Gotham is not a stranger to tragedy, but the newest murder seems to be a haunting echo of its most notorious crime. The GCPD struggles to get ahead while experiencing interference from on high, and is forced to turn to Batman and his extended family to see justice served for a little boy and his murdered parents.

At the same time, the vigilante family's new order is tested by their patriarch yet again. Will this highly personal case be the original Batman's last?
The boy leapt onto the sidewalk from the archway of the theater doors. The high action and heroics of the film were still loudly sounding in his head. He was eight, and his mother and father did not bother to chide him for enthusiasm. They watched, arm in arm, as he jumped and shouted and flailed frantic arms.

It had been a good night, a fun film.

"Did you enjoy the movie, Son?" his father questioned, amused.

"Duh!" was retorted as the boy held the hero's weapon in his hands, eyes narrowed down the invisible sights. The *BADDA BADDA BADDA* almost seemed to come from somewhere besides the boy's own mouth.

His mother laughed, a light, airy sound that was both gentle and earnest. It was the boy's favorite sound in the world. "You know, the Gray Ghost used to be a TV show from when your father and I were kids."

He misstepped on that note, twirling around on one foot to round back on his parents before his balance was ever fully regained. In his excitement, he had barely noticed they had gotten so close to the parking garage. "No … way-"

The sound of cheer was quickly drained from the air. The boy's face dropped from excitement and joy to confusion. He looked beyond his parents' shoulders with wide blue eyes.

"Honey?" his mother began, concern in her voice, before she turned for herself. Her hand slipped from her husband's grasp and over the bulge of her dress.

Both parents looked on in horror as the thick fog, unnatural even by the standards of Gotham, poured from the alleyway behind them. It darkened the street and sidewalk alike, shrouding everything in darkness but the visage of a blank skull with soulless eyes. They were suddenly all three aware of how utterly alone they were despite being less than a minute's walk from the happy theater.

"Oh, my god!" the boy's mother screamed, reaching for her son, too stunned to move on his own.

"Keep away from us!" his father shouted at the shadows and smoke. It gave no answer. "Take the boy and run!" he ordered to his family just before there was a haunting flash of light and spraying of blood.

The boy's eyes widened. His numb body felt alive only under the tingle of splatter on his face. "Dad…"

"No! God, no!" his mother screamed before a second flash dwarfed her voice then smothered it.

She landed at her son's feet. The boy watched as her last breath hung in the chilled Gotham air. It was swallowed by the thick fog before the boy could even process what it was.

The skeletal face sank back into the darkness, eyes gazing only at the boy as it retreated. He looked back at it, his own breath stuck in his chest.
"Why?" he asked, voice cracking as he sank to his knees, kneeling between the only two people in his entire world.

He was alone and without answers.

Robin carried the momentum of his pivot into the quick strike. The would-be assailant was thrown back at a force great enough to break the exhibit table he landed on. Glass shattered everywhere, but the man landed on the floor unconscious.

The vigilante thought about how stupid the ski masks looked and would have made a quip if someone far more notorious for such remarks hadn't been present to make them.

"I think," Batman grinned beneath his cowl, each punch and kick from the unfortunate robbers not even approaching his body, "you're all a bit out of touch."

Putting his hands on his hips, Robin sneered. "Tt. Really, Batman?"

The elder crime fighter caught the fists of both attackers at once and easily flipped them onto their backs. He sighed, hiding his yawn from all but his protege. Both robbers landed harshly on their backs, stunned and done. Robin reached for one's ankle and swiftly drug him over to his spot, quickly zip tying and securing him before the man could think to resist. Batman was already done with his own.

"You were a bit harsh on your guy, Robin," Batman said, looking to his partner. His head tilted as he smirked. "Is the Teen Wonder still upset over Nightwing's partner?"

Robin's eyes narrowed. "Batgirl is a menace. If Nightwing is going to such lengths to keep her trainee's identity a secret from us the least she could do is see to it that the girl can handle her own and not waste valuable time on childish antics," he snarled. "How many resources were wasted - and precious time, Batman - so that she could pretend to return the Batarangs she pillaged from me to begin with just so they would explode into 'goop' upon inspection!?"

Beneath the cowl, Batman raised a brow. "It was a little bit funny. And perhaps I should be concentrating more on the fact that Batman's partner didn't see that one coming." When Robin looked ready to break another display case, the elder quickly changed tactics. "I'll talk to Nightwing about it."

Sirens sounded in the distance and the two casually made their exit through the back exit, reaching for their grapples as they did so. "Will you? I am not entirely certain our Eggplant Terror of the Night is not still the source of this… direct attack on my dignity."

"Sound theory, chum," Batman admitted as they ascended to the rooftops. "And you used to say you weren't interested in detective work."

The look Robin gave his mentor spoke volumes of the sorts of nasty retorts he was choosing from just before a familiar ping sounded across their communicators.

With a knowing smirk, Batman reached to answer the comm built in his cowl. "Playing Oracle tonight, Red?"
"Who said anything about playing?" Red Robin answered briskly.

"Red Robin," Robin answered haughtily, a sense of formality in the address.

"Robin," their brother returned without missing a beat. "I saw that the police responded to the break-in. Everything run smoothly?"

