I forget you really are just a kid.”

“I’m not,” Jason bites back.

“You are,” Clark says evenly. “To me. I really was just trying to get him to leave you alone. If I’d said you were a friend, even, I knew he’d have a dozen questions for you. I didn’t know he’d try anyway or I would have led with saying you were a foster son. I don’t want you out of the way. You need to be here. Bruce loves you.”

“I disappoint him,” Jason finds he is unable to say this without scorn. It is a shield against the truth he is bracing himself for, but he can’t stop himself. He’s hunting for a way to feel wounded, an excuse to rally the fury that guards him.
“No. And I wasn’t disappointed either. I’m worried about you and I’m stressed, Jason. He’s my best friend. I spent all morning talking the League trying to convince them not to show up, feeling like a hypocrite because I get to be here. When I got to your apartment this morning, I was a mess. I’m sorry I didn’t handle things better.”

Jason is deflated, the last reserves of his anger trickling away in the face of this.

“Bruce asked me a few months if I wanted him to forge paperwork,” Jason says flatly, staring at the floor. “Make me officially a Wayne, again. I told him no. And ever since I left the manor last night, I just keep thinking, what if he dies and I have to be the dead son for the rest of my life?”

He folds over on himself in the small chair, head buried in his crossed arms. He doesn’t want to cry. He isn’t mad. He’s just numb, something even the hours of drinking didn’t achieve. He doesn’t even have the energy to prepare himself for the reassuring speech Clark is about to give him.

But it doesn’t come.

There’s a hand, firm and steady on his back. It doesn’t move. It’s just there, pressing just enough that Jason feels it as an anchor to the world.

People don’t touch him anymore. Sure, he’s had a hug or two, and people are trying to beat him with fists or feet or weapons on a regular basis, but that’s about it. It’s his own fault, really. It’s hard to try to comfort someone who might break you in half for trying. But he can’t break Clark.

They sit that way for a long time.

“Alfred is probably wondering if we killed each other,” Jason says finally.

“Yes,” Clark says.

Clark pulls his hand back and Jason sits up. Clark tightens the knot of his tie and Jason gets his sunglasses from across the hall.

They stand, reassembled, and regard each other for a moment.

“You ready?” Clark asks.

All things are ready, if our mind be so, Jason thinks, from Henry V.

“Oh my golly gee,” he says. “I’m always ready.”
The television in the corner of the conference room keeps going in and out, flickering between the OR status board with its list of patient numbers and a blank blue screen. Tim is standing on an chair fiddling with the cords but doesn’t seem to be making much of a difference.

Dick Grayson takes everything in. He taps his foot as he leans forward in his seat, watching Tim, watching everyone.

Alfred is calm, filling out a crossword puzzle that is balanced on his knee, his legs crossed primly as he sits in a hard plastic chair. Despite the fact that it is called a conference room, there is no grand table. There are no thickly padded leather swivel chairs.

The room was empty when they arrived except for a dozen stacking chairs and a plastic table set against the long wall and a flatscreen monitor with cords snaking out from under it into the wall.

They’ve since filled it with phone chargers, discarded jackets, and kicked off shoes piled in a corner.

Tim is still twisting cords, pushing buttons on the screen. Bruce’s patient ID and the status In Surgery have been up for almost two hours now, whenever the screen does display info.

Stephanie and Cass are coloring on the floor, in one of those books with the intricate geometric designs. Their pencils look expensive. Stephanie was the only one to actually bring a backpack full of schoolwork and distractions. She had been working on psychology homework until Cass began pacing restlessly and bouncing on her toes beneath the monitor.

Jason is reading and Damian is sitting by himself in a corner playing a video game on whatever handheld device he has, a Nintendo something or other. All Dick can remember at this point is that it is not called a Gameboy and that makes him feel old.

Babs stole Dick’s jacket to use as a pillow and fell asleep in the corner furthest from the monitor, facing the wall, her wheelchair between her and the rest of them.

For the past hour, Dick has been sitting with his phone and earbuds, listening to the police scanner. And even though nothing of note has happened, he can feel his stress level climbing into insane ranges.

“Dick,” Tim says, stepping down from the chair. The screen is now just blue, not even flickering. “I think this cord is corroded inside.”

“I’ll go find IT,” Dick says, standing quickly.

“One might be able to ring them,” Alfred says, without looking up from his crossword.

“No, I’ll go,” Dick says, eager to move, to do something. Alfred does look up at him then, and studying his face, nods.

“We’ll hold down the fort,” Alfred replies.

“Anyone want anything while I’m out?” Dick asks, looking around the room.

“Coffee,” Tim says, stretching out on the floor near Cass.

“Same,” Stephanie says. “I’ll pay you back.”
“Food,” Jason says. “And I’m not paying you back.”

Alfred stands then, and tucks the crossword under his arm and pulls out a wallet.

“Use the card, Master Richard, and if you please, a pack of spearmint gum for me and a sandwich for Master Damian. Something vegetarian.”

“I’m not hungry,” Damian protests. “But, Grayson, I do want a carbonated juice.”

“A sandwich and a fizzy juice,” Alfred says, putting the card in Dick’s hand. “Would you like some assistance?”

“I’ll help,” Tim calls from the floor, rolling onto his back but not getting up.

“I’m fine,” Dick forces himself to give Alfred a smile. “I’ll find a tray or something.”

It is clear that Alfred is not buying the smile, but he searches Dick’s face with a small frown and nods.

“Very well,” he says. “Text one of us if you have trouble locating a tray.” He returns to his crossword puzzle.

“Clark?” Dick stops by the door. “Anything?”

“Oh? No, I’m fine, thanks,” Clark says, absorbed in whatever he’s working on.

Dick closes the door behind him with a sigh of relief, feeling like he’s escaped something. It’s nice to feel like he has something to do, it’s nice to walk, to be able to go somewhere, to have a list of things to get, to have a goal.

But instead of the purpose giving him calm, his stress is continuing to skyrocket. There is so much he is responsible for, so many things he cannot forget.

Dick skips the elevator and heads for the stairs, thinking that running them might help. Once in the stairwell, on impulse or instinct, he goes up instead of toward a lower level.

He makes it to the upper roof access landing, sprinting up the stairs by twos, before he breaks down.

The corner is quiet and musty and stands with his forehead pressed against the roof door and cries. He hasn’t actually cried yet, despite feeling like he might and wanting to the night before. He’d gotten distracted by finding Damian.

And the crying is interrupted by a panic attack, not noisy or dramatic, but tight in his chest and head, hot on his skin and he wants to rip his hair out of his scalp and plunge his head into ice water.

“Dick?” A tentative voice behind him shatters the tense quiet. “I don’t know if it would help for me to give you a hug…”

It’s Stephanie.

He turns from the wall, managing to suck in a shallow breath.

Dick tries to talk but finds he can only manage a nod.

She doesn’t hesitate. One, then two steps, and she’s there, her arms wrapped around him, squeezing him.
After a few seconds, he tries to talk but she says,

“Shut up, Dick,” before he can.

When he tries again a minute later, his voice is shaky but level and she doesn’t stop him.

“I’m fine,” he says.

Without discussing or planning it, they both sit on the top step together.

“Bruce told you about Damian,” she says.

“He sent me an email,” Dick gives a small, bitter laugh. “I got it this morning. Is that why you followed me?”

“Alfred told me to,” Stephanie admits, giving him a wry smile. “I was going to avoid you.”

“Of course he did,” Dick sniffles and uses the back of his hand to wipe his face off. “I’m not mad at you, Steph. I’m mad at him.”

“I told him you’d be upset,” Steph complains, dragging the toe of her shoe in a figure eight on the step. “But he was all like, ‘It’s okay, Dick can handle it.’”

Dick bites back a sob.

“Shit,” he says, pressing his hands against his face.

Stephanie keeps talking, her words picking up speed.

“When he called me this morning, all ‘I just wanted to adopt you, you’ll always have a place in this family, sorry I didn’t make that clear’ blah blah blah I was like ‘Ugh you don’t have to be so dramatic all the time enough with the grand gestures.’”

“Ha! You told him that?” Dick looks at her with a laugh, this one free of bitterness. “Good for you, Steph.”

“I’m sorry I told him yes,” she says quietly, looking down the stairs so she doesn’t have to look at Dick’s face.

Dick’s chest is still tight. It feels like a conveyer belt of excuses, his lungs pressed flat by a cycling roster of reasons. As soon as he talks himself out of one, the next is there. But he can breathe. It is getting easier.

He puts an arm around Stephanie’s shoulders and gives her a hug, his turn this time.

“I’m not mad at you,” he repeats. “And I think you’re good for Damian, I really do. I think Bruce knows what he’s doing.”

“Wait,” Stephanie says into his shoulder, “then why are you mad at him?” She sits up.

Dick pulls himself together. This is basically his little sister, he has to get a grip. He needs to not be falling apart, not leaving pieces for others to pick up.

But he can’t stop his unraveling.

He feels like he’s working without a net.
“Is it that he doesn’t trust you?” Stephanie asks, linking her arm through his. Dick needs it, it’s holding him back from the fall. “Because I know what that’s like.”

Nope, he’s falling anyway.

“No!” He says, and his voice is too loud, too upset. “He trusts me too much. While you’re getting a phone call explanation, and Tim gets instructions, and Jason gets story time, I get ‘Wear the cowl, Dick, you can handle it, Dick,’ and from everyone else I hear, ‘Dick can handle it, let Dick handle it, Dick will be fine, Dick is fine, Dick can handle it.’ But what if I can’t?”

He suddenly remembers who he is talking to.

“I’m so sorry, Steph, I shouldn’t–”

“Yes, you should,” she says sternly. “And that’s what you should have said last night. You need to just tell him you need help. Everyone in this family acts like everyone else is a mind reader!”

She hugs him again, her words easier to swallow with the comfort of it. It’s like a net to him.

“I can’t just tell him that, Steph,” he protests. “It’s really complicated.”

“No, it isn’t. Don’t talk to me like I’m Damian,” she says. “You just tell him you need some help if he’s asking you to carry so much. Remind him that you aren’t him. It doesn’t make you weak. It just means you’re you. You’re different.”

“I’m turning into him all the time,” he complains.

“Yeah, but mostly the good ways,” she retorts. And then a pause. “And he might be getting better, too.”

“Have you been taking lessons from Babs?” Dick asks, looking sidelong at her.

“Yes,” she grins. “And I’m an amazing student.”

“I’m glad he asked you, Steph, honestly I am,” Dick tells her, standing up. “Damian needs more than just me and Alf. Don’t wait for Bruce to be out of the way to keep doing stuff. I know he appreciates it, even if he pretends like he’s a solo act.”

“I know,” Steph nods, putting her hands in her hoodie pockets. “You know what he said to me?”

“What?”

Dick stands on the landing again and then hops up on the railing. He just wants to move for a minute, to put all his weight on his arms and hold himself balanced above the world.

“You know what, never mind,” Steph shakes her head. “I don’t know if…anyway. That text. You got one, too? What was that?”

“Oh, that was definitely Babs forcing him,” Dick says, parallel to the ground. He doesn’t press about the abandoned question, even though he’s curious. “But that doesn’t mean he didn’t mean it.”

“Yeah,” Steph says quietly. “Anyway. Want me to stick with you? Help with drinks?”

“Sure,” Dick says, flipping backwards off the railing onto the landing. His arms feel alive, he feels better now. “I’d love that.”
“I hope you remember it all,” Steph says, laughing. “I should have written it down.”


And he does.

They return to the room with an IT guy and a bundle of cables in tow, arms laden with sandwiches and drinks and Dick hasn’t forgotten anything.

He surveys the room, cataloging everyone’s location. Everyone is here, everyone is where they need to be, no one is killing each other.

The screen flickers and and IT guy finishes screwing in the new cord. Dick looks over and it still says In Surgery. Somehow, he feels better just knowing.


“I am not. That’s not even a word, Grayson,” the boy says archly.

Alfred is unwrapping a sandwich anyway, handing Damian the juice he had asked for. Damian pops the tab on the juice with a sour scowl, watches the television the whole time he’s drinking it straight down.

Tim is giving Cass sips of his coffee and laughing at her expression. Steph is taking Babs a water bottle, talking quietly to her, her own coffee in one hand. Jason is asleep with his book on his chest, stretched out on the floor by Clark’s feet.

Clark is still typing, oblivious to all of them. Or at least, he seems that way. He’s probably hyper aware of everything.

Dick smiles as he looks around the room. It’s a crap day but at least they’re together.

It’s nice to not be alone.
The sound of shattering plastic and the thud of impact on drywall finally tear Clark’s attention away from his laptop. He’s been writing for hours, it feels like, requiring himself to go slowly, to think clearly, churning out one mundane article after another as reserve for busier times. Occasionally, he switches back to another piece he’s writing, but he keeps needing to take breaks from that project.

He looks up to see what the commotion is just as all the yelling starts. Damian is screaming at Tim, Dick is yelling at Damian, Stephanie is yelling at all of them, Tim is picking up fragments of a broken Gameboy, and Cass is sitting with her hands over both ears. Alfred is nowhere in sight. Clark vaguely remembers him leaving, asking Clark to keep an eye on things. He has no idea how long ago that was. It’s late afternoon.

Clark is reluctant to get up. At some point, Jason rolled over in his sleep and his face is pressed into Clark’s left shoe. He still feels so awful for what happened with Whitlock, he wants to let him sleep. But he supposes, after a moment, that if Jason is sleeping through the loud fighting, he’s going to survive a moved shoe.

Slowly, carefully, he slips his foot out from under Jason’s head, angling his leg so he doesn’t just drop his face against the floor.

He stands.

Cass notices first and looks at him with a pleading expression.

He steps forward and easily snatches a struggling, shouting Damian out of the middle of the mess. They all grow quiet. Then they all start yelling again, almost immediately.

“What is going on?” Clark asks.

“It’s none of their fucking business!” Damian screams. “I can do what I want!”

“He threw his 3DS,” Stephanie tells Clark, just as Dick is snapping, “Language!” at Damian.

Clark checks to make sure the door is closed and then hoists Damian over his head while the little boy kicks and snarls.

“Enough,” Clark says to all of them. “I’ll take care of him.”

The others are too upset to back down right away, but they do stop talking and gradually settle. Clark pulls Damian back down before he kicks out a ceiling tile.

“You stop, I put you down,” he says. He waits. After a full minute Damian stops struggling and ineffectually punching or kicking at Clark’s arm.

The door opens and Alfred steps back in. Damian goes limp. Clark doesn’t let go immediately, but slowly releases the boy’s arm. Alfred looks around the room, hmms at Damian, and then looks at the OR monitor. He sits without speaking and Clark notes how tired he seems.

Damian tries to stalk off but Clark grabs him by the shoulder.
“No,” Clark says. “You stay with me.”

“You can’t tell me what to do,” Damian snaps.

“Damian,” Alfred says, once. Damian stays by Clark.

“We’re going for a walk,” Clark announces. “Get in touch if we need to come back.”

Damian follows him out of the room, muttering. Clark takes him up to the roof.

“What are we going to do?” Damian asks, suspicious.

“Anything,” Clark shrugs. “It’s a tough day. What do you want to do?”

“I want to go home,” Damian says. “It’s stupid that we’re just waiting here.”

“Probably,” Clark agrees. He knows almost any of the crowd downstairs could be having this conversation, it’s nothing special. “But we’re here.”

“I’m going to do kata,” Damian says, looking sideways at Clark to see if this idea meets with resistance.

“Go ahead. Be careful. If you fall off the roof, I’m not going to catch you.”

“I’m not stu-” Damian stops. “Was that a joke?” He sounds offended.

“Yep,” Clark grins.

Damian gives him the tiniest of smiles. It reminds him of Bruce.

Clark talked to Lois on the phone for a few minutes earlier at Jason’s but other than that, nothing. He’s starting to feel drained, which is a strange feeling for him. It’s why he was pouring himself into work. He needs the air up here on the roof as much as Damian does.

Damian is already working, his limbs sharp with precision, the contour of each movement clearly defined and plotted out.

There’s a small ledge around some drainage grating. Clark sits down on it, keeps an eye on Damian, slips his phone out of his pocket and presses the second speed dial contact.

It’s answered by video call on the second ring.

“How’s Bruce?” She asks right away.

“Still in surgery,” he says. “Just wanted to talk.”

She’s got her hair pulled back and is standing in the kitchen, whatever she was working on abandoned to talk to him.
“Apples?” He asks, guessing.

“By the bushel,” she says. “We had a good crop this year. Making apple butter today.”

“How’s Pa?” He asks next. He wasn’t lying, he just wants to talk. He wants to talk about normal things that aren’t brain scans and post-op care and waiting for biopsy results.

“Oh, he’s good. Happy as a clam, actually. Just went out to check on the puppies.”

Out of the corner of his watching eye, Clark sees Damian stumble.

“Did Sadie have her litter already?” Clark asks. He could have sworn he’d only known for two weeks, but time has been strange recently.

“Two days ago,” Martha Kent answers. “We told you in July, Clark. I told you time was gonna move faster every year.”

“That was July?” Clark is bewildered. “Did I miss hay season?”

“Clark.” Martha gives him a look, a little scolding, a little amused. “My fingers are turning to prunes from apple juice. What do you think?”

“Why didn’t you call me?” Clark asks, checking on Damian. He’s moving again, but closer to Clark now, trying very hard to not look like he’s eavesdropping.

“You’re busy,” Martha answers, leaving the kitchen. “It’s alright, the Llewellyn boys helped us. It only took two days. Your Pa decided to leave the south field.”

“Call me next year!” Clark exclaims. “I can make time to help you guys.”

“Oh, hush. We want you to come home to relax. I’m gonna find your Pa so he can say hi. He’s still in the barn with those dogs, he’s been on them like a mama himself.”

“I bet they’re cute,” Clark grins. “Lois would kill me, though. We aren’t home enough. Not for a human dog.”

“Please tell me you didn’t just say human dog,” Martha Kent is laughing hard. She’s stopped in the yard and Clark can see the laundry line behind her, a single sheet fluttering in the fall breeze.

“Damnit,” Clark isn’t tired exactly, but something like it. He’s so distracted all the time now. “Please don’t tell Lois. Please.”

“Oh, I’m calling her as soon as you hang up,” Martha wipes a tear from her eye. “But really, how are you holding up?”

Clark is suddenly very, very aware of how close Damian is. There are so many things he wants to say to her and does not want Damian to overhear. So he shrugs.

“I’m alright. You know, Bruce’s youngest is right here. Mind showing him around?”

He looks up expecting to see a frown of resistance on Damian’s face but instead the boy looks young, younger than Clark has ever seen him look, and his expression is total excitement.

“Did you say puppies?” He asks, breathlessly.

Clark nods.
“Sure! Is this Damian?”

Clark should have figured his Ma would know. She probably has their birthdays written down somewhere, just in case she can ever do something about it.

“Yes,” Clark tells her, as Damian stands close to his shoulder to look at the screen.

“Hello!” She says, “I’m Martha.”

“You know my name,” Damian answers. “And I already knew yours.”

If Clark had ever been this rude, he would have been put to work digging fence post holes. But Martha lets it slide.

“Let’s find Clark’s Pa first,” she says, “And then we’ll take a look around.”

It takes a minute for the screen to adjust to the dim inside of the barn once she steps in, so Clark can hear his Pa talking and Sadie barking before he can see them.

When the camera does adjust and focus, Martha already has the lens pointed at a squirming pile of puppies. They still have their eyes shut and they’re mewing and trying to crawl.

“Can you see them?” She asks. “I can’t figure out how to turn this around.”

“We can see them,” Clark says, but he’s mostly watching Damian. The boy is wide-eyed and looks for all the world like it’s Christmas morning, every other single thing about this shitty day forgotten for just a few minutes.

“Where’s the mother?” Damian demands.

“I’m making her eat,” Jonathan Kent says from off-screen, and then he adds, “Hey, Clark. Missed you at haying.”

“Ma told me,” Clark replies, sighing. “Sorry.”

“I’m just teasing you,” Jonathan says. “Don’t worry about it.”

They watch the puppies for a few more minutes and then Sadie hops back into the pen with them, sniffing each puppy before she settles down. She whines a little at them and Damian says softly,

“You’re making her nervous. You should leave.”

Martha laughs, “You heard the boy, Jon. Get on out of here and leave the poor dog alone.”

The camera backs up but doesn’t turn around to her face again.

“Well,” she says. “Let’s go look around.”

Clark leans back, phone held in one outstretched hand, Damian leaning close to the screen as Martha walks the farm and shows him the few cows, the fall pig, the chicken coop and garden, the edge of the fields.

Damian is silent except for once, when he looks back at Clark and asks,

“You grew up here?”
Clark nods and Damian turns back to the screen, saying, “Why did you leave?” but it’s clear he doesn’t want an answer.

“Well, I think that’s everything,” Martha says, turning the camera to face her again. “And I gotta get dinner on. Maybe you can come visit sometime, Damian.”

“Thank you, Martha,” he says very seriously.

“Want a puppy?” She asks, and Clark knows the minute he hears it that it’s a joke. That’s all it is. But Damian is already saying,

“Yes. I would very much like that. Please just let your son know when I should come to pick one up. I’d like the one with the pale ears.”

Martha is looking at Clark, and she’s smiling, shrugging, and biting her lower lip all at the same time. It’s a mix of apology and amusement.

“Ma,” is all he says.

“Honey, you’re going to have to ask your dad.”

Clark raises both eyebrows and makes a warning face, and she pales, but Damian continues as if nothing is wrong.

“This doesn’t concern Father. It would be my dog. Thank you, again.”

Martha is mouthing ‘sorry’ at Clark as Damian walks away.

“You know what,” Clark says, running a hand through his hair, “I don’t think Bruce will even care. Remind me next time to tell you about their cow.”

Martha laughs and then soberes. She’s standing in the kitchen again, the fridge full of pictures and phone numbers and notes behind her.

“You keep me updated,” she says. “I love you. Don’t be a stranger.”

Clark promises, returns the sentiment, and ends the call.

Damian is standing by the door to go back down inside. When Clark joins him, Damian cranes his neck to look up at him.

“Thank you, Kent. I needed that.”

The assessment is too grown-up for such a little guy. And he sounds almost exactly like Bruce, on a higher register.

“Me, too,” Clark says, ruffling his hair. Damian pulls away from him, saying “tt” sharply.

Yep, just like Bruce.

“We should go back in and check,” Damian says tersely.

Clark looks at him.

“He’s going to be okay,” Clark says.
“You can’t know that,” Damian snaps.

“Alfred thinks so, too.”

Damian looks back at him now, studying his face with an arrogant scowl. He looks like he’s relaxing a little, though.

“I believe you,” Damian says, looking away. “But only because Father says you’re a terrible liar.”

“He said that?” Clark asks, knowing already that it is true. Of course he would.

“He also said you can’t cheat at Scrabble to save your life,” Damian adds, with a wicked little grin.

“Damian,” Clark says, defensive, “Nobody can cheat at Scrabble.”

“Tt,” the boy replies.

“Let’s go in before I throw you off the roof,” Clark says. He tousles Damian’s hair again and doesn’t feel at all bad when the boy recoils, sprinting down the first few steps to get away.

When they get back to the conference room, the status on the screen is unchanged. Jason is awake and Damian makes a beeline for him, talking in a low voice. Clark hears him, though, and he is demanding help with a name for the dog.

“Should I take her home?” Stephanie is saying to Alfred, and they are both looking at Cass, who is chewing the end of her hoodie sleeve and staring at the screen, balanced on one foot, the other leg tucked in the air. Her fingers are moving rapidly, the way someone might indicate falling rain, but faster and without the downward motion of her arms.

It gives Clark an idea.

And he is so glad he is here, that he can actually help. It doesn’t bother him in the slightest to go from one thing to the other. It’s better than sitting at home or kicking around in the Daily Planet bullpen pretending nothing much is wrong.

“Cass,” he says to her. She doesn’t turn immediately and Stephanie starts to try to warn him. “Come play a game with me.”

Cass turns and looks at him, her fingers stilled.

“What game?” she asks.

In response, he sits on the floor and waits for her. He wants to keep talking, but he’s watched Bruce and the others with her, he knows it will do the opposite of what he wants.

She sits across from him and he puts both hands in the air.

Cass imitates the motion.

And then he goes slowly, showing her where to move her hands, repositioning them if he needs to. They do it again, and then again. And then they start to pick up pace. And Clark tries not to laugh, thinking about what Lois would say if she saw this.

“Where did you learn that?” Dick asks while the sound fills the room. Clark can hear the smirk in his voice.
“If you have to ask that, then you’ve never spent years waiting for the school bus in Kansas farmland,” Clark retorts.

The rest of the room leaves them alone. Cass’ eyes are bright as she gets faster and faster. He matches her speed, not rushing. They keep it up for five minutes, ten, then fifteen and she’s still not flagging or tiring.

Then a different movement catches Clark’s eye. Tim is sitting ramrod straight in his chair. Cass stops.

“He’s in post-op,” Tim says, as Clark follows his gaze to the TV screen with the surgery updates.

The room comes alive, waking as if from deep sleep. They are all sitting on the edges of seats or standing, all looking at the board with baited breath. A minute passes and then the stillness lapses into conversation, tense and muted. There is still nothing they can do but wait and they don’t know yet how deep their relief should run.

“Clark,” Tim says, leaving his chair to crouch next to him, near Cass. “They’re going to try to wake him up. Do,” the boy pauses, biting his lip. He tries again. “Kon can…”

“I’ll listen,” Clark tells him.

Tim gives him a grateful smile.

“Thanks.”

Clark closes his eyes to focus. He can hear a city away, but narrowing it down specifically to one room without hearing a specific voice, a name, to draw his attention could take some effort.

[Mr. Wayne] he hears an accented voice among the chatter of a thousand sounds. [Mr. Wayne, can you hear me?]

That’s all Clark needs. He’s tuned in. But there’s silence in response to the question.

[Mr. Wayne, this is Dr. Dev. We’ve finished in surgery. Can you tell me your name?]

Silence.

[Jenn, can you let speech path know to send someone in? We might need some help. It’s alright, Mr. Wayne. You’re okay. Can you blink once if you understand me?]

Clark’s heart sinks.

[Dr. Dev, we have what looks like a hand tremor on the right side.]

[Decrease that sedative drip. 5ccs]

“Oh, no,” Clark hears Tim’s voice, as if from far away even though he knows the boy is right next to him. Clark realizes he must be doing an awful job of controlling his expression.

He opens his eyes. Everyone is looking directly at him, faces stricken.

Except Alfred.

“Master Kent,” he says calmly, “I do not know if it is possible, but is there perhaps a way to determine if he is tapping a finger? Perhaps on the right side?”
Clark closes his eyes again.

The hand tremor.

The nursing staff and doctors are talking and he pinpoints his efforts on the smaller sounds in the room.

[taptap tap tap tap taptap tap tap tap]

It’s almost a pattern. It could be?

[Dr. Dev, it’s been two minutes since sedative adjustment.]

[Let’s give it another go. Mr. Wayne, can you tell me your name?]

There’s another long pause. The tapping stops. And it is Bruce’s voice, hoarse and soft, that makes the next noise.

[Ba]

[Bat]

Another pause, this one longer than the ones between the syllables. Just enough time for Clark to feel deep relief and simultaneously think, oh shit. The voice tries again, this time hoarse but steady.

[Bruce.]

Clark exhales.

[Mr. Wayne, you’re coming out of surgery. Can you tell me the day?]

[Thursday.]

[Great, Mr. Wayne. What about your date of birth? Jenn, tell speech path not to rush. We might be in the clear.]

“I think he’s okay,” Clark announces.

And Clark drinks in the joy that explodes in the room when he delivers the news.

He is a reporter, after all.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you didn't mind that this had a slight foray into a bit of fluff! After fourteen chapters of crying and throwing things, I felt like the story needed an interlude of sorts. Thank you all for continuing to read! I've got more coming soon!
Everything is blurry. There is a weight on all of him. He is heavy.

There is someone there?

“Hey,” He says, looking at the face above his own. His dad? His Alfred. Alfred.

“Hey, yourself,” Alfred replies with a warm smile.

He’s panicking? There’s something wrong. He feels tense all over. His face is in prison. He reaches for it.

“It’s alright, Master Bruce,” Alfred says. “Just an oxygen mask.”

What else was there. A one he needed to know about?

“Damian.”

“He’s fine,” Alfred says. “Do you want to see him?”

No, that’s the wrong one. It feels good to know that one is okay. But there’s another one.

Something else he is wrong about? Which one does he need?

“Clark,” He manages to get out.

“Of course,” Alfred says. Maybe it’s a normal request. Alfred doesn’t seem surprised.

A minute passes. Another face appears.

“Bruce,” the new face says. He is also smiling.

“Did I tell them?” He asks, feeling like it is an urgent matter. He can’t remember why though.

Oh. *That.*

His head is killing him. It’s taking too much effort to think, to speak.

“No,” Clark says. “You came close, but didn’t.”

“Good,” He says and he feels like now it is safe to relax. “Thought I was…”

What did he think? Why did he mix up his names?

Oh, yeah. *That.*

“Captured. Couldn’t tell them the truth.”

Clark starts laughing and he, too, realizes this is funny for some reason. He laughs and then groans.

“Take it easy,” Clark says, his voice sounding far away. “You and your damn paranoia.”
Someone is still groaning. Is it him? His head really, really hurts. His throat hurts, too, maybe? Or is it outside his neck that hurts? That doesn’t make sense.

“Nurse,” someone is saying, “perhaps a touch more painkiller, if it’s possible?”

He’s out.

It’s cold. Not dangerously cold, just waking up cold. The room is dark but not too dark. There are boxes all around him. Is he moving?

Oh, no, they’re machines. One of them is beeping. It sounds like a metronome. Did he play piano once? In school? It feels like years ago. Yeah, it was. Years.

Maybe a bird. A strange little robot bird, beeping at him. That seems more friendly.

He’s still cold. Where are the blankets?

Oh shit it hurts to sit up. Why is he sitting up? Is he? Only a little. He’s cold. Not dangerously cold, just-- no, he’s definitely had this thought before. He’s not even sure there are blankets.

Wasn’t there, though? At least one? It was really comfortable.

He looks around. It’s so hard to see. Is it dark? Yeah, it’s dark, but there are two of things. Are there usually? It’s night, then, and he’s not sure. Maybe it’s a night thing.

Where is everyone?

There’s someone in the hall. He closes his eyes to listen. She’s not moving much. At a desk, maybe. Would she bring him a blanket? Can he ask that?

How would he ask. Does he want to?

“Can-” he says. He’s really cold. It’s freezing in here.

There’s a girl.

There’s a Cass.

Oh, it’s Cass.

He laughs, relieved.

She’s like an answer every time.

“Shhh,” she says, a finger to her lips.

He’s quiet.

“Can you see me?” She asks in a whisper. “They said your eyes are broken.”

Is she usually so fuzzy?

“I can see you,” he says, trying to whisper. “You have a shape.”

She smiles, her teeth white in the glow from the bird box.
“What are you looking for?” She asks. “I’m staying here tonight. They shouldn’t know.”

“I’m cold,” he says.

She disappears. No, that’s not right. She didn’t vanish. She bent over? He can’t see her but he knows she’s there.

When she stands again, she has something black in her hands. A cape? No…close to a cape. Oh, yeah, a blanket.

It settles over him and it is so good and warm. His Alfred made it. He remembers now.

“It fell,” she says, her head peeking over the edge of the bed. She’s standing weird. Hiding. That’s right, she’s secret.

Secrets!

“How’s Gotham?” he asks. It’s a big question.

“Quiet,” she says. “Good quiet, not nervous quiet.”

“Good,” he says, sighing. Was he worried? He’s not sure. He isn’t now.

“Does it hurt?” She asks from a disappeared place. Under the bed. Her face is by his again. She moves so fast.

“Yeah,” he says, because it does.

“Sorry,” she says, her voice quiet. “Is that right? To be sorry?”

“No,” he says. “You didn’t do it.”

She didn’t. He remembers that much.

“Sorry,” she says again. “Because it hurts.”

“Are you cold?” He asks, trying to be polite.


“I’m fine,” he says. He will be, anyway. He is. He’s not cold anymore.

“You always say that,” she says. “It’s almost never true.”

This is a big speech for her. He can tell. He remembers. He looks at her.

There is a tear on her cheek. A cut down her face. No, wrong kind of tear. Not a cut. A line. A wet line. A crying line. Just one.

Oh, Cass.

He finds his hands. Where are they? He needs them. Right now. Oh, there. He puts a hand on her crying.

Her head is down on the bed now. Is she on the bed? No, she’s in a chair, he can see it at the edges of her. It’s just her head, by his most of him. Oh, his side. That’s what it’s called.
Did he knock her down? With his hand? No, his hand is somewhere else, in the air. The fingertips are wet. Are they leaking? Does that happen? No. Cass. Her crying. Her tears.

What can he do? He had a plan, what was it.

Yeah. That was the plan.

He finds his hand again. He puts it on her head. Her hair is so soft. It’s like a kitten.

Oh, man. He really loves kittens. Not sure about cats.

Cass.

He loves Cass. Sweet Cass. His heart feels so full. Is it drugs? No…but it’s making his head feel better. He’s proud. That’s what it is. She is the best daughter.

“Don’t be sad,” he says, knowing this is something he should say.

“I’m not sad,” she says. She leaves her head where it is. He leaves his hand. “I’m bittersweet.”

“Good word,” he says. It is. It really honestly truly is.


“You’re so smart,” he says. “It’s beautiful.”

Cass is quiet. He is quiet.

It is so nice. Even if he hurts all over himself. No, that’s not quite right. His knees feel okay.

“My knees don’t hurt,” he tells her. Maybe it will cheer her up.

“Good,” she says. “Now work on the rest of you.”

“I will,” he promises. He wants her to know he’ll be okay. He’s not lying. “You help. Stay here, please.”

“They’ll be mad,” she says. “They will make me leave.”

“No,” he says. He can promise this, can’t he? He’s got something. Money. Oh yeah. It’s like a power source. “I’m Bruce Fucking Wayne.”

It makes him angry to think someone might make her leave. She’s just Cass.

She’s giggling, her hair tickling his hand. Then it stops.

“Don’t say that word,” she says. “It’s ugly.”

“Wayne?” He asks.

“You know,” she says. “Don’t be dumb.”

He smiles. He’s not dumb. He knows that much.

“Okay,” he tells her. “But you stay. It was so cold before.”

“Sleep,” she tells him. “I will stay. I will hide when they come and I will unhide when they leave.”
“Good plan,” he tells her. “I love you. You are the best Cass.”

It is so true.

“You are my favorite,” she says. “I meant it before but I didn’t say it with words.”

“It’s okay,” he says. “I know.”

“Sleep,” she says again. “Get better.”

He means to promise, but he’s sleeping when he thinks it.

It is morning. He’s in a new room. He’s staring intently at the screen. This is a game they play at home and it’s nice to feel like he can keep up. Start a crime show, first one to solve the mystery wins. Wins what? Just the thrill of victory. Dick cheated once, watched an episode ahead of time, tried to pretend he hadn’t. He was banned for a month.

And this is a new show, maybe, or maybe it’s just that his eyes are still acting strange. It doesn’t matter. He’s already figured it out.

“I know who the murderer is,” he announces. This is how it works. He’ll explain and others can offer their own theories or agree with him and give up.

Tim is snickering. Maybe he doubts it can be solved so quickly. He should know better.

“Bruce, this is House Hunters,” Tim says. There’s a sound of a fist hitting body and a yell. “Ow, Dick!”

So it is a new show. That’s why none of the characters seemed familiar.

“Shut up,” Dick says. “I want to hear this.”

Yeah, he does. Because Bruce just won. Again.

“Phones out,” he can hear Barbara now. “C’mon, kids, this oughta be good.”

Yeah, damn right it is. He just solved a murder in the first three minutes. And new show, too! Usually speed depends on formula-- it helps to know the show.

“Alfred, I warned him,” Barbara is saying. “But guys, if I ever even think you’ve put this on the Internet, so help me I will ban you from everything for the rest of your lives. Capice?”

Because Barbara, unlike some people, is not an idiot. She knows how sensitive material like this can be.

“I’m ready,” Tim is giggling. Aw, that’s such a nice sound. “Go ahead, Bruce. Tell us who did it.”

Finally. He thought the show was going to be over by the time they let him talk.

They’re just sore losers.

They reduced his meds, by a lot. There’s a therapist coming today. His head aches and his throat is still sore. They’ve been letting him eat soft food but his stomach always wants it more than his mouth, and even then, not much.
He can’t see very well. He can see well enough, he supposes, but it’s not well.

Maybe that therapist will help. Vision therapy is a thing, isn’t it? He’s just still so glad he can think. He can move. He checks his toes and his fingers and his legs and his arms every time he wakes up. Just in case.

He knows he walked for a bit earlier. Did he sit in a chair? It feels like a long, slow drift. He thinks of the days. Has it only been one? Yeah. He was in surgery yesterday.

There’s a TV on. Again. It seems like it’s always on now. Is he boring? No, hospitals are boring. That’s what it is. He listens for a moment. He can see it, too, but not well enough to be certain.

It’s a sci-fi, he thinks. There are spaceships. And stars. Aliens! He knows an alien. Clark. Clark is an alien and his best friend.

It figures, that his best friend wouldn’t be human. He has a weird life.

Who is here? He’s just waking up, that’s why he doesn’t know. Tim! Timmy. That boy is a gift to the world.

“Hey, Bruce,” Tim says. So he is really awake. His eyes are open.

“Hey, Tim,” he says. He groans a little. Man, does his head hurt. It feels like someone cracked the back of his skull open.

Oh.

Yeah.

“Sorry,” Tim says. “They need to see how you do off the painkillers. You have a therapist coming soon.”

“I know,” he says. And he does. It feels easier to hold onto things in his head. It’s been hard. “It’s okay. What are we watching?”

“Star Trek, Next Gen.”

“The good one,” he says. He’s biased. “What time is it?”

“A little before one. Want me to clear out when the therapist gets here? Do you need a drink?”

Tim’s such a good kid.

“I’m alright,” he says. “You can stay. Who is it?”

He knows Tim will know this. Did he ask him to? It doesn’t matter, Tim would know anyway. Tim is like him.

“Leo Schaeffer. He did his residency in Germany. Military.”

“Good,” he says. That means he’ll be tough. He needs someone tough. He wants to start pushing. Damn it, but his head hurts. “Can I get some water, actually?”

“Sure,” Tim says casually, turning off the television. “It’s really good to hear you so alert. I’m sorry it hurts so much.”
“I’ll live,” he says. It’s like a joke, right? Except also true.

There’s a knock on the door. It opens.

He needs a break already. Just from drinking water.

“Where’s Schaeffer?” Tim is asking, by the door. He sounds angry.

“I’m Angela Felding,” the woman is saying. There is a woman.

“You can’t be here,” Tim says. He’s so angry.

“I’m filling in for Schaeffer. Mr. Wayne is marked as a high priority in my files.”

“You cannot come in,” Tim insists.

Something is wrong. Something Tim isn’t saying.

He tries to sit up, makes it halfway. He can’t see her face. He doesn’t know her voice.

“I’m going to have to ask you to leave,” she says, gently. “It’s okay to feel a little nervous. But he’ll be okay. It’s just an initial evaluation.”

“No,” Tim says. “You can’t.”

“Maureen, can you get security? One of Mr. Wayne’s sons is having a hard time. I’m sorry, I really need to see him today. Are you…Richard?”

“No.”

He is managing to sit propped on one arm. What is going on?

How is security there so fast? Is that normal?

Something is wrong.

They’re taking Tim. He’s yelling. Is he crying? Whatever it is, it got bad fast. He’s shouting. He’s down the hall.

What the hell is going on?

The woman steps into the room and closes the door on Tim’s shouting.

He is already back on the bed. He needs to bide his time, figure things out.

Felding.

Dent.

Oh, God, she works in Arkham.

He turns his wrist, gathers the IV line. He pinches it to block the line. He needs to be awake. He needs to make sure she can’t use it.

He can barely move. He’s dead exhausted. He might be dead.

Oh, shit, Tim.
Hurry.

Chapter End Notes

Just in case y'all forgot you were reading a comic book story, haha.

Also, you guys, painkiller stories are the BEST. Please share all of yours in comments I will be forever grateful.
Jason waits for the automatic doors to swing open, the book in his hand. It’s the first time he’s been to the hospital since yesterday after Bruce was out of surgery. He just couldn’t take it after the ICU. It made him want to puke.

The doors open and he knows immediately that something is wrong. There’s a lot of commotion.

What the diddly flip.

Is that Tim?

There’s a security guard, no, two, and a crowd of nurses. Tim is screaming at them, trying to fight without really fighting.

Jason barges in the middle and hauls Tim out of the circle. The security guards seem relieved to let him go. He drags him down the hallway. Tim is fighting him, too, pushing at the hand on his arm.

He throws him against the wall.

“What the hell, Tim? What’s going on?”


He still has the book in one hand.

Tim tries to bolt past him down the hall but Jason’s arm flies out and catches him. They could really go at it if either of them tried but they’re both holding back.

“Arkham,” he gasps, straining against Jason’s grip. “She worked with Dent.”

Jason doesn’t need any more.

They’re running together, skidding around the corner while nurses and security shout, startled by the return.

“Boys! You cannot go in there like this!” one of the nurses is yelling as they slam against the heavy door.

It opens, too slowly, and Jason doesn’t wait to take in the whole picture. He hurls himself toward the woman by the IV pole, noting the plastic bag in her hand as they crash into the wall.

There’s a sharp cry and Jason is already on his feet, gripping the woman by her hair as she struggles. He doesn’t fricking care.

Security have their hands on Tim again and he’s struggling but still holding back, because of course he’d be worried about blowing cover because Bruce would be. Jason still doesn’t care.

“Someone called for security?” A man asks from the doorway, panting. He’s overweight and red-
faced and he’s been running. Jason can see sharp intelligence in his eyes and before his partner catches up with him from behind he’s already saying into his walkie-talkie, “We have a Code Indigo, we have two unknowns impersonating security on the fifth floor.”

He’s got a hand on his gun but overhearing this is enough for Tim. Jason is stepping forward, dragging the woman with him, when Tim’s elbow snaps back and one of the fake guards staggers and drops like a rock.

Jason sinks the other one with the heel of his hand.

“What the hell is going on?” the nurse just inside the door asks when the second man lands on her feet.

Tim is breathing hard.

Jason turns to check the bed.

Bruce is sitting up on the edge of the bed, blood dripping off his fingers. Jason looks down at the woman, who has stopped fighting and is yelling at him, pulling at her hair in his hand. The IV line is on the floor leaking fluid.

Holy guacamole, did he rip it out of Bruce’s arm? He did. He definitely did.

The security guys at the door step in and drag the unconscious men away.

The nurse hurries to examine Bruce’s arm, then she stoops and picks up the fallen IV bag.

“This is Zemuron,” she says, her eyes wide. “This would have killed you.”

The woman on the floor spits at Jason and he slams her head into his knee without considering that this might be a bad idea. She goes limp.

“Don’t touch that,” Bruce says to the nurse. “It’s evidence. Call the police,” he orders, his eyes tightly shut. “Right now.”

The nurse picks up the phone.

The guards come back for the woman. After they take her, Jason flexes his hand and picks strands of hair off his skin. He doesn’t know where they’re keeping her while they wait for the cops, and he, again, doesn’t care.

“The police are on their way,” the nurse says, placing the phone back on the cradle. She pulls a plastic tray out of a cabinet and then takes Bruce’s arm up in a deft motion, wiping the blood off. Her tone is professional and calm, as if the chaos was an everyday occurrence. “Mr. Wayne, I’m going to need to place another IV site. Would you like to lie down? I think everything is okay now. Your boys saved your life.”

Jason hasn’t moved. There’s a blue and white mat thrown down over the leaking IV line. He looks to Tim. The younger boy is bending over, picking Jason’s book up off the floor where it slid under a chair.

“Thanks,” Jason says, taking it.

“Thank you,” Tim answers.

“Mr. Wayne, you’re hurting me,” the nurse says suddenly.
Jason spins to see that Bruce is still sitting up and he is holding the nurse’s wrist, the needle in her hand centimeters from his skin.

“No,” he says, his voice scratching. He lets go of her wrist and she moves back, rubbing her arm. “I’m going home.”

Jason and Tim share a look.

“You really need these meds, Mr. Wayne. I’m sorry about the scare but we can’t skip these.”


Tim puts his phone to his ear.

“I’m going to need to page your doctor,” the nurse says, “I really don’t think he’s going to want you to go. You’ve only been out of the ICU for half a day. I think the best thing to do right now would be to get some rest. You’re safe here.”

“Don’t patronize me,” Bruce says, his voice gravelly. Tim and Jason exchange another glance. That was Batman talking.

“Why don’t you go page the doctor?” Jason suggests, stepping between the nurse and Bruce. Tim is talking rapidly on the phone, standing by the window now with one finger pressed against his free ear.

“I’ll do that,” she snaps. She leaves.

Jason drags a chair over and sits across from Bruce. The older man has his bloodied arm draped over his knee and his eyes are still tightly shut.

“Hey,” Jason says. “You okay? Tim’s talking to Alfred right now. You wanna be upstairs or downstairs?”

“Downstairs,” Bruce says firmly.

“You wanna lie down?”

“No.”

Tim hangs up and comes to join them.

“I’m so sorry,” he says first. “Alfred is getting stuff ready right now, but he says he needs help.”

“Go,” Jason says. “I wouldn’t have any idea what to do.”

Tim is still looking at Bruce, concern etched deeply on his face.

“Go,” Jason repeats. “I promise I won’t leave him for a second, not even to piss.”

“Okay,” Tim says reluctantly. “You promise?”

“Damn it, Tim, just go,” Bruce snaps. Tim is stricken. He grabs his bag and leaves without another word.

“Are you going to let the nurse start another IV?” Jason asks quietly after Tim leaves.
“No,” Bruce says. “Not until I’m home.”

“Well, that’s stupid,” Jason says. “I’m gonna be right here.”

There’s a long pause and Bruce opens his eyes.

“Alright,” he says. “But not until we get discharge papers. Is my bag in here?”

Jason looks around the room and sees a small black suitcase in the corner.

“What do you need?”

“Clothes.”

Jason brings him the first things he finds and then meets the nurse at the door. She has two IV drip bags in her hand and she looks pretty mad.

“Send Tim pictures,” Bruce says from behind him. “We aren’t starting anything until he checks them.”

“The doctor is on his way and you are not leaving today, Mr. Wayne. The police are outside with the woman who attacked you and they’re going to leave a security detail.”

She puts the IV bags by the sink in the room and leaves again, saying, “That IV is going in when Dr. Dev gets here.”

Jason takes pictures and sends them to Tim.

ok to use? B wants u to check.

“Jay,” Bruce says, his voice pained and exhausted.

Jason turns. Bruce must have stood up, because he has the pants on, but he’s sitting again with his limp arms through the sleeves of the t-shirt, paused in the step before pulling it over his head.

“Got it,” Jason answers, grabbing the hem of the t-shirt. He feels suddenly nervous and fumbling, bunching the back of the collar together to get it over Bruce’s head without scraping the white bandage there. Thinking about staples underneath makes him queasy again, even though he thought he was immune to gore.

“Thanks,” Bruce says, tugging the shirt down once it’s over his head. Jason steps back and his hands are shaking.

“You wanna lie down?” He asks, just to say something.

“Yes,” Bruce says heavily. “I really do.”

“Okay,” Jason sits down again. He finds the book where he left it by the bed.

“Don’t let me sleep,” Bruce says as he settles back on the bed. “Not until I’ve argued my way out of here.”

“Want me to read?” Jason offers, hurriedly, before he can second-guess himself. “It’s Garcia Marquez again. A Hundred Years of Solitude.”

“English or Spanish? I’m not going to remember any of it.”
“English. I don’t care,” Jason says, because he still and again doesn’t. His focus is on other things. “Will it help?”

“Let’s try,” Bruce says, his face drawn and pale.

Jason starts reading, and Bruce interrupts to ask a question or make a comment about every paragraph. They’re almost always monosyllabic strings and it annoys Jason at first, because the book is distractingly lovely, until he realizes Bruce is doing it to stay awake.

So, Jason starts asking questions of his own or making observations. It would almost be…fun…if it wasn’t for the fact that Bruce was using it to stay awake because of a murder attempt. It makes Jason want to suit up and go blow a couple heads off.

Somebody needs to pay. Somebody was behind this and there should be a reckoning.

_Come at the king, you best not miss._

“You cannot kill anyone over this,” Bruce says, as if reading his thoughts. Jason must have paused too long in his reading.

He absolutely wants to kill someone over this.

“She tried to _kill you_, Bruce,” he says, knowing it will not make the slightest difference. The binding of the book is bending in his grip.

“Jason. Promise me.”

“Or you’ll what?” He spits. “Ground me?”

Bruce doesn’t reply.

“Can you read again?” He asks after a few seconds.

Jason is fuming.

He reads for five minutes straight, biting off the words, ignoring every question or interruption until Bruce stops trying. _Fricking frack_, he thinks, stopping mid-sentence. He glances over to see if Bruce is still awake. The older man is on his side, his eyes closed. He’s breathing strangely.

“Bruce?” Jason asks, his stomach churning with guilt and a dash of fear.

“Mm? I’m awake. Concentrating.”

“I’m sorry,” Jason says. “That I ripped your IV out.”

“Hush,” Bruce says, sounding a lot like Alfred for a moment. “It was necessary.”

Jason’s a wreck inside, a storming, shouting, cyclone of a wreck. But he tamps himself down like fine espresso, leaning into the weight of compression, sinking it deep within himself. It is a monumental effort, this reining himself in.

He is terrified. He knows he cannot hold on to good things, it’s outside of his nature. He can’t even stay dead. There is so much to screw up, it’s easier not to care, but gracious, he is trying so hard.
Jason wonders where the damn doctor is.

“You saved my life,” Bruce says evenly.

“We’ve been over this, B,” Jason says. “It was really Timmy.”

“No,” Bruce replies. Jason looks at his face but his eyes are still closed. “Your text message.”

Jason’s eyes widen.

“I had forgotten who I was and you reminded me.”

“Are we talking about the same text?” Jason asks, swallowing hard. “Full disclosure, I was really drunk, I might have sent others.”

“‘Fuck you, Bruce, do not go gentle into that good night’,” Bruce replies and there’s a small smile on his face. “You are pure poetry, Jay. I didn’t know it was possible to improve Thomas.”

Jason bites his lip so hard he cuts the inside, his own blood metallic and hot in his mouth.

“I really want to promise I won’t kill someone. I swear I do. But I don’t know if I could keep it tonight,” he says, not much more than a whisper. He’s trying so hard.

“Stay with me,” Bruce says steadily. “For tonight.”

“I can do that,” Jason says, warmth trickling into him. “Want me to keep reading? I won’t ignore you this time.”

But the door swings open and the doctor is there.

And Jason had thought he was angry.

Chapter End Notes

you guys i am addicted to writing jason chapters. i am so sorry. i promise we will revisit other characters soon.
Alfred is not one to speed while driving.

But today, he went a full fifteen miles per hour above the limit.

He left Tim to finish preparing things after making sure the anxious young man knew he had done an excellent job, a wonderful job, doing exactly what Bruce had told him to do.

Alfred does not want to think about what he would be driving to do right now if Tim had not been there, if Tim had not memorized the hospital staff list and schedule, if Tim did not keep track of the medical professionals at Arkham almost as well as Bruce himself.

So he doesn’t think about it.

Now, his steps echo down the hospital hall as he hurries toward the room.

_In every hour of trial, good Lord, deliver us._

He passes the nurse’s station and sees Harvey Bullock and another officer standing there. Bullock is destroying a toothpick with his teeth, pulling another from his shirt pocket.

“Pennyworth!” The detective says as Alfred walks by. “Listen, we got that crazy chick in holding, sky high bail. But we need to talk to those kids. Nurses won’t let us back there, not for all the gold in the kingdom.”

“Please, stop by Wayne Manor around seven this evening and I will make sure both boys are available,” Alfred says, barely slowing.

“Damn one percent,” he can hear Bullock grumbling behind him. “Think they can do whatever the hell they want.”

But Alfred knows GCPD will be there at seven anyway.

The room is just ahead on his left and he can already hear a stern voice, lecturing without reserve.

He goes in, and the doctor doesn’t turn or slow his speech.

“—want to die of brain swelling?” He’s demanding in British-accented English, his dark hands flying through the air as he gestures. “Because your surgery wasn’t luck, it was a damn work of art and I’m not bloody well going to let you muck that up by being stubborn. For what? Because someone tried to kill you? You’re not special! This is Gotham, man!”

Jason is by the window, folding the black blanket with a scowl like he hates the world. So, Alfred surmises, he’s frightened.

Bruce is sitting on the bed with a scowl to match.

The doctor sighs and spins a chair and sits facing the back of it, his arms crossed along the top. He doesn’t seem to be aware that Alfred has entered the room, his focus is so narrow.
“Officially, I can’t let you go. Unofficially, I think you’re going to kill yourself trying to stay awake for three days and I’m an arrogant bastard, I don’t want that blemish on my record. I have some conditions, though.”

This startles Bruce out of his scowl.

Alfred breathes a sigh of relief. He genuinely likes Dr. Dev and wasn’t looking forward to severing a useful professional relationship.

“What conditions?” Bruce asks, his eyes now open.

Alfred thinks his mouth sounds dry. He busies himself finding a glass to fill with water from the sink.

“One. We get a whole bag of steroids in you before you leave. Two, you let myself or the nurse check for craniospinal fluid leakage. Three, you stay for the MRI you have scheduled this afternoon. Four, you strictly follow all my written instructions and keep follow up appointments. And finally, I will be making house calls every day until I think you are in the clear.”

“Done,” Bruce says, reaching for the water Alfred hands him. His hands are trembling, so Alfred doesn’t let go. He finds a straw.

“And minimal pain meds,” Dr. Dev adds. “I need to know the second anything seems off, and I need you as alert as possible for that. The ride home is going to hurt like hell.”

“I’ll manage,” Bruce says.

“I don’t doubt you will,” Dr. Dev says. “Now will you let that poor nurse start your IV or are you going to make me stoop to such menial tasks?”

“I’m going to make you,” Bruce replies. “Jason?”

“Tim says yes,” Jason calls, zipping the blanket into the bag Alfred had packed.

It doesn’t surprise Alfred in the slightest the extent to which Bruce is already managing his own medical care.

“I am a bit worried about your vision,” Dr. Dev says, standing and pulling sealed packages of tubing and needles from a cabinet.

This is a surprise to Jason, Alfred can see immediately. Alfred himself only feels a mild pang of worry. Blurred vision is hardly a broken back or gunshot wound.

“I’m going to fix it,” Bruce says, as if this is a thing reasonably within his control. Dr. Dev doesn’t argue.

“I’ll recommend a vision therapist,” he says, studying the veins in Bruce’s arm.

“I’ll cross reference it with my list,” Bruce replies. “Try above my elbow.”

It is gradually dawning on Alfred that something seems off in the interaction. He looks over at Jason, to make sure he’s still there-- the boy seems like it’s taking a lot of effort to not flee the room, the very picture of nervous energy.

“What have you eaten today?” Dr. Dev is asking. “You must be peckish coming off those pain meds.”
“I don’t remember,” Bruce says. “I might be hungry.”

“Jason,” Alfred says quietly. The boy looks to him. “Would you go get a sandwich from the cafeteria?”

“I promised Tim I wouldn’t leave,” Jason says, suddenly rooted in place by the window. “Not for anything.”

Alfred considers challenging this. He could override it. But now that he considers it, he does not want to give Jason the opportunity to walk by the exit and abandon his promise completely. He knows it would be too easy, too much of a temptation.

“Very well. I will go,” Alfred says. “Master Bruce?”

“Anything cold,” Bruce answers, understanding the question. It delights Alfred even now how well they understand each other.

And then he can put his finger upon the the thing that appears off to him. Bruce is talking around Dr. Dev like Dev knows. He is not being falsely modest, flippant, or cheery. Maybe this has something to do with the surgery, but upon studying Bruce’s face once more before leaving, he thinks not. He is certainly in some pain and his eyes do not have their usual precise focus, but he is clear-headed.

Still, the default is certainly to act in denial unless Bruce explicitly tells him otherwise. It is the rule, and it is Bruce’s life and identity at stake.

When he returns with the sandwich and a milkshake, Dr. Dev is standing outside the room, waiting for him with a thick stack of papers.

“These are discharge instructions the nurse will not be giving you,” he says. “You will be required to cosign the AMA release.”

“Thank you,” Alfred says, taking them in his free hand. Then, because it is not a direct question and because he is curious, he observes, “He is surprised by your show of support.”

Alfred is, himself, still surprised.

“I would only allow it if I was fairly certain of his health,” Dr. Dev counters, looking sternly at Alfred. “But you’re asking me why I’m certain.”

“I am,” Alfred says. He has also decided that on the off-chance Bruce’s own alertness is itself a ruse, he would like to know how much Dr. Dev knows or is willing to admit to knowing.

Dr. Dev looks around them in the hallway, insures that nurses are out of earshot, then pulls Bruce’s chart out of the door and flips it open. The page is nothing, just a list of family history and allergies. Alfred looks it over regardless.

“I have been slicing skulls open for ten years,” he says quietly. “And Wayne has scars in his brain tissue that no man alive should have.”

Alfred gives him a blank and pleasant look.

“Perhaps genetic?”

“Don’t insult me,” Dr. Dev says. “Not one of my own countrymen. No, they’re scars. I’ve never seen the like before, but he seems to have compensated.”
“As he is wont to do,” Alfred concedes this point.

“I think the probability of his survival is fairly high, because frankly, he should already be dead. It’s out of my golden hands.”

“I’d like to extend the invitation to have tea,” Alfred says. “Perhaps after a house call?”

“Only if it’s good tea,” Dr. Dev says, dropping the chart back in its slot. “If so, I’d be delighted.”

“Postcard on Bond Street,” Alfred answers. “Not two weeks old.”

Dr. Dev raises an eyebrow.

“Wild horses couldn’t drag me away,” he says, appreciatively. “Invitation accepted, with thanks. I’m going to go settle the details about the MRI.”

Alfred nods and pushes the door open with his polished shoe, papers, milkshake, and sandwich balanced in his hands.

Dr. Thompkins has returned and found an uneasy balance in the family again, but despite his own feelings concerning her, she will not always be around and perhaps it is time to start thinking long term. And now might be the right time to make some of those preparations.

“I hope you know this galls me,” Alfred says as he peels plastic wrap off the cafeteria sandwich and hands it to Bruce.

“I like junk food,” Bruce replies, “Despite all your efforts. Still, it will pale in comparison. How is everyone, now that I’m awake enough to ask?”

“Fine,” Alfred says pointedly, sitting in the chair next to the bed. Jason is still by the window, doing something on his phone. Alfred crosses his legs and holds the milkshake, waiting. “You gave us quite a scare. It’s fortunate the boys were here.”

“Mhmm,” Bruce says, mumbling around the sandwich. He’s half-asleep. Alfred takes the sandwich right out of his hand.

“Sleep,” he says. “I’ll wake you for the MRI. Then we’ll go home.”

Bruce lies back without another word and is out.

“Master Jason, would you care for a milkshake?” Alfred offers, joining him at the window.

“Always and forever,” Jason replies, taking it. He freezezes. “Unless you want it.”

“I’m not certain it’s real ice cream. I could dispose of it, though.”

“Hands off,” Jason doesn’t relinquish it.

Then all they have to do is pass the time. Alfred spends most of it on his phone, marveling at the technology the whole time. He sends and receives a steady stream of text messages, jots out a grocery list, signs Cassandra up for another session of ballet lessons, checks Damian’s school progress report.

When he checks on Jason, the boy is watching a movie on his phone, but pauses it to chat with him about it. Jason seems more at ease the longer they are sitting and waiting. Alfred wonders what it was exactly Bruce said to get him to stay.
They do not leave for the MRI until they confirm the technician’s name with Tim, much to Dr. Dev’s quiet amusement. The neurosurgeon accompanies them for the MRI and Alfred has the distinct impression they are receiving unusual treatment.

Bruce wakes slowly but is alert when they reach the machine. Alfred waits near the machine and Jason, clearly nervous, has stuck to them like glue.

Minutes seem to move in a vacuum, separated from reality. The scan seems to take far too long and go too quickly to be useful at the same time.

When Bruce comes out, Alfred can see how tense he is. It is written all over him.

Then he speaks and Alfred has no idea what he is saying or what language it is.

Dr. Dev is completely unconcerned. Laughing, even.

“I should have assumed he would be bilingual. Good luck. Call me if it doesn’t fade within a day or two. Don’t leave until I look over the scans.”

It should be uneventful, considering. They get the go ahead within the hour, Alfred signs the papers, but Bruce is getting more and more upset that they don’t understand him. Or rather, he’s upset they aren’t answering his questions, because he seems to be unaware of his own language.

By the time they get him from the wheelchair to the car, he’s furious.

They drive the whole way home, Bruce cursing roughly in whatever language it is-- Alfred guesses it is cursing-- every bump and bend of the way.

Alfred is at a loss.

Chapter End Notes

Oh you guys. Thank you so much for all your comments! We've got some chapters I've really loved writing coming up over the next few days, including Jim Gordon and Selina Kyle. Hang in there! We're not done yet!
Tim isn’t stressed.

Tim is stress.

He is stress embodied. It is the thing his sinews are made from. It is the rapid beating of his heart, the pulsing through his arteries, which are also made of stress.

Tim almost let Bruce die.

Because he was stupid and holding back. He could have shuttered that woman right out of consciousness while she was standing in the doorway with her vapid smile and therapy cart.

Jason was the one who acted, who didn’t hesitate. Jason was the one who didn’t care enough and it saved Bruce’s life.

Not Tim, who is now standing on the top step of the Manor, his lungs pumping stress, as Alfred pulls up in one car and Detective Harvey Bullock pulls him right behind him in another.

It is 7:02 PM and Tim needs to help get Bruce, who probably hates him, inside and also talk to Bullock about details he shouldn’t have known and details he definitely should have acted on sooner and figure out what the hell to tell the police about Jason because they will also want to talk to him and by the way he is dead.

Tim wishes he was dead.

No. He just wishes he was not alive right this minute and somehow it is a different thing to wish.

He tries closing his eyes but his eyelids? Also stress.

The car door is opening, no, four cars doors are opening all at once and Tim feels like he’s on a bad game show with crap prizes. Which door will he choose? Doesn’t matter, all prizes are awful, please play again.

Alfred is the closest and he hurries to open the fifth door, the door with the biggest prize. Bruce swings his legs out of the car and then stops, his eyes closed, half-heartedly yelling at Alfred in a language that is almost familiar to Tim.

But his eyes are closed, so he doesn’t see Tim standing there.

At least Tim has that going for him, for a few seconds. Then he feels guilty which immediately also becomes stress and great, there go all his emotions probably for the rest of his life.

I stress you. Forever.

It might be helpful to note that his sleep is also stress and he has not slept any sleep since the two hours he had slept maybe two days ago? Whatever day it is now.

“Master Timothy, some assistance,” Alfred says and Stress is moving.
He has become himself.

Bruce refuses to take Alfred’s hand and mutters darkly at them both when Stress reaches the car. Bruce stands and walks up the steps on his own until the last step, where he stumbles, but it is Jason with a bag hooked on his shoulder who catches Bruce’s arm, guides him inside.

Stress hurries after them and then turns, torn, to go meet the detectives because somebody has to, and Alfred is following Jason and Bruce and already trying to calm an argument happening in the hallway that is half English, half unknown language. It is probably because they are making Bruce go upstairs, away from the med bay, away from the cave that he specified as his preference.

*Downstairs.*

Why did Jason even ask him? What kind of question was that to ask a man with a hole in his skull?

Stress has no idea.

“It’s Tim, right?” Bullock is asking, offering a hand.

Stress thinks so? He shakes the hand.

“Come on inside,” he says, his voice far away. “We can sit in the front room. I’ll tell you all I know.”

The detectives follow him.

All he knows? Stress has no idea what he’s going to say.

*My dad, who is Batman, asked me to commit to memory the names and backgrounds of all the hospital staff he would come in contact with, and I did, and so when she came to the door today, I knew she was not scheduled to work with him and I also knew that she spent six months last year as a therapist for Harvey Dent who is Two-Face in Arkham when his leg was broken in a riot and nobody comes out of Arkham uncorrupted and my suspicions were proven correct. I should have punched a woman in the face right there, sir, but I maybe had misplaced priorities and instead my dead brother came and did it, to save our dad Bruce Wayne who is also, did I mention, Batman?*

The detectives decline to sit down and Bullock says,

“Spill.”

“I just had a bad feeling about her,” Stress hears himself saying. “She was acting weird.”

“A bad feeling. Right,” Bullock says, giving him a skeptical look.

“Her aura was very negative,” Stress hears himself again. “Black, really. It’s a death color?”

He is making all this up. He is going to ruin everything.

“Let me make sure I got all this,” Bullock says, making eye contact for a minute with his partner, who is scribbling notes in a pad. “You had a bad feeling because she had a death aura so you told her she couldn’t come in?”

“Black aura,” Stress corrects. “It doesn’t always mean death. Sometimes it can be financial loss, or a natural disaster.”

“Mhmm,” Bullock says, nodding and fighting back a smile. “Alright, where’s the other one? The one who tackled her?”
“Right here,” Jason says, and Stress turns. This is so bad what are they going to say? Jason keeps walking until he’s right next to Stress. Oh no.

“What happened? Your own words,” Bullock instructs, chewing on a toothpick he pulled out of his pocket. Didn’t he smoke once?

“I went to the hospital to see Bruce and when I got there, Tim was being restrained by the guards. He told me something was wrong so we went to check. She was putting something in Bruce’s IV and it just looked fishy. So I stopped her.”

Who is talking? How is this Jason? Where did these calm, grown-up words come from?

“And you just believed him? What is he to you, anyway?” Bullock asks. “I don’t think I remember you. What’s your name?”

“He’s unstable!” Stress says. They all look at him. “I mean, it doesn’t take much to set him off.”

Jason glares at him but he feels no fear. He is Stress.

“Todd!” A young voice breaks into the room like a katana. It is Damian.

“Oh, no,” Stress hears Bullock mutter to the other detective. “Not this one. I don’t get paid enough for this job.”

“What are you doing here?” Damian demands of the detectives. He doesn’t wait for an answer. “Todd, Pennyworth wants you right now. Father is crying for you for some reason.”

Stress knows this is a lie. This is Alfred’s plan. Everyone has better plans than him today.

“Hold up,” Bullock says, “Sorry, but we gotta finish here. Todd Wayne? And I want to know how the two of you took out the security guards.”

“I panicked,” Stress says.


“You cannot honestly believe we have not studied martial arts,” Damian turns on the detective with a look of fierce scorn. “Father has insisted we all be educated in rudimentary self-defense. Do you have any idea how much we are worth in ransom?”

“Woah, woah. One at a time!” Bullock growls at them. He snaps his toothpick in half and holds it in his hand. “Alright. Black aura, about-to-be-a-Wayne kid, kidnapping lessons. That about right?”

“Father is crying for you,” Damian says in a loud whisper, tugging on Jason.

“Yep,” Stress says with false cheer to the detective, as Damian and Jason hurry out of the room.

“Oh my god this family,” Bullock is saying under his breath while Stress smiles at him.

“Anything else?” Stress asks.

“Nah, we’re done,” Bullock says, and his partner flips his memo pad closed. “I’m sorry about your dad, kid. He’s a good guy.”

Stress knows this cue. He can at least do this right.
He cries, just a little.

This unnerves and softens Bullock, it seems, who waves his partner ahead and then pulls a business card out of his pocket.

“Listen, what you’re going through, no kid should have to deal with. And then this, on top of it, with the attempted mur- the incident. You probably have an expensive therapist already, but if you ever need to you know, talk to someone a bit more down to earth? Call me and I’ll get our department’s guy to see you.”

Stress would be super touched by this right now, considering how awkward Bullock seems and how hard he is trying, but he doesn’t feel comforted, mostly because he is Stress. And partly because he wants to stop fake crying before it turns into real crying and he wants Bullock to just leave already.

He takes the card and Bullock does leave.

Stress runs up the stairs, drawn like a criminal to the scene of the crime.

Bruce is standing next to the bed, clearly refusing to lie down even though he is swaying like he might collapse. He is insisting on something, in whatever language it is, and Alfred and Jason and Damian all have phones out, and they are all talking to different people.

“Steph has no idea, but she’s sending Cass over,” Jason says.

“Grayson says it is not anything he recognizes,” Damian says.

“Miss Gordon thinks possibly Esperanto, but I have my doubts,” Alfred says, before saying something a little angrily into the phone. Alfred is stressed. Stress knows his own. “She has retracted this, it is not Esperanto.”

Stress listens.

He can fix this. He can. He just has to think.

It’s hard to think when your brain is Stress.

Bruce sees him from across the room and points at him, then at the floor immediately in front of him. He says something in the language Stress does not know and whatever he is saying it is firm, decided words, not angry ones. And then Bruce hugs him, tightly, for one second, two seconds, three seconds.