"It was fine," Batman assured him. "Do you have anything else on the grid that needs our attention?"

The channel was filled with Red Robin's signature hum and the fierce typing of the technological Bat's fingers. "Silent night by Gotham standards. The GCPD is on top of their calls, and nothing much coming in all things considering. Probably helps that Hood has the cartel's on the ropes. They've not been making next to any noise after he blew that freighter."

"You mean after you both took out that freighter," Batman corrected.

"Because I was present and negligent of what Hood planned on doing with those charges doesn't mean I was an accessory," he said easily, the smile in his voice almost visible. "Necessarily."

"This is why father encourages you to be locked away with a laptop permanently," Robin huffed.

"Don't take it to heart, Lil' Brother," Batman offered with an easy smile. "Someone's having Batgirl troubles."

The cough Red Robin gave almost covered his snort. Almost.

"There would be no problem if our supposedly gifted Technical Analyst could discern her identity," the teen growled.

"I know her identity."

"Then what is it and how did you find it!?"

"Can't divulge personal information, Demon. And what do you mean how? I figured out Batman's identity."

Rolling his eyes, Batman sighed. "Alright, enough. Someone has an early morning shift and if the other patrols are still out and the city is being uncharacteristically tame, then I'm going to be a good example for my little bat brethren and turn in early on a night we can."

"As if my academic performance is ever a concern," he grumbled in return before turning in the direction they had left the R-Cycle. "Nights I'm home early always end with a game of twenty questions. It's not as if I'm going to bed any earlier."

"Night, Robin," Batman said as he turned to face the West Side and the apartment of a very exhausted Dick Grayson. "Don't suppose I'm inspiring any other successors to turn in for a good night's rest today, am I?"

"If you really want me to, I can put Hood on three way. I'm sure he'd love to answer that for you," Red Robin responded cheekily. "Also, to make you feel somewhat better, she might not be a former Robin, but I have a BlackBat sleeping like a log on my couch. She turned in about twenty
"A little bit better," Batman admitted, gliding to the next rooftop. "Don't forget to sleep, Lil' Brother."

"No promises."

*

There were few things Dick Grayson found more comforting than returning to his loft with the prospect of a full four hours' sleep.

It was easy enough to sleep on the cot in his bunker under the building, but as much as he had worn down the cot the idea of an actual mattress for once was just too tantalizing. He stripped down from the cape and cowl in record time, signed off all his frequencies to let certain computer-attached family members know of his safe arrival, and padded his way to the hidden entrance to his room.

For nearly a full second he contemplated the idea of setting out his uniform for his other job before landing promptly on his bed, sprawled out and nearly boneless. He was barely in enough of a state of mind to glance at the clock and be sure its alarm was set for work before his eyelids slid shut, having enough of his meandering wakefulness.

Just as Dick rested in the gentle restfulness of almost sleeping, his duty phone went off - blaring Bad Boys as obnoxiously as possible because Jason thinks he's funny.

After a moment of opening his eyes dully and staring at the clock, completely bemused by the fact only fifteen minutes had passed, he rolled onto his back and reached with his nearest hand to grab the phone from the nightstand.

"Grayson," he croaked into the phone.

"Dick," the commissioner's voice rang across the phone, fully waking Dick up and prompting him to sit on the bed. "Are you in uniform?"

He glanced cautiously to his civilian closet. "I can be, Boss."

"We need you at the station." There was a pregnant pause before, "Officer Grayson, this case needs... your unique sensibilities."

Frowning, Dick was already on his feet and reaching for the first pressed uniform in his wardrobe. "I don't like the sound of that. I'll be right there."

He hung up and sighed, leaning his forehead against the frame of his closet just long enough to wiggle into his pants. Already he was growing concerned with what sensibilities the GCPD would need from him instead of Batman.

If he was completely honest, however, knowing the commissioner, she probably meant them both.

His back brace clinked against the computer's chair softly. To any normal person, the noise would be nearly indiscernible from the whine of the chair's metal or the creak of leather that came along
with it. But he was no normal person, and its sound was a violent distraction from the solidarity of the cave and the hum of the multiple screens before him.

At his feet, Titus huffed and kicked out his legs. The dog slept easier than any of the other bats.

Batman leered at the screens before him, noting the long passage of time since the files were left alone in light of more important cases at the GCPD and his current access.

It was always uncomfortable to know how a city with so many crimes could so easily forget some of her most brutal.

When a corner screen signaled that the southern gate had been entered and the hum of the R-Cycle filtered through the tunnel, Bruce glanced casually to the clock. It was just past 2:30.

Unusual, to say the least.

Titus stirred, head lifted and tail cautiously wagging until the light of the bike was visible. The dog whined, crawling on his belly before quickly getting to his feet and bounding to the park, nails clicking against the cave floor.

Bruce swiveled his chair to face his returning son more directly. He observed as Damian stopped, kicked down the stand, and removed his helmet.

There were no injuries visible.

Satisfied, the original Dark Knight turned once more to his screens and searched for the sentence he had left off at. Titus barked until his master calmed him - the dog was spoiled like that.

"You're early," Batman's voice seeped through as Bruce leaned forward and clicked to enlarge the crime scene photos in question.

"There was an usual calm in the city," Damian returned calmly, walking up to the computer dock. "Grayson works the morning shift this week."

He grimaced. Bruce already knew when Dick worked - cold case files weren't the only things on the GCPD's network available to him. "I don't like him working there period. It's risky."

"I somehow believe he knows that already," the teen returned, his biting sarcasm as thick as ever. "We stopped a robbery. Everything went fine. There's nothing else from tonight of note." The boy paused, his face growing the ugly sneer it did when he was addressing something he found particularly foul. "The new Batgirl requires my full attention. I'm more determined than ever to cause her to desist. Her pranks distinctly smell of Brown, though. So, perhaps, I'll devise a way to force them both into retirement."

Knowingly, Bruce smirked. He looked expectantly at his youngest. "Good luck with that."

Damian waved his hand as if the cynicism was a fly to be swatted. "It shall just be another area in which I surpass you all." He then leveled a glare in his father's direction. "The last report is of the upmost importance. Drake is an annoying prat. And if everyone is insistent on allowing him to take over for Gordon's position as technical mind, then he should be required to be forthright with any and all information at his disposal. It could be life or death."

"I won't make him give you Batgirl's identity," Bruce headed off before the thought could be
continued. His eyes settled on the cold cases again. "We're detectives first, Damian. Perhaps he's allowing you to test your deductive skills."

His son had no response but the boy did carry a scowl.

"There was nothing tonight?" Bruce prompted as the boy removed his domino.

"No, Father," the teen responded, practiced and bored. "Drake is still on communications and he indicated that Brown, Todd, and Batgirl were at his disposal. Cain is sleeping, apparently."

"Where?"

"Drake's couch."

"Hnn," Bruce brought a hand to his chin. "Tomorrow, since the city is so quiet, I may have you reexamine a witness for me."

His youngest nodded, looking to the files for himself. "How old is this one?"

Bruce frowned. "Ten years. I never got to it. At the time I was working a case for the League. It was cold by the time I could refocus on Gotham." He looked to Damian. "And you have several college applications to finish from what Alfred tells me. When were you planning on doing those?"

The teen rolled his eyes. "As if it's a question on whether or not I shall get in."

"Not the point, Damian."

"Tomorrow then," the boy groaned, turning to the showers. "I hope you plan on sleeping tonight, Father. I do not wish to live through another Thompkins and Pennyworth intervention. They're most unpleasant for all involved!"

The detective ignored his son and placed all focus on the cases once more. Since his "tentative" benching he had solved nearly thirty cold cases for the GCPD. He gripped tightly to his armrest and couldn't help but feel it still wasn't enough.

Commissioner Gordon ran a tight ship, making every officer and detective around her perform with speed and efficiency most generals would aspire to. She was dedicated to completing and upholding the mission her father had dedicated his life to: protecting and serving Gotham by clearing up her protectors and creating a well-oiled machine.

It was understandable, then, that everyone was a bit haunted to see an unexpected repeat of the very case that had begun to the GCPD’s infamous dark descent.

Many of the older officers on the force, those retired or nearing retirement, warned the youth about the demoralizing the entire force experienced in the wake of the Wayne family double homicide. It was something the city thought it would never recover from until the former Commissioner Gordon stepped up.

Barbara was not a fan of restarting at square one.
"Get Cohen and Kasinsky in my office the second they're back from the scene," she demanded as she looked to the reporting officer - Allen, a second generation officer most likely going to make it to detective in a short amount of time.

"Yes, Ma'am-" the young man hesitated, looking spooked as he stared over the commissioner's shoulder into her office. The expression gave way to relief after a moment of panic and he returned his attention to the commissioner. "Right away."

Allen left, Barbara turned to see Dick, in uniform, by her desk.

"You summoned me?" he said, his teeth showing through his smile.

"Don't make a scene," she chided before rolling her chair in through the door and slamming it behind her. "I half expected you in your other uniform."

"Half awake, I'm still pretty good at discerning who you're calling for," he responded with a hum, watching as she stopped behind her desk. "Any reason I've been called in to M.C.U.?"

She looked expectantly at him.

When she had retired from Oracle and turned her attention instead to a career in Gotham's police force, it had partially been to thicken the line between the two forms of crime fighting, and partially to take her father's place in the most important role between Gotham's two protectors.

A year later, Dick, for what she was sure were his own reasons, had joined the force. She tried very hard to pretend it didn't still bother her.

They made an arrangement, a slippery slope of rules about how to engage each other in any situation - Officer Grayson and Commissioner Gordon, Batman and Commissioner Gordon, Dick Grayson and Barbara Gordon, and so on. One of those rules was that Dick could not work with Major Crimes, especially involving any of the numerous rogues. Not as Dick Grayson, at least.

"We have a copy cat," she admitted darkly. "One that you need to know about before it hits the presses."

Dick made a face that would have been unreadable to almost anyone else. Barbara wasn't anyone else. "Not Zsasz," he said, too dark to be hopeful.

"No, not Zsasz this time," she said, removing her glasses so that she could gingerly rub at her tired eyes. They had had three cases of copy cats of Victor Zsasz since the two of them took to the force. None ended pleasantly. "No, this one hits a little closer to home, Dick."

He began to move toward the desk, closer to her, but hesitated. He stopped short instead, brow furrowing in concern. "Closer to home for who?"