Stress melts into this hug.
Then Bruce pats his shoulder and lets him go.

And Tim is back, the world aright. Goodbye, Stress.

He is not being blamed.

He can fix this.

He remembers where he has heard this language before.

“Call Clark,” he says.

Alfred pulls a phone away from his ear to say wearily, “I do believe it is time we handled things for a day or two on our own. Master Clark has been away from his wife for several days at our disposal now.”

“I'll call him,” Tim says, remembering that he has a phone.

“Everything okay, Tim?” Clark answers, already alert. Tim turns speaker phone on.

Clark listens.

“Will someone get that man a sandwich?” he says through the phone after a minute. “And some water?”

The room grows quiet.

Alfred leaves, probably to find food.

Bruce holds his hand out for the phone, gesturing insistently. So, Tim, knows, he understands English even if he isn’t speaking it. Tim gives him the phone and Bruce switches it from speaker phone, holds it to his ear, and begins talking rapidly in the language Tim knows is Kryptonese. Of all the languages.

Tim needs to suit up. He’s fixed this and now he needs to go help Dick and Damian fix the other thing, now that it is dark outside. They’ll need to go to Arkham, to talk to Dent, to see session notes, to get to the bottom of this and make sure it doesn’t happen again. At this point, they don’t even know if Dent has figured out that Bruce is Batman or if he was just carrying a grudge against Bruce himself or if he was even involved at all.

He sits in a chair to think through some of this.

The next thing he is aware of, he is waking up, it is probably nine in the evening based on the light outside, and Bruce’s face is near his in the dark.

“Tim,” Bruce is saying. “Go to bed.”

Tim rouses himself, looking around. The room is empty except for the two of them.

No, it’s not. Jason is asleep on the rug.

“You’re speaking English,” he says.

Bruce nods.

“And no, I’m going to go help Dick,” Tim yawns.
“He can handle it,” Bruce says. “Get some sleep. You did good work today.”

Tim is too tired to argue. He is so tired now that his tired is not stress.

“Need anything?” he asks, yawning again. “Why are you out of bed?”

“No idea,” Bruce answers. “Don’t remember. If you can smuggle a box of Pop-Tarts up here past Alfred, though, I’d owe you.”

“We have Pop-Tarts?” Tim asks, eyes wide. “Where?”

“Behind the…” Bruce stops. “You know. I have no idea. Don’t worry about it. Go to bed.”

“I’m going to find them,” Tim says. “If they exist. And then I’ll sleep. Get back in bed.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Bruce says, but he’s already standing up, stumbling back to the bed, dragging an IV pole with him. Tim unpacked it from the closet earlier, reassembled it. He thinks they’re probably one of the only households in America that has a full medical unit in the basement and back-ups of everything in a hall closet.

“I’m glad you’re home, Bruce,” he says, standing at the door.

“Two packs, Tim,” Bruce answers, “If you find them.”

Tim grins. He is tired. He is so tired.

Later, soon, he can work.

For now?

He is so happy.

Chapter End Notes

you guys i just really love tim i want you to know.

also: LANGUAGE. I'm curious! Did anybody call it?
The streets are dark and Jim Gordon is walking them. He’s in rough territory, one out of every three streetlamps broken and never replaced. The city gave up a while ago when it was clear that they were pouring money into bulbs that were never going to last more than a few nights. But the dark doesn’t bother Jim; he’s long since stopped feeling safety in the light.

Jim considers himself a simple man. He did not set out to be a man of politics or subterfuge, so that the trajectory of his life has led him to be a man intertwined with shadows still stuns him, on those days when he stands alone in his tiny backyard drinking a beer and grilling bratwurst. All he wanted was to do the right thing and somehow he’s ended up here, walking an old beat to clear his head, his world thick with intrigue and his name on an office door.

That office door is why he spent the past day at home with a migraine, holed up with all the blinds drawn. The migraine he went home with was due to stress because something truly awful happened the week before, something no one else has put together yet. And the migraine is why goddamn Harvey Bullock didn’t even bother to tell him when Gotham Memorial called and said someone had made an attempt on Bruce Wayne’s life. He had to find out when he came into work this evening to catch up on work after the migraine had faded.

Jim does not want the migraine to come back and he needs to clear his head. He needs to face the truth.

And despite the high crime rate associated with this neighborhood, he feels at home here. He is still, at his core, a good cop. He knows the nicknames of the kids who sling on these corners, he knows their real names and how many priors they have. He knows which ones to release from booking, charges dropped, because they have little sisters they take to school on time.

Jim knows their names. He knows the ones that have disappeared over the years, which ones grew too old to overlook and now sit in cells in county prisons. He knows the few that made it out. He has a Christmas card on his fridge, five years old now, from one boy-- signed with his street name, the picture his college graduation photo from a Washington state school: Commish, all the best. Survivors, yo. Thanks. - Po Stack.

When he gets to a tiny shop that sells liquor and potato chips overnight, he steps in, the bell ringing above his head. He pulls out his wallet and nods to the man behind the counter.

“Minh,” he says.

“Commissioner,” the man nods in return, his Vietnamese accent thick.

This is how you stay a good cop: you acknowledge people, all of them, not just the bad ones.

“Give me a slice of pizza,” Jim says, pulling out his wallet. There’s a tiny warming box behind the counter with three limp slices of cheese pizza. Minh puts one of these in a triangle shaped box.

“What do kids drink these days? What do you sell a lot of?”

He turns to the coolers to look.

Jim finds the short cans in a fridge close to him. He turns it over in his hand, reading the label. Cranberry juice. Lime. Kiwi. Whatever the hell guarana is, more teaspoons of organic sugar than the can should be able to hold. He puts it on the counter.

“Bag it up for me, Minh. Thanks.”

He steps back out onto the street with the drink and pizza in a brown paper bag. It’s not too late yet, not quite ten. The sidewalks are a mix now, of jittery boys armed with coded slang in their oversized tank tops and girls in glorified bras and glittering high heels leaning against brick walls.

Jim walks the beat. They give him wide berth, falling silent as he passes. One girl whistles at him and those with her giggle and shriek. Nobody vanishes; they know him, they know he isn’t here for them tonight.

When he passes one girl, he holds up the bag and she leaves the tiny crowd she’s with. She follows him, a few feet behind, without striking up conversation. She’s so young. Barbara was still occasionally sneaking paper dolls out in her bedroom when she was that age, navigating the transition from girl to woman with the safety of toys and fruity-smelling lip gloss.

They turn, one after the other, into an unmarked door in a crumbling building. Lights are on in the hallway inside, the harsh yellow of old, cheap filament. Jim leads the way into a utility closet and sits in one of the two plastic lawn chairs.

She sits in the other and snatches the bag out of his hand.

“Commish,” she says, devouring the pizza. “I was wondering when you’d come ‘round.”

“Just tell me what you’ve heard,” he says. All he wants is news of Him. Everyone knows that. It’s why she’ll stay alive, tonight, because they all know what he’s asking. She’s just another in a string of informants. The previous girl died of an overdose. He doesn’t want to think about the year on this one’s birth certificate. Her name on that certificate is Holly Mackenzie, but that’s not what she calls herself. Neither of them will talk about this. He wants to tell her to put some damn clothes on. But he can’t save everyone.

“Nothin’,” she says, licking grease off her fingers. “Nobody seen him for days.”

“What’s the word? What’s Young Paul saying?”

“That bitch don’t know squat,” she says venomously. It’s not often that she gets to knock her pimp. “But Ulysses say he got one in the chest last week. On West Decatur. But he the only one talkin’.”

She finishes the tiny can of soda.

“Who’s been taking credit?” Jim asks next. She seems uneasy now that she doesn’t have anything to eat or drink, to busy herself with. She pulls a thin tube out of a zippered pocket on her skirt and reapplies lipstick.

“I told you, nobody talkin’ but Ulysses. He sayin’ Arkham nasties but, nah. He always say that and nobody out right now.”


“You think he dead?” she asks, shoving the box and can into the bag. She leaves it on a shelf. He picks it up to throw it away when he finds a trash can.
“No,” he says. “You tell the boys to watch themselves. He’ll be back.”

“Mhmm,” she says, clearly doubting him. “Everybody got an expiration date. Young Paul say the Bat long past his.”

The incongruence of her opinion of what Young Paul knows and doesn’t know does not seem to occur to her. Jim opens the door and they step out into the hallway, their brief meeting over. It didn’t give him anything he didn’t already know or suspect. He hates dead ends, especially when the crime feels so personal, but he knew in his gut he wouldn’t get anything here. Still, good cops turn over every rock.

Out on the street, a northern wind blows and she shivers, walking a few steps ahead of him. He sighs. There’s nothing he can do. One after another, they round the corner rejoining the busier road. A sharp cry breaks through the regular bustle of nightlife.

“Bat flyin’, yo!” a man’s voice cries. All along the street, the mid-level pimps and dealers sitting on stoops or talking low into burner phones on curbs stop what they’re doing, vanish into doorways or under awnings.

Up above them, a little boy, not more than five, is leaning out of a high window pointing, signaling to someone below.

Against the dark of the sky, a hundred feet or more off the ground, a caped figure swoops across the city followed by a smaller, pointed form. He’s on his way somewhere, not concerned with whatever is going on tonight down here. They wouldn’t have seen him first if he was.

The girl looks back at Jim and makes a clicking noise, her tongue against the roof of her mouth.

“I guess he ain’t dead,” she says. “Young Paul gonna be salty as fuck.”

Jim keeps his eye on the sky and pulls out his wallet. He gives her a hundred dollar bill he brought just in case.

“Don’t go home tonight,” he says. “Get a hotel, disappear for a day or two.”

“It don’t matter,” she says casually, taking the money. “But me and Toffy’ll get Chinese for lunch tomorrow. Thanks.”

He tried, anyway.

But now with the Bat back in the sky, he knows his next step. He heads back to the station.

Jim greets the officers working night shift by name as he trudges through the foyer, up through the floors of desks and cells. He reaches the roof, closes the door behind him, and flips a worn switch.

The light floods the sky. He waits.

He doesn’t wait long. They’ll want access to Arkham tonight, they were waiting for him. He’s going to have to ask, he’s going to have to say it out loud, to dare to voice the thing he had a migraine trying to avoid.

Batman and Robin land on the roof, step only halfway out of the shadows. Jim’s chest aches.

“How is he?” Jim asks.

The shorter, thinner Batman clears his throat.
“He’s away. Business out of town. Might be a while. But we have a situation.”

Jim is a good cop. He has been doing this a long time. He has played the games, followed the made-up rules, understood they were for safety all around. The rules protect so many people.

But he’s got missing perps and a botched robbery a week ago on West Decatur street in downtown Gotham, a rookie killed by armor-piercing bullets, rumors of a falling caped figure and a blur of Metropolis red, and now a billionaire with a murder attempt on his life after undergoing emergency brain surgery.

A tumor, hah.

Jim sighs. He didn’t ever want it to come to this. He has prayed so many times it wouldn’t. But he needs to know.

Batman and Robin move forward a bit.

“Don’t lie to me, Dick,” Jim says. “How is he?”

There is dead silence on the rooftop for a full minute.

“Who are you talking to?” Robin snarls.

“Shut up, Robin,” Batman says, his voice tired and lighter, resigned. He looks at Jim. “How long have you known?”

Jim puts his hands in his pockets.

“I don’t know,” he says honestly. “It wasn’t just one thing. I woke up one morning a couple years ago, looked out the window in my living room, and watched a bird splashing in a puddle on my balcony. And I said to myself, ‘Jim, Bruce Wayne is the Batman,’ and it didn’t surprise me. I found it was something I’d known for a long, long time.”

“Tt,” Robin says, leaving them to sit on the corner of the roof.

“So, how bad is it?” Jim asks.

“I think he’s okay,” Batman says, his shoulders sagging. “He was out of it this morning. I only saw him for a few minutes tonight, but, I don’t know. Pretty good, considering, I guess. Not the worst it could be.”

The young man seems caught in a mix between how he wants to talk and how he feels he should talk. Jim senses there is more, his cop instincts telling him to wait it out, to let things settle themselves before he asks anything else.

Batman looks over to where Robin is sitting, his hooded cape fluttering above the station building. Batman lowers his voice.

“There’s something wrong with his eyes. And we’re still waiting on the biopsy results. He’s not out of the woods yet, not until we know if we’re looking at chemo or radiation or…” Batman trails off.

“Anyway, you’re stuck with me for a while.”

Jim is staggered.

“Biopsy?” he echoes woodenly. He’s still processing any words that came after this one.
Jim and Batman look at each other.

“What did you think—” Batman begins to ask at the same time Jim is saying,

“I thought the tumor was—”

They both stop.

“A cover story,” Jim finishes. “Nobody has seen him since the Russian mafia killed one of my rookies last week. I thought he’d been shot.”

“No,” Batman says simply. “It wasn’t a cover story.”

“Damn it,” Jim says, sighing again. “And the murder attempt?”

“Oh, that was real,” Batman says, his voice grating again. “We think Dent.”

“Well,” Jim says bitterly. “At least some things are still the same. Does Dent know? I know he suspects.”

They have an old history, one Jim would prefer not to think about for too long. No cop likes revisiting his failures but any good cop spends more than enough time doing it. Jim has kept that history company with a bottle of cheap whiskey too many nights already.

“I’m not sure,” Batman admits. “I think he hates both of them enough that it might not matter.”

“I want to see him,” Jim says suddenly. “I know he’s not going to be happy about it, but I don’t give a damn.”

They have been through so much together. Their partnership is off the books, but one of the longest and most significant of Jim’s life. He remembers the night he realized what he’d gotten himself into, working in this city.

Nineteen years old. Idealistic through and through. Fresh out of his high school graduation cap, sped through the academy by a desperate need for cops, and straight into a pressed uniform at the end of a theater alley with body bags and a weeping little boy.

“This fucking city,” his partner had muttered, going to the squad car to radio for child protective services. He’d put in his two weeks and was gone before the month was out. Jim never saw him again, heard once he’d ended up in Florida.

No, he doesn’t give a damn how Bruce feels about it. He was just going to be a good cop, a simple man, and they’ve ended up entangled for his entire adult life. He remembers when his Barbara was shot, visiting the Joker in Arkham days after, both of them on life support at the same time, Babs with a broken spine and Joker with a broken neck.

It was broken in just the right place to not kill him.

Jim just knows he looked at him, satisfied that he was not dead but in for months of pain, thinking, Thank God B doesn’t have a badge I have to take. In Gotham, Bruce has been the best kind of partner.

“Robin can take you,” Batman is saying in response to his demand. “Call Arkham and let them know I’m coming.”

Robin lets out a strangled noise of outrage and Batman goes to talk to him, away from Jim, their
“He’s going to be asleep,” Batman says to Jim. “Do you want to come tomorrow?”

“I’ll sit and wait there,” Jim says grimly. “If I don’t go now, you’ll change your mind and no one will open the Manor gate for me.”

“Tt,” Robin says again, which is as good as acknowledging that it’s true. “We’ll take the Batmobile.”

“No,” Batman says sternly. “You won’t. Red Robin let you drive that one time and it’s never going to happen again.”

“We’ll take my car,” Jim says, to settle things. “It’s on the second level of the parking garage. I’ll call Arkham on the way down. Meet me there.”

And it is not until they are outside Wayne Manor, the gates swinging open after a sulking Robin taps in the key code, that Jim’s suspended belief collapses and he thinks,

*Christ, I did it.*

He isn’t sure if it’s a curse or a prayer.

All those years of knowing and knowing he shouldn’t ever admit it and it’s over, he’s gone too far, it’s too late now. If Bruce pulls through (because he still has to keep reminding himself that there is a biopsy to worry about instead of a gunshot wound), he might have ruined their partnership forever just so he could see a friend.

But Jim is a good cop, a simple man. And sometimes people are more important than alliances. Sometimes, maybe, Gotham needs to take a back seat, otherwise why try to fix things at all?

Alfred Pennyworth leads him to a study and leaves him with a plate of pasta and a glass of water. They have a brief conversation:

“I know.”

“I know. How could you not? He will not be pleased.”

“Tough luck. We’ll deal with it later.”

Jim waits in the study for hours. He peruses the book shelves, eats the pasta, drinks the water. He plays a game on his phone for a bit, that snake game Barbara helped him install. He’s had it on every cell phone since they started coming with games.

It is early, early morning when Dick comes for him. He doesn’t say anything about Arkham or what he found there. Jim can’t tell for certain, but he suspects this is due to location rather than failure.

“He’s awake,” is all Dick says at first. “You might as well come see him so you can go home.”

Jim follows him up the stairs into the more private halls of the Manor, thinking about how familiar these spaces must be to Barbara, because of her relationship with Dick. He thought this young man was going to be his son-in-law once. He still thinks it might happen someday. He wonders if she knows, too, that her once-boyfriend is also Batman’s son?

How could she not, though?

 Mostly, he is avoiding thinking about the room ahead. He has no experience with brain tumors, but
he has experience with serious illness. He doesn’t know if he’s prepared to deal with breathing tubes and heart monitors and oxygen masks.

So he is surprised when Dick opens the door and Bruce is standing at the window, a white bandage on the back of his head but otherwise looking completely fine.

“Dick told me you were here,” Bruce says, while Dick makes a quick exit. He clearly does not want to stick around and deal with whatever this might turn into.

“Yep,” Jim says, hands in his pockets by the closed door.

“He told me you’ve known for a while,” Bruce says, moving to a wingback chair and motioning to another near it.

“Yep,” Jim says again, taking a seat. He hasn’t been thrown out in a fit of rage yet, so that’s good.

“You didn’t have to come,” Bruce says, his tone carefully controlled.

“And miss the chance for a conversation you don’t disappear halfway through? I’ve been waiting years for this,” Jim says, his humor belying his nerves.

There is a long silence in reply. Bruce seems like he’s struggling with himself and Jim regrets coming. He’d thought the younger man would be mostly unconscious, fuzzy with pain medication. He didn’t mean to cause so much additional stress *right now*. He thought he’d see for himself Bruce was alive and then they could deal with it later.

“There are some rules,” Bruce finally speaks.

Jim swallows his sigh of relief.

“We do not mix names. What you did tonight with Dick, that can never happen again.”

“Understood,” Jim says. And he does understand.

“If it comes to your life, you give me up,” Bruce continues. “My secret is not worth your life. But if it’s your career or name, I will do everything I can to discredit you. I’m sorry. But Gotham needs me.”

Jim expected nothing less. He does not forget, ever, that Bruce— that Batman— is a hard man.

“Understood,” he says again. “You know, this doesn’t really change much.”

“I know,” Bruce looks at him. “That’s why I’m allowing it.”

Jim does not want to think about what Bruce could do, is capable of doing, if he did not want to allow this. For the first time since outing himself on the rooftop hours ago, Jim is afraid.

Their partnership is an old one, but it has always had certain conditions in place. The shift of these is something he is now not sure he is ready for.

“You cannot spend too much time here,” Bruce says, his demeanor shifting to something more amiable. “But Dick can show you the cave, and we can keep you more in the loop for incidents like this one.”

Incidents.
Jim wants to laugh, but doesn’t.

Bruce seems more at ease now and Jim knows it is not drugs. The first part of their conversation was a warning and Bruce wanted him to feel afraid.

Jim is a good cop, a simple man, but long has he lived in a world of shadows and secrets. He can forgive this necessary hardness in a boy who once sat wrapped in a scratchy wool blanket and listened to adults around him say,

“Who’s coming for the kid? Does he have anybody left?”

“I’m glad you said something,” Bruce says, leaning back now, relaxing. “It’ll make it easier on Dick. He’s not the same man I am, for all that he tries.”

“Thank God,” Jim says without thinking. There is no pang of regret that follows, though.

Bruce laughs.

“I’ve suspected you’ve always known,” he admits. “That first time I met you on the roof with that damn light, it felt like it was shining straight through me and you’d known all along.”

“You give me too much credit,” Jim says, chuckling. “The mask unnerved me for months. I had nightmares about it, even. I’m just a cop.”

“Don’t dismiss yourself so lightly,” Bruce warns, with authority that skims the age gap between them. “I wish Gotham had more men that were just cops like you.”

“Maybe some day,” Jim says. “Until then, we’ve had a good run, B. I should go and let you rest. Something tells me you’re about ready to collapse and you’re putting on a show for me.”

“You’re a good partner, Jim,” Bruce says, standing and shaking his hand. It’s a little weird, shaking Batman’s hand. “And it’s not that bad. Your instincts aren’t always right.”

“You leave my damn instincts out of this,” Jim says, exaggerating his annoyance.

“I’ll walk you down,” Bruce replies, and then, with a touch of intensity that feels right at home to Jim, he asks, “Speaking of instincts, what do you think about Dent?”

Jim has been thinking about this, so his answer is ready.

“I don’t think it matters if he knows or not. I don’t think it matters who he was going after. I think he let that blasted coin decide. We oughta burn that thing.”

“He needs it,” Bruce says, his expression distant. “But I think you’re right, about all of it. I’ll tell Dick.”

“No, you won’t,” Jim says, his turn to be stern. “And you aren’t walking me down either. You’re going to go sit down before you fall over and you will let me talk to Dick, my way, on my roof, and keep business out of the house. You stay here and convalesce.”

“What an awful word,” Bruce says with a small groan, turning to the window again. “I’m already sick of the idea. But you’re right. You handle things with Dick and I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Jim is out in the hallway at the top of the stairs by the time Bruce is halfway through this speech. He knows when the other man turns around to address him for a final time because he is waiting, on the stair out of sight, and hears Bruce exclaim to the empty room,
“Damn it.”

Jim has wanted to do that for years.

Chapter End Notes

So, this was a long chapter, haha. You'll have to please excuse my mild retconning. This was a chapter I've wanted to write for a long time and I just decided to have fun with it!

Oh, Jim.
The Scout

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dick was in the room for one of the four times Alfred woke him, waiting to see, but Bruce looked so beat he didn’t have the heart to try to rouse him more.

In the kitchen now, he finds Tim and Babs talking, a plastic container of homemade cupcakes between them on the kitchen table. Two are missing and Tim has blue icing on his lip.

They say hello to him and he doesn’t hesitate to reach out and smudge the icing harder into Tim’s face. The younger boy twists away with a good-natured yell, scrubbing hard at his mouth as he does so.

Dick puts an entire cupcake in his mouth while he sits down and thoroughly enjoys Babs’ disgusted expression. When he reaches for another she slaps his hand.

“Don’t. The rest are for Bruce.”

“All of them?” Dick exclaims, pulling his hand back.

“Don’t pout,” she scolds him, laughing. “Nobody’s been digging around in your brain with a scalpel this week. And after Alfred, Damian, Cass, Jason, Steph if she stops by…that’s only four left.”

“Only four,” Dick grumbles. “I would have taken my time if I’d known I was only getting one. I would have eaten it a crumb at a time and made you watch.”

“Yeah, who only makes a dozen cupcakes at once?” Tim asks, gazing at the remaining nine.

“Oh my gosh, you two,” Babs is trying to sound angry but can’t manage it. “You go make some cupcakes if you’re so put out. You aren’t helpless.”

Tim looks at Dick, sitting next to him. Dick looks back.

“If we split one,” Tim says, “that still leaves three.”

“If we each take one that still leaves two. We could tell Steph not to come. We could tell Damian they have meat in them. We could tell Alfred it’s from a box mix.”

“Don’t you dare,” Babs shouts, eyes flashing, almost actually angry. “If you tell him that he won’t even let Bruce have any.”

Dick laughs.

“Okay,” he says. “We won’t eat any more. While you’re looking.”

“You are the worst,” she says. “Both of you.”
“So, your dad was here,” Dick says, changing the subject abruptly. “He and Bruce talked.”

“I heard,” Babs says, sighing. “But not from Dad. Alfred told me.”

“Does he know?” Tim asks, resting his arms on the table. “About you?”

“I don’t know how he doesn’t,” Dick answers, but Babs is shaking her head.

“I’m his blind spot,” she says. “Unless I take him to the tower myself he’s never going to accept it. Once, last year,” she lowers her voice and leans in, and both boys lean closer to meet her, “Bruce was gone and I was so mad, so depressed one day. You can’t ever tell him this, by the way.”

Dick and Tim nod in unison.

“I went to see Dad. He was having a hard time, too. He knew it wasn’t Bruce in the mask. He must have suspected, at least, about Tommy. He was watering his plants, which are always already dead, and I sat in the middle of the room and said, ‘Dad, I used to be Batgirl.’ He didn’t even look at me. He just sort of hummed and said, ‘That’s nice, Barbara,’ like he was thinking about something else. No, he doesn’t know. He won’t let himself.”

“I don’t know if that’s sad or awesome,” Dick says. “I mean, it’s…”

“Don’t even say it,” Babs warns.

“…sawsome.”

She groans.

Tim laughs.

“Thanks. Just gloss over my inability to be completely honest with my father, who is a good man, by the way,” Babs says.

“You’re in a good mood,” Dick says, nudging Tim. “I was worried about you. Damian thinks you went off the deep end.”

“Eh, I just hadn’t slept enough,” Tim says, running a hand through his hair and looking sheepish. “I’m okay. And when does Damian not think that?”

“He was actually worried, though. When we left for patrol last night he was all sour and I thought it was because of Bruce, but we were hardly out of the cave when he asked me, ‘Do you think it is possible Drake has suffered a mental breakdown due to stress?’ And he was completely serious. Apparently he heard you telling the Gotham PD something about black auras?”

“To Bullock?” Babs exclaims. “What did he say?”

“Oh, man,” Tim puts his face in his hands. “He gave me a card for the police force therapist.”

“He didn’t!” Dick shouts, full of glee. “Tim, are you serious? Harvey Bullock?”

“The one and only,” Tim says. “I’m going to be the crazy Wayne kid for months now.”

“Where is Damian, anyway?” Babs asks, looking around as if he’ll appear. “I thought for sure the blue icing would draw him out.”

“He’s avoiding me,” Dick says, sighing, his glee cut off at the feet. “He’s furious that I didn’t just lie
to Jim.”

“Why didn’t you just lie to him?” Tim asks, holding his hands up in a placating gesture when Dick glares. “No judgment! Just curious. What did he say, exactly?”

“He said, ‘Don’t lie to me, Dick,’” Dick says. “And I almost did anyway.” He looks at Babs. “It felt like that first time we had dinner at his place after I started dating you. I was sweating all over and my fingers and toes went numb. Except last night, about twenty seconds after that, I thought, Damn it, you’re Batman, Dick. And whatever Bruce thinks, he gave me the job and I get to do it how I want the job done. And Jim just looked…so…”

“Heartsick,” Babs offers softly. “I know. He always is when he thinks something’s happened to him. I’m surprised it took him so long to just ask.”

“Anyway, it’s done now. And Bruce didn’t throw him out. Or me. But maybe that’s later.”

“Maybe what’s later?” Bruce asks, coming into the kitchen. He sits at the table with them as Alfred trails him into the room.

“Master Bruce should be staying close to his bed for now,” Alfred announces. “But would not rest until we’d sought out food. I should warn you, he seems a bit…I believe the phrase is ‘out of it.’”

“Alfred,” Bruce says, “I’m right here. What are these for?”

He means the cupcakes. Dick is watching him carefully. He wants so much to talk to him about Arkham, but somehow it still feels off. Maybe Tim, later. Tim will know what to do.

“For you,” Babs says, sliding the cupcake container closer to Bruce. “Happy Post-Op Day.”

“That was yesterday,” Bruce says, picking up a cupcake anyway.

“Alfred, are we on our own for dinner?” Tim turns to ask. The butler is already behind the counter pulling things out of the fridge. “I was going to make some rice, but I can help with whatever.”

“I will make dinner,” Alfred says, “If you three can keep him company for a bit. Keep an eye on him.”

Dick has been watching Alfred, studying him to assess how tired the butler seems. He hasn’t seen him sitting down once all day, but that isn’t especially unusual. The older man looks more tired than normal though. Dick almost gets up to offer to help, but he senses that Alfred needs the rhythm of normal work, that he won’t really be able to relax until they get biopsy results.

“Oh my god, Babs, these are so good,” Bruce says, and Dick turns to him. Bruce is eating another cupcake, oblivious to his stare, and to Tim’s, and Barbara is giving Dick an entirely too smug I told you so look.

“So, Bruce,” Tim says, very slowly, as if still considering whatever it is he’s about to say. Dick gives him a warning frown but Tim ignores it. “Stephanie tells me she got you to listen to some music with her. Kendrick Lamar. I was wondering what you thought.”

That is not what Dick was expecting. That is not what Dick was expecting on approximately three different levels.

Bruce doesn’t flinch, but fixes Tim with a brief stare.
“I’m not high, Tim,” he says, picking up another cupcake. “It was pretty good.”

Tim seems disappointed.

“I saw him in concert with her,” Babs says, more to Tim than to anyone else. “He put on a good live show. Not as good as One Direction, so I hear.”

Dick pales when she looks at him.

“That is not fair,” he says. “That was a favor. To a friend.”

“Please, tell me more,” Tim asks Babs. “Did you see it? Did he dance?”

“Stop,” Dick says. “No more.”

“I have video,” Babs says. “Of him singing along.”

“It was for a friend!” Dick exclaims again. “And it was a betrayal of trust that she sent that to you. You were supposed to delete it.”

He’s never going to live this down, for as long as he lives, not now that Tim knows.

And he doesn’t even care. It’s so good to see Tim laugh, to see Babs laugh. Even Alfred is chuckling at the counter behind them. It’s absolutely worth it to have this moment. He looks over at Bruce, to see if he’s equally amused.

Bruce is getting to his feet, leaving an empty cupcake tray.

“Alfred,” Bruce says, walking around the counter. “What else do we have to eat?”

“Bruce,” Dick says, his mouth hanging open afterward. Tim and Babs have stopped laughing and all three of them are gaping across the kitchen at Bruce.

Despite Alfred clearly working on something at the stove, Bruce has the fridge open and is looking around inside. He gets distracted by the top of the door and runs a finger along the crease in the rubber seal.

“How do crumbs even get in here? It’s above where the food is.”

Alfred freezes at the stove, in the middle of moving something with a spatula. He looks over, once, at Bruce, and then exhales slowly and goes back to what he’s cooking.

“How many did he eat?” Alfred asks, facing the subway tile on the kitchen wall behind the stove.

“All of them,” Dick answers, wincing.

Alfred swings around and gives all three of them such a fierce and dour frown that Dick feels like he’s ten years old again.

“Leave them alone,” Bruce says, taking a carton of juice from the fridge. “I’m an adult.”

“You,” Alfred says, turning to him now, “are not thinking as clearly as you ought.”

Bruce tips the container back and drinks straight from it.

Dick is already on his feet and moving. Alfred’s expression is now pained and he glances once at the
cabinet where Dick knows the glasses and cups are, then sighs and focuses on the skillet in front of him.

“Hey, Bruce,” Dick says, trying to keep his voice even and serious. “Can I talk to you about something? In the study?”

“Is this an attempt to babysit me?” Bruce asks, capping the juice and putting it back in the fridge. Dick has a clear vision of Alfred pouring it down the sink after they leave. “Because I’m fine. I’m just hungry.”

Dick was making excuses, but he is genuinely torn. His Arkham visit has been troubling him all day, the sharp smell of their strange brand of sanitizer haunting him despite two showers. It was a successful visit, if you can call anything relating to Arkham a success, but it doesn’t sit well with him. He’s realizing that what he wants from Bruce isn’t conversation but permission to do what his gut is telling him he should.

“No,” he says. “It’s about Arkham.”

That gets Bruce’s attention. It also gets Alfred’s, and Tim’s, and Barbara’s.

“I’m coming,” Tim says. Dick doesn’t tell him no. He wants Tim’s clarity, his sharp mind. Alfred wasn’t kidding when he said Bruce was out of it.

“I’m not,” Babs says. “I’m going to keep Alfred company.”

“The cave?” Bruce asks, taking a container of raw cut carrots and broccoli out of the fridge.

“No,” Alfred says, sharply. “Absolutely not. I will throw out dinner.”

“The study,” Dick says.

Bruce considers this for a moment and then nods and eats a carrot stick.

“Lead the way.”

In the study, Bruce leans back on the couch, still munching vegetables. Tim sits at the desk and Dick sits across from Bruce in a chair.


Tim is doing something on the laptop at the desk. The television monitor flickers to life above the fireplace, mirroring the screen Tim is working on. Tim leaves it there and gives his attention to Dick.

Dick continues, watching Bruce’s face carefully.

“He wasn’t surprised to see me,” Dick says. He remembers standing at the glass, the smooth, handsome face of Harvey Dent turned to him in profile. The flash of a spinning coin in the bright room. The smell of triple antibiotic ointment on the knuckles of a nearby guard.

Bruce looks pensive. He’s chewing a piece of broccoli.

“I asked him about Bruce Wayne, if he’d been in contact recently. He told me there was a fifty-fifty chance he’d see him in hell.”

Dent had turned to him. No, Two-Face had turned to him then, the hideous flesh deeply shadowed in scarlet and plum under the fluorescent lights where the skin was missing, the muscles taut and pulled
away from Dent’s shining teeth and glistening eye.

“So he was behind it,” Tim says from the desk. “He basically told you the coin decided.”

“He made a phone call the morning of your surgery to a disposable cell phone. I also checked the video records of their therapy sessions. The last four sessions had been deleted.”

“By whom?” Tim asks, his brow creased.

Bruce has his eyes closed, his mouth pressed in a thin line.

“By her,” Dick says, “She submitted paperwork to have them all redacted, citing doctor-patient confidentiality.”

“That place is insane,” Tim says. “Why is that even a thing? Why do they have that option?”

Bruce still hasn’t spoken. Dick is starting to worry that maybe he’s overdone it and has a headache or is close to blacking out.

“So,” Dick says, as a prompt, to check.

Bruce’s eyes open. “So, that’s it,” he says. “There’s nothing else to do.”

Dick is relieved, both that Bruce is alert and that his sentiments match Dick’s feelings.

“I know it’s a bit of a let down,” Dick says. “There’s no chase or fight. We got lucky.”

Bruce gives Tim a significant look that absolutely does not escape Dick’s notice.

“We didn’t get lucky,” Bruce says. “We were prepared.”

Dick looks to Tim now, to see how the younger boy is handling this, how he feels about it.

Tim’s face is like iron. It is sharp, resolved, serious.

“You’re asking us if it’s okay to let it go,” Tim says to him, meeting Dick’s gaze. “But there’s nothing to let go. It’s just over already.”