She looked at him before reaching for the file on her desk, handing it to him. He accepted.

"Tonight a family of three were leaving a movie, The Gray Ghost Strikes Again, when an assailant in what we're assuming was a skull mask stepped out of the alley and killed the father and mother. The son is eight years old," she says clinically, trying her best to mask how disturbed she really was.

He looked at the files, face drawn tight, disbelieving. His features were becoming colder the more
he read. "It's not exact," he said softly. "But it can't be ignored." Dick looked up from the file and at her. "This isn't in the system yet, is it?"

Barbara scowled. "He's in our recent files, too?" she asked critically.

"You never know with him," Dick responded before looking at the file, deflating. He looked honestly devastated. "How sure are we that it's a copy cat? I know it's Gotham and there are never coincidences but… why now?"

"I can feel it, Dick, the whole force can," she responded tiredly. She looked at him. "But you, Officer Grayson, are not working this. I called you in for something else entirely."

The man looked at her, brow raised.

She maintained a calculated facade, only hating herself a little for putting the worst burden on her oldest and dearest friend. "His name's Terry. He's in the first exam room. Something funky is going on with child services and they can't get here for a while. We can't get him to eat or talk."

Dick's expression softened considerably. "I'll sit with him."

He was cold and numb. One of the officers, a nice lady who arrived after what seemed like endless hours on the pavement, had wiped his face clean with her sleeve. As if removing the blood of his parents from his face was going to erase the horror of what he had seen.

His clothes were the too-large sweats of an officer, his own sweater, shoes, and pants taken by the people who bagged his only family.

They let him keep his socks, and there was something almost funny about that notion that he would remember for the rest of his life.

Even in the police station, with fresh clothes, though, Terry couldn't feel his extremities. It was an exhaustion without possibility of sleep.

It was that complete drainage at fault for why he did not hear or sense the officer until the man was wrapping a standard issue coat around his shoulders.

For the first time in what felt like an eternity, Terry found the strength to look up at one of the officers.

The man swallowed a bit, like something about Terry's face had caught him off guard, but it was quickly hidden by a sad smile. The officer squatted in front of Terry and the bench, his own hands on his knees.

"Hi, Terry," the man said softly. "My name's Dick Grayson. You can call me 'Dick,' okay?"

The other officers had been nice to Terry, but there was something different about Dick. He could smile at Terry without it feeling fake or clueless. He knew what Terry was feeling somehow. He somehow made it okay to cry.

Tears fell down the newly orphaned boy's face and he sniffed the best he could to croak out, "Hi, Dick."
Dick's face drew together, just a little sadder, but his soft smile kept. "I know you've been through a lot, Kiddo. Believe me, I know. But I want to be your friend, okay? And friends know when to let their friends cry. And they know when to give hugs." He shifted a little closer, rested a warm hand on Terry's knee. "Do you need a hug, Terry?"

With that, Terry found himself choking on a sob he never knew was being held down. He nodded fiercely, coughing with the quake of his shoulders. His vision blurred, watery and so tired all of the sudden.

He couldn't move on his own, but warmth washed over his petrified body as he felt strong arms encircle him. He buried his head into the collar of the pressed shirt as the officer lifted him up and onto Dick's lap. It felt like his crying had only begun as he was gently rocked and felt his hair stroked.

"It's okay to cry," Dick murmured in his ear, a gentle mantra.

Dick never lied and said only *it's okay*. And somehow, more than any of the police he had endlessly been paraded around so so far, that was a surprising comfort.

It was not okay. But it was okay to cry, to *feel*.

And that for Terry, was more than enough for that moment.
Forging Partners

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Cassandra had, somehow, managed to completely flip what side of the couch her head was on during her sleep. It truly was the sleep of the dead and Tim had to wonder at least a little if it was all the frequent flyer miles adding up since his sister became the go-to Bat for representing their Gotham chapter in the international Batman, Inc.

He made a mental note to rotate her more in the roster, or at least ask her about whether she liked flying out two times a month. Perhaps with Cricket dealt with, she would be more willing to consider her options.

It was worth a try. As was sleeping before work.

Tim stretched back against his desk chair, arching with his yawn, toes curling within socks. When he finally sat back down, he reached for the first button in the seemingly long process of shutting down all of the Network equipment when he hesitated.

Sighing, he sat back in his chair and swiveled to look in his brother's direction.

"Don't tell me you came to make sure I was in bed already... or to tuck me in if I wasn't," he pleaded. "I don't think my dignity could take it."

Dick smirked, looking more than a little impressed, and put his hands on his hips as he tilted his head. Tim noted that there was a distinct, visible sadness in his older brother's eyes. "You and Dami and your precious dignity. I don't know what scares me more: how much you two still bicker or how much you're too alike," the elder said before sitting on the corner of the desk. The glow of the screens refracted from Dick's badge. "What kinda equipment did you install to detect me coming in?"

Folding his arms, Tim leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. "I'm offended, Dick. I sensed you there." He paused long enough to raise a brow at his brother. "You and Damian do remember I still patrol and do field work, right? It's not like I'm out of practice."

"Just frequently overworked and under-rested," his brother returned with a pointed look. "You should've been in bed three hours ago. Like I should have."