“Yes,” Dick says, a huge weight lifting off his shoulders. For some reason, he anticipated more resistance from the two of them. The fear he’d need to reason with them to reach this conclusion was why he had felt he needed to talk to Bruce. He needed to hear it from the man himself that it wasn’t failure for it to be so simple. But Dick’s instinct had been correct and all three of them are on the same page. He is consoled by their quick, mutual acceptance.

“Jason is going to be pissed,” Tim says.

“Let me handle Jason,” Bruce says, finishing the last carrot. He sets the empty container down on the floor by his feet. “And tell Alfred I’m going to eat dinner in here. I don’t think I can make it back upstairs until I lie down for a bit.”

Regardless of the energy Bruce seemed to have when he first came downstairs, despite the fact that he slept for over fourteen hours, he already looks worn out again. It shouldn’t be surprising to Dick how quickly he tires right now, but it is anyway. Maybe what’s more astonishing is that Bruce is admitting it.

Dick springs to his feet.
“Of course,” he says. “Do you need anything else?”

Bruce looks up at him, and despite the fact that his eyes are just a little out of focus, Dick feels like Bruce is really seeing him.

“Arkham is a hard place to visit. Unless there’s an emergency, I want you to take the night off.”

Dick blinks. He was not prepared for this. His first impulse is to insist that he’s fine, that he can do the job exactly the way he decides he should.

_Dick can handle it_ he hears in his head.

“Sit down,” Bruce says. “Eat dinner. Give yourself some time to clear your head, to get the smell out of your mind.”

“Okay,” Dick says, swallowing hard. “I’ll let Alfred know to bring trays.”

A show begins playing on the TV behind him, streamed from the laptop.

“*Bob’s Burgers*, Tim? Really?” he asks, glancing again at Bruce.

“Research says mindless entertainment is the order of the day,” Tim retorts.

“It’s fine,” Bruce says. “I’m not going to follow half of it anyway.”

Dick tries not to grin at the jubilant shrug Tim gives him.

In the kitchen, Alfred is already loading trays with plates of food. Babs, he is told, has taken a box of food to go and left to spend the night on call. Jason is coming down the hallway, yawning. A text message from Steph tells him Cass is out on patrol with her, and that Steph is not coming to eat dinner or coming for the cupcakes Babs invited her to share and then told her were gone. She’s signed the text message, _your loving co-parent._

Dick helps Alfred carry everything to the study. Tim is at the desk, still, and Bruce is in the same spot on the couch. Jason is sitting on the floor in front of the couch, his back against it, wearing nothing but socks and shorts. So, he’s staying a while, not prepared to rush off.

There’s a sliver of motion in the corner of his eye and Dick turns. Damian is in the doorway, scowling, Titus right behind him. He starts to turn to walk away, but Bruce says,

“Damian.”

And Dick watches as something in the boy melts a little. The turn of his mouth is just slightly less severe. Bruce motions with an arm and Damian hops easily over the back of the couch and settles next to Bruce, his head on Bruce’s shoulder. He says something quietly to Bruce and Bruce pulls him in tighter with one arm.

There’s a lump in Dick’s throat as he watches.

Damian was so mad at him all day. But Damian has not had a moment with Bruce, that Dick is aware of, since Bruce came out of surgery, except for brief minutes in a hospital room. And Damian, for all his brains and finesse, is still just a little boy. Sometimes, Dick thinks, in some ways Damian is even younger than he seems rather than advanced for his age.

No, he’s not going on patrol tonight.
Yes, it really is that simple.

There is no looming danger to chase down. Maybe it’s luck, or maybe they’ve just gotten really good at what they do, all the time, and there are other things they need to work on for a while.

Alfred is in one of the chairs, dragged around to face the TV. Dick finds a plate of food and sits on the floor next to him. As the show plays, Alfred leans over to Dick and whispers right above his head,

“You owe me a cupcake, Master Richard. I told you to keep an eye on him.”

Dick laughs.

Jason kicks him in the back with a socked foot for the hell of it.

Tomorrow, maybe the day after, they’ll get biopsy results. But Dick shoves it out of his mind. For right now, everything is okay.

Chapter End Notes

maybe you were expecting more intrigue, but after reminding everyone that this is a comic book story, we go back to our regularly scheduled family drama and angst. haha.
Damian Wayne is barefoot in the dewy grass in the chill of dawn. It is a little after six in the morning and he does not understand how the others can still be sleeping. They didn’t even go out last night, except for Cain, and she’s still awake in the den playing some animal game on Tim’s PS4.

He slices through the air slowly with the blade of his flattened palm. This morning, with the crisp September weather, calls for Tai Chi and not something with speed. Damian craves the patience of the motions, his limbs restrained.

Alfred will make him go to school tomorrow. His Father says he can stay home for a few more days, but Damian doesn’t want to spend more time trapped at home waiting for things he has no control over.

But right now, in the snap of fall weather, he can control his muscles and that gives him some solace. The last time he was at school, they worked on creative writing papers exploring the different ways to describe apples. It felt stupid at first, but the exercise of thinking of just the right word in English proved a suitable challenge. His first words are always Arabic; his hand still slants to write toward the left side of the paper, pencil poised at the right side to begin, when he is distracted.

He has always spoken English. He cannot remember a time when he did not know it. But his heart is in Arabic, his first thought the curling scrawl of it across paper when he works.

School would be exceedingly boring if it wasn’t for this challenge, the rewriting of his natural bent. But advanced math is his preferred habitat. The numbers are the same, the history is his own. It was Arabic men who ventured into the landscape of algebra, who plotted the course of calculations while watching the stars, the tides, the trade of their spices.

For mental alacrity, he takes the next swoop of his extended foot against the background of the sunrise and envisions the numerical description of its arc along the Y- and X- axes.

His foot is at the top of this glacial track when there is a tornado of leaves and and bending shrubs and spraying pool water.

Superman is hovering in front of him, cape still blowing to the east in the force of his own speed, a terrible darkness on his face, the furrows of fury in his brow and just the edge of red in his blue eyes.

Damian stumbles from his balance on one leg, thinking suddenly of the description of the White Witch in the Narnia books Alfred insisted on reading aloud to him, “a beautiful face in other respects, but proud and cold and stern.” He didn’t much like those books, except the last one, because it was the only one where at least one Eastern Calormen was not evil. The fact that they were otherwise sinister without explanation makes him uneasy, even now.

But there is a more pressing uneasiness as he looks up at Superman, from where Damian himself has fallen back in the wet grass. Something is wrong. He tries to decide how he could get to the cave, to the Kryptonite in the vault. It would have to be smart, not fast. He could never outrun him. Superman has still not offered to help him up and while Damian believes he could put up a respectable fight, a deep and hidden part of him is very, very afraid.

Was this the same man who showed him a farm just two days ago? No, not a man. An alien.

“Where is he?” Superman demands, his voice not raised but like thunder all the same.
“Why do you want to know?” Damian snaps, staying on the grass. He can spring back from this position further and faster than he could run, just to get a head start.

“He’s not in the cave or the bedroom. Where is he?”

Damian swallows hard.

Father can handle himself. If Damian tells him, distracts him, he will have time to get the Kryptonite. He is not as fast as Clark but he can be fast enough.

“He fell asleep in the study,” Damian says, fighting the tremble of his fingers.

Superman is already gone.

Damian flies, his feet across the grass, down the hall, down the stairs, through the cave.

He does not have time to wake the others.

Father changes the vault code on a regular basis but Damian always makes sure he knows it. This morning is no exception, even with everything that has been going on.

The unmarked lead box is on a shelf inside.

Damian sprints back up the stairs without waiting for the vault to latch, he skids through the hallways on bare feet still damp with dew, sticking to the floorboards.

Outside the study door, which is partially opened, he freezes. He needs a second, just a second, to plan. While he listens, his hands work, undoing the box clasp.

“–didn’t you tell me?” Superman is shouting. The manor is definitely going to wake up. Damian was only gone for a minute, he didn’t miss much.

Father says something he cannot hear.

Damian has the box open.

“We talked on the phone!” Superman says angrily. “All you said was that you decided to come home early. Don’t you think that’s something I’d need to know? Instead, I had to find out in the damn Sunday paper! It was on the third—”

The green, jagged chunk of rock is glowing in Damian’s hand, dumped out of the box in the same instant Damian realizes he’s terribly misunderstood.

Superman’s words drop off like dead things.

“Clark?” That’s Father’s voice now, full of alarm.

Damian is frozen.

The Kryptonite is snatched out of his hands and shoved back into the box.

“What are you doing?” Grayson hisses at him, panting in the hallway with tousled hair, wearing nothing but boxers. “Damian!”

“Clark!” Father is shouting from inside the study. Grayson latches the box and goes into the room, leaving Damian still frozen in the hall.
Damian tries to move.

Grayson is inside the study now, and he and Father are talking, moving, their voices low and fast. Father sounds tired and worried. Grayson sounds angry and angry.

Damian tries to be angry. This is not his fault.

Instead, like the struggle of trying and failing to find the right English word to describe the skin of an apple, Damian tries and fails to find the right note to string his anger on and he bursts into foreign, bitter tears.

Damian is humiliated. This does not happen to him. Ever.

Father is in the doorway now with an infuriated countenance and he grips Damian’s wrist so tightly that it hurts, and hauls him into the room.

Damian stands by the desk, sniffling, trying to regain control of himself.

I am not a child he thinks, but it sounds feeble even to his own mind.

The lead box is tightly shut and on the desk. Superman is on the couch with his head in his hands, his face as white as the Empress Jadis. Grayson is standing with his arms crossed, a worried frown on his face. When he looks up at Damian, the worry hardens into wrath.

“I don’t even know where to start,” Father says icily. “I…” He stops, tries again. “You…” he stops again. Then, “What the hell, Damian?”

“It’s not his fault,” Superman says from the couch, his words strained. “I must have scared him to death, Bruce.”

Father is having a hard time letting go of his rage. Damian can see it at war on his face, in his fists.

Damian gulps. He’s not trying to be dramatic but he wants to yell, to defend himself, and all that’s rising from his chest is another sob.

“Bruce,” Superman says, his voice a little steadier. “It’s not his fault.”

Father drops his head, hands on his hips, and winces and pulls his head back up. He rubs his neck and glares hard at Damian.

“I still have no idea what’s going on,” Grayson says, breaking into the tension. “But I’d sure like to know.”

“Your father,” Superman says stiffly, “neglected to tell me that he left the hospital because of an attempted murder. I might have overreacted.”

“Attempted,” Father emphasizes. “And we had already handled it. We have already handled it. It’s over.”

This is news to Damian, who spent all night wondering why they weren’t going out.

Now, Father and Superman are glaring at each other and Damian can feel the swelling in his throat subsiding, the tears drying on his face.

“I thought you had snapped,” Damian hurls the accusation at Superman, now that he can manage it. “You were entirely unlike yourself.”
Father sighs.

“Dick, can you take this back downstairs?” he asks, picking up the lead box.

“Sure,” Grayson says, giving Damian a final, sharp look. “I’ll be back after I get dressed.”

“Let Alfred know everything is alright,” Father says. “And have him bring some water. Tell the others to stay out.”

Grayson leaves and closes the door. It latches with a soft click, sounding to Damian like the clank of prison bars. Whatever is about to happen, he is not going to like. It feels like the hour he spent curled against Father’s side, ignoring a stupid cartoon and listening to his heartbeat, was another life.

Father is still standing close enough to grab his wrist, to grip his ear, to strike him like one of Damian’s old trainers.

But Father walks away from him and sits next to Superman on the couch. They look at each other and then both regard Damian with expressions he cannot decipher.

“He is your son,” Superman says, while they are both still looking at him. “And you’ve seen me angry.”

“I know,” Father says. They both take their eyes off him, lean back against the couch in unison. Father tilts his head to avoid pressing the bandage against the cushion, Superman lets his hang back.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I should have,” Father says.

“I’m sorry I scared the crap out of Damian,” Superman says. “My parents gave him a dog.”

“Maybe it’s the brain trauma,” Father says without moving, completely unfazed, “But I’m going to assume those two things have nothing to do with each other.”

“They don’t,” Superman answers. “I just realized I hadn’t told you.”

“Hnn,” Father says.

“I’m sorry, Damian,” Superman says, looking at him. He stands up and walks over, offers his hand. “Considering what you must have assumed, you did a good job.”

“That’s it?” Damian asks, incredulous, eyeing the offered hand but not taking it. “Am I not in trouble?”

“That’s up to your dad,” Superman says, casting a look at Bruce. “But I’d advise against it.”

“You aren’t in trouble,” Father says with his eyes closed, “even though I’m already having second thoughts about it.”

Damian thinks he’s been closing his eyes a lot recently.

“I’m going to go,” Superman says. “Lois is probably losing her mind.”

“Are you alright to fly?” Father asks, sitting up.

“I’m fine. It wasn’t that long or that close. I’ll have a headache today, but that’s probably it.”

“That makes two of us,” Father stands and he does shake Superman’s hand.
“Call me as soon as you find out,” Superman says, not letting go of the hand until Father nods.

“I promise,” Father says.

They’re talking about the biopsy results now, Damian realizes. There is a pang of dread in his stomach, which feels empty and twisted.

“So, another dog, hm?” Father says after Superman leaves. “Let’s let Alfred in and you can tell me about him.”

Damian should feel excited but all he feels is numb. They’ve all been pretending it’s over, acting like everything will be okay.

But what if it’s just starting?
Bruce is sitting in the study at the desk when Dr. Dev arrives around lunchtime. He knows Alfred is unhappy that he won’t go sleep in the very comfortable, very wonderful bed he has upstairs in the master bedroom, but Bruce is unwilling to admit how much the thought of climbing the stairs exhausts him.

Coming downstairs this early was a mistake, perhaps, and he is trapped. If he sleeps enough on the couch this afternoon, maybe he’ll rally and make it upstairs when the others are heading out on patrols and he can send Jay out on some fabricated task, so he can stop to lean on the railing unobserved. Otherwise, he might just cave and tell Alfred the truth, let Jay help him.

The very idea makes him cringe inside, shuddering away from the fact that he cannot make it upstairs unaided, on his legs that can press five times his weight, his arms that can lift a half ton.

Now that the relief at waking with his mind intact is ebbing, a mere fact instead of a surprise, he is growing frustrated. He cannot walk far, he often forgets what he is doing or what he was thinking, he hears himself saying things he did not plan to say, he has still not verbalized quite how bad his eyesight is, how frequently he is closing his eyes both against the ache at the back of his skull and the sharper forward pain from managing constant blurred and staggered images.

He is not frightened. He is irritated.

“Must I remind you it’s only been three days?” a voice cuts into his thoughts before they can start to wander. It would have happened soon.

Bruce knows by sound and not by sight that Dev is on the study threshold. He does look at him, anyway, to take in what details he can. A briefcase on a long strap hangs from Dev’s shoulder and he fills the doorway, tall and rail thin. There is a white shape in his long fingers, fingers that are suited for violin fingering rather than blood and gray matter. It’s an envelope.

“I know that look,” Dev says, stepping into the room. “I’ve seen a hundred men of your ilk with it. It’s the ‘I should bloody well be better already’ face.”

“There are no men of my ilk,” Bruce says, swiveling the desk chair away from the desk.

“I actually don’t doubt that,” Dev says, coming around the desk. “Don’t stand for me, not yet. Where’s Alfie?”

“Two cups of tea and you’re allowed to call him Alfie?” Bruce asks. “He must really like you.”

“It’s cute that you think we only have a cup each time,” Dev replies, dropping the envelope on the desk and pulling a light out of his bag. The envelope is like a snake waiting to strike. Without warning or asking, Dev tips Bruce’s chin up, the surety of medical right in his hands, and looks into Bruce’s eyes with the beam.

“How are the headaches?”

“Hnn,” Bruce says, trying not to pull away from the light. “Manageable.”
“Out of a ten?”

“Between four and six,” Bruce answers, blinking hard when Dev steps back.

“Good,” Dev nods. “What’s the worst they’ve been? And where?”

“A nine. On the ride home.”

“Good,” Dev repeats, rummaging in his bag. “Keeping up with meds?”

“Yes,” Bruce says. “But I’d like to reduce the steroid dosage.”

“I’m certain you do,” Dev has another instrument out now, he’s looking in Bruce’s throat. “But it’s not going to happen quite yet. You have a few more weeks of pimples and crying like a jilted adolescent girl.”

Bruce actually likes Kiran Devabhaktuni, which isn’t something he can say for most people outside of his usual circle. He had a medical research arm of Wayne Enterprises headhunt him after reading about some of the neuroplasticity studies Dev was doing at Oxford with lagging funding. He never expected to do more than fund the research and provide the area with a good neurosurgeon; in all his various expectations for the future and the ways that things could go wrong, he didn’t anticipate the need for Dev’s work for himself or guess that they’d get along so easily, so quickly, or that he’d find a friend for Alfred.

Still, there is obviously a lot Bruce is holding back.

A lot he expects Alfred to hold back.

And Alfred is coming into the room, quietly shutting the door, his silence a deeper one than what he usually carries around with him.

Dev is behind Bruce now, snapping nitrile gloves onto his hands. Bruce closes his eyes, finding comfort in the muted lights and colors, and holds himself absolutely still while Dev carefully peels back the gauze bandage, taking a few antiseptic oiled hairs with the medical tape. Bruce controls his breathing, his heart rate, his thoughts, while Dev gently prods the area around the incision his own hands made.

And then it is over. Dev is using new gauze, new tape, and covering the wound again.

“Three days and you won’t need the dressing,” Dev tells him. “Keep washing your hair, but not more than a minute or two under flowing water.”

“I read the papers, Dev,” Bruce says, irritated.

He didn’t. He had Jason read them.

Violent and erratic Jason, who has been more nervous in the past few days than Bruce has ever seen him, who turned a little green reading the papers when Alfred was out of the room, who spent most of the night on the chair in the study, who by some miracle just barely missed being there when Clark came storming in. Bruce insisted he go down to the cave and work out when Dev was on his way.

“And this is your reminder,” Dev says cheerfully, “that they are orders and not suggestions, contingent on which is my continued service.”
“Acknowledged,” Bruce says.

“Oh, good, you’ve arrived,” Dev says to Alfred. “I was waiting for you. I have the results. I’ve read them over, of course, but I find it best to let the patient read them in these circumstances. When you ask questions to make certain you understand, we clear up a lot of common misconceptions.”

He leans against the edge of the desk, his arms crossed.

“Actually, Alfie,” he says, his voice a bit more gentle. “You might want to take a seat.”

Nobody in the room moves for a moment. Then Alfred sits in one of the chairs across from the desk, across from Bruce, and will not look Bruce in the face.

Bruce puts a hand on the envelope but doesn’t pick it up.

He pulls his hand back and sighs in disgust.

“I can’t read it,” he says angrily. “And you know that I can’t.”

“I knew you were being reticent,” Dev replies sharply. “And I wish you wouldn’t be. I’m your doctor, not your old mate to go ‘round to the pub.”

“Shall I?” Alfred asks, his voice hollow.

“No, I’ll do it, bloody hell,” Dev says. “I just wanted him to admit he couldn’t.”

Dev picks up the envelope and slides the paper out. He hands it to Alfred without looking at it and says to Bruce,

“It’s negative. It all came back negative. It was absolutely benign. And before you shout at me, I’m not a monster. If it hadn’t been good news, I would have just told you right off.”

“You told Alfred to sit down,” Bruce says with a frown, his displeasure far unscored by his deep relief. “How is that not manipulative dramatics?”

“Look at him, man!” Dev says. He hasn’t looked at Alfred himself yet. “He was braced for the worst, I know his type. We could have said you had two weeks to live and he would have stood there without flinching. It’s good news that undoes him.”

They both look. Alfred’s eyes are glistening with tears as he looks the paper over.

“If I hadn’t made him sit down, he would have collapsed in a joyful heap at the desk. I never would have gotten my cuppa,” Dev says.

“Kiran,” Alfred says, his breath catching on the syllable. “You’re in very real danger of being served Lipton.”

“Your threats are hollow,” Dev says to him firmly, “And I will not be cowed by them. You sit there and enjoy your good news and then make the best pot of tea you’ve ever made in your life. I deserve it. I am a bearer of most excellent tidings.”

Bruce’s own relief is tempered by the ache in him at Alfred’s reaction. He doesn’t even have the emotional energy to smile. He should.

He made a promise, he remembers. And they have family to tell.
Results back just now. All negative. Benign. He sends the message to Clark, his fingers tapping out the words without seeing them, while he feels like the news is a mistake, something he’ll have to retract as soon as they look at the paper again.

“Wayne,” he hears Dev saying gently, as if from far away. There’s a hand on Bruce’s shoulder. “It isn’t an error. I ran the tests myself. Twice.”

Bruce puts his head down on the desk.

He doesn’t understand what’s happening.

He didn’t want to die. He wasn’t hoping it was cancer. So why is he shutting down?

At some point, he is aware that Dev and Alfred are talking above him, but not to him. About him. Alfred has been doing that lot lately. It needs to stop, but he can’t figure out how to make it happen right now. He can’t remember if they’ve tried to talk to him or if they’ve just decided to leave him alone.

The dark green vinyl blotter is heaven on his forehead.

“I’m going to make tea,” Alfred says from the doorway. “I won’t be long.”

Is the light off? No, his vision is dimming. This startles him but it comes back. He was just falling asleep.

“Alfred,” he says, his voice hoarse. He’d thought his throat had stopped hurting. “Tell everyone.”

“Of course,” Alfred says, a smile in his tone. “Right away, Master Bruce.”

Bruce loses all track of time, sitting with his head on the desk while the shadows change and move across the study. The door opens and closes at one point, and is his distantly aware that Dev is in the room again, picking up his bag, leaning against the desk next to him.

“Before I go, I need to be certain this is shock at blessedly good news and that you are not having partial simple seizures. You’ve not been shutting down other times and this is the first occurrence?”

“Yes,” Bruce says without lifting his head. “I’m fine.”

“Any strange smells, tastes? Sounds that didn’t make sense? Colors?”

“No,” Bruce says. “Nothing.”

“Then get some rest. You hardly need a reminder that the past few days have been hell on your body. And let me know immediately if you shut down like this again; we cannot afford to miss it if you’re having silent epileptic fits. Do you want help to bed?”

Dev is a doctor. This is his field, the realm of illness and infirmity. Bruce could say yes right now, collapse into bed, sleep for another fourteen hours, and Dev would never mention it again. No one else would even know he’d needed help.

“No,” Bruce says. “I’m fine. Thanks, Dev.”


“Thanks, Dr. Devabhaktuni,” Bruce says, a small smile turning one corner of his mouth. “I’ll see you
tomorrow. How was tea?"

“Better than sex,” Dev replies casually, with just a touch of earnestness. “Use a chair in the shower, when you wash your hair tonight. I’d be bloody pissed if you slip and die.”

Bruce finally lifts his head, laughing.

“You have a terrible bedside manner,” he says.

“My bedside manner is gorgeous,” Dev retorts. “But my desk side manner is harsh, reserved for special cases, like your sweet face and profoundly weird brain. I just feel I should warn you my interest here is primarily scientific. And I’m also here for the biscuits.”

“Do you play chess?” Bruce asks, feeling better by the minute. Not back to normal yet, by any means, but whatever cloud had swallowed him is passing.

“God, no. I spend all day thinking. I don’t want to leave off work to go home and work. I play video games. But I’d play a match to let you slaughter me in exchange for another brain scan.”

“I’ll consider it,” Bruce tells him. “Have a good evening, Dev.”

This time, Dev doesn’t correct him,

“Cheers,” he says, and leaves the room, leaving the door open.

“Your eyes are going to be fine,” Dev shouts through the hall. “The brain is a remarkable piece of organic machinery, shrouded in mystery and miracle.”

Bruce doesn’t need to see him to know Dev is walking backwards, putting on a show, wanting the others to overhear. He should perhaps be mad but he mostly feels gratitude. He hears the spin of a slick heel on wood floor, knows Dev has turned and actually gone.

The phone on the desk is blinking with unread messages. He unlocks it and stares at the screen for a minute. The text is hopeless but there’s a red circle on the voicemail icon and he clicks it. He’s been putting off setting up assistive technology but he’ll get Jason to help him tonight. The more he keeps him busy the longer he’ll stick around.

“Hey,” the voicemail begins. It’s from Clark. “I went through three text message drafts before I remembered they might be hard to read, so, sorry this is a bit delayed. I don’t even know what to say. I’m just really glad to hear it. And I know how you feel about it, so I want you to have time to prepare, but the next time I see you, you’re getting a hug. I’ll swing by tomorrow or the day after, because I know if I come now you’re just going to tell me the results are probably false. Shoot,” there’s a sound Bruce can’t quite make out, maybe a sniffle and a clearing throat. “I’m just really, really, really glad. I’ll bring pie.”

The voicemail ends and Bruce isn’t sure if Clark hung up or if it cut him off.

Alfred steps into the room with a small smile, a smile that Bruce suspects won’t leave his face for the remainder of the day.

“You can’t tell Dev, Alfred,” Bruce says without preamble, finding it easier to move on than to have other conversations. “I know you’ve been thinking about it. But keep inviting him for tea, even after all of this, and maybe someday will be the right time.”

“He already knows,” Alfred says. “It’s why he allowed you to return home.”
“Jim knows,” Bruce counters. “Dev suspects. Give it time. We may need him some day in that capacity, but not yet.”

“Very well,” Alfred says, setting medicine and water on the desk. It is the cadence of his life now. It’s only been three days.

For all of five minutes, Bruce is looking forward to seeing everyone at dinner and he knows they will all come tonight. And then as if thrown by a stuttering grappling line, he dreads it. He is weary to his bones, unused to this fickleness of his physical self, disciplined and controlled for so long.

“How is everyone?” Bruce asks, feeling like this isn’t quite what he wants to be asking. But his words are cloaked in fog, the edges of the aphasia Cass must feel on a daily basis flooding him.

“Relieved,” Alfred replies. “Jubilant. I’ve told them to make plans out for the night. They’re in the mood to celebrate and you, Master Bruce, need rest. Miss Stephanie has already picked up Master Damian for the afternoon. There was talk of an Afghani restaurant and he was most pleased. By most pleased, I mean to say his frown was less severe.”

“Allfred,” Bruce tries to say, but he finds he is too choked up. How does Alfred know what he needs, over and over again? Why is everyone being so nice? He really hates these damn steroids. Hates them.

The butler pats his shoulder in a consoling way and then says, “Rally yourself, good sir. We’re going to make it upstairs and there you shall stay for dinner and the night.”

Alfred is in a really good mood.

The older man hums while leaving the room, with a promise to return shortly.

As soon as he’s gone, the window on the other side of the desk swings open and Jason curses, sucking on a finger he must have pinched, before climbing through into the room.

“Hey,” he says, standing next to the desk and shaking his hair out of his eyes. “Alfred tried to run me off, but fuck that. I’m sneaking back in.”

“Hnn,” Bruce says, looking from the window to the door Alfred just went out. “We should start moving or he’s going to try again.”

“Hell, yes. Let’s get your sorry ass back in bed. No more sleeping on couches overnight.”

Bruce stands up and steadies himself for a moment at the desk, then heads for the door. He’s three or four steps ahead of Jason in the hall when the boy catches up to him, a book under one arm, strolling as if he’s there purely for company.

When they reach the bedroom, Alfred is inside just swinging a comforter out over the bed, a pile of stripped bedding by his feet. He doesn’t say anything about Jason’s return.

“What are we reading, Jay?” Bruce asks after he climbs into bed, pleased he didn’t end up needing to lean on Jason, pleased that he was there anyway. He allows Alfred to straighten covers and fuss over a pillow.

“The Martian Chronicles,” Jason says, flipping open the Bradbury hardback. “Because I’m in the mood for outer space and shit.”

Alfred gathers the discarded bedding into a basket and then acts like he’s straightening part of the
room for the first few minutes, then gives up pretending and just takes a seat next to the bed, crossing his legs as he listens. The afternoon light streams through the windows, the curtains half-open to let it in.

Bruce watches the light for a bit and then closes his eyes against a headache and is still, listening to the sound of Jason’s voice fill the room as the afternoon hours swell and wane.

Chapter End Notes

you guys might think it's over.

it's not over.

sorry.

i love you all. haha.
The anger in Selina Kyle is not raging and hot and impulsive. It is a cold, compact thing, carefully tended. She’s been grooming it for several days before she realizes it’s fading, shrinking away into chilled worry and curiosity.

And that is why she has just picked the lock to a second story window in the back of Wayne Manor at three in the morning. She is not in costume, but she is in all black.

She slinks through the dark halls, listening at doors. Tonight, not long ago, she saw Batman, Robin, and Red Robin standing on a rooftop, consulting with each other, so she knew it would be relatively safe to come.

A plaintive meow slips from an open doorway and a gray cat emerges from the black shadows and presses itself against her legs, its tail curling as it purrs.

“Hello,” she whispers, crouching and petting the cat. “You can come with me if you’re quiet.”

The cat follows her through the silent manor, flicking its tail when she stops. At the master bedroom, Selina turns the doorknob and lets herself into the room.

It is empty.

The bedcovers are in a slight disarray and the bed is surrounded by medical equipment, some of it unplugged as if ready to be packed away. The cat leaps onto the bed and kneads a pillow with its front paws, then rejoins her on the floor.

Selina leaves and tiptoes down the stairs, around the corner. Down one hall is the kitchen but it is silent and navy in the faint moonlight through the windows. The other direction, most of the doors are closed, but one is halfway open and faint lamplight casts a yellow glow on the polished floor. The sound of men talking drifts toward her, energetic and low.

She creeps forward. The cat steps primly ahead of her into the room. In the doorway, she lingers, casing the room. It is the den. She does not see him, but there is a different man-- no, a tall, broad-shouldered boy-- asleep in a chair. On the TV there are two men in a sleek, orange car, driving a twisting closed course and discussing the engine.

The cat is sitting on the back of a couch, licking a paw. Selina makes a small noise, almost like a sigh, of annoyance and disappointment.

“There you are,” a deep baritone says from within the room and she jumps, despite herself.

“How did you know it was me?” She asks, because she does not doubt that he does know.

“Did you think you could have gotten in if I hadn’t let you?” Bruce questions in reply.

God, she loves him. She’s missed this. It’s been too long. But she’s still angry, a weight like hardened lead in her gut.

She can’t see him and he isn’t showing himself. The cat turns to her then, its eyes shining in the
lamplight, its expression incredulous, as if it can’t believe she’s so stupid.

And she knows before she slips noiselessly across the floor to perch on the arm of the couch that he will be there.

He is. He’s sprawled out on his stomach, his face turned toward the television as if he actually cares about two British men arguing about horsepower. He pauses the show and sits up, slowly, and looks up at her.

She inspects him for a moment. He is a little thinner, perhaps, and there is a smattering of small gray hairs at his temples. There are dark circles under his eyes, but maybe those have been there for a while and he’s just paler than usual. For the most part, he looks unchanged.

“Cars, huh?” She says, petting the cat as it settles on her lap.

“Jason picked it,” he replies. “Hold on. Jay,” he calls, raising his voice a little. “Go to bed.”

When he says it, he turns to the sleeping boy, away from her. Selina’s breath catches. There is a straight, vertical scar on the back of his head, the hair around it buzzed away. No, not a scar-- a wound, the dark pink, puckered edges held together by glinting staples.

Instinctively, she reaches out and touches it with one outstretched finger. It’s so out of place, she wants to make sure that it’s real before she accepts the horror of it.

He freezes, his casual turn caught in stasis. She pull her finger back as if burnt.

“Sorry,” she says softly.

The boy, Jason Todd, she realizes now, stands and stretches. He walks by them, sleep still heavy in his face, and says, “Hey, Selina,” when he goes by.

“He’s going to realize, just a second,” Bruce says, turning the other way to the door. She feels guilty for feeling relieved, but also morbidly hopes she’ll see it again, to study it.

“Shit,” Jason’s voice carries back into the room. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” Bruce calls back, a slight smile on his face. “Everything is fine. Go sleep.”

“I thought you two weren’t getting along,” Selina says.

“It’s been a little better,” Bruce says, guardedly. And then, more openly, “He’s hardly left my side all week. We’ve read a lot. It’s been good for him. For both of us.”

“Good,” Selina says, and she means it. And even though she was planning to wait, to assess the circumstances more carefully, she changes her mind.

“Why didn’t you call me?”

Because her anger is a cold and cultivated thing, it can come out in little, hard words instead of in loud and violent fits. But he understands she is angry.

“It was very sudden. I was distracted,” he says, and it is not an apology. She waits. She tickles the cat’s ears. He continues, “I was going to call you after, but every time I picked up the phone, I couldn’t think of what to say. I don’t remember what I’m doing half the time. Everything is in fog.”

She waits.
“I’m sorry,” he finally says, his voice rough.

“It’s alright,” she says, a little appeased. But the anger is now melting into hurt. He didn’t think of her, didn’t trust her enough. In its own small way, it is a comfort, or at least a familiar hurt. The cat jumps off her lap.

Selina moves to the end of the couch, pulls gently on his shoulder. He doesn’t resist. His head settles sideways on her lap, facing the paused television. The wound on his scalp is only two inches from her abdomen. She is acutely aware of it; she carefully avoids it as she begins stroking his hair, pushing it back from his forehead, around his ears.

“Is this okay?” She asks, after a moment.

“Mhmm,” he answers, but he doesn’t sound sleepy.

“I’m surprised you’re still up,” she says. “I thought invalids slept all the time.”

“Old habits,” he replies. “And steroids.”

“I knew you were a user,” she teases, gently.

“I said ‘and,’” he says testily, but she knows it’s false ire.

She loves the way they fall back into this, the cadence of their conversation fitting like a favorite sweater.

The cat puts its front paws on the edge of the couch and stretches, right in front of Bruce’s face.

“How long have you had a cat?” She asks.

“I don’t know. He’s Damian’s,” he says.

That reminds her of something else she’s been curious about.

“Are you and Talia still…” she trails off, indicating what she means by the words she won’t say.

The change in him is instantaneous. His whole body is rigid, his breathing changed.

“No,” is all he says.

So, definitely not. And she’s stepped onto thin ice, and the inky blackness of it unsettles her. A conversation for another time. She retreats, far away, not even willing to bring up Damian again right now.

“Do you remember the first time we met?” She asks.

“Yes,” he says, relaxing. She resumes toying with his hair, unaware until that moment that she had stopped.

“How long ago was it now?”

“Fourteen years,” he says, shifting his weight a little.

“That long?” She’s surprised. “Really?”

“We’re getting old,” he answers.
Across the room, the TV shuts itself off, plunging them into deeper darkness. The lamp is only a small one and close to the door.

They sit in the dark for a few minutes and then, very gingerly, she touches his head right above the edge of the cut.

“You must have been terrified,” she whispers.

“It was a difficult night. Bittersweet,” he says, his voice equally quiet.