Interest piqued, Tim drew his brows together. "What, you haven't slept yet? I thought you were just stopping by on your way to the Department."

"Got called in," Dick said, his tone and expression growing grimmer as they approached the subject that had been apparently weighing heavily on him. "I've been at Central since two thirty this morning with a kid who watched both of his parents die last night."

Tim felt his brows stretch for his hairline. "Man, Dick. I'm sorry," he said genuinely. He straightened in his seat. "Do they have the perp?"

Dick looked hard at his own badge. "No. In fact, the assailant disappeared into the alley after killing them both. Left this kid sitting in his parents' blood. He's eight." He looked meaningfully at Tim. "Sound familiar?"
It took a moment for Tim to process it all. It was, of course, familiar. It was the one open case that was on each of their subconscious at all times.

How could he forget the murder that gave birth to Batman?

"Does he know?"

His frown still tight on his features, Dick shook his head just once. "I'm heading over to talk to him in person about it. Babs gave me today off after 'services rendered' this morning." He paused, looking off in thought. "Children services still weren't there by the time I left. But the kid finally fell asleep so I didn't feel so bad about leaving him."

Tim still frowned. "Is that the usual poor public servants of Gotham at work or is something else going on? If this case has the makings of being high profile, you'd think they'd have as much manpower behind it as possible from the start," he pointed out.

"You would think," Dick conceded before looking seriously to his little brother. "But they're not." He narrowed his eyes. "And it stinks, Tim. Even if it didn't seem like a copy cat of the Wayne murders, something about this whole deal feels sour. And it's not just me. Babs and some of the others in the department are sensing interference from something higher up. Possibly government-level clearance. They're in the shadows mucking with everything, tying up children services could just be the start of it."

"Ah," Tim uttered, raising a brow. "Are you saying that it could use a fresh pair of eyes to examine who's in the system?"

"I am," Dick acknowledged, crossing his arms and smirking. "Too bad we don't have anyone with fresh eyes present."

Rolling said eyes, Tim waved his brother off and turned back to the Network. "Please, Officer Grayson. Hold back some of that overwhelming support and confidence. It's unbefitting a cowl of your magnitude."

To that, Dick let out a small but genuine laugh. He walked over to his brother's side and squeezed Tim's shoulder. "Thanks, Li'l Brother. Owe you almost as much as you owe your sleep debt."

In good humor, Tim rolled his shoulders to shake himself free of potentially overbearing siblings. "You've got that much right." Pausing as his system took time to gain remote access, Tim looked over his shoulder to Dick. "Bruce'll take this hard. Do you need back-up? Emotional support?"

"Hmm," Dick hummed before releasing a sigh. "Emotional support? Sure. But Alfred'll be there so I'm probably covered at least partially on that front." Then, because he never could resist the opportunity, Dick rustled Tim's hair and turned to leave.

Tim let the unwarranted affection slide as his attention was consumed, bit by bit, by the information presented at hand on the screen. He didn't even bother to look behind him when he heard his siblings interacting.

"Cass! Good, you're up. I have a job for you."
It was by far the angriest Babs had allowed her department see her get. She released a frustrated hiss into her phone and turned her chair from her office's window. It made it at least slightly easier to ignore the shocked looks everyone on the floor was giving her.

"This poor kid has been at Central since one this morning," she gritted out. "You're telling me that CPS can't even process his file!? This child witnessed his parents' murder and the city can't afford to put anyone on the case?"

The hesitation from the director on the other end of the phone conversation spoke volumes to the amount of fury the commissioner was radiating. All Gordon could think was good.

"Commissioner Gordon, I don't know what else we can tell you," the man said truthfully. "We began processing the case to get a file together and send someone out as soon as you contacted us, but we were contacted immediately and told to desist until further notice."

She became so taken aback that her vision whitened. "Who has the authority to take you off a case of child endangerment when said child is newly orphaned with absolutely no relatives?" she demanded. "And furthermore, what dirtbag would make such an order to begin with!?" Only when the grip of her free hand began to hurt against her metal desk was she able to reign her emotion back in. "The least you could do is send a child specialist to us. We have a criminal profiler keeping him company and doing primary evaluations on him now. But I don't think I have to explain to you how unprofessional that is."

"I know, Commissioner, and I can't apologize enough," he continued, a certain somberness to his tone. "My hands are tied."

When he hung up the phone, Barbara immediately reached for her forehead. She closed her eyes and felt the surging of her vein.

"What would you do, Dad?" she sighed to the office.

She didn't even wait for an answer before turning to head back to the interrogation room.

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The poor boy looked somewhat relieved when the well-out-of-his-realm profiler excused himself and took his briefcase with him. Barbara waited patiently at the door, a brown bag in her lap, until the man was gone. She then carefully wheeled herself from the door to the table Terry sat at.

Whatever relief the boy felt immediately drained from him by the time Babs was taking a spot at the corner nearest him. He was staring at his hands intently, the rings of his eyes looking like ripe bruises and swollen from tears already spent.

"Hello again, Terry," she said softly, concentrating on him to gage his responsiveness for herself. When he didn't react, she moved on to bringing the paper bag to the table and unpacking it methodically. "I had someone pick us up some lunch. I didn't know what you'd like so I had them get a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for you and some chips." She pushed them closer to Terry on the table. "We got a Capri Sun, too. But if you don't like that you can have my water."