“I’m sorry I missed it,” she says, still whispering.

“No, you aren’t,” he says, “I was an asshole to anyone over eighteen.”

“Are you always so hard on yourself?” she asks, laughing a little.

“Only when it’s true,” he says.

“Oh, Bruce,” she says, “You have a massive backlog to plow through. We should start immediately.”

He’s laughing now, just a little, and it turns into a cough. She takes her hand off his head until he catches his breath and his breathing evens out.

“I’m glad you came tonight,” he says. “I’ve missed you.”

“Should I let you sleep?” She asks, glancing around for a clock. She doesn’t see one.

“No,” he says, “I wasn’t joking about the steroids. I can’t think and I can’t sleep. I’ve been lying around a lot.”

“Do you need a map?” She offers. “Because this sounds like foreign territory.”

“Oh, shut up,” he says crossly.

She laughs.

“Well, then, I’m at your disposal,” she says. “What do you want to do?”

He is silent for a while.

“I want to sit on a skyscraper rooftop and watch traffic,” he says. “Up where the wind is strong enough to push me off the ledge if I’m not careful.”

“And since that isn’t an option?” Selina prompts.

“I’d settle for half-watching a movie while we talk.”

“Much better,” she says. “You’ll be back to the city skyline before you know it.”

He stands up.

“I’m going to go make popcorn.”

An amused smile flits across her face. It lingers.

“Okay,” she says. “I’ll pick a movie.”
She finds him in the kitchen ten minutes later after growing tired of waiting for his return and unable to locate the movies.

He’s standing at the fridge with the door open, looking inside. There is no sign on any of the counters of popcorn being made.

“Hey,” she says, wrapping an arm around his waist and leaning against him in front of the fridge. His skin is chilled. “What are you doing?”

“I don’t remember,” he says.

“You were making popcorn,” she says easily. “But you know, I’m not in the mood for anything salty.”

She tugs open the freezer door and finds a carton of ice cream.

“C’mon, grab two spoons,” she says.

“What about bowls?” He asks, shutting the fridge.

“Did I say bowls?” She returns, arching an eyebrow.

He follows her with two spoons and a boyish grin.

Back in the den, he grabs a blanket and they sit close on the couch with the pint of ice cream. It feels so normal, so easy, it makes her heart ache. There are so many nights she spends alone. How can this be so effortless when she should be so out of practice?

“I couldn’t find the movies,” she says, taking a bite of ice cream.

“They’re all digital. On Tim’s PS4.”

“I’m going to pretend I understood that, but for your own rehabilitative practice I want you to walk me through it,” she says.

He laughs.

“Grab that controller, the one on the table.”

Selina picks it up and holds it in front of her.

“Now what?”

“Push the button with the-- you know what, just give it to me.”

He takes the controller from her and presses buttons rapidly.

The TV springs to life and flies through menu screens faster than she can process. Then they are looking at a display of movie poster thumbnails.

“What are we watching?” He asks.

“Hm,” Selina says, as if she didn’t spend the ten minutes alone, searching for DVD cases or binders, thinking exactly about this.

“Cat People?” He suggests, looking at her with a wry twist of his mouth and a distant look in his


“Are you trying to chase me away?” She says, shoving his shoulder gently with her own. “Let’s watch *Le Samouraï*. You do have it, don’t you?”

“If I didn’t, I’d buy it. But I have it,” he says. “Are you sure?”

“Don’t drag your feet. You asked me. I picked. You’re just jealous you’ll never be Alain Delon.”

“Every man is jealous he’s not Alain Delon,” he retorts. “Which way?”

She doesn’t understand the question. He motions to the screen.

“Which way?” He repeats. “I can’t make out the genre subheads.”

And it strikes her like razor claws against her cheek.

“Bruce,” she says sharply, alarmed. “Are you telling me you can’t see?”

“Just some blurred vision and diplopia,” he says. “Double vision,” he clarifies a second later.

“Is it permanent?” She demands, tense, the pint of ice cream softening in her hand.

“No,” he says.

“Did your doctor say it wasn’t permanent?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he says, scowling. “It won’t be.”

She settles back on the couch, furious and scared for him.

He presses a button on the controller and a search menu overlays the main screen. The letters appear one at a time, picked by his flicking through the alphabet chart, apparently by memory.

It isn’t until the movie has started that she says,

“You could have just done that to begin with.”

“I wanted you to know,” he replies. “And I have a hard time talking about it.”

She offers the ice cream that she has been holding in a death grip.

They lean close again and after a few bites of ice cream, she asks,

“Do you want to do something you don’t have to watch or read subtitles for?”

“*Je ne veux pas les sous-titres,*” he says, his eyes closed. “Shh. I’m trying to listen to your French lover smoke a cigarette.”

She doesn’t argue and she settles against him.

Thirty minutes in, the pint of ice cream is gone and it is clear he is no longer following the plot. Instead, he’s mocking every line of dialogue in his own string of profane French commentary. Selina is too amused to be annoyed, except for one slanderous comment about Delon that provokes her to flick his chest with a polished nail.

“Envy doesn’t suit you,” she says, and he moves on.
By the time the credits roll, he is asleep, his head on her lap again. The sun is starting to rise, faint rose-blossom gold edging the window drapes.

She sits without moving for a long time, as the room fills with filtered light. She’s half asleep herself, her head tipped back on the couch and Damian’s cat curled against her hair, purring.

This is part of their ancient dance, all the way through to his failure to call her. He withholds information, acting indifferent-- it draws her. She comes, curls around him, and he accepts, leans into it. And when his grip begins to feel like fetters, she leaves.

The sun is almost up. She cannot stay for breakfast.

Next time it will be her turn, to do something stealthy yet bold and catch his attention, to lure him by implied invitation. They will have another night, of any one of a dozen natures, maybe even a few days, and then go their own ways again for a while. Neither of them will completely want it to be so, but it is their pattern, and they are getting too old to change.

The door unlatches and swings quietly open.

Alfred walks in, a tray in his hands.

“Shh,” she says, lifting her head. “He’s finally asleep.”

“We’re going to have to wake him,” Alfred replies, his voice thick with regret. He doesn’t seem surprised that she’s there. “I’m afraid these cannot wait.”

It’s medicine: a tiny plastic cup full of small pills and a bottle of water.

“Would you like to stay for breakfast?” Alfred offers, regardless of his own opinion of her, as she knew he would. She declines.

“Bruce,” she says, shaking him gently.

He grabs her hand as he stirs.

“Stay,” he mumbles.

She should have left while he was asleep.

“No,” she says. “I can’t.”

She leans back as he sits up. He takes the medicine Alfred offers him, chases it down with a long swallow from the bottle of water.

Selina stands and slips her shoes back on, tugging the backs of her flats over her heels.

“I’ll see you around,” he says, not looking at her. He knows how the dance goes. It is too late to change their steps.

They are getting old.

Selina pauses by the door, looks back at him. She thinks of her own apartment, the plain bagel she’ll toast and smear with cream cheese and then give half of to her cats when her appetite wanes.

Bruce is on his feet, folding a blanket that she now sees is very much like a cape. How did she not notice before? Her heart is in her throat, thinking of the first time she saw him, when he was just a
silhouette against the sky.

What if his vision never recovers? Where does that leave their next step, if not in the shadows of rooftops, under a waning moon?

There is gray at his temples.

He is only thirty-eight.

She has spent the last nine mornings eating a bagel alone.

“I’ll stay,” she says suddenly. “But only for coffee.”

Bruce doesn’t look up from the couch cushions he is straightening, but he smiles.

Chapter End Notes

you know, I started this chapter partly for a friend, and it ended up being one of my favorite things to write.
Cassandra Cain is sitting under the desk in the study, not hiding like a fugitive, just being. It is a nice place. It is like a safe box or a squared off cave, a wonderful little home for capturing herself and sorting things.

She knows he knows she is there. She is the only one he did not chase away after the eye doctor appointment. His moods lately have been like honey or white vinegar. He is more gentle, sweeter than usual, or prone to say more cutting things, to lapse into dark silences.

He is in a white vinegar mood right now. He returned, with Alfred, from the eye doctor ten minutes ago. He is still sitting by the bookcase in the corner. She has not heard him move. He hasn’t spoken to anyone after yelling at Alfred in the hall.

But he let her stay there.

Cass slips her hand up and snags his earbuds off the desk, pulls them down with her and slips them into her hoodie pocket. Then she pulls out her phone and taps out pictures. This has cheered him up before.

She can hear his phone buzz from across the room, it is so silent around them.

He walks toward her.

“Cass, where are my earbuds?” He asks from right above the desk, on the other side, where she cannot see his legs. Cass doesn’t say anything. She likes to hear it. He sighs, a little annoyed, and leans against the desk to sit there. If she lowers her head, almost touching the floor, she can see his feet in their black socks just through the four inch gap.

<Tuesday, September 15. Cassandra Wayne. Message: “VIOLIN, SAD FACE, COFFIN.”>

The phone reads the message, translating the emojis. Cass had felt a rotten leaves kind of fear when his eyes were broken, but it has not stopped them from talking. He found a way.

“Cass,” he says out loud to her, sounding not as amused as she had hoped with her tiny seed of hope.

There’s a knock at the door before she can type or think or speak a reply.

“Come in,” Bruce says.

The door opens and it smells like sunshine and ink. It’s Clark.

She thinks of him that way now, after he taught her the clapping game. She thought he was always Superman, just hiding under skinny ties and acetate (she knows that word, it’s a good sound) glasses, but no. He is like Bruce. Bruce is not Bruce Wayne but he pretends to be. Bruce is sometimes Batman but sometimes he is just Bruce. Clark is the same. And the more time he spends around them, instead of just with Bruce, the more she feels like gray stone by a river on a summer day. It’s a warm feeling. Not close. Not soft. Just warm. Is affectionate the word she wants?

But today. Right now.
Now is not a good time.

Bruce did not even laugh at her pity joke.

“Clark,” Bruce says. His voice is like vinegar and cold oil. There is something sour, something that could be dangerous if it grows hot.

“Hey,” Clark says to him. “Alfred let me in. We’re long overdue for a round of Scrabble.”

Inside of her, Cass is a fire alarm. What is he doing? Did he take his brain for a walk and leave it in the rain and now it is sick and dying of fever, sneezing all over everything?

“Clark,” Bruce says again, and it is a warning like the alarm inside her. It is the kind that says Please do not use the elevators.

Then there is the sound of rattling tiles, clicking like little gathered bones, shut up inside a box.

“What is this?” Bruce asks, and his voice is a little like sandpaper. All the fire alarm and hot oil are gone. Cass wants to crawl out and see but she doesn’t move, she is like a rock deciding if it wants to be warm again or not.

“It’s a set of Braille scrabble tiles. And a Braille chart, just in case, but I’m guessing you can already read Braille.”

The study is without breath.

“It’s been a while, but give me a few minutes to brush up,” Bruce says when the room is about to die without oxygen. It is like being on a rollercoaster with Dick, tipping over the edge ready to scream, and then going down the steep slope more slowly than she walks.

Cass pulls out her phone and taps rapidly, furiously, needfully.

The phone buzzes and she has his earbuds still tucked in her hoodie. She knows he is distracted, will play the message without thinking. Or she hopes, with a small seed of hope again.

<Tuesday, September 15. Cassandra Wayne. “NERD FACE, GRINNING FACE, SMILING FACE WITH HEART SHAPED EYES, LOUDLY CRYING FACE, EXTRATERRESTRIAL ALIEN, HUGGING FACE.”>

There is a different kind of silence, a shorter one.

Clark laughs.

“Thank you,” Bruce says to Clark, all the vinegar gone from him. “She’s right.”

“Don’t mention it,” Clark says, and they are walking away to the low table between the couch and chairs on the rug, moving furniture.

“Come out, Cass,” Bruce says to her, and she crawls out with a grin.

The table has been moved closer to the couch, a chair set directly across from it. Cass sits on the floor next to Bruce’s legs, her back and knees wedged between the couch and the table in a happy, pressed origami way. She has always wanted to watch them play. Being here is like a wrapping paper and silver bow feeling.

“Root language?” Bruce asks.
“Latin,” Clark replies. “I’m going to take it easy on you.”

“Don’t you dare,” Bruce answers, flipping tiles as Cass watches. She doesn’t understand what their conversation means but she’s glad they are still getting along, that Clark arrived at the wrong time but in the right way for it.

She looks at Clark, to smile, but stops. There is something sad in him; she didn’t see it until just now. Something he is not saying. Her smile fades. If Bruce doesn’t notice, she has her phone. And then she feels herself like a weed, choking out the words they want to say to each other. She should leave.

Bruce’s hand brushes the top of her head once, while he puts tiles on a tray. It is better than a word. It means stay. But she must be careful, thoughtful. Is he using her to avoid a sad thing? Is she a shield? Has he not noticed the sad thing in Clark? She should still leave.

“Selina came by the other day,” Bruce says and Cass freezes. She does not get up. She settles back down. No, he has noticed. He is choosing to make her invisible. And it is not the bad kind, it is the important kind. What is it? Trust.

“Alfred told me,” Clark says. “He said she stayed for breakfast.”

And there it is again, from him, too.

She will be the best at being invisible. This is better than the gift of watching the game.

Tiles go down on the board from Clark’s hand and she reads their shapes. It takes a moment for the lines to stop being their own picture to her and start meaning another. FORGE. She isn’t sure if that’s a good word to start with or not. This is not her game. They are the ones that can dance with words.

“Alfred needs to mind his own business,” Bruce replies, but he is not angry like hot oil.

“Do you think you’ll see her again?” Clark asks.

“Eventually,” Bruce replies. Cass wonders at this, the little edge of bittersweet, like too-sour lemonade. It is their word.

“Hmm,” Clark says in reply.

They’re quiet for a few minutes. She watches the formation of words, filling up the board with cream squares of letters and bumps. Her face is near the tray that belongs to Bruce, and she watches him run his finger over each tile he flips over before adding it to the others. He does this once, for each word Clark plays, and then not again. She is astounded and not astounded that he remembers all of it. It is something he would do, and it is something that is not easily done.

“How are your eyes?” Clark asks. Cass tenses. She is again astounded; she still forgets that he can ask things others can’t, hear answers others will not be allowed to hear. And she is tucked into the furniture, also hearing. Bruce does not avoid the question here, in front of the game.

“I went in for an evaluation today. It’s probably going to be a few months of therapy and other things.”

“They said a year?” Clark asks.

“She said a year. But she’s wrong.”

Clark is chuckling, playing another word. Bruce leans forward to run his fingers across the tiles.
“That’s not a Latin root,” he says. Clark grumbles and stands.

“I’m getting a dictionary,” he says. “Because it is. And you should be ready for it to take a year.”

“Dev guessed eight months, and he’s better than she is,” Bruce counters. “And it’s not Latin.”

“Huh,” Clark says from near the bookshelves, a dark green book in his hands. “You’re wrong.”

She looks up at Bruce’s face. There is a scowl there.

“Let Cass read it,” he says.

Clark brings the dictionary over and hands it to her, points to the word.

“You didn’t let her stay in here just for this, did you?” Clark asks while she reads it over. The sounds of the words aren’t a problem but there are symbols involved.

“No,” Bruce says and she knows he means it.

The word lists two roots.

“It is Greek and Latin,” she says. “Both.”

“Hnn,” he says, frowning.

Cass reaches up and taps two fingers against the side of his head.

“Patience,” she says, because it feels like the right word even if he won’t like the sound of it.

He doesn’t say anything but his frown fades a little, and the game resumes.

Cass goes back to being invisible.

Clark has still not said what his sadness is for, and it is on him like a blanket or a cape. Bruce is quiet and when she looks at his face she sees that he is not upset, he is her word: patience.

There are six more words on the board before Clark speaks again.

“I stopped a train from derailing yesterday,” he says, as if this is a thing everyone does. Cass looks at his hands. They are the same hands that taught her a clapping game. They are not even bruised.

“I heard on the news,” Bruce says.

“There was a car,” Clark says. He swallows like he is eating the sad on him but it won’t go down. “It was at an intersection. The train hit it.”

Bruce says nothing.

Cass is invisible.

“Just the front bumper, but it started spinning. The driver wasn’t wearing a seat belt. He didn’t make it.”

Invisible Cass watches Clark sit like a statue.

Cass is like a warm gray rock splashed with icy river water.
“It’s not your fault,” Bruce says.

Clark is like a puppet on a string. His shoulders shrug, but just a little, like being pulled.

“That’s what Lois said,” Clark replies.

Cass is so invisible she almost doesn’t exist.

Her heart is very heavy for a heart that is almost not real.

“It’s not your fault,” Bruce says again.

“I know,” Clark sits back and sighs. “I know she’s right. Sometimes I think I just need to hear it from you, because I know you wouldn’t hesitate to tell me if it was my fault.”

Cass is invisible and Cass is relieved, sad, warm, cold, bittersweet.

She pulls her phone out of her hoodie pocket, but keeps the earbuds hidden away.

She knows what it is like both ways, to be responsible and know and to be not responsible and not know.

And words are not easy for her.

<Tuesday, September 15. Cassandra Wayne. “GIRL LIGHT BROWN SKIN. CLAPPING HANDS. RED HEART.”>

When Clark looks at her she is not invisible. She is a warm gray rock and rocks are hard, they are steady, they are unyielding, they are solid ground.

Clark swallows and this time, she sees the sadness go down with it. There’s a little in his eyes but she knows hers are the same. They have to be.

“Your word,” Bruce says.

Clark looks down at the tiles and grumbles, “I don’t know how I feel about being double-teamed by the Waynes.”

But it is a pleasant kind of grumble.

“Don’t get used to it,” Bruce warns.

Cass understands. This is not a shiny new normal. These weeks are cocooned in “just this once” and “never again” and “only for a few days.” They are hard crutches under Bruce’s limping life right now.

“The ophthalmologist I saw wants me to get glasses,” Bruce says suddenly. “To help while the neurological side is being corrected.”

Clark laughs a small laugh, the sadness tucked away with other sadnesses. Cass knows.

“Don’t sound so disgusted,” he says. “They aren’t the worst thing in the world.”

“You don’t need yours,” Bruce says, a touch of the white vinegar back.

“I like mine,” Clark replies. “I spend time picking them out. I get mad when they break. And
anyway, maybe it's time to recreate your image. It's getting colder out and last year you told me you felt weird wearing those black turtlenecks, after Steve Jobs.”

“I didn’t say weird,” Bruce protests, playing a word on the board. “I said it seemed socially insensitive and inappropriate for one tech conference.”

“Oh, yeah, the Summit,” Clark says, frowning at his tiles. “I covered that. I wondered where we’d had that conversation. Anyway, don’t knock the glasses. You got off easy, considering.”

“I know,” Bruce says.

Clark plays a word. Cass is watching his face. He’s waiting for Bruce to start laying tiles down, a smile trying to escape out of him onto his lips. When Bruce leans forward, he speaks again.

“Hear me out, though. Tortoiseshell keyhole frames, something thick. You grow a beard, have Alfred find some good mustache wax. Lumberjack flannel shirts. You can pick the colors. I don’t know about skinny jeans, but definitely black Levis. Pastel Keds. Or do you have any old leather boots? Really old ones?”

Bruce has turned into rock like Cass, except he is not warm or gray or near a river. He is black and frigid and deep under the earth.

“This,” he says, his voice tight, “is exactly why I didn’t want to tell you.”

Cass is trying so hard to be invisible.

But then Clark looks right at her and grins.

She cannot hold back the laugh that soars out of her throat like an animal set free. She claps a hand over her mouth to try but it does no good.

Bruce fumbles the tile in his fingers when he is startled by her laughing, looking sharply at her, and he says,

“Damn it, Clark, I can’t even remember the board now.”

But he is laughing.

It is like blue wrapping paper with a bright gold bow.

A gift.

Chapter End Notes

hey you guys. sans editing, I finished writing the LAST SCENE TONIGHT. so I'm uploading another chapter to celebrate! we've got about seven more after this one. Thank you so much for reading and commenting!

Also, the assistive tech feature Bruce and Cass are using is a real thing! It's pretty awesome!
The Catalyst

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sun is just setting when Barbara Gordon pulls up in front of the Manor. A breeze warmer than any October breeze has a right to be blows over her arm when she opens the door. It’s been in the eighties for three days now and there are no signs that it’s letting up.

Stupid Indian summer. She was just starting to enjoy wearing sweaters again when it swept in, rendering caramel apple cider and scarves disgusting for another week or two.

Babs pulls out her phone and sends a text. She really doesn’t feel like roaming all over the grounds trying to find him.

By the pool.

She goes through the manor and out the back patio. The house lights are on in the dimming natural light and Bruce and Jason are not actually by the pool, they are both standing next to a shrub looking at the leaves on it, talking.

“Is it an especially interesting shrub?” Babs asks.

They both turn.

“It’s jasmine,” Bruce says, as if this explains their interest. They join her on the patio. She has a manilla folder on her lap and she promptly hands it to Bruce.

“Everything’s in order,” she says.

He flips open the folder and glances through it, squinting a little even with the glasses he’s wearing.

“Thanks,” he says to her. He hands the folder to Jason and says, “Here, these are yours.”

She can tell by the look on Jason’s face that he has no idea what’s going on and it figures that Bruce wouldn’t have bothered explaining anything or preparing him. In fact, Bruce is walking away, back toward the study, leaving Jason to look at the contents of the folder while she either ignores him or explains.

Babs picks the latter, even though she has super mixed feelings about this entire endeavor.

“They’re identity and adoption papers,” she says, as Jason reads them in the failing evening light, his eyes widening. “He had them drawn up a while ago but they’ve just been sitting. He heard from Clark that you might be ready, I guess.”

Jason snaps the folder shut and strides away from her, muttering, “Gorram Jiminy cricket.”

She had a vague suspicion this wouldn’t end well and she’s wondering if it’s why Bruce bailed. She watches Jason stalk across the yard and then go into the house through a window, taking the most direct route to the room he wanted, apparently.

It’s the study.

She goes back inside the normal way, through the doors and down the hall until she’s outside the
open study door catching the tail end of a hug between Jason and Bruce.

So, maybe it’s not going as badly as she thought.

“I’m going to go for a ride,” Jason says, glancing over at Babs.

“We have a chapter of *Anathem* to finish,” Bruce says.

Babs doesn’t have to have it spelled out for her, the code in their conversation: *I need some time to think* and *okay, but come back.*

She lets Jason go by, the folder still in his hand, and she wheels herself into the room.

“He’s still reading to you?” she asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes,” Bruce says, and he doesn’t elaborate.

Babs is both touched by and super curious about this arrangement but she doesn’t press.

“Thanks for bringing the papers,” he says.

“No problem. I just wanted to tell you,” Babs wheels herself back and forth a little, idle movement to keep herself busy while she talks, “I’ve noticed how hard you’ve been trying to be nice to everyone. That sounds childish. I mean…you haven’t been shutting us out. And I’m sure it’s been uncomfortable sometimes, and I really appreciate that you’re trying.”

Bruce *looks* a little uncomfortable, like he’s not sure what to do with this, but finally he nods.

“It has been hard,” he says and then he leaves it hanging there for moment. “But it’s been good, too.”

“I told Dick I’d go downstairs while I was here,” she says, feeling like she should give him some space.

“I’ll come down with you,” he answers.

“Are you sure?” She asks, waiting by the door. “I mean…Dick said you haven’t been down since…”

But he’s already ahead of her in the hallway, saying in a voice ringing with familiar authority,

“It’s been six weeks.”

As if that makes it okay.

She follows him, a sense of dread enveloping her. She knows him. He’s going to have a hard time holding back. She should say something; she knows what it’s like to push too much, too soon.

But maybe he needs to just figure it out for himself. It’s not like he’s never recovered from things before.

And he’s smart. Maybe he’ll assess his limits well and just look around.

They are in the cave for approximately two seconds before she realizes this was a gross misjudgment on her part. He strides right off the elevator, calling out ahead of him,

“Dick! Come spar with me.”
“What? Really?” Dick looks up from the parallel bars across the room and drops to the floor, dusting his hands off as he walks toward them. Damian’s head pokes up from under the hood of the Batmobile.

“Bruce…” Babs begins to say, but he gives her a look that isn’t quite angry. Just discouraging. He hands her his glasses.

“Just light sparring,” he says to Dick. “I’ve been working out upstairs. Dev says I’m fine for normal activity.”

Babs listens to him, really listens hard to his voice. He’s not pleading or wheedling, he’s just telling them. He’s just Bruce again.

And he’s already on the mat. Dick looks wary, but eager, too. Babs can see from here how much he wants him to be okay. They make eye contact, her and Dick, for a brief second and she gives a little shrug.

Bruce does sound okay.

“Are you afraid you can’t take me?” Bruce challenges Dick with a grin. He’s in his element again, Babs can see it all over him. He’s home.

Dick joins him. Bruce moves first, and he’s fast, even holding back. Dick matches his pace and force and Babs relaxes a little when she sees they know what they’re doing, of course they do. It’s all light blows and a steady stream of exchanged blocks and side steps and strikes.

This is fine, she thinks. It’s working, it will be good for him, he can build back up slowly. It’s been over a month and as long as he’s careful…

“Master Bruce!”

The clear, sharp displeasure rings across the cave from behind Barbara and then everything slows for her. It’s a frame by frame where she is sluggish, watching and unable to act.

Alfred’s voice is the starting gun.

Bruce, who has an arm up to block a kick he knows is coming, is startled.

His arm falls.

His head turns.

Dick’s eyes widen because he sees, he knows, and he twists trying to pull back but it is too late to do anything but barely lessen the blow.

Babs shouts, knowing it is useless, but she must do something.

The moment of impact, the thuck of foot against skull, is when everything hurricanes back to speed, overshooting real time and slinging into rapid chaos.

It would be no big deal if everything was normal.

But nothing has been normal recently.

And Bruce has tender young scar tissue covering a literal craniotomy hole in his skull.
A savage bellow tears out of his throat and he doubles over, one hand on the back of his head, and then he topples to his knees.

Babs is down the ramp before she’s even aware that she’s moving. Alfred is sprinting next to her and Dick is frozen, a white ghost with horrified eyes.

There is a low groaning pouring out of Bruce and it fizzles out in a whimper. His breath hitches and Alfred is snapping his fingers at Dick, saying,


Dick moves. There’s a trash can by the computer desk and he vaults over the railing to get it. He’s still three steps away when Bruce pukes, one hand planted against the mat to brace himself.

*Oh, God, this is bad,* Babs thinks and she spins. Damian is by the Batmobile and she yells at him,

“Go! Call Dr. Dev right now. Tell him Bruce fell down the stairs.”

Damian nods and runs. She’s so grateful in that moment that he is Damian, thought and action in the same breath.

She turns back to the men. Bruce is not moving, not making any noise, just breathing.

“We have to get him upstairs,” she says. She wishes for the first time in her life that her wheelchair had handles.

“Dr. Dev can—” Alfred begins.

But she is not Barbara right this minute.

She is Oracle and this is their cave.

“No, Alfred,” she says sharply. “Upstairs.”

He nods.

“Bruce,” she says, “can you stand up?”

For a moment, his breathing is more rapid and then he pushes himself to his feet and staggers, his eyes squeezed shut. Dick grabs his arm and Bruce shoves him off, steps over puke, and heads for the elevator.

“What was he doing down here?” Alfred demands, as they follow him.

“He was fine,” Dick says, and he sounds like he’s near tears. “He was fine.”

Alfred looks back at Babs and she sets her jaw. She’s not going to lie to him. She nods.

“He was fine.”

Alfred looks stricken.

They ride up in the elevator, Bruce leaning heavily on the wall. Right before the doors open, he bends at the waist with his fingers gripping his knees, swallows, and curses hoarsely. The doors open and he stands and stumbles off ahead of them.
“Get ice,” Barbara says as soon as Bruce sits down on the steps in the foyer, his head in his hands. She doesn’t care if it’s Dick or Alfred who listens.

“Bruce,” she says, when he has an ice pack on the back of his head. “I want you to stay awake. You talk or I do.”

“You,” he says tightly.

She talks. She talks about anything and everything for twenty straight minutes, until Dev is there. He bursts into the foyer without knocking. His car is beeping in the driveway, the driver side door still open.

He strides across the foyer to where Bruce and Babs are, crouches in front of Bruce and tilts his chin up with two fingers.

“Look at me,” he orders.

Bruce’s eyes open for a fraction of a second and he winces.

“Hospital,” Dev says, standing. “Right now. Let’s go. I’m driving.”

“I’m going,” Damian says from by the door. He’s in clothes that still have oil stains from the Batmobile engine.

“Whatever,” Dev answers, still looking at Bruce. “Go get in.”

Damian doesn’t wait for more.

“Up,” Dev orders, tucking a hand under Bruce’s arm and pulling him to his feet. “Walk. Straight.”

Babs scoots out of the way.

“Two steps left,” Dev is saying. “Step down. Straight again. Six steps down. Turn right. Again.”

A car door opens and closes.

“Alfie!” Dev shouts and Alfred goes.

The car tears out of the drive and Dick and Babs are left in the foyer, alone.

“This isn’t your fault,” she says, turning to him. “But you were both being stupid. He wasn’t ready.”

Dick is deflated. His head drops and Babs knows there isn’t anything she could say that would make this not his fault, to him.

She’s suddenly angry at Bruce.

He should have known better. The risks were still too high.

“I’m going to go clean up downstairs,” Dick says in a small voice. “Then, should we go, right? To the hospital?”

“Yeah,” Babs says. “I’ll text Jason and wait in the car. Grab some clothes for Bruce. And change.”

They pull into the hospital a little under an hour later, wait in the emergency room for a while, and then an orderly finds them and asks if they’re with Mr. Wayne. They are led to a hallway lined with
numbered doors. Dev is at the nurse’s station scribbling on a pad of paper.

“Stairs?” he asks, when they are closer. “That’s your story?”

“He tripped,” Dick says easily. “At the top.”

“Hmm,” Dev says. He turns to them.

“I suppose you’ve not had an update. Alfie seems beside himself.”

“We haven’t heard anything,” Babs says. “How is he?”

“Don’t rush me,” Dev says, irritated. He rolls one shoulder and tucks the pad of paper he was writing on underneath his arm. “We got him in for a scan. The good news is, no hemorrhaging. The bad news is some cerebral edema. We’re keeping him overnight and starting another week of dexamethasone and phenytoin.”

“Is he going to be okay?” Dick asks impatiently. Babs knows he will ask later for a translation of the medical jargon.

“Okay?” Dev slaps a hand down on the counter at his side. A nurse jumps and frowns at them. “I don’t know. We wait and see. Because people six weeks out of brain surgery should not fall down the bloody stairs.”

The way he is scowling at them, it is clear he still does not believe the story.

Dick turns and walks away.

“Dick,” Babs spins and calls after him, but he doesn’t stop. She sighs and looks back at Dev. He is undaunted.

“Stairs,” he says again with a growl, muttering to himself as he takes off the opposite way. “I give them a bloody miracle and they give me fucking stairs. Bugger me.”

Babs is left alone in the hallway. Her phone vibrates with a text from Jason, finally.

wtf where is he? what room? @hospital

Babs lets out a short, bitter laugh.

You know, she types, no one told me. I don’t even know.

Chapter End Notes

...and now back to your regularly scheduled full-angst.

sorrenotsorry.
The Poison (An Interlude)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Alfred wipes down the speckled counters in the kitchen, sweeping crumbs deftly into his hand to shake them off in the trash. They have been home for two days.

He glances at Bruce, who is chewing eggs like he hates them, sipping coffee like it is poison. Or, that is what one could surmise based on his expression.

Alfred clears his throat to speak, to say something good-humored, to shake Bruce out of it and back into the present world.

_He was fine, he was fine_ Alfred hears in his own head. If only he hadn’t over-reacted, hadn’t shouted. If only he had been silent and watched for a moment.

Alfred does not speak. He finishes wiping the counters and watches Bruce get up and leave the room.

Dick hides in the Batcave, firm in the conviction that Bruce will not be down again anytime soon. It is a good place to be to avoid him.

He can’t even look him in the face, much less speak to him to apologize.

Thank God he’s alive at least.

_You were both being stupid_ he hears again in his head. It’s true, he was being stupid. Just because he wanted to see that Bruce was doing better. He should have said no, he should have argued, he should have resisted a bit more.

Bruce is alive but Bruce is angry and he has every right to be. Dick was not careful.

This is all his fault.

_I can’t stay here_ he texts Stephanie. And he knows it is selfish, but he adds, _going to take Damian to my apartment for a few days._

The reply comes a few minutes later.

_don’t. he needs to be with his dad. suck it up, buttercup._

He can do that. He can do it for Damian if not for himself.

He can just stay in the cave, right?

Oracle jerks the broken keyboard off the desk and shoves it into a trash can. She gets another from a storage shelf and replaces it, grumbling.

The comm is silent while she works.

Her brain is not.
She knew he was going to overdo it. It was too early, his reflexes still not sharp enough, otherwise he never would have dropped his arm just because of a shouted name.

She should have said something, reasoned with him before they went downstairs.

She’s too mad at herself to reach out to him.

She’s too mad at him to apologize.

She just needs time to cool off, then she’ll be more rational, she’ll be able to help him work on some guidelines for returning to all of it.

But she needs time.

And so does he.

Damian does his homework, goes to school, comes home, does homework again in his room, and stays in his room until night falls. He has projects up there to work on anyway.

He should have been sparring instead of Dick. He should have offered. His control is better, it’s sharper.

He should have moved fast enough, knocked Dick down so the kick didn’t land.

But he didn’t. So he closes his eyes in his bedroom every afternoon and hears the noise Father made when he fell, over and over and over.

He goes on patrol with Dick but they never talk about it. It’s easier to pretend nothing is wrong, so Damian allows this, for both of them.

He doesn’t want to take the suit off in the mornings.

But he goes to school anyway, because then at least, he doesn’t have to be in the house with Father, who is too kind or too sick to bring up Damian’s responsibility in all this.

He’s the blood son. He should have done something.

He goes to school.

Jason reads less and less. They’re limping through Anathem and he hates it, knowing that Bruce loves the density and that Jason is dragging it out because his mind keeps wandering.

I’m going to go for a ride, he had said.

Because he’s always running. It’s what he does now. Even from good things, like Todd Jacob Wayne on pieces of paper with government seals.

I still wanted to be able to call you Jay, officially Bruce had said. That was all he had said. There wasn’t anything else to say.

He should have been there. This never would have happened if he had been there.

And even after the hospital discharge, he knows things are different. The headaches are worse. They found Bruce’s glasses on the floor in the cave but he wears them less. Won’t keep his eyes open.
Jason should have been there. Bruce would have listened to him, now, after all the time they’ve spent together.

He puts the audiobook version of *Anathem* on Bruce’s phone. Bruce needs a good distraction, not Jason’s constant breaks and interruptions and pacing.

He doesn’t run. It is all he can do, just to not run. But he can, for once in his life, at least manage that.

________________________________________

The headaches are finally ebbing but his anger is still there. After two weeks, the headaches that are a direct result of the swelling and a side effect of restarting both drugs and an after effect of the mild withdrawal of re-stopping both drugs-- *those* headaches-- they are fading.

*What was he doing down here?*

What was he doing? What was he thinking, putting himself and Dick in that position?

He wasn’t ready. In good condition, he never would have dropped his arm or turned because of a sound. His focus was all over the place and he should have known better.

What a fucking disaster.

*His* cave. He’d collapsed in *his* cave because he tried to rush things. He’d scared his sons, embarrassed himself, put himself in actual danger because he wasn’t ready.

Six weeks. He should have been ready after six weeks to handle *sparring*. He hasn’t been pushing or working hard enough. This has to change.

His head hurts. He can barely see.

He’s just going to sit at the desk in the study for a bit longer, then another twenty push-ups.

Fuck the headaches.

He should be *better* by now.

It’s his own damn fault if he’s not.

Chapter End Notes

what is this. i am breaking chapter title format.

also chapter format. oh yes.

i am.
The Estranged

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The early December air is chilled but not really cold yet, the lingering Indian summer prolonging weather that feels right for football and tailgating.

The campus is a frenzy of holiday sports activity, finals preparations, and drunken holiday partying that, if anyone is honest, has really been going on non-stop since Halloween.

Stephanie is glad to escape it. It’s gotten so bad she’s been tempted to spend nights just patrolling campus to prevent date rapes and accidental stabbings.

And since the other alternative tonight is a crazy depressing holiday office party her mom is going to, Steph is relieved for maybe the first time ever to have been roped into a Wayne Manor Christmas party.

Not the kind where Alfred makes too much popcorn and hot chocolate and whoever is around watches *Die Hard* or *It’s a Wonderful Life*, but a Real Wayne Manor Christmas Gala, with tuxes and expensive dresses and sickeningly expensive jewelry.

She’s ostensibly there as a babysitter for Damian, but ever since Bruce’s surgery, every favor or request with Damian also feels like a reassuring reminder of belonging. They could hire a babysitter, but they want her there, with the family. It’s the society cover for how much they want her to be included.

It would be a little more pleasant if Bruce didn’t seem like he was in such a bad mood recently, but maybe he just really hates parties.

Either way, Steph had an excuse to get out of her mom’s party, to get off campus and away from finals, and she got to spend almost two hours getting herself and Cass into uh-may-zing dresses, doing the quiet girl’s hair and then her own, and painting their nails in French manicures while *The Princess Bride* played in the background.

Steph is a serious, smart woman and she can kick ass with the best of them, but sometimes you just need a girls’ night, or afternoon, or whatever. It’s not a bad way to spend the day.

And now she’s here.

The party is roaring around them in the massive ballroom in the wing of the Manor reserved for public functions, the industrial kitchen spitting out hor d’oeuvres and drinks, and Damian looks so cute in his little tux that she kind of wants to squeeze him, but he’d probably kill her.

The windows on the west wall are cracked open to let in the moderate breeze. She trails Damian around the party as he talks to people, alternating between haughty comments and dissolving into a sweet, oblivious child act depending on who he’s talking to. And he’s getting *good* at it. He must have been practicing.

They float through the evening. At one point, he tugs her down to be near his face with his phone extended and orders tersely, “Smile.”

She does, and he has a wide, open-mouthed, excited grin plastered on his face for a whole second.
Then his frown returns and he studies the picture, taps at his phone.

“Grayson said I need to work on maintaining my social media services,” he says, his voice dripping with disdain.

“You aren’t even old enough to have social media,” Steph retorts.

“That doesn’t stop other eleven year olds, apparently,” he says and she can’t argue.

“I’m tagging you,” he says as if it pains him. “Otherwise, my school friends will be difficult.”

“Why would tagging me make them not difficult?” Steph asks, snagging a small quiche as a tray goes by.

“Because they’ll look at your own account and see that you’re not that interesting.”

“God, Damian,” she laughs, “if you like someone you aren’t supposed to insult them like that.”

Her heart is tough. She’s ready to hear him easily dismiss her, to say he doesn’t like her, actually.

“Insults are how Drake and Grayson display affection. And Grayson and Gordon. And Father and Clark.”

He has been staring steadily at his phone but he glances up now, gives her a small, shy smile, and then it is gone again.

“Aww, Damian,” she teases, ruffling his hair while he jerks his head away, “I didn’t know you cared.”

“Tt,” he says.

They eat more snacks, mingle for a while. Even Steph is fully and completely bored by the time eleven rolls around. She does her job, makes a show of extracting him from being teased and coddled by a group of middle-aged women.

“Let’s go, Damian,” Steph says in front of all of them. “It’s way past your bedtime, little man.”

He glowers at her but follows her away from the women calling good night, stops for a formal farewell with Bruce who smiles and pats his shoulder absently while keeping up a conversation about stock market activity. They leave the ballroom together and Steph yawns.

Out in the hall, she slows and looks at him. He looks a little miffed, maybe he thinks he’s really being ushered to bed. But there’s no way she’s doing that to him.

“Okay, appearances kept up. What are we doing? Video games? Movie?” she asks.

“I should be in there,” he says peevishly. And she’s surprised that he’s serious.

“Damian, any your brothers would die to get out of there early right now.”

“That’s because they don’t understand how important it is. I do. I’m his real son,” Damian spits at her.

The hall is quiet but Stephanie is not looking at Damian.

Damian turns slowly, to see his father towering above him in his tux. His face is shadowed with rage
in a way that Steph hasn’t seen for a long time. The glasses Steph is still not used to seeing him wear do nothing to dim the fury.

“They are all my real sons,” Bruce says, his words scraping through the air like metal on concrete. “And you cannot say shit like that. Ever. In fact, you’re grounded. No going anywhere, no TV, no patrol. For a week.”

Steph is glad someone is calling Damian out on saying things like this, she’s over the moon happy to hear Bruce defend the others, but even she thinks this is a little excessive, coming out of nowhere. She’d known he was a little moody recently, but this?

“But it’s school break next week! I’m supposed to go to the Kent farm!”

Steph wants to hiss at him, *Damian, shut up*, but she doesn’t. Bruce is already walking away from them, but calls back without turning,

“So you aren’t going.” And then he mutters, loudly enough that he has to know they can hear, “The last thing we need right now is another fucking dog.”

Slowly, she turns to Damian, half-expecting him to have a knife out in his hand. His hands are trembling and his tanned skin has gone pale with anger. She grabs his arm and pulls him down the hallway before he can go after Bruce.

She knows he’s shaken when he doesn’t fight her, but lets himself be dragged out of the decorated wing of the house, through the private halls, and into the den.

Then she releases her grip on his arm and orders,

“Pick anything. I don’t care what the rating is.”

“But he just said—” Damian looks over his shoulder toward the door, confused. He’s used to defying his father in small ways but he’s not used to having encouragement.

“I don’t care what he said,” Steph says. “And anything you want to eat.”

She doesn’t want to spoil him. She wants to distract him so the Christmas party doesn’t turn into a murder scene over a puppy. A puppy Damian already has twenty pictures of from Martha Kent on his phone, a puppy that he has already named, and gotten a collar for.

How could Bruce be so stupid? So cruel?

Damian glances toward the PS4 now.

“Anything?” he asks, willing to go along.

*Good kid,* Steph thinks. He’s showing an admirable level of restraint. He’s participating in his own distraction. On purpose.

“Anything,” she says.

“Grand Theft Auto,” he answers. “And I’m playing Todd’s file.”

“Fine, whatever, I’ll deal with him,” she says. “Go. What do you want to eat?”

“Hummus,” he grumbles, half-heartedly. “But I would also accept anything from the high cabinet to the left of the refrigerator. That’s where Pennyworth hides all the good stuff.”
Damian is turning on the PS4 when she leaves the room.

He was not kidding about the cabinet, which is so far above the counter she has to kneel on the granite in her drapey dark purple dress to reach it. It is the kind of cabinet her mom would use to keep dusty wine glasses and broken blender parts and appliance warranties. But this one is packed deep with junk food she hadn’t even thought Alfred knew existed.

Steph goes back to the den with an armful of stuff and drops it by Damian on the floor.

“Knock yourself out,” she says. “I’ll be right back.”

“Tt,” he says, eyes locked on the screen.

Steph hurries through the long hallways back to the ballroom and plunges back into the party. It’s still in full swing, people everywhere. She stops by one of the bar tables, waits until the bartender is looking the other way, and snags a flute of champagne. She downs it fast just in case he turns and notices, and leaves the empty glass on the table.

Then, she goes hunting.

She finds Dick chatting with an elderly woman on the far side of the room. He is listening patiently, nodding, smiling a lot. He has so much practice with this sort of thing by now, he’s a natural.

Steph is reluctant to interrupt, to make anything approaching a scene. She scans the room.

Bruce is near the center, laughing at something someone has told him. He looks perfectly at ease, a little tipsy, not a care in the world. There’s a small crowd around him now, and he’s telling a story, she thinks.

She takes another step or two closer to Dick and hisses in his direction,

“Dick. Dick.”

A man at her elbow whirs to face her and gives her a disgusted and annoyed look.

“No you,” she snaps, and then she remembers. She composes herself, smiles, looks embarrassed, “Oh my god, I’m so sorry. I’m just the babysitter. I need to get Dick Wayne’s attention, about his brother. Just ignore me.”

He chuckles, placated, and returns to his conversation without a word.

Dick has excused himself from the company of the elderly woman and is already at her side, and they walk away together toward a corner with a large Christmas tree and a stereo speaker.

“What’s up?” he asks through a fake smile. “Is it business?”

“No, it’s Bruce,” she whispers back. “He just about tore Damian’s head off over a stupid comment. Were you still thinking about taking him to stay with you?”

“After the Kents, yeah,” Dick answers, waving at someone walking by. “But you were opposed to that plan, if I remember correctly.”

“Well,” Steph says, looking over her shoulder at Bruce. She looks back at Dick. “Officially? I’m not anymore. And I don’t think he’s going to the Kents. I think you should get him out of here ASAP.”

“Steph,” Dick says, his voice thick with concern. His fake smile has vanished. “What happened?
Should I talk to Bruce?"

“No,” she says quickly. “No offense, but he’s been bitchy ever since you kicked him in the head. I think this is firmly in Alfred-only territory. Just get Damian out of here for a bit. I’ll help, with food, entertainment, whatever.”

“Okay,” he says, looking hurt. “We’ll focus on Damian. Alfred will know what to do with Bruce if we clear out for a few days.”

“Yes, thank you,” Steph says, relieved. She feels bad about bringing up the cave incident, but she doesn’t want things to spiral out of control tonight. “I’m going to go keep him company and maybe get him packed.”

“Steph,” Dick says, as she starts to walk away. “How bad? Really? Like, I hate to even ask, but is this party stress?”

He was right to be reluctant to ask. She’s super annoyed.

“No,” she snaps. “Bruce told him he can’t have the dog.”

“Shit,” Dick says, scowling and putting his hands in his suit pockets. Then he gathers himself, quickly, and smiles like they were talking about something trivial.

“We’ll take care of it,” he says.

“I know,” she replies. “And Dick, it’s not your fault he’s being an asshole. I’m sorry I brought it up.”

He shrugs and she knows he doesn’t completely believe her, but she can only do so much damage control. She leaves the party again, pausing in the hallway to take a few slow breaths.

Things had been going well, right? They had been getting better? She’d actually been excited to come to this.

But some things just never change.

When she gets back to the den, she says,

“Damian–”

He cuts her off.

“I sent a text message to Martha Kent,” he says stiffly. “I told her I was having second thoughts and concerned about how Titus would adjust. I also told her I was not feeling well and would like to postpone my visit.”

“Okay,” she says softly. “What did she say?”

She’s a little surprised he’s not fighting Bruce on this. It must mean it’s cutting him pretty deeply, or that he’s worried about Bruce, or both.

Damn that man.

“She said they would keep the dog for me for a few months in case I changed my mind,” he says. He hasn’t taken his eyes off the game once.

Steph spends the rest of the night sitting with Damian, ignoring the studying she should be doing for
her biology final. At some point, Cass wonders in and sits with her, gives her a hug and they watch Damian steal cars and fiddle with the in-game radio until she makes him mute it after the fifth f-word in thirty seconds.

It probably shouldn’t matter at this point but it still does.

At one point, she realizes he’s systematically destroying Jason’s saved file, dead-ending missions and ruining cars. But she doesn’t stop him. At least it’s just a game.

When the others start drifting back over from the party, she makes him turn it off and she and Cass get him upstairs and into bed, somewhere around two in the morning.

“Bruce is not well,” Cass says, as she watches Steph stuff a bunch of Damian’s clothes into a duffel from the closet.

“Nope,” Steph says in a whisper. She’s pretty sure Damian is asleep, passed out in a video game and sugar hangover. “He’s not. But that’s his problem. Damian isn’t going to be collateral damage.”

Cass disappears for a moment and returns with Damian’s toothbrush. She looks worried.

“He’s white vinegar,” she says. “But it’s not his fault.”

“He’s an adult, Cass,” Steph says, accidentally raising her voice a little. “It’s not fair to take it out on Damian. We’re not abandoning him, either, just clearing out for a little. He needs space.”

“Okay,” Cass says, her face lit by the glow of her phone screen as she checks it. She seems disappointed by whatever she sees. “I’ll come with you. Watch Gotham for him.”

“I think that’s a great idea,” Steph says, nodding. “Let Alfred handle this. We can help in other ways.”

She doesn’t want to be too discouraging. She knows Cass has a connection with Bruce that she doesn’t and it would be petty to let her own opinion right now damage that, but she doesn’t want to see Cass hurt either.

Steph zips the bag shut and drops it at the end of the bed.

“I’m not tired at all,” she says to Cass. “Are you?”

Cass shakes her head.

“Let’s go patrol, right now. Dick can handle things here. I’ve got stuff in the cave.”

“Yes,” Cass says. “We should. It would be good.”

She doesn’t say who it would be good for. Steph’s choosing to believe she means them, and Gotham, and not the man who just broke his eleven-year-old boy’s heart and didn’t even notice.

Chapter End Notes

so that's> where those pop-tarts were.
and this is just going to keep snowballing.
The Runner

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jason is trying so hard not to run.

So. Freaking. Hard.

It’s why, after months of not touching the thing, he finds himself in the den turning on the PS4 to do something that isn’t just sitting in the study reading or in the cave beating a bag until his arms are sore.

He just turns the damn thing on and decides he’ll play whatever the hell is already in. It’s GTA 5 and that feels pretty right to him. If he’s not going to go rampage around Gotham shutting up pieces of trash, he can spend a brief stint as a piece of trash. Close enough to truth.

There’s a file on here he’d started a long time ago, had invested some hours in, and he pulls it up.

And it’s a disaster.

He doesn’t remember exactly the state of his save file but it was definitely not this mess.

Jason stares at the screen for a minute or two, thinking, and then he realizes.

Damian.

_Thou art like a toad._

He pulls his phone out of his pocket with the game still idling on the screen and doesn’t bother with texting. He calls.

“Wayne,” the boy answers, like he’s fifty-seven with a hedge fund and a portfolio.

Jason honestly doesn’t care that much about the file but he wants to yell at someone and this is a good excuse. It could even be fun.

“Did you fuck up my GTA file, you little miscreant?” he demands.

“I fixed your GTA file,” Damian shoots back without missing a beat. There’s a scuffle on the other end and a protest from Damian and then Stephanie’s voice is pouring into his ear.

“Leave him alone about the stupid game,” she says. “I let him do it.”

“What? Why?” Jason is on his feet now, actually surprised.

“Didn’t you know? Bruce told him he couldn’t get his dog,” she says. “It was your game or heads at that damn party.”

Jason stops pacing.

“What?” he asks again.

She tells him everything.
He gets hung up for a minute on the bit about real sons.

“Bruce said that?” he asks when she says it.

“I think you’re missing the point,” she says, “but yes, he said all of you are real sons.”

She says it like she’s rolling her eyes, like this part should be obvious.

But then she gets to the part about the dog again.

And now? Forget the wrecked game file. Now Jason is actually pissed.

He abandons the den without turning the game off, striding down the hall past Alfred, and flings the study door open.

“Why in the fricking frack did you tell Damian he couldn’t get his dog?”

Bruce is on his feet, his shock at the violent entry already blowing up into ire.

“Don’t you dare question my parenting,” he says, his voice hard.

“I’ll question your damn parenting as long as you’re being a shitty parent! He needs an actual consequence, not your pissant, self-centered vindictiveness!” Jason yells back, matching his glare.

“Vindictiveness?” Bruce scoffs, leaning back on the desk. “You’re one to talk.”

“Don’t make this about me,” Jason says, clenching his fists. “If you can’t even focus on you and Damian for five minutes, then he’d be better off with Talia.”

There is a dead silence.

Then Bruce is no longer leaning on the desk.

He is trembling with fury when he starts screaming at Jason, venom clinging to every word hurled from his mouth.

And Jason, startled and terrified, manages to keep his hands balled at his sides instead of swinging through the air, and pours his energy into screaming back. He doesn’t know half of what he says.

Jason cannot recall having many out of body experiences, just a few major ones, but the next thing he is fully aware of is being bodily hauled from the room by Alfred while Bruce roars at the slamming door.

In the kitchen, Jason sits shaking at the table and Alfred pours him a whiskey, then sends him on his way with an apologetic frown.

He stands outside in the freezing air, a half-dozen things Bruce said running on repeat in his head and cutting him like razor wire, and he finally lets himself run.

And with his cycle and his suit for the first time in months, he runs straight into the frigid Gotham night and puts five men in the hospital before the sun rises.

He sleeps the day away, wakes at night, listens in on the comm without letting them know he’s there. Oracle is updating Batman on the hunt for an escaped serial rapist, and Red Hood spends all night hunting. He doesn’t find him, but he leaves another three half-dead scumbags in his wake.
They don’t all deserve death, but they don’t deserve comfortable lives, either.

The second day, he replays the argument over and over while drinking and sleeping by turns.

That night, he finds the rapist.

This guy? He deserves death. Red Hood read the case file, the prison records, the court documents.

He has a gun to the monster’s head when Batman and Robin sweep down into the alley.

“Red Hood,” Dick, as Batman, says to him, pleading and warning at once. “You’ve got him. Let us turn him in. If you kill him in front of me, I’m going to have to turn you in, too. He wouldn’t want this.”

“He can go to hell,” Red Hood says, and they both know he doesn’t mean the rapist, who can also, coincidentally, go to hell. Right now. But he doesn’t pull the trigger yet.

“Please,” Batman says. “Don’t put me in this position, not right now.”

Red Hood looks over at them.

The son raising a brother.

Robin is scowling at him but it isn’t the disdain for his imminent action that catches Red Hood’s attention.

It’s the desire for it.

And not so Batman can turn him over to the police, either. Robin wants to see this man die in front of him, as much as Red Hood wants it. Maybe more.

And Bruce’s last words to him mingle with the gaping wound he keeps putting off acknowledging. For all his internal monologues about justice and crusades and wars, the first few weeks after the surgery he’d found peace sticking around the manor, staying in, reading.

Then he had spent every fucking day after that one day in October trying to get it back.

Red Hood lowers the gun.

“It’s your dadgum lucky day,” he says to the rapist, who is sniveling and trembling and leaking urine all over the pavement.

He leaves the bastard for them to deal with.

Jason sits on his apartment balcony in the cold and doesn’t sleep that night. He chain smokes, thinks, and forces himself to sit and read The Living Reed, the book Bruce was reading that night before his surgery.

_The wisdom in books is now our possession._

He drinks black coffee instead of liquor, lights another cigarette, and reads.

_He longed for the safety of the old house about him, and this though his mind told him there was no safety even there._

It is not just a book about spies or travel. It is a book about fathers and sons. About brothers and
brothers. About losing and finding family. It rends him to the heart, and he presses on.

*His own first doubt of death as a weapon had begun then.*

He reads until sun has broken the horizon, steeping the pages in gray winter light, his hands chilled and then warmed again by more coffee in a thin porcelain cup.

*It is not only the stabbed who die.*

He thinks as he reads, his breath a fog over the pages. He leaves the door open, lets the heater overwork itself spilling warmed air out onto the balcony where it mixes with the cold about his feet.

*If he made a center of his own, he could begin again.*

And as he thinks, he decides.

Those few weeks in September, sitting in the bedroom or study, the words pouring off the page and out of his mouth, Jason had found he wasn’t sticking around because he felt guilty or pressured. He was staying because he enjoyed it. Not just the reading, being needed, being wanted-- but just being.

And Bruce needs something, but it isn’t Jason right now. Jason doesn’t know what it is. But Jason doesn’t need Bruce to need him to be who he is.

And who he is? He’s a fricking Wayne.

He has been for two lives already. He can’t even die out of it.

And whatever the hell is going on with his dad, that’s not all he is or all he has. He has family, more than just Bruce.

Bruce is going to have to come around on his own or some other way. But Jason is done waiting to be who he is or who he’s supposed to be, done hiding behind the extremes of aggressive violence or quiet solitude.

There are other needs right now.

While the sun works its way higher into the sky, he takes his bike to the Manor, sneaks into the garage, takes one of the roomier cars. He doesn’t leave a note. He doesn’t even talk to Tim, who might actually understand, but might not. He’s not even sure why Tim is still there. But maybe Tim is who Bruce needs now, and for the first time in a long time, this idea does not devastate him.

Before noon slices the day in half, he’s knocking on Dick’s apartment door. Dick answers, groggy with sleep. They must have been out late.

“Are you allowed to have dogs in your apartment?” Jason demands, skipping any niceties.

“What?” Dick asks, rubbing his eyes. “I guess. I don’t know.”

“You are,” Jason decides, stepping past him into the apartment. Damian is sitting at the table sketching something in a notebook, eating crackers and hummus from a restaurant take-out container with Arabic writing on it.

“Todd,” Damian says, acknowledging him when Jason throws a jacket on the notebook, snagged from a hook as he came in the front door.

“Put it on. Pack your stuff. We’re going.”

“Where are we going?” Damian asks dryly, pushing the jacket aside and continuing to sketch. “School starts tomorrow.”

“Don’t care,” Jason says. “You can miss a day.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Damian says, picking up a cracker and eating it without looking at Jason.

“He’s not going anywhere with you,” Dick says. “You’ve been a trainwreck for days.”

“Text Martha Kent,” Jason says, ignoring Dick. “We’re going to get your flipping dog.”

Damian freezes, his pencil stopped midway through the curve of a shadow line. He looks up at Jason, his eyes wide. He has the jacket on before Dick can say no again.

“I’m ready,” he says. “I don’t need to pack anything.”

Jason turns to look at Dick then, to see if they’re going to have to run or fight.

“Go,” Dick says wearily. “I should have thought of that weeks ago. I’ll handle the school.”

They’re three states closer to Kansas before the sun is down.

And Jason has no second thoughts, no pang of regret or hesitation, even when Damian complains for thirty minutes straight about the music selection on Jason’s phone.

The whining doesn’t change the little bit of peace Jason has found again, the tiny glimmer of hope. It can’t shake him now that he’s started running for it.

And it’s nice to run to something for once.

Chapter End Notes

a few things:
1. thank you for ALL of your amazing comments. i did not anticipate the last chapter inspiring such discussion and i am so delighted and thankful that it did. i loved all the different opinions about bruce's actions and damian's reaction. consequences aside, what bruce said to damian is something i've wanted to write him saying for a long time.

2. i honestly did not start this story intending to make everyone hate bruce. i am sorry. it's not over yet. please carry on, haha.
The Child

The fields stretch out around the car for miles and when Damian leans close to the window and exhales on the frigid glass, he can peer through the fog of his own breath and the ruddy prairie winter grass almost looks like sand.

Except it’s so flat.

Overhead, the sky is so blue and the sun so bright with morning that it is easy to forget it is not blistering hot outside. It is a desert kind of sky, clear and cloudless and unbroken by city. The only interruption is the long row of telephone poles and sagging power lines that hug the shoulder of the road. Damian puts his forehead against the window to remind himself how cold it is, closes his eyes and listens to the wind push against the car in waves.

They have been driving all night. Damian needs to pee after finishing off two disgusting coconut waters from a gas station. Jason had said he couldn’t get anything without “water” on the label and Damian plunked the things down on the checkout counter, drank the first one straight down in the car while glaring sidelong at the older boy.

“Good stuff?” Jason had asked with a smirk, and Damian had screwed the lid off the second one and started sipping.

It was awful. He hadn’t been paying enough attention and had ended up with something that had pineapple flavoring so sweet it made his teeth hurt. He kept sipping it.

And now he really, really has to pee, but there’s nowhere in sight to stop.

“Turn right in .5 miles” Jason’s phone announces over the car speakers.

“To fucking where?” Jason wonders aloud. Damian turns from the window to see him scanning the horizon, looking for anything that isn’t just field.

“Slow down, Todd,” Damian says. “There’s no point in speeding if we’re just going to miss our turn.”

Jason growls but eases up on the gas. They still don’t see the drive or the little green road sign until they’re almost past it, Damian snapping,

“There!”

Jason slams on the brakes and skids around the turn into the gravel, raising a cloud of ashy dust around them. The car slows down even more and they rumble down the lane, the gravel underneath the tires jostling them until Damian is afraid he might burst.

“You have arrived at your destination,” Jason’s phone tells them.

There is still no house in sight, just prairie grass and gravel, stretching ahead of them endlessly. Possibly some cows in the far, far distance.

“The actual fuck,” Jason says to no one, irritated.

“You have arrived at--,” the phone says again and Jason jams a finger against the power button for the speaker, plunging the car into silence. He speeds up again.
“Two minutes,” he says, “and we turn around.” He looks back over his shoulder as he says this. Because he isn’t looking, the car hits a pothole with a sharp dip and jerk, instead of swerving around it.

“Stop the car,” Damian says, already pulling on the latch for the door. It swings open as Jason slams the brake pedal down, and Damian topples out while the car is still moving.

“Damian!” Jason yells and Damian doesn’t care, doesn’t care at all. He’s standing on the edge of the gravel, his fly unzipped and he is sighing in relief. It’s freezing and he doesn’t care.

It’s not until he climbs back in the car that the shame hits. He should have been able to wait.

“Feel better?” Jason asks with a smirk, before putting the car back into gear.

“Tt,” Damian says, focusing on the view out the windshield. The sun is moving across the sky from right to left here, the hood of the car pointed north. It feels right to him and that soothes him a bit. He needs to be soothed and it’s not just the shame of needing to urinate. He feels so at odds with himself.

From the moment Jason said they were going to get his dog, he has been torn. He desperately wanted to go. But there is the nagging suspicion that he’s doing something dangerous, not permitted. He misses Titus. He cannot see this new dog in the Manor, not in his mind. Father’s face is too furious there. He can imagine the puppy in Grayson’s apartment, but eventually, that stay will end. Will the dog stay with Grayson? Should he not get too attached? What if Grayson forgets to feed him? He doesn’t think Stephanie will come around to help if he isn’t there.

Ahead of them now there are two barns, but no house. There’s another barn far off in the distance, this one steel gray instead of red and white.

The lanes curves slowly and then there is a sudden drop, hidden by the level grass here and beyond it, cloaked a bit by the bigness of the first barn. The flatness of the surrounding landscape has hidden this hollow they are now driving into, a tucked away corner of drab green grass and small trees and a little white farmhouse next to a winding creek. There is a dirt path from the creek up to the barn and though he couldn’t see it at all a minute before, Damian immediately recognizes it from video and pictures.

“This it?” Jason asks, shifting into park next to a blue pick-up truck in front of the porch.

Damian doesn’t answer.

There’s an older man with white hair tucked under a faded baseball cap and dressed in a thick coat walking the path down from the barn and he’s being followed by a plodding brown dog and a big puppy who is running back and forth, taking ten bouncing steps for every one of the older dog’s strides.

*His* puppy.

“Hey, there!” Jonathan Kent calls to them, and he sounds a little like Clark.

Jason and Damian climb out of the car, stretching stiff limbs, and while Jonathan is saying to them, “You boys made good time. We thought for sure you’d stop for the night somewhere,” his puppy is there, right there, scampering around his feet and nipping at his hands and panting excitedly.

Damian sits down right there in the gravel and lets the puppy clamber all over him, sniff him curiously, burrow his wet little nose into Damian’s palms and neck, and lick his face and chin and
ears. He doesn’t notice the cold air, even as Jason stands next to him with his arms hugged around his chest after shaking Jonathan Kent’s hand. Their coats are still in the car.

“Jonathan,” a woman calls from the porch. “It’s bitter cold out here. Come on inside.”

Damian can be well-mannered when it matters and right now, it matters to him. He stands and offers his hand to Jonathan Kent.

“Hello,” he says. “I’m Damian Wayne. Thank you for having me.”

His hand is swallowed by the farmer’s rough, calloused one.

“I’m glad you came,” Jonathan Kent says to him. “We’ve heard a lot about you, not all bad. C’mon into the house before Martha tans my hide for keeping you out here.”

“How, Damian!” Martha says from the porch, shivering a little in the wind when he looks up at her. “You might as well bring that dog in with you.”

Damian climbs the porch steps and goes into the house ahead of Jason, his arms full of soft brown fur and wriggling limbs. He loves Titus. Titus is his dog. But this is also his dog and he should have been here sooner.

After getting civilities out of the way, Damian leaves Jason to talk to the Kents and he lies on the floor in the warm, carpeted living room and plays with the dog. He is so happy he doesn’t even know what to do with it; it feels like everything else in his life has been chased away, reduced to a slapping tail and the tug of playful teeth on his fingers.

He doesn’t know how much time has passed when Jason comes into the room and sits next to him on the floor. The dog, who was getting sleepy, now finds a second wind and springs on the older boy. Damian’s lap feels suddenly empty and cold, the comforting weight gone.

“We’re going to stay tonight,” Jason tells him. “But we have to leave first thing in the morning. You can’t miss too much school or Bruce will find out.”

And every ounce of happiness that was filling him somersaults upside down into everything the happiness was keeping at bay. Father will have to, eventually, find out. Father will be furious that they defied him. Father is still furious about what he said at the party. Father was still furious then about the cave.

Once it begins, it floods him. There are so many things he wants to ask, he wants to understand, and he cannot even figure out where to begin.

“And I didn’t say this in the car, but Damian, Bruce was right. You can’t talk about us like we aren’t his sons, too. Think about what that does to Dick. To Tim.”

Damian is so strangled with his own fear and anger that it doesn’t even register at first how calmly and gently Jason is talking to him, how unlike Jason it is. When it does register, seconds later, he fumes with the insult of it.

How dare Todd speak to him like he is a child.

How dare Todd bring up this thing that is a like an exposed nerve.

How dare Todd remind him that he has to go back, to boring school, to tense patrols, to the ghost of his own bedroom and house across the city, to the shadow of his Father’s disappointment.
How dare his Father be disappointed? How dare he shut him out, stop talking to him, leave him alone? Didn’t he know how hard he was trying? How acutely aware of his own failure he was? He deserves to be put aside but he hates Father for doing it anyway. He hates him. He *hates* him.

And Damian is on his feet, snarling at Jason, “Father can go to hell. And he’s *not* your Father, you call him *Bruce*.”

He stalks out of the room and he both knows what he is going to do and he doesn’t know what he is doing, at the same time. He ignores Martha Kent when he blows through the kitchen, through the front room, and out onto the porch in the icy evening air.

Jason calls after him from the porch when he is halfway across the yard but he doesn’t stop. He guesses at the location of the thing he wants, and he doesn’t even know what he’s looking for, but he’ll know it when he sees it. The wind stings his cheeks and his arms and he steps out of it into the barn.

There it is, leaning against the wall next to a pile of wood stored inside. He hefts it. It would be heavy to most eleven year olds, but he is not most eleven year olds. He leaves the barn with it, half running down the dirt path back into the hollow with the house and the yard and the gravel and one of Father’s cars.

It’s not the nicest one, but Todd and Father are more similar than they realize and it is one Father *prefers*, and admitting this spurs him on. Jason is on the porch again, shrugging his arms into his coat and yelling, Martha right behind him. Damian knows where they are because he is aware of things, all the time, knowing where they stand in relation to him because he has a mind suspicious and always ready. Jonathan was in the barn and Damian had ignored him, too, but he is now coming down the path behind him, still far back.

Jason leaps down from the porch, skipping all the steps, in the same instant Damian hauls the axe into the air above his head and smashes it down into the windshield. The first blow is sloppy, it glances off the glass leaving spiderwebs of cracks. He didn’t have the blade lined up correctly. Almost in the same instant of impact, he has it back up and he tries again.

This time, the glass gives way, shattering into thousands of pieces along the lines the spider web cracks left from the first blow.

“Damian!” Jason yells. He sounds angry and scared at the same time. He snags Damian around the waist and pulls him away from the car, even though it is pointless. Damian had already let the axe go and it is halfway across the interior dash, halfway across the hood.

Damian elbows Jason hard under the arm and wrenches himself away, glowering.

“I *hate* you,” Damian bites off the words. “I hate *all* of you.”

Jason opens his mouth; Damian is braced for whatever Jason can throw at him. But it never comes.

Martha Kent, wrapped in an old pink coat, puts a hand on Jason’s arm and says, “Let me talk to him.”

“I’m so sorry,” Jason says, turning to her, and Damian can see that he’s nervous. He’s worried, Damian realizes, about what she thinks of them. “I never would have brought him if I’d thought—”

“It’s alright,” Martha says. “You and Jonathan go on inside.”
Jason scowls at Damian and then leaves him alone with her in the darkening night. Damian swallows and glances at the destroyed windshield. What did he just do?

This was stupid, so stupid. It doesn’t hurt Father at all and now they aren’t going to let him take the dog, he’ll never be able to come visit and see the rest of the farm.

“Come sit with me on the porch swing,” she says, turning away from him. Sluggishly, he follows her, dragging his feet. He sits next to her on the swing, not close, not touching, as far away as he can. He presses his lips in a thin, straight line and he waits. If she wants to talk, she’ll have to talk. He doesn’t know what will come out of him if he tries to speak first. He is on the verge of tears, on the verge of swearing the roof off the porch.

“Jason tells me you were raised by assassins,” she says bluntly.

Damian stiffens all over. That was not Todd’s story to tell.

“It must be difficult to go to school with normal little boys,” she says, and his head turns sharply to look at her.

“Sometimes,” he acknowledges, uncertain where this is going. She has her hands buried deep in her coat pockets. His hands are cold but he doesn’t move to warm them.