After a long moment, Terry glanced up at the saran wrapped sandwich and the bag of chips.

"My mom always used one slice of bread," he said miserably. "She'd fold them up. We called them 'P.B.J. Flops.' And she'd cut apples."
Barbara held off on unpacking her own deli sandwich, opting instead to force a sad smile as she took one of Terry's hands into her own. "Would you like your sandwich better if we got an apple, Terry? I can peel it for you."

The boy searched her face for a long moment, checking for how genuine the emotions she offered were before nodding. His head did not drop again, his eyes were locked on her. He was 'waking up' from the stupor he had been in for nearly half a day.

The commissioner was not sure if the development was good or bad yet, but she would not look a gift horse in the mouth. She looked meaningfully to the one-way glass and knew that someone would be by shortly with an apple from the lounge.

Her attention went back to Terry who had apparently followed her look to the glass and back. Some color had returned to his cheeks since they had brought him in, shocked and feverish.

"Is that a… a one-way mirror thing?" he asked.

She smiled softly. "It is."

"I saw one of those in…" Terry stopped. His open mouth snapped shut with an audible pop before he looked down, a choked noise escaping his throat. Those tiny hands in his lap closed tightly into fists. "I saw one of those in th-the Gray Ghost…"

Concerned about the trigger that the innocent adventure movie could have been, Barbara reached forward, holding tightly to the orphan's shoulder.

What she wasn't expecting was for the boy to look back up at her again, his face darkened and his eyes burning with anger. Still, she held her ground.

"Someone should have stopped him," he said lowly. "My mom and dad shouldn't have died."

Barbara felt her breath catch in her chest. A chill ran down her back. After carefully swallowing, she leaned forward, grabbed Terry's other shoulder with her free hand and leveled herself to him. She looked him directly in the eyes as she responded, "No, they shouldn't have, Terry. And someone should have stopped the man who did this - the man himself. He is the one at fault and we're doing everything we can to bring him in."

"No!" Terry cried out, jerking back in his chair with enough force to yank away from her hands. He gritted his teeth as his eyes glistened, too tearless to fully cry with the weight of this new emotion. "I could have done something! I-I wanted to go to the movies. Mom doesn't even like superheroes! I… I asked to." Just as it seemed his resolve was dwindling once more, falling back on the sadness instead, Terry took a breath and returned to a righteous fury. "I was there. I didn't do anything. I didn't know what to do. But I know what I want to do when I see him again."

She sat in her chair, dumbfounded as she looked at the little boy so full of anger and hate, and guilt. Survivor's remorse, certainly, but it was to a degree that Barbara was painstakingly familiar with. The parallels were beyond eerie.

One time there was a Gordon who gave an all-too similar boy what few words he needed to hear. Barbara felt it was time to step up to her new mantle.
"What will you do, Terry?" she asked quietly, watching the confusion begin to edge in on the boy's face. "You want to stop him, Lord knows we all want to help see that happen as well. The police bring people like that man to face the law and justice. We have a system to protect people. It's hard to see that right now, but I want you to know that I won't rest until we find resolution. Alright?"

Terry lowered his head again, the heights of his epiphany apparently gone.

For the former vigilante, it was not satisfying. "Listen, Terry--"

Before she could finish, the door opened and she turned sharply to glare at the intruder. If they had interrupted her to bring the apple she would possibly hurt someone.

Instead she was met with a very serious Captain Grant. "Commissioner," he spoke up promptly. "We need you there are... people asking for you."

After a moment of confusion, she turned her chair around. She glanced over her shoulder to Terry. "I'll be right back, Terry," she promised. "Feel free to eat anything."

The boy didn't make a move.

Feeling as though her progress had been completely undermined, Barbara barely withheld her fury as she exited. It was an outburst quickly forgotten when the examination room's door shut and she was met with two black suits and their held out badges.

*Checkmate.*

Dick had yet to second guess his decision to inform Bruce about the current case alone until he was nearing the Manor's gate and saw three photographers.

The word *vultures* came to mind along with *road kill* but he reigned in the wandering thoughts early. He wasn't, for better or worse, Jason.

It only slightly added to his annoyance when he neared the gate and was bombarded with pictures. He pulled the clicker from his pocket and ignored the flashing bulbs and obnoxious questions as the gate opened just enough to fit him and the bike. He sped through, quickly clicking the control once more to close the gate behind him before the paparazzi got any clever ideas.

Entering the Manor itself became more daunting as he rang the doorbell and noticed that the Lincoln, Alfred's choice vehicle, had not left yet to take Damian to school.

Either his youngest brother was ungrounded or something had caused the executive decision that it wasn't a good day for Waynes in public.

The current Batman had an inclination toward the latter.

Alfred opened the door, looking prim as ever. However, age had presented Alfred with a few more wrinkles to give subtle clues as to his true expressions. Dick could see clearly that he was perturbed.

"It's barely noon," Dick sighed. "It's already out?"

"I am not privy to the exact circumstances, Master Dick," Alfred responded, ushering the eldest of
his 'grandsons' into the Manor and swiftly shutting the door behind him. "But I have learned enough of the events and seen enough of Master Bruce's foul temperament to know that it is not pleasant circumstances upon us."