“Clark was such an angry little boy,” she says, abruptly changing the subject. He is openly staring at her now. What does that even mean? He thinks of Kent and Father talking on a Gotham rooftop, the easy smile and the dubious frown. Kent is not the one he would pair with the word angry.

“He had all those powers,” Martha continues, “and didn’t know what to do with them. He had to go sit in school and work twice as hard not to lose his temper when things didn’t go his way. Maybe three or four times as hard. I would have kept him home, but it was important he learn to fit in, more than most boys. Everyone had to think he was normal, normal as pie.”

Damian shoves his hands under his armpits now, to keep them warm, while he listens. He’s still tense all over, his shoulders shivering in the cold night wind. Martha seems not to notice.

“But he wasn’t normal. And he was so angry about it. I think some of it was loneliness. There were all these things he couldn’t say to other people, couldn’t talk about. And he didn’t want to say them to me or his Pa; he was afraid he’d hurt us, maybe. Or maybe he was mad at us, too. You know, one day he came home all excited about t-ball starting up, and when I told him he couldn’t play, he turned his head and sheared the corner right off that barn roof with his eyes.”

She’s pointing to the red barn he took the axe from. Even in the dim light, he can see where the boards are joined on a diagonal. So she isn’t making this up, which he suspected she might be doing.

Martha gets up suddenly and goes to the front door. She opens it and yells inside, “Jonathan, send that puppy out before he pees on the carpet.”

The dog that might not be Damian’s anymore comes out the front door, tail wagging, and runs into the grass. After a minute of running and sniffing and peeing, it climbs the steps again and runs straight for Damian, like it already knows him. Damian pulls the puppy up onto his lap, relaxing a little in the warmth.

“What changed?” Damian asks, scrubbing the puppy between the ears, finally finding a question he wants to ask and can ask.

“Time,” Martha says simply. “And love. Lots of work.”
“Tt,” Damian says, not liking where this is going.

“You have a hard life, Damian,” Martha says, surprising him again. “Harder than Clark’s. You’re not normal and you’re growing up with a father who isn’t either. I know you think of him as powerful and strong, and he is, but he’s also just an angry little boy inside. He didn’t have a mama when he needed one, to finish growing up.”

“He hates me,” Damian says quietly, letting the puppy lick his face.

“No, honey.” Martha says softly, reaching out and petting the puppy. She doesn’t try to touch Damian. He appreciates that. “He hates himself. After all these years, he still hates himself for not being able to save them.”

“He was only a child,” Damian says scornfully. “He had no training. It’s illogical for him to assume responsibility for events beyond his control or expertise.”

“Hmm,” Martha says, looking at him now.

“But I have training,” Damian says, protesting. “I should do better. I shouldn’t make mistakes.”

“Everybody in this whole world makes mistakes,” she says. “And the sooner you learn to live with that, the sooner you can maybe help teach him. I know that’s a hard thing to ask. You’re just a boy.”

“I’m not a child,” Damian says, but he doesn’t want to be saying it.

“No,” she says, “not in every way, but in some ways. Like him.”

And Damian does not mean to be, does not want to be, but he is crying. He is bent over, crying into the puppy’s fur, for the second time in six months around a Kent.

“He didn’t pick me,” he says, sniffing fur and snot, scrubbing at his nose. “He picked everyone else. I have to be good enough.”

Martha Kent doesn’t answer.

Then Damian is being lifted off the porch swing and into Jason’s arms. The older boy holds him tightly and Damian presses his forehead against his brother’s shoulder.

“He’s a fucking mess,” Jason says roughly, sounding like he might be close to tears himself. “He’s not letting us help right now but that’s him, not you. It's not your fault. And until he's better, you have the rest of us. You didn't pick us either but that's kind of how family works.”

Damian nods into Jason’s chest and takes a deep breath. Jason’s shirt smells like coffee and gasoline and cigarettes in the cold air. The tip of Damian’s nose is numb.

“You should put me down now, Todd Wayne,” he says.

Jason sets him down on the porch.

Martha is not looking at him, or Jason. She's petting the puppy and talking to it.

“What did you name him?” she asks Damian and he bites his lip. They're letting him keep the dog.

“Malcolm,” he says.

Jason lets out a short laugh, packed with some emotion Damian cannot identify. He ruffles Damian’s
hair, hard, and Damian allows it. He does not shrug away.

“Mrs. Kent,” Jason says, “I hate to ask, but do you think we could stay for part of tomorrow while I get the windshield fixed?”

“You boys stay as long as you need. And call me Martha.” Martha tugs off her coat and puts it around Damian’s shoulders. It’s warm and feels like a hug he wouldn’t otherwise accept. “You’re always welcome here. Come in whenever you’re ready and we’ll have supper. And Damian, when your brother takes care of the windshield, there’s some farm work you can help Jonathan with. Hard farm work.”

She says this easily, firm and kind, and Damian looks at her, looks her in the eyes. And he knows it’s because of the windshield that she’s saying it, and not because of the farm. The coat is warming his back and shoulders and arms like a hug still.

He nods.

“I will do whatever work he requires,” he says while Jason raises an eyebrow at him.

And she goes inside the house, leaving Jason and Damian with a sleeping puppy.

“From Macbeth?” Jason asks after a minute. “I said that at the hospital as a joke.”

“Tt,” Damian says. “It fit. I’m sorry about your game. And the windshield.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jason says, as they turn to look at the car together. “We’re all just fucking messes, really. But we’ll be okay.”
Tim Drake made a phone call three hours ago that he is still not sure was the best idea he’s ever had. But it is nearing the end of his winter break from school and rather than a house full of cheer and activity, it is silent.

Bruce has been angry before, but this is different. It isn’t completely new, but it took Tim a few days of intentionally sticking around the manor, with Alfred while everyone else has been avoiding it like the plague, to place it.

He’s been acting the way he did after Jason died. Except, no one has died. And in reaction to his dark mood, they’ve stopped coming around. Tim isn’t sure they even realize it, exactly. Or maybe they do.

The others have only been venturing into the cave, if that. They’d probably just say they’re busy, with holiday plans, with friends, with work. But even Damian has been staying with Dick since two days before the school break started.

And Alfred didn’t even protest, even though he must know Dick has been feeding the boy a steady diet of pizza and macaroni. Tim himself would be a little worried if he didn’t know that Steph and Dick had some weird arrangement going on where she shows up once a day to make them both eat vegetables in exchange for Dick doing her laundry. Steph had laughed until she snorted when he asked her if there was something romantic going on, Tim stuttering over the words.

Tim wonders idly, now that he’s waiting in the foyer, if he could get Dick to do his laundry.

But that’s beside the point.

The point is that after the cave incident during the freakishly warm late October, Bruce descended into a perpetually foul temper that has worsened all the way into the frigid early January. His primary form of communication has become grunting or yelling and even Tim, sticking it out at the manor, skirts around him most of the time without meaning to. He’s been spending a lot of time with Alfred and with his laptop.

The final straw probably should have been the massive fight that drove Jason away from the house over a week ago. It was loud and cursing and is probably the only time Tim has ever heard anyone out-swear Jason and he hopes it won’t ever happen again. Alfred extricated Jason from the fight and gave him whiskey in the kitchen and waited for his hands to stop shaking and then gently suggested he give it a few days. He hasn’t been back since. It’s just been Tim and Alfred.

Because he’s been spending time with Alfred, he knows that once a week, Alfred has tea with Dr. Dev, who has only seen Bruce briefly in the past two weeks now that he is considered primarily in the clear. But Tim has been doing more research about neurology and eyesight and also, maybe, just a little, breached a major barrier and looked at Bruce’s internet history. For a few minutes.

And Bruce has started looking into alternative vision treatments. Like, other side of the world mystic stuff, which he usually hates.

That ended up being the final straw.
So, Tim called Dev.

Alfred will maintain certain boundaries of both etiquette and privacy that he feels compelled to keep because of his relationship and his position in the house and his staunch British heritage.

But Tim? Tim snuck into the Batcave once. Tim tracked down Dick Grayson to argue with him. Tim became Robin to keep Batman from snapping. Tim hunted around the world for Bruce, saw him dripping and intertwined with alien tech, told the JLA what to say to bring him back.

Tim’s job is saving Bruce Wayne and he is freaking good at it.

Years of experience.

Tim gets to do things like call Bruce’s doctor and and say, “This is Bruce’s son and I need to talk to you, because I’m worried.”

And Dev understands enough to not question his age or his right or the breach of patient confidentiality but to say, “I have a consultation, and then I’ll be right over.”

The timing works out just right and when Dev pulls up, parks his car in the gravel loop in front of the manor, and jogs up the steps, Bruce is still in the study for the afternoon. Then again, he spends most of the time in the study now.

Tim is pleased, maybe relieved, to see Dev glance around the foyer conspiratorially before stepping in. They don’t talk right away. Tim leads him to the den and notices Dev’s appreciative eye toward the PS4 that Tim has somehow managed to keep Bruce from throwing out, possibly because he spent a week storing digital copies of Bruce’s film collection on six backup drives. Tim is probably more crafty than he should be.

But the PS4 and any conversation about it can come later. First, business.

Tim doesn’t sit down and neither does Dev.

“So you, um, want a drink or something?” Tim offers first.

Dev declines, so Tim jumps right in. He doesn’t think Dev would enjoy small talk very much.

“The glasses aren’t working very well. Nothing is working,” he says, “and he’s basically never happy about anything anymore. I mean, physically he’s in good shape I guess, aside from his eyes. But I don’t know about overall.”

“He has to give it time,” Dev says, but it doesn’t feel like a rebuttal. It feels like an agreement, despite the words.

Still, Tim feels like he needs to make Dev completely understand. Bruce is not a normal man. Bruce is a bit...extremist sometimes, in how he handles things.

“I mean, he doesn’t think it’s working at all. And you don’t know him like I do. He won’t—he can’t—accept anything less than total recovery. Give him another month feeling this way, maybe less, and he’s going to go off-grid. He’s already looking. And those solutions sometimes have really awful trade-offs. So, if there’s anything you can think of, anyone you know, no matter how drastic, now would be the time to bring it up. He trusts you. He’ll listen to you if you don’t wait too long.”

Tim is banking on this being true, because despite Bruce’s usual trust in Tim’s abilities, anything close to a conversation about these concerns has been immediately and firmly shut down.
He also has a small hope that maybe Dev does know someone, maybe from school or residency, some avenue they haven’t explored yet. Tim has found a few things that seem promising, but there’s big difference between “seems” and “is.”

And honestly, it really scares him a little that Bruce isn’t looking into those first.

Dev sighs and puts his hands on his hips, hangs his head.

“Bollocks,” is all he says for a moment. “Alfie hinted that maybe he was doing poorly, but it seemed like it could just be a bad day or week.”

“Um, yeah, it’s definitely worse than that,” Tim says. “I’m kind of the only one even here anymore.”

“Did he expect me to get something more out of that hint? Because I’m usually pretty ace at reading things,” Dev says. He seems somewhere between actually put out and self-critical. Tim knows that feeling.

“No, that’s just…Alfred. I think he’s kind of in denial himself.”

“Bollocks,” Dev says again, stressing each syllable. “I didn’t even notice when I saw him last week.”

“I wouldn’t feel too bad,” Tim says, feeling the need now to reassure him. He hadn’t really prepared for Dev to take it so personally. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but Bruce is really good at keeping up appearances when he wants to. And sometime recently he decided that you’re somebody he wants to keep up appearances with.”

Tim realizes after he says this that it is the opposite of reassuring. But, ironically, this is the thing that seems to snap Dev out of it.

“Let’s go talk to him,” he says, with a determined expression.

“Both of us?” Tim asks, trying not to sound panicked. There are times when he wants to confront Bruce and will, but he was calling in the cavalry here. And Bruce isn’t going to like it.

“I don’t like being yelled at,” Dev says. “It’s why I usually try to snag that role for myself. And if there’s a chance, you’re coming. A united front might rattle him quite a bit anyway. I get the feeling most of you try to go at him one at a time.”

“That’s true,” Tim admits. “Our group confrontations are rare.”

“Then let’s have at it,” Dev says. “I have an idea, anyway.”

Dev knows without being told where Bruce will be, sparing Tim from having to lead him there. It is Dev who knocks on the study door, sharp raps against the wood, undaunted and firm. Then he tries the door and it is locked. He pounds on it, hard, without speaking.

The door swings open and Bruce is there with a scowl that fades to surprise.

“What’s going on?” Bruce asks. He was not expecting Dev, obviously.


He points to one of the chairs by the fireplace and to Tim’s shock, Bruce actually takes a seat without protest.

Dev drags a chair from the desk across the rug and sits next to Bruce. He claps his hands together
and rubs them and says,

“Timothy called me and he has some concerns. About your continued vision difficulties.”

Tim is standing by the door. They both look at him for a second and he gives a small half-wave and then immediately feels like it was a dumb thing to do.

“Alright,” Bruce says mildly, turning back to Dev. Tim knows his mind must be racing trying to figure out what’s going on and how to respond.

Dev leans close to Bruce, lowers his voice.

“I know a doctor,” he says, quietly.

Bruce doesn’t move, but this catches his attention.

Tim had known talking to Dev would be a good idea.

“That can knock some bloody sense into you!”

The shout makes Tim and Bruce both jump. Bruce glares hard at Dev and then at Tim. Tim wants to vanish into the wall. Times like these, he wishes he were meta-human.

“Wayne,” Dev says more calmly, sitting back. “It’s me. I can knock some sense into you. Timothy tells me you are getting restless, on the verge of truly stupid action.”

Here, Bruce is still glaring at Tim but a look of something like guilt flashes across his face. Tim wonders if he knows about the internet history spying. He must. Of course he does. He’s Bruce.

“But you had a brain tumor, man,” Dev continues. “It’s been four months. It takes most people a year to recover, and I think you could do it in half, but you aren’t there yet.”

Tim won’t meet Bruce’s eyes. It was a huge breach of privacy, but Tim isn’t ready to look apologetic for it, so he just doesn’t look at all. Tim appreciates how Dev says “Timothy” the same way Alfred does. He finds comfort in the familiar inflection. He keeps his gaze on Dev.

“Before you go off tilting at windmills, I want you to think. You’ve holed yourself up here in this bloody house, your eyes pinched shut half the time. You need air. You need to look at the horizon and I mean that literally. Some long distance focusing is going to do marvelous things for your brain. Smell some leaves, study some trees. Roll around in the dirt and snow, I don’t care, but get out.”

“Dev,” Bruce says, finally looking away from Tim. “Are you seriously suggesting nature therapy?”

“I am,” Dev says, giving him a serious look. “And don’t make that face at me. I am backed by mountains of research. What you need is to relax and let your eyes do some work. What you are doing here instead is stressing and keeping your brain locked away from the world it needs.”

Tim knew going to Dev was a good idea.

“So, you suggest roaming the grounds in the winter air?”

“Yes!” Dev shouts again. “Go sledding, make a snowman, freeze your bollocks off and then come in and roast chestnuts. I don’t care. Just stop moping around and hiding.”

Bruce glares at the floor and then says,
“The cold makes the headaches worse.”

Tim did not know this. He knows that Bruce avoids going out for long, even though he has been walking in the morning, and is usually in a bad mood after. But he’s always in a bad mood these days, so maybe it’s not surprising Tim didn’t know.

Dev glances at Tim and motions for him to sit down. Tim does, trying to make himself small on the couch. This time, when Dev’s voice is quiet it is a different kind of quiet than earlier.

“Wayne. It is my professional opinion that after the hell of being on and then coming off steroids and antiepileptic medicine and also surviving brain surgery, you are clinically depressed. The vision issues and headaches are not helping. But I get the impression from your family and from the minefield of, quite frankly, very alarming scars across your body and brain that you usually fight a bit harder than this without going off the deep end. I do not want to prescribe you more medication. I don’t think you need it, yet.

“So, as your doctor, I am ordering you to get out of this fucking house. Get out of the country, go somewhere warm. Don’t come back until your eyes are getting better and this place feels like home again instead of a prison.”

Tim wants to hug Dev. He really does. He wants to hug him maybe more than he’s ever wanted to hug someone who is essentially still a stranger to him.

But he is also tense, waiting to see how Bruce responds to this. He is braced for a lot of yelling. But it doesn’t come.

Bruce just sighs, a long shuddering sound.

Tim wishes he would yell.

“Allright,” he says. “You’re right. Tim, is Damian with Dick?”

“Yeah,” Tim says, a little bewildered. Did he honestly not know where his eleven year old was?

Bruce doesn’t look at either of them but he pulls out his phone and types something.

And then something else.

And then something else.

Tim isn’t sure if he’s managing to read replies or just not even bothering with them.

Bruce looks up then, at Dev, but not Tim. Tim is acutely aware of this absence.

“I’m going out,” he says. “I have some things to take care of.”

Dev nods. He doesn’t get up.

“You can go. And thank you,” Bruce says.

Dev leans back in his chair, stretches out his long legs, and crosses his arms.

“I’m going to stay until someone picks you up,” he says. “I am not leaving until I am absolutely sure you aren’t just planning to off yourself.”

Tim’s heart skips about a year’s worth of beats. He’s been watching Bruce mostly, but he casts a
sidelong glance at Dev to see if the doctor is joking. And he’s not. The fact that Bruce will not make
eye contact with either of them now is really freaking him out.

The door was locked.

And Bruce had looked guilty, not angry.

Oh God.

They wait in silence, Tim’s heart now thundering like a stampede of wild horses. The afternoon is
turning to evening and there is no sign of Alfred. Tim isn’t sure if he should feel panicked or
relieved.

Dev hums for a bit, music Tim doesn’t recognize, and it seems to be time-killing humming and not
significant in any way.

After a while, Bruce’s phone buzzes and he glances at it and stands up. He starts walking and he
stops, for just a second, and puts a hand on Tim’s shoulder and then keeps going out into the hall.

Tim’s tongue is paralyzed.

They follow him.

Out of all the people Tim expected to be waiting outside in the loop next to Dev’s car, Jason was not
one of them. But he’s there on a motorcycle. On the top step, Bruce slows and says,

“I’m not coming back tonight. I’ll be with Clark.”

“Good,” Dev says, and he stops there. Tim stops next to him.

Bruce takes the stairs down by twos, accepts the helmet Jason wordlessly offers him, and climbs on
the back of the bike. They take off without a backward glance.

“Did…” Tim can’t bring himself to finish the question. He tries again, he has to.

“Did we stop something just now?”

“Aw, Timothy,” Dev says, looking at him. “No, I don’t think so. But I think he might have been
getting close.

“If he had yelled at me,” Dev says, turning to watch the bike disappear into the trees, his arms
crossed tightly across his chest, “we’d be on our way to the hospital right now for an involuntary
admittance. But the fact that he was quiet means he knows how bad it was getting. He wasn’t there
yet but I needed to shock him a bit.”

Tim is too tense to sigh with relief yet.

Dev keeps his eyes on the road until Jason and Bruce are out of sight and then he says to Tim,
grimly,

“Do you have a way to contact his friend Clark? You should double check with him if possible.”

Tim’s phone is out of his pocket in half a breath.

*did Bruce text u? Do u have plans?*
The reply comes less than a minute later.

Yes. I’ll stay with him. Picking him up from Jason’s.

Tim looks at Dev and nods.

“Well, thank God that’s over,” Dev says, glancing at the road one more time. “I’m bloody well glad you called me. Call me again if he doesn’t make plans to travel, or if he tries to make them to travel alone. But I do think he’ll be fine. You did good, Timothy Wayne.”

“Okay,” Tim says, feeling like he needs to sit down, to sleep, to literally just run until he falls over.

“How old are you?” Dev asks him suddenly, giving him an appraising look.

“Seventeen,” Tim answers, taking a deep breath.

“Hm,” Dev answers. “You seem older.”

“Sometimes,” Tim manages a sigh now, “I feel like I’ve been seventeen for a really long time.”

He wonders where Alfred is. He doesn’t want to go back into an empty house, to sit around and wait.

“What do you play?” Dev asks and Tim doesn’t understand the question at first.


It is music to Tim’s ears. To sit and not think about anything except what’s on the screen is exactly what he wants to do right now. Otherwise, he’ll just be sitting in the dark texting Clark every hour, “is he still with you, is he still with you?”

“Yes thank you for everything including staying and not making me feel juvenile, is what Tim wants to say. Thank you for taking me seriously and probably saving Bruce’s life again.

“You’re on,” is what he says instead, and even though he hasn’t known Dev long, he gets the impression that Dev absolutely understands what he means.

Chapter End Notes

please get help if you need help. there is no shame in it.
i did not write this chapter as a prevention or awareness chapter, but i’d be remiss not to address it seriously when dealing with such dark content. severe depression can present itself as irrational and constant anger, and that is not a happy way to live. please reach out.

http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/ is one place you can go to find help. you can also message me. i will talk to anyone, anytime, if you are even just wondering if what
you are dealing with counts as "having a hard time."

for those of you with trigger warning needs, please know: this story does not end in suicide. i feel like the tension of that is not worth the emotional stress or fear of anyone reading, especially when you've been such great company as i work through this story.

also, i am on an update kick to get through this before i leave for vacation, then i will be gone for a week. expect another update tonight, three tomorrow, and the final sunday morning. i already have another completed story undergoing some edits and i plan to start posting that soon after. i have two stories in progress and as of now, i'm loving writing and enjoying sharing it and would love your continued company :) thank you all so much!
Alfred Pennyworth is sitting at the kitchen table, waiting. It is almost seven in the morning and after doing everything he could think of by six, there was nothing to do but sit and wait. He has no desire or inclination to sleep, so he prays and waits.

_The snares of death confronted me._
_In my distress I called upon the Lord,_
_And cried to my God for help;_
_He heard my voice out of His temple,_
_And my cry for help before Him came into His ears._

He came home the night before feeling weary, laden with groceries, to an empty study. Dr. Dev and Tim were in the den playing a videogame that they paused as soon as they noticed him.

It was Tim who explained, Dev quiet and offering commentary when needed.

Alfred felt like his world had fallen out from under him. He still feels that way. How had it gotten so bad without his notice? He had known, of course, that things were not ideal, but he had chalked it up to holiday stress and the frustration of those cooped up for too long.

After making certain he was alright, Dev and Tim returned to their game. They do not come out for food or drink, and as far as he can tell, and they are still in there.

Or were.

Dev is walking by the kitchen now, his shoes in his hand, looking bleary-eyed. He waves to Alfred and mouths, “He’s asleep,” and keeps moving.

For lack of anything better to do, Alfred follows him. Dev is already in the foyer, tying his shoes.

“Would you like a cup of tea?” Alfred offers out of habit.

“Thanks, but no,” Dev says, yawning deeply. “I’m going to go sleep. I have a surgery tomorrow morning and need to be beautiful for it. Is he back?”

“Not yet,” Alfred says. “But I will be up waiting. Thank you for sitting with Master Timothy.”

“Timothy was indulging me,” Dev says. “Call me and let me know.”

When he opens the door to leave, Bruce and Clark are standing on the step about to come in.

Dev stops short, nods to Clark, “Mr. Kent,” and offers Bruce his hand, and then he’s down the steps and climbing into his car.

The two men Alfred was waiting for step inside.

Bruce has deep shadows under his eyes and is wearing Clark’s coat, Clark’s gloves, Clark’s scarf, Clark’s hat. He begins peeling it off wordlessly in the foyer, handing it to Alfred, who folds it all into a neat pile and sets it on a chair.
“Come to the kitchen,” Alfred says.

They sit at the table where he sat minutes before and Alfred starts coffee. He gets eggs and flour out, then looks over at the two of them. Bruce looks exhausted but there’s a purpose and intention in his eyes that Alfred had somehow not even noticed was missing before.

“Breakfast?” He asks.

“No, I’m–” Bruce starts, stops, looks at Clark who is frowning hard at him. Alfred watches without comment.

Clark is the one who looks at Alfred, offers a warm but tired smile, and says, “Breakfast would be great, thanks.”

Alfred puts the eggs away and busies himself making sandwiches while they talk quietly, their words falling just beneath the register of his usually sharp ears. When he moves closer to rummage for a cheese slicer in a drawer, he realizes it doesn’t matter. They are speaking Kryptonese.

When he is slicing a tomato, Bruce speaks to him.

“Don’t make any plans for my birthday this year,” he says.

“I am aware that you do not care for surprise parties,” Alfred says, warding off a chill in his heart.

Clark says something to Bruce in Kryptonese; it sounds scolding.

“I’m going to be out of the country,” Bruce clarifies. Alfred turns to look at him and the expression on his face is one of sheltered excitement, not dread. It is a small and fragile excitement, but there all the same. Alfred’s heart lightens just a little. So he is taking Dev’s advice.

“I’m going to Europe with Selina,” Bruce says. Then, with more prompting from Clark: “I hope you don’t mind that I’m leaving you behind.”

“Of course not,” Alfred says gently, setting aside his reservations. His judgment is not the best right now.

He serves the sandwiches and coffee and then straightens the kitchen, does the dishes, and puts a cup of tea to steep while they eat.

“I’m going to go call in to work,” Clark says, standing up. “I’ll be right back. Thanks for the sandwich, Alfred.”

When he leaves, Alfred is standing at the counter with his tea and Bruce is sitting behind an empty plate.

Their eyes meet and it only takes a second for Bruce to say,

“I’m sorry, Alfred. I’m so sorry. I’ve been awful to everyone.”

Alfred wishes Bruce was eight years old again so he could pick him up, hold him, carry him through the hallways to bed. But he is not. He steps around the counter, sits next to him at the table, while Bruce stares at the empty plate.

“Hush,” Alfred says. “One doesn’t apologize for this sort of thing.”

Bruce nods.
Bruce takes a deep breath.

Bruce reaches for him and Alfred embraces him tightly, Bruce’s head tucked beneath his chin, Alfred’s cheek against the scar. It doesn’t bother him in the least.

“I’m sorry I didn’t see,” Alfred says quietly, “what a hell of a time you were having.”

Bruce’s chest heaves, his arms tighten their grip.

It is only a few seconds more but it is enough. Bruce leans back and takes another deep breath.

“Tell Dick to bring Damian home,” he says, his voice growing steady. “They should stay here for school. And let him go with Clark to get that dog.”

“Of course,” Alfred says, standing and returning to his tea. He does not mention the pictures he has of the dog at Dick’s apartment.

Clark comes back into the room, still looking at his phone. He puts it in his pocket and then gives Bruce a look and Bruce nods in return.

“I’m going to go sleep,” Bruce says, standing up and taking his plate to the sink. “Selina and I leave Monday. I’d like to have everyone over for dinner before then, if you think you can arrange it on such short notice. I have,” he pauses and frowns at the counter, then he looks up at Alfred next to him.

“I have a lot of apologizing to do.”

“Dinner isn’t a problem in the slightest,” Alfred says. “Consider it done.”

He can and make sure they will all be there.

Bruce looks for all the world like he’s going to say something else. There aren’t any verbal nudges from Clark and finally he says,

“Forget it. I changed my mind.”

Alfred watches him until he’s out of sight down the hall.

Clark sits down at the table and Alfred refills his coffee for him, sits across from him with his own tea.

“How was he?” Alfred asks bluntly.

“I don’t know if…” Clark trails off, looking a little pained. Alfred does not usually ask questions about their private conversations. But this is different. This is a situation that requires corrections, preventative measures for the future.

“Clark,” Alfred says sternly. His rare use of Clark’s first name catches Clark’s attention. “I am an old foolish man, and I missed every warning sign. I have no right to ask. But I am a foolish old man and I’m going to ask anyway: tell me what kind of night my son had.”

Clark nods.

“I should say first, it wasn’t that bad,” he says. “It was, but not in the ways you might be expecting.”

Alfred sips his tea, his fingers tight on the handle and the saucer.
“When I got to Jason’s, they had talked. I don’t know about what, but they were reading. So that was good.”

Alfred nods.

“Jason was calm but he was glad to see me. He seemed like he was handling things well, he was really gentle with him. Bruce was still pretty rough at this point. He had been crying, I think, and you can’t ever tell him I told you. I lent him my coat and we went to Wayne Tower and sat on the roof.”

Alfred gives him a sharp look of alarm and disbelief.

“Give me some credit, Alfred,” Clark pleads. “I wouldn’t have taken him up there if I’d thought there was even a chance.”

Clark does not say how easy it would have been for him to catch Bruce if he had been wrong. Alfred knows this is implied but beyond what can be voiced right now.

“We didn’t talk for a long time. We sat for over an hour before he said anything. I think he just wanted to watch his city. He hasn’t been up there since before the surgery.”

“I know,” Alfred says.

“We stayed until I started to worry about hypothermia. His teeth were chattering but he still didn’t want to come down. So, I took him to the Watchtower.”

“Like that?” Alfred asks, disbelieving. “No cowl?”

“I made him disable all the cameras when we got there,” Clark says. “The only others there were Diana and Barry. We just sat and talked. He was quiet but paying attention, not drifting. And he did say things, occasionally, on topic.

“Barry even got him to laugh once or twice. I think he’s really missed it there, working with them. Maybe more than he realized. Then around five we left for the airport and booked tickets. He knew exactly what he wanted to do, where he wanted to go. I took him to Selina’s and he went in without me for a bit. Then we came here.

“I don’t know what he said to her. I could have listened but I didn’t. Maybe I should have. But I think she’s a good choice. He’ll let her take care of him a bit more than he might with one of us.”

Clark adjusts his glasses.

Alfred remembers that when they stood in the doorway this morning, with their similar glasses and dark hair, it was the most they’d ever looked like brothers to him.

“I don’t think he’s given up,” Clark says. “I don’t think he had given up. But he was close. He’s working really hard to just tread water. I’m glad Dev told him to get out of the States. I think he really needs to reset.”

“I agree,” Alfred nods. “Leaving has helped immensely in the past.”

“I’m sorry, Alfred,” Clark says after a long pause. “I should have been here. Especially after what happened in October. I knew he wasn’t handling it well, but then I just assumed he was busy with holidays and family, maybe because I was. Then my ma told me Damian came for his dog and I took it as a good sign. And Metropolis gets busy for me around the holidays. But it’s no excuse. I think this is kind of my fault for not seeing it sooner.”
“I think we’re all going to feel that way for a bit,” Alfred says. “But I don’t know that it helps.”

“Except Tim,” Clark says.

“Except Master Timothy,” Alfred agrees. “And thank God for him.”

They sit for a bit longer and then Clark drains his coffee and stands.

“Let me know when dinner is. I don’t know if he meant to include me, but I’m coming anyway.”

“He meant to include you,” Alfred says. “You’re family.”

Clark smiles at that and leaves.

When the house is quiet, Alfred is ready for sleep himself. He’s heading that way when his phone buzzes. It’s from Bruce.

*changed my mind again. committing now. in case you need him while i’m away. tell dev everything. I thought you were asleep,* Alfred replies, choosing to process the news about the Dev situation later.

*can’t mind racing* is all he gets as an answer.

Alfred turns on his heel in the hall, heads a different direction.

*On my way to sit with you. Stay in bed. Might fall asleep myself in a chair.*

He’s already outside the room when he gets another message.

*nvm Tim here*

That lad never sleeps.

Alfred stops to listen, just in case, his ear pressed to the door.

“You knew I’d look at your internet history,” Tim is saying. It sounds like an observation, stripped of anger.

Alfred cannot quite make out Bruce’s answer; it sounds muffled.

“No!” Tim says, firmly. “You really scared me, Bruce. I can’t lose another dad.”

Alfred puts a hand on the doorknob but he waits, just one more moment.

“I’m sorry, Tim,” Bruce says, his voice a bit clearer now.

“I don’t want you to apologize,” Tim says. “I just wanted you to know.”

More muffled words.

“Absolutely not. I do think you should go. Dev’s orders. But for this morning I’m staying right here. And Cass is, too.” There’s a pause. “Yeah, she just came in through the window.”

There’s a broken, ragged laugh and a question. Alfred can tell just by the cadence, the lilt of the words though he cannot quite hear the forms of them.

“I don’t know,” Tim says. “It’s your own fault we have trouble with entrances. And anyway, you’re
stuck with us now. If there’s anything you’re actually bad at, it’s getting rid of me.”

Alfred realizes he’s leaning on the door, more than just an ear pressed to it. He straightens and inhales deeply, quietly.

_God our creator, we thank you for the gift of this child, entrusted to our care._

Later, he will be needed. For now, content that Bruce is in good hands, Alfred goes to his room and sleeps.

Chapter End Notes

excelsior
Dick Grayson drums his fingers on his knee and leans forward in the hard plastic airport chair. His eyes track the movement of Bruce across the boarding gate lobby, the broad hallway peppered with little overpriced snack and souvenir stores.

In one of the shops, Bruce is taking a price gouged cell phone charger and pack of earbuds off the wall of a display. He’s just visible through a glossy magazine rack. Dick isn’t watching anyone else in the airport; it’s just the two of them in the midst of the early morning flight crowd.

He’s still drumming his fingers as Bruce stands at the register, smiling easily, laughing a little as the clerk looks from him to a nearby newspaper with Bruce’s own picture, and back. They’re talking about it, the clerk looks nervous and relieved and Bruce is casual, amiable about the surprise.

There’s a fumble of movement, Bruce is nodding his head, and the clerk looks even more nervous. A cell phone comes out. Bruce leans, the clerk leans, the cell phone is held aloft for a second.

When Bruce walks back toward him with a bag in his hand, Dick pulls out his phone and checks Twitter, searches a hashtag.

Sure enough, the selfie is already there, most recent result for #BruceWayne, captioned “omg u guys, just met my dad’s boss. suuuuuper nice, have a good trip mr wayne if u read this!”

When Bruce sits down next to him and bends forward to tuck the bubble-plastic packages into his carry-on, Dick looks away from the picture and watches him again.

There is no physical indication that Bruce is finding the usual ruse taxing, but in normal circumstances Bruce would not forget to pack things. He would not forget to pack things as basic and everyday as a cell phone charger or the earbuds he still uses for text messages when he's sick of wearing glasses.

“She's still not here,” Dick says when Bruce sits up. He surveys the growing crowd to make sure it's still true. It's not too busy, really; the flight boards at six and it's still only five.

“She'll come,” Bruce says. “But at the last minute. She's not a morning person.”

“If she doesn't show up,” Dick cranes his neck to look down the other hallway, still searching, “I'm going to come instead.”

Usually, Bruce would protest this declaration of a change in his own plans, but he doesn't now.

Dick hasn't quite recovered from the reeling shock he felt when Tim called him, sniffing, four days ago to fill him in. It persisted, numbing any guilt or anger or fear, through a surreal dinner Alfred invited them all for, required them all to attend.

Alfred often suggested. He rarely required. They were all there.