The officer took in a deep breath and rubbed at his temples. "Great. I came all the way here to tell him in person and that gets shot to hell." At the raise of Alfred's brow, Dick blushed and coughed into his fist. "Eh, language. Right. Sorry, Alfie. It's... been a long morning?"

With a twitch of his perfect mustache, the butler turned to lead Dick toward the study. "I shall simply add you to the list of mentors responsible for Master Damian's preferred expletives, Sir," Alfred said evenly. "Fairly soon it will only be Miss Cassandra kept well in good graces."

"Only because we can't hear her thinking," Dick muttered, a good natured grin surfacing just before he found himself outside the study's closed door. He studied the knobs. "Think it's locked or that he made it easy for me?"

"Please mind the woodwork, Sir," Alfred responded quickly, turning toward the kitchen. "These doors are antiques and have weathered many a child in these halls. Including you."

Dick laughed, squatting to get better access to the lock beneath the knobs. He worked swiftly. "I'll do my best."

After only a few seconds, which convinced Dick he'd have to ask Bruce later about reinforcing the older doors in the Manor, Dick easily opened into the study and neared his adopted father's desk.

The elder man was reading from his tablet at the desk, not the least bit surprised by Dick's entry which meant he had known his son was picking the lock successfully and still hadn't bothered to let Dick in like a normal person.

It wasn't exactly a new revelation that his father was a bit of a jerk at the best of times.

Predictability was also a problem of Bruce's, which was why Dick didn't bother looking at the tablet to confirm that it was the GCPD's network being accessed. Dick sighed.

"I was coming over to tell you myself," Dick said, remorseful. He looked at Bruce, waiting to be acknowledged. When the silence went on a second too long, he continued. "I suppose they've already put a lot of the report on the computers. I had hoped, with CPS taking so long, that it would've waited until after I got here. Guess this is one of the rare occasions where the department's on the ball."

Bruce stopped, putting the tablet down on the desk, and looked up at Dick. "I was getting ready to call it a night," he said crisply. "I wouldn't have checked the newest archive had I not gotten a call from Vicki."

Dick blinked, caught only slightly off guard. "Vicki? Vale? I thought she retired."

"From the Gazette but not from personal reporting, apparently," Bruce responded. "She runs a blog. Her initial reports are already making some circulation and since she had made a one sentence comparison of last night's attack to my own parents' murder, she felt it would have been in bad taste to our friendship if she didn't give me heads up." Bruce's features tightened, though his mouth managed to stay a straight, fierce line. "Since she made the connection in her own report, every 'reporter' in the city has drawn it as well. I had Alfred unplug the landline after the
fifteenth caller."

"I warned you about keeping a house phone," Dick said lightly. "It's only the twenty-first century, and you have three cell phones to your name."

As expected, Bruce showed no capacity for Dick's attempts at levity. He pushed up from his chair. "Are you assigned to the case?"

"No, which means Barbara wants Batman to get a perspective on it," Dick responded, suppressing the urge to stick a hand out and assist his mentor. "Where's your cane?"

"Good," Bruce said, blatantly ignoring the question. "But you have other responsibilities to look into."

Dick raised a brow. "Oh? In the longest string of quiet nights we've had this year?" When the implications of Bruce's words began to catch up full speed, Dick had to shake his head. He then blanched at his mentor. "Wait. No. Bruce, I know you want to work on this case. I get it, believe me. I get it probably more than anyone else. You know that. But you made a promise to all of us after last time. Which, might I remind you, was less than a year ago."

"Ra's is my responsibility, despite what Tim might argue," Bruce returned sharply. "There was no other option. This time, the case is personal."

Not accepting Bruce's stubbornness, Dick stepped between his mentor and the grandfather clock. He narrowed his eyes. "I know what this case means to you already, Bruce. But you absolutely have to trust me to take care of it. The world needs Batman, but it also needs you. Hurting your back again or getting yourself killed helps no one. Do not get in the suit again."

Bruce glared. "You can't stop me."

As a matter of fact, Dick could. Easily. His mentor's rigorous injuries, the heart attack that took the suit the first time after threatening to take his life, and the damage to his liver after years of processing poisons, antidotes, pain killers, and more had beaten at the former pinnacle of physical health.

But Dick would not stop him physically like that. It wouldn't solve the real issue. Bruce had already began working the case in his mind the moment he heard of it.

The Master Detective was like a bloodhound. He could not stop what he started once he was on the scent.

"Bruce," Dick sighed. "It's a terrible idea, alright? And you need to work with someone."

To that, the corner of Bruce's mouth quirked slightly in a smirk. "I won't have to think too hard about my options. You've already assigned people to tasks, I assume."

"Tim's looking into everything on the parents as we speak and I have Cass out in uniform," Dick said with a nod. "I already assessed the situation first hand with the boy at Central. Was with him for a few hours which is why I'm late on telling you."

Bruce, still standing though his hand his steady against his desk, leaning just slightly, shifted at the mention of the boy. The ghost of a smile on his face faded quickly. "How is the boy?"
Dick ran a hand through his hair. "About as good as a kid can be after watching his parents die," Dick sighed. "It was… hard seeing it so clearly on his face. He's… he's just a little boy. About my age when… Well. You know."