After the dinner, Dick had found himself sitting on the floor outside Damian’s bedroom, next to Stephanie, who had her knees drawn up to her chest and both hands over her mouth.
“Oh my god,” she had said, letting her head slip forward so her hands were over her eyes instead. “Cass was right. He wouldn't answer any of her texts and I told her not to come, said he was just being a bastard. I didn’t want her to get hurt and she listened to me, but she was right. I’m literally the worst.”

“I’ll fight you for the title,” Dick had replied. “I just stopped talking to him. I didn’t even try.”

“You are acceptable co-parents,” Damian had said, coming out of his room with hair still wet from a shower. They had started, then, in unison-- Dick had not been aware that Damian had ever picked up on their joke. The younger boy had kept talking, while snapping a leash on the puppy’s collar, Titus right behind him. “But you are stupid. We were all acting like children. You have to learn to live with that and then move on, otherwise your risk of redundant mistakes exponentially increases.”

Damian had walked down the hallway with both dogs at his heels, not looking back.

“I’m gonna go find Cass,” Steph had said, climbing to her feet. “I need to talk to her.”

And Dick had gone downstairs and told Alfred he wanted to take Bruce to the airport on Monday, and he wasn’t taking no for an answer.

“I need to thank you,” Bruce says, jarring Dick out of his wandering thoughts. “For taking care of Damian. Again.”

“It’s fine,” Dick says, distracted by Bruce’s foot tapping against the dingy airport floor. Bruce doesn’t usually fidget. He’s leaning forward, sitting at the edge of the seat, much like Dick a few moments before.

“It’s not fine,” Bruce answers, his eyes on the floor. “I think you’re a better father to him than--”

“Christ, Bruce!” Dick exclaims, irritated. “Stop it. Just stop.”

The numbness of the shock is slapped away from him and he’s overwhelmed. There are too many things in his chest at once for him to process, to sort out. He is vaguely aware of the fact that maybe, he shouldn’t have sounded so harsh.

Bruce’s foot has stopped tapping but he’s still just staring at the floor.

“I’m sorry,” Dick says. “It’s just...that kid loves you, Bruce. I can’t take your place. He wouldn’t let me even if I wanted to. So, figure this out and come back. And call me if Selina bails on you. I’ll drop everything and I’ll be there, no questions asked.”

Bruce sighs and slumps back in the seat.

There is a moment, a moment in which Dick almost hesitates, almost overthinks. But he has done so much of that recently.

He shuts it down, drops back in his chair, and leans his head on Bruce’s shoulder, his temple and cheek against pique polo shirt and muscle and bone. Maybe it’s selfish. But Dick needs, craves, the physical contact after so much absence. He is ready to let it be a brief moment, a mistake or a stolen second, if Bruce stiffens or resists the contact. He is not too selfish.

But Bruce does not, so he stays there.

“It’s been a really shitty year,” he says quietly.
“Yeah,” Bruce says, equally quiet. “It has been. Aren’t they all?”

Dick doesn’t move his head from Bruce’s shoulder, but he jabs him in the side with a finger. Bruce pulls away but not much, not enough to shrug Dick’s head away. He moves back almost immediately, leaning a bit toward Dick, too.

“We’ve had our good years,” Dick says, rallying. He knows he sounds like Robin, the Robin he used to be and maybe still is at heart. “And this one has been shitty in all new ways.”

“Hnn,” Bruce says, sounding a bit like his usual self.

“One thing that might help,” Dick ventures to suggest, and Bruce does stiffen a little, his shoulders tensing, “I mean, if you don’t mind me offering advice. How about…

He pauses, waiting. He’s in old form, his sense of timing honed by years of rooftop and cave practice. Bruce doesn’t move, or even really breathe.

“…you never have a brain tumor again. I think it was a huge error in judgment.”

And Bruce chuckles, a short relieved sound.

“I’ll make a note,” he says.

And then he leans his own head on Dick’s head, a sudden weight on Dick’s dark hair. They sit for a bit, Dick afraid to move or speak like he might accidentally startle him away.

“I…” Bruce says softly, and then he stops. They still sit, unmoving, caught somewhere between relaxed and wary. When he speaks again, it is without pause. “You’re a good son, Dick. And I love you.”

“Did Babs make you say that?” Dick asks, trying to swallow the lump in his throat, to force back the brimming tears in his eyes. For a brief second, it makes him feel physically ill that it took the hellish past few months to get to this point, but then the feeling is gone, swallowed by acceptance. It is what it is.

“No,” is all Bruce says in reply.

They sit for a while that way, their heads tipped against each other as the airport terminal fills around them. Bruce doesn’t seem in a hurry to move and Dick feels like, in some ways, he's waited for this his whole life.

He wishes this, right here, would make everything better, but he knows it's just a waystone. There's still a slump in Bruce’s shoulder, a weary resignation in the way he holds his hands, that reminds Dick he is not yet home.

“I love you, too,” he says minutes later, when he realizes he'd never replied.

“Selina’s here,” Bruce says, and Dick sits up and looks. She’s walking toward them like she knew exactly where they’d be, a small gray bag slung over her shoulder.

If Dick had been holding on to any reservations about Bruce’s choice of companion, the open expression of concern and tenderness on Selina Kyle’s face drives it all away. He doesn’t always understand the relationship she has with Bruce, or even think it's entirely healthy, but she does clearly love him in her own way. And maybe it's a way that Bruce needs right now.
“Selina,” he says, standing. She hugs him around the neck, brief and friendly.

“I'm surprised to see you,” she says. “I was steeling myself for Alfred’s skeptical frowning at me.”

“You've got me instead,” he shrugs. They turn to Bruce, who is still sitting, slouched back in the hard plastic chair. Selina steps past Dick and sits down next to Bruce, puts a hand on his hand.

“Hey, you,” she says. “I'm here. You better have gotten us first class or I'm going to pitch a fit.”

There's a smile on Bruce’s face, faint but real and warm.

Dick sits down again on the other side of Bruce and stretches his legs out.

“You guys are stuck with me til you board,” he says casually. “I'm going to stand and weep dramatically at the gate. It'll be good for the papers.”

“I don't see any reporters,” Selina says, making a show of looking around. It's a thing they can do, a semblance of normal activity or verbal sparring to fill time around Bruce, to give structure to their wait.

“Oh, just the family newsletter,” Dick says. “Alfred is managing editor and he likes celebrity gossip.”

“What will you write about us?” Selina asks, still holding Bruce’s hand in her own. Bruce is quiet, but turns his hand to hold hers in return, Dick notices.

“Local Man Kidnapped by Crazy Cat Lady,” Dick says with a grin. “Son Devastated, Scrambling for Ransom.”

Selina laughs.

“I don't know if you can afford him,” she says, looking with a suddenly serious glance toward Bruce. Dick watches as she reaches out, pushes hair back from Bruce’s forehead.

He looks away, feeling intrusive. Maybe he won't wait for boarding, maybe he should just go now.

“Probably not,” he replies, his tone still light. “But a kid’s gotta try.”

A loudspeaker crackles and announces that first class will be boarding soon, after handicapped and special needs boarding.

Dick stands, a little too quickly, and says, “Have fun, you two.”

And now Bruce stands, pulls him into a hug. Even Selina looks startled by the rapid movement.

“I'm going to be back,” he says, looking into Dick’s eyes, sounding more certain and determined than he has all morning. “As soon as I can.”

Dick nods.

“I know,” he says. “I don't expect anything less. You always come back.”

Selina stands, puts a hand on Bruce’s arm. They're announcing boarding for first class now.

“Take care of him,” Dick says to Selina, as Bruce leans over to pick up his bag. “He needs it.”

She smiles, a little sad, and links her arm through Bruce’s.
“Doesn’t he always?” She asks, looking up at Bruce, who doesn’t dismiss this out of hand. “See you soon, Richard.”

She imitates Alfred’s accent and intonation when she says this, and as they walk away, Dick stands with his arms at his sides and calls after them,

“I’m loudly weeping. How will I ever manage the ransom?”

An airport employee frowns severely at him, as if they cannot believe he’s being so tactless in an airport. He ignores it. He waits until they’ve disappeared into the gate tunnel and then he steps up to the boarding desk and sets a ticket on the counter.

“I changed my mind,” he says. “I’m not going, so you’ve got an extra seat on there.”

“Is there anything we can do for you?” She asks with a professional smile.

“Nope, just changed my mind,” he insists, taking a step back and then walking away.

He wasn’t ever planning to use the ticket, not really.

He’d told himself he was getting a ticket just in case Selina didn’t show.

But really? He’d gotten a ticket so he didn’t have to leave Bruce at the security line.

He’d gotten a ticket so he could sit with him.

Chapter End Notes

Three. More. Chapters!

Two today, one tomorrow.

Do you guys want them all at once or spaced out today?
"When you invited me to go biking in Europe, this is not what I thought I was agreeing to," Selina says, pulling her helmet off. Her dark pixie cut is matted and disheveled. She lowers herself stiffly to the ground next to him on the camping blanket spread out on the uneven Portuguese forest floor. She's close enough that he can smell the tang of her sweat.

Bruce is on his back looking at a map held aloft above his face. They are on their fifth week of biking the most difficult trails he can find and the oppressive blackness that had been swallowing him in Gotham is a distant memory, a faded thing that is losing its edge more each day.

It’s been a long five weeks. The first week, the only way he can think to describe himself is fragile. He resists a shudder just remembering it. Selina made him eat. Selina made him get up. Selina made him snap the helmet buckle under his chin, stick to the list of trails he’d made on the plane in a moment of clear-headedness. She prodded him, held him, teased him, biked with him through sunrise and sunset under tree branch canopies and across coastal fields.

Somewhere near the end of the second week, he actually started to feel like himself again.

By week three, they’d fallen into old and familiar rhythms. It’s been glorious.

The past months had broken him in ways he never anticipated, but maybe that’s always the way it is with being broken. And he can feel himself being reknit with every mile of trail.

Selina knees him in the side on the blanket. He looks over at her.

“Are you just taking your helmet off? Did you stretch?”

“Yes,” she snaps. “I stretched. Didn't you see me?”

He didn't. He wishes he had.

He folds the map. The lines on it are almost in the same places now, joined where they should be.

“What did you expect when I invited you?”

“Oh,” she sighs. “I don't know. Vintage bikes. Sleeping in. Leisurely jaunts down paved paths to coffee shops. Staying in when it rains. I didn't know I was actually signing up for the Return of the Cowl training marathon.”

“Do you want to go?” He asks, dreading the answer, carefully keeping his voice neutral.

“No,” she says, sitting up and wrapping her arms around her knees. “I don't. It's been fun. I just like to complain.”

Bruce props himself up on one elbow.

“There's something else,” he says, because he can see it in the way her back is arched, even with bad eyesight and his glasses shoved in a backpack.

She turns to look him in the face.
“I honestly didn’t mind coming because you needed someone. But I don't like feeling like I'm your rebound girl while you and Gotham take a break.”

He can feel all the blood drain out of his head. He climbs to his feet and walks away, he needs to be moving, doing something. He always thinks he's ready for this conversation and he never is. His bike chain was making a small noise earlier, catching a little.

There's a palm-sized orange toolkit in his bag. He pulls it out and sits in front of the bike, tugs on the greasy chain. His fingers come away black and slick.

“I knew it,” she says bitterly. She's standing behind him, he guesses she has her arms crossed. He doesn't even want to think about how her hair looks, it was killing him. He wants to press his face where the trimmed neckline is, to inhale deeply and not ever talk again.

“You're not…” he pauses. How does he say what he wants to say, what he means, without sounding insipid? Selfish? Sentimental? Deceptive?

“You aren't a substitute, Selina,” he says finally, still feeling like it's not the right thing to say. His fingers are running the length of the chain, feeling for anything out of place. “I invited you because I wanted your company. I like spending time with you. I…” he swallows. “I love you. You know I do. But you aren't wrong, either. I'm going back to Gotham as soon as I'm ready.”

She sits next to him in the dirt, facing the opposite direction. Her shoulder is close to his, so close he could lean and kiss her cheek without much effort.

His fingers find a piece of hard, chipped wood wedged in a hinge of the chain. He tries prying it out without luck. He's going to need a tool, one from the kit that's on the other side of her, and now he's growing angry.

This is not the first time they've done this, the temporary escapes or recoveries. The overseas meet-ups where they can pretend for a while that they are people who could get along, stay together, get an apartment overlooking the Seine.

So why today? Why, if she doesn't want to be here, doesn't she just leave? He's okay now.

But she's handing him the tool kit instead.

“I love you, Bruce. But this isn't just you. It's me. I'm fickle and jealous and I don't like sharing you.”

“Gotham needs me,” he says, anger lingering. Or maybe it's fear. It's his line of defense, thrown up against the thing she has every right to ask and that he could never agree to, no matter how much he might want it.

“No,” she says gently. “You need Gotham. But I think you also need me.”

The wood chip gives way under the small titanium flat head he's using as a wedge. His vision blurs. The chain is clean and he could reattach it, but he makes no move to.

If there was weariness or resignation in her voice, he doesn't think he could handle it. He would come dangerously close to giving in, to making promises he would later regret.

But there is a hardness in her, a fierce determination that reminds him not of the house cats she keeps but of a tiger, prowling the jungle.

She runs a finger along the scar under his hair, and he shivers a little, but it doesn't feel bad. She
doesn't pull back. This isn't the first time or even the second and it's a relief how at ease she is with it, even as her words are iron.

“Gotham is a selfish bitch and she uses you. If neither of us can have you all the way, at least one of us should be good to you. And she shouldn't get to have you all the way. She'll kill you and she won't even feel bad. So, I'm staying. And I'm glad you asked me to come.”

He works on reattaching the bike chain, the black grease slick on his fingers. He's sweating and he runs the back of his hand across his forehead, trying to keep his fingertips from his skin or hair.

“Alfred doesn't want me to come home,” he says quietly. “He does but he doesn't.”

“Did he tell you that?” She asks, leaning against his shoulder while he works.

“No. He used to. He doesn't anymore but he still thinks it. And the funny thing is, it would have been easier to walk away from ten years ago. I'm in too deep now.”

“It's who you are,” she shrugs, her arm jostling his. “And let's be honest. If you asked me, really asked me, to settle down with you? I'd run for the hills. You wouldn't see me or hear from me in months, maybe years. I'm not saying it's healthy, it's just what it is. It's who we are.”

For the first time since she joined him next to the bike, he looks at her. The chain is still only halfway on. The narrow gear track by the rear wheel is at a bad angle for his fingers.

“I worry about you,” he says simply. And it's true, he does. “I'll go home after this and even with all the physical danger, I'll have Alfred, and my kids. And Clark. They saved my life. You shouldn't be alone so much. You need people.”

“Have I died?” She asks, laughing, but there is a catch in her voice, a haunted look he could see from a mile away. “Is this Purgatory? Is Bruce Wayne giving me a lecture about not being a loner?”

But he's not going to let it go. Especially after her determination to stay with him, knowing what it meant and what it could never mean.

“You shouldn't eat alone so often. I'm not asking for commitment or even scheduled dates. Just, come over sometimes. Come have breakfast or dinner. Spend the afternoon.”

All traces of false laughter are gone.

“Okay,” she says, meeting his level gaze. “I can do that.”

He turns back to the bike chain. She puts her hand on top of his.

“Let me. My fingers are smaller.”

He moves back and watches her easily slip the chain over the gear.

When she finishes, she stands and kisses the top of his head while he's still sitting there.

“We're stopping in Paris on the way back,” she says, walking away from him to the trail they're camped beside, “and spending the whole day eating chocolate croissants and drinking coffee.”

“Was always the plan,” he says. He knows he's asked a lot of her.

“Where after Portugal?” She asks, looking one way then the other while standing in the middle of the narrow trail. She bends and rubs her calf, in a slow and curling way, but with a grimace. “Shit. I
should have stretched.”

“Southern Spain. And I thought you did,” he says, packing the toolkit away. He stands and looks up at her on the mountain trail.

“Do you honestly think that if I'd stretched, you wouldn't have noticed?”

He doesn't have to think about this to know the answer.

“Perhaps you've forgotten,” he says, “but my eyes are bad right now. I had a brain tumor. You should come closer if you want me to notice.”

She's already stretching on the trail and she shakes her head at him.

“Nuh-uh. I saw you looking at that map. You weren't even squinting and God knows where you left your glasses. You're fine. But I'd take a massage later.”

He grins.

It is two days later, in a secluded little inn, that he wakes in the early dawn, rolls over and watches her sleeping. A minute passes before he realizes he can see her face in sharp definition, the slope of her nose and individual black eyelashes and the pout of her lips.

They eat breakfast together on the balcony and the clarity persists. They pack their bags for Spain, unzip everything again to find the toothpaste, repack and decide to throw away one of his shirts with grease stains across the sleeve, and through it all he is quiet, soaking up how beautiful the world looks.

“You okay?” she asks, after they check out.

“Hnn,” he says as they step out into the bright street. The train leaves in an hour. There's a little shop next to the inn, with newspapers and candy and beer and tea, it might also be a post office. He ducks in, finds a pair of sunglasses on a rack in the corner, and pays for them and a British paper.

She's quiet.

On the train, he reads the news and waits for her to go get a drink or go to the bathroom or something. When she does, he slips the prescription glasses out of his bag and stares at them for a minute.

“Sorry, Clark,” he says, and he snaps them in half.

When she comes back, the pieces are already in the trash. He has a brief pang of regret, but no, they aren't a souvenir he wants to keep around.

“I think--”

He is about to say, I think I'm ready to go home, if you're sick of biking up mountains.

But he sees her face, and he can really see it now. There are two more trails on his list and Gotham has waited six months. She can wait two more weeks.

“I think we should take an extra day in Spain,” he says. “Maybe find somewhere with good steak. It rained all day on your birthday and I need to make it up to you.”

She smiles, warm and lovely. He wants to take her picture, to save the moment forever, the muted
rumble of the high speed train and the golden light through the window and the wispy ends of her hair that she would say needs a trim but he thinks is perfect.

He wants to save it for the time he knows will come, the tug on his heart and limbs a sealed promise, when he is on a Gotham spire in the dark of midnight, chasing the grit and violence out of his city streets with a watchful eye.

She turns from him to look out the window at the rushing landscape.

He leans forward to look with her, his face next to hers.

Damn, but the whole world looks gorgeous.

“I’m glad your eyes are okay,” she says, while they watch the coast fly by, the ocean a perfect blue. But he barely sees it, he’s looking at her again.

“Me, too,” he says, kissing her cheek. “Thank you for coming. I’m going to go get a sandwich. Want anything?”

“No,” she says. “Just come back.”

“I will,” he says.

He walks three train cars before he pulls out his phone. He loves Selina, he really does, but she isn’t the only person in his life. He’s barely used his phone for days. He sends one text, to Alfred, trusting that the news will spread on its own:


Chapter End Notes

You guys. This might feel like an ending. But he’s BATMAN. Two more chapters.
The hall is cluttered with wood planks and drywall dust, two boxes of nails, and cans of paint.

Alfred Pennyworth tapes a box of books shut and puts it on the dolly. He glances over at the face of the man he is working alongside, expecting to see a thoughtful frown.

But Bruce is smiling faintly, a distant expression on his face. He's stopped packing books and has one open in front of him, skimming the words with quick and steady eyes. It's a book Jason brought over an hour ago, his complaining punctuated with swear words Alfred pointedly ignored.

"It is a fucking crime that you don't have a copy of this," he had said, tossing *True Grit* on a pile of packed books. Bruce had left it where it lay and kept packing, only saying, "Hnn."

Jason is across the room now, wrapping the curated shelf of first editions in brown paper before putting them in a box. The rest of the books are in the proper library, and the ones here Jason will not let anyone else touch.

They are moving the study.

Bruce arrived home from Europe three days before and announced the same day that he was shutting up the south study for a while and remodeling the unused billiard and smoking room across the hall. Nobody needed to ask why.

There is already a contractor installing shelving in the other room, ripping up carpet and stripping paneling sour with layers of decades-old nicotine. The on and off buzz of an electric saw fills the air.

Bruce only looks up from the book when Damian appears in the doorway behind them, with an oafish, big-pawed puppy at his side.

"Don't let him piss on the books," Jason snarls from across the room.

"Only on yours, Todd," the boy retorts.

Bruce snaps his book shut, packs it with the others, and leads Damian away from the room. Alfred tapes another box shut and follows them.

"He's beautiful," Bruce is saying, bending to scratch the dog’s ears. "How's Titus with him?"

"A bitch," Damian says scornfully, but there's some pride there, too. "He mothers him."

"I'm sorry, about the Christmas party," Bruce says quietly, as Alfred is walking past them.

"I know," Damian answers. Alfred looks over his shoulder to see the boy crouching to let the puppy lick his face. "I understand."

Alfred is stopped in the hallway, watching, and when Bruce notices him, he stands and motions forward.
They walk the hall together, Damian and the puppy trailing them until they break off into the den. Bruce backtracks, ducks his head into the dim room while Alfred waits.

Bruce doesn't know it, but he's about to interrupt a Saturday ritual and they might not be pleased.

“Piss off and shut the bloody door!” Dev yells. Alfred can see the outline of their heads against the glow of the TV screen.

“Hey, Bruce,” Tim calls casually. “You might want to wait until we finish off this witch.”

“FUCKING BASTARDS,” Dev roars. “Do you even have your sodding rifle equipped, Timothy?”

“Damian,” Bruce says sharply.

Then Dev turns and sees the boy behind him.

“Aw, shite. Sorry.”

But he's back at the game before Bruce can reply.

“I watched a man's arm burn off last night,” Damian grumbles. “I don't think his language is going to cause any significant damage.”

But he leaves the room with them anyway.

Near the kitchen, they meet Cassandra, who shoves a silver and blue wrapped box into Bruce’s hands and then bounces on her toes, her eyes bright with mirth.

He stops, gives her a look, and then wordlessly opens it. Alfred peers over his shoulder to see. Damian, uninterested, is already heading through the kitchen and Alfred hears the door to the outside slam.

Inside the box is a plaid flannel shirt, black and yellow.

“Cass,” Bruce says. He sounds like he’s trying hard to be angry but he’s failing miserably. She’s already typing on her phone, not looking at him, and a stilted mechanical voice comes out of the phone’s tiny speaker.

<“NERD FACE. MAN IN BUSINESS SUIT LEVITATING. CROSSED FINGERS LIGHT BROWN SKIN.”>

“I just want you to know I had nothing to do with this,” Clark Kent says, joining them from the direction of the cave.

“Hnn,” Bruce says and he hands the box to Alfred. “Put this in the closet. Thank you, Cass.”

He kisses her forehead and she walks away beaming.

“I just saw you in Paris,” he says to Clark, as they walk back toward the cave. “What are you doing here?”

“Dick said you're going out tonight.”

“So, you're babysitting me.”

“No!” Clark exclaims, their voices fading as Alfred stays behind upstairs. “What? I'm not allowed to
miss you? I thought we could patrol together.”

Alfred cannot hear Bruce’s reply to this because the elevator doors have already closed.

Bruce didn’t specify which closet, so Alfred hangs the shirt in the master bedroom and then returns to the kitchen to make dinner. He stands in front of the pantry doing mental calculations, surveying what they have. He didn’t expect so many people to be around for dinner but he's not put out in the least.

There is chicken sizzling in the oven when Dick staggers into the kitchen in a workout tank, drenched with sweat. He gulps half a water bottle down from the fridge and then drops into a wooden chair at the kitchen table, drapes his dripping upper body across the table’s surface.

“Master Richard,” Alfred snaps, trying to think where the nearest bottle of strong disinfectant might be.

Dick doesn’t move, but he moans, “Why did we think it was a good idea to let him come back? He has no mercy. I don’t know what Selina did with him but it was definitely more than just biking.”

“Master Richard,” Alfred snaps again, aghast. Then he fights back a smile. “I take it he’s in top form again?”

“You could say that,” Dick says, not lifting his head. “Or I’m getting old.”

“You’re young,” Alfred says firmly. “But you’ve been busy. You’ve had a run of long nights and he’s been resting.”

“At least someone around here is kind to me,” Dick replies.

“How do you feel?” Alfred asks gently, putting a cup of almonds by Dick’s hand. Dick begins eating them while still sprawled on the table. “About giving up the cowl?”

“This time? Honestly?” Dick says around a mouthful of almonds. “Relieved. It’s my turn to go to Europe.”

Alfred is glad to hear this. He had feared some lingering resentment after seven months of standing in. But the month before was a rough one in Gotham and involved too much time purging fear toxin while getting Scarecrow back into Arkham.

There’s a small cabinet of cleaners in the corner and Alfred checks it. The wood-safe bleach is there. He puts it on the table with a rag and says,

“Finish and wipe up after yourself. Then shower, please, before dinner.”

“Yes, mom,” Dick answers with his eyes closed.

After a minute he says, “I’m glad he’s back,” and gets up to clean the table.

Dinner goes smoothly, considering. Stephanie shows up ten minutes before they eat and Alfred can hear the shouting when she turns the game system off in the den. She deftly ignores Tim and Dev’s glaring all through the meal and then announces she’s taking Damian to see a Turkish movie at the university theater, does anyone want to come?

Bruce is quiet while they eat, but it is not a silence that worries Alfred. He works with Jason and Clark in the study for a bit after dinner while Alfred cleans the kitchen, and they leave Jason with the
books and head down to the cave together.

“I'll meet you out there,” Clark says once they're downstairs, unbuttoning his shirt to reveal the S insignia underneath. “I need to check something in Metropolis first.”

He leaves and Bruce and Alfred are left in front of the suit, the cowl and cape recently cleaned. Dick’s is already packed away in a storage case.

When Bruce leans forward to take it off the hook, Alfred busies himself dusting the computer station. He blows dust out of the keyboard before it can turn to grime in the cave.

Alfred turns after a few minutes and Bruce is standing behind him, suited up except for the cowl and cape, which he is holding and staring at pensively.

“I've missed this,” he says.

“I know,” Alfred replies. It's been a long seven months. An eternity, in some ways.

“Selina said Gotham doesn't need me,” Bruce says, and he seems troubled. “She said that I need Gotham.”

Alfred gives a small shrug.

“Perhaps it's both.”

Bruce looks at him and Alfred can see the change in his face, the shift from uncertainty to determination.

In one swift motion, he pulls the cowl over his head and the cape settles across his shoulders, over his back.

“O,” he says, and the computer speakers come to life at the same time his earpiece must.

“I've got you online,” Oracle’s voice carries across the cave. “You are up and ready to go just in time. We've got an in-progress robbery just underway on the 300 block of Jefferson.”

“I'm on it,” he says, striding toward the Batmobile as the top hisses and slides open.

“Have a good evening, sir,” Alfred calls. “I'll be up waiting.”

“Hnn,” Batman says as the Batmobile door closes.

Oracle’s voice comes over the speakers again.

“It's good to have you back, B. Welcome home.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you ALL for your wonderful company, encouragement, and comments! I have a feel-good epilogue to post but this is pretty much it. They made it! Everyone survived! I really appreciate all of your feedback and I'm so excited to keep writing.
September, One Year Post Diagnosis

“What's this?” Bruce asks, picking up the folder from the study desk.

“It's nothing,” Clark says, standing at the window and studying the oak trees across the field. The edges of the dark green leaves are just starting to curl with autumn red, waving in the chilly air. “I mean, it's something I worked on last year, that week.”

He doesn't need to specify the week.

“What is it?” Bruce flips the folder open, scanning the page. “Clark. What is this?” He's starting to sound a little angry.

“It's the only copy,” Clark says, turning. “It’s an op-ed. I didn’t work long before I realized I could never publish. Everything else was deleted months ago. I saved this, for when you could read it on your own. And then I kept putting it off. I wanted you to be able to see it and then you can burn it.”

“Hm,” Bruce says, already reading.

“I'm gonna go,” Clark says. “I don't know if I have the heart to hear you butcher it. Lois is waiting on me for dinner, anyway.”

Bruce doesn't reply. Clark leaves.

It's a bright fall morning in Gotham and the Wayne family sits in a conference room set aside for their privacy in Gotham Memorial Hospital, waiting restlessly for Bruce Wayne to be out of emergency surgery. Wayne was diagnosed with a brain tumor less than forty-eight hours ago.

When most people think of Bruce Wayne, the words that spring to mind are likely those carefully crafted by his publicist at Wayne Enterprises: businessman, playboy, philanthropist. Gotham City loves Wayne. Ask any passerby and they will sing his praises, but the praise is generic, impersonal. He has his critics, to be sure, but their complaints are equally vague.

The Wayne family waiting anxiously for news of their patriarch knows a different man. It is no secret that he is a foster parent, but light canvassing of the general population reveals opinion as removed as that of his public persona-- he is, at best, a man sponsoring teens out of the deep fold of his wallet.

Bruce Wayne’s personal history is rooted deeply in the cultural legend of Gotham itself. Any native Gothamite knows the story like their own. A young boy goes to the theater with his doting parents and returns home an orphan. What has been carefully hidden from the public, however, is just how much this tragedy has shaped the trajectory of his private life.

As this reporter sits among the waiting Wayne family, I feel compelled to correct some assumptions, to shed some light on the life of a man who lives his real life behind a crafted image. I must do this with the caveat that I am fiercely biased. Somewhere along the course of my own small life, Wayne has become a friend, and I sit with the family not as a reporter but as one who shares their stress, their hope, and their fear.
Bruce Wayne is, to put it bluntly, a collector of orphans. He does this not out of an unhealthy compulsion or an awareness of his wealth, but out of a tender and empathetic heart. He himself would protest this, but spend five minutes not with the average citizen but with one of Wayne’s family, and they will confirm it and more.

They, too, are often slandered in the media. This, too, needs correction.

Richard Grayson Wayne, or Dick, known as the eldest and one who has distanced himself from his adoptive father in past years, retains the lithe and quick body of the acrobat he was born to be. He is a paradox, considered by some to be an ungrateful rebel and by others to be a neglected son.

He is neither. It would be dishonest to say that he and Wayne have not had their falling outs, but at the end of the day, he is his father’s right hand man. They depend upon each other without the need for discussion or argument. Ask Dick Grayson where his father is or where his siblings are and he might not always have an answer. Ask him how they are doing, however, and he will know without hesitation.

Jason Todd passed away half a decade ago and his death is an open wound in the family’s life. The Waynes underwent an investigation on charges of negligence, but these came to nothing. Ask those nearest him and they will assure you, no one mourns Todd’s death or bears the weight of it to the extent that Wayne himself does.

Timothy Drake Wayne was once a neighbor of Wayne Manor and found himself drawn to the house. Many misjudge him because he regularly looks close to sleep, his brown hair in his eyes, a cup of coffee in his hand. But Tim has an intelligence and heart in him that seeks truth far more fiercely than many twice his age. He and Wayne seek one another out for company, and his devotion to his father is clear in his attention even now. Before Wayne is out of surgery, Tim will know the name of every doctor and therapist scheduled to work with him. It would not surprise me in the least to see Wayne Enterprises pass into his hands without contest or envy from his siblings. He is the only person ever known to beat Wayne at chess.

Cassandra Cain is usually shielded from most media exposure. She is quiet, thoughtful, and suffers a severe language delay. She is a treasured and doted upon daughter and Wayne’s commitment to her goes beyond dresses and therapy appointments. Wayne himself learned sign language to speak with her and was her first meaningful connection to the outside world. She is one of the few who can get a genuine laugh from him within mere minutes.

Damian Wayne is disliked by many reporters for his sharp manner of speaking. He is the only biological son, but use the word “real” in front of Wayne and you risk your head. Damian’s existence was hidden from Wayne for his entire infancy and young childhood and is marked with horror most cannot imagine. He is the spitting image of his father and Wayne has worked tirelessly to give him the stable home and love he needs. It is working. Damian is still guarded, cautious, but he is a bright and creative boy whose tender heart is most evident in his care for animals.

Todd Wayne is the newest addition to the family but is already an integral part of the Wayne life. The name he shares with Jason is a bond rather than an insult. He and Bruce share a love for literature that would put English professors to shame, and though he is prone to violent outbursts due to past trauma, one only needs a few minutes of his lecture on the character of Mr. Darcy to hear how sensitive and smart his heart runs.

Alfred Pennyworth is, for all accounts and purposes, Wayne’s own adoptive father. But in some ways, this title diminishes his role in the family. He is a confidant and best friend, and their relationship is akin to Damon and Pythias of myth.
What can be said of a man who gathers such beauty to himself, except that he recognizes and values it with an astute eye? I do not have to rehash the many reasons the Wayne children are criticized or written off. I only need to say that he himself has never done so.

Gotham would certainly mourn if Wayne was lost to it. But the grief of the city would not touch that of the family, who are far from being depositories for financial assistance or mere props for a public image. They are beloved sons and a beloved daughter, an indispensable paternal friend. They would feel his absence keenly, but they would not fall apart.

Wayne has brought them together and gave them the foundation to be a family. Those bonds are now cemented by his love for them and their love for each other. And for all his multi-million dollar philanthropy, I cannot help but feel that this is his and Gotham’s greatest triumph:

A boy orphaned in the dark of the city chose not to leave it for brighter places, but found those like himself and rescued them, and forged his own brightness in the midst of the dark.

Bruce finishes reading and then reads it again.

He picks up his phone.

This is sentimental bullshit and you need an editor, he sends.

Then a few seconds later, he sends another message.

Thank you.

He stands and walks to the fireplace, where a small fire crackles and bends flame.

Bruce stands there for a long time, the papers in his hand. He needs to act, to just throw them in and watch them turn to ash. Alfred is making dinner for everyone and he doesn't want to keep them waiting.

He goes to the desk and puts the papers back in the folder. He shuts it, puts it in the desk, and locks the drawer.

And later that night he sits on a jutting roof corner hundreds of feet in the air, a cowl covering a scar on his head, his cape whipping around him, the autumnal wind pushing against him so hard it is like a giant hand that wills him to fall, and he does not stagger or slip. He holds against the wind.

He watches the traffic halting and jerking forward far below him, thinks of his sons, his daughters, his father, his parents, a partner, a best friend, a lover, and the city he loves.

And he holds.

Chapter End Notes

In which Clark crushes hard on the Wayne family and probably goes home to ugly cry and will need a round of Scrabble soon.

Thank you all :)
P.S. You guuuuuys he wrote it in the hospital waiting room under stress, it's in the story
Developmental Milestones

I am posting here for those who bookmarked the story, because I can’t think of a better way to let everyone know at once. The sequel to *Foreign Object*, a piece called *Developmental Milestones* is now live on AO3. It's a story about Kiran Devabhaktuni and the Wayne family.

And it's right here: Developmental Milestones

Thank you again, to everyone, for reading and commenting and just being here!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!