After a quiet moment, Bruce looked over his son intently. "I suppose you have a suggestion on who I'm partnering with directly."

"Yeah," Dick said, a fondness in his voice from pure nostalgia. "But I'm guessing you don't want to waste the manpower of two Batmen on this one."

Bruce shook his head. "For this one I will make an exception."

Sighing with relief, Dick nodded. "It's been a long time, partner."

"It has," was all Bruce said as they both turned to the grandfather clock.

Chapter End Notes

I am sick as a dog, but posted this chapter anyway because I mentioned Wednesday in the last chapter's notes and now I'll feel like a quitter if I don't post this.

So please, please do leave a critique of this chapter if you have one. I can't tell you how much I'd appreciate it, because it might be something I want to come back and fix when I'm better rested.

Hopefully the next update will still be Saturday!
Black Bat watched from the shadows as her former mentor led the men in well-tailored suits to her office. She read the minute movements of their muscles like a delicate ballet.

The men were authoritative. Confident. While they were alert for attack and surprise, their mannerisms spoke to a confidence that the daylight spared them from real concern. Bats didn't fly in the sun. They wanted something from Barbara and were more amused than intimidated that she was upset with her orders. Her imminent yelling would be little more than venting for her because they were well hidden behind something bigger than the two of them.

Barbara - Babs - Oracle - was too familiar to require a full examination from Cass' judging eye. The commissioner was deeply upset by the events of the evening, the abuse of power currently handed to her, and by the pompous zeal of the men in suits. It reminded Black Bat of when a bird had flown just out of the reach of a cat.

Cassandra smirked. Barbara was a cat about to eat well.

When the doors of the office closed, the Black Bat gracefully shifted from shadow to shadow, up the ceiling, and into an air duct without so much as a squeak from the cabinet she had climbed to do so.

The GCPD bustled beneath her as she quietly maneuvered to the interrogation room where the boy sat, alone and quiet.

He was so sad. And angry. The emotions fed into each other loudly as Black Bat thoroughly examined him. While it reminded her of so many others in her family, she could see how the young boy's feelings were unabated. They were not suppressed by calculations or training.

In a way, it made Cassandra even more saddened to know the type of grief ahead for the boy.

That would be the excuse she would use later for reaching from the ceiling expertly, unplugging the camera examining the boy coldly, and dropping to the floor.

Her family - especially Bruce, Batman - often told her that while her methods were uniquely her own and contradicted much of their own methodology, they trusted her judgment.

Cass hoped they would continue to feel that way as she stepped enough out of the shadows to catch the boy's attention.

The young boy stiffened, eyes wide as saucers as he turned quickly to face her. He looked almost haunted by her sudden appearance, but it quickly faded into a neutral face as his eyes locked onto her chest - to the family emblem.

"Bat… girl?" the boy said, voice weak as he fumbled over his own thoughts. He was confused, lost.

Alone.
"Close," Black Bat said as she neared cautiously.

The boy watched her warily, shoulders trembling only slightly. "Wh-what do you want?"

"To say," she said gently before reaching forward with her hand and placing it tenderly over the boy's heart. "You are not… alone. We will help. We'll find him. He will pay."

Hearing that seemed to cause only more confusion. The boy tilted his head and then glanced down to her golden bat again. "My… my mom always asked… why bats?"

It was a question Cassandra had never thought of before. She tilted her head in return, remembered what Bruce, her father had said about bats. "They're… good survivors."

This was not an acceptable answer, she could see it in the boy's eyes. But the strangeness of the entire situation seemed to negate a lot and he frowned. "If you're not Batgirl… who are you?"

"Black Bat," she responded confidently. "Or Bat."

"Oh," he said, drawing a breath and then looking at her in the eyes. "I'm Terry."

She nodded.

"You're going to find the guy who killed my parents?" he pressed. "What will I do?"

Cassandra felt boxed. She instinctively motioned a sign with her hands, to express herself more completely, only to be met with a blank stare from Terry. Her words failed to express what she knew how to say in her mind, but for this sad boy she would try her hardest to do so anyway.

Because she knew from looking at him what he needed to hear.

She placed both her hands on his shoulders and, after allowing his tenseness to pass, she pulled him into a hug.


Almost immediately, Terry became limp against her. Her words had drained some of the hate and hurt from him and it was all she could have wished for. Dick was better at this.

After releasing Terry, she sat on the ground by him, silently providing company until the door began to open.

Black Bat kept to the shadows, re-plugging the camera and keeping vigil from the air duct. She felt confident that Batman - Dick's Batman - would understand why, despite being only told to watch the boy, it was important to step in. Her family trusted her judgment. Dick told her to step in and rescue the boy when he needed saving.

She was only following orders.

It was almost three in the afternoon when Dick returned to Central. He was met with similarly grim faces and he couldn't help but see why Barbara was already drawing comparisons to the Wayne murders.
Dick Grayson had been serving as an officer for the GCPD for some time, weathered a few international news-worthy crisis and scandals. It was par for the course for an angry, hungry city, but he had never once seen the morale of his fellow officers so shaken. Suddenly cops who were as dirty as the scum of Gotham sewers looked as if their own grandmothers were on the slab in the basement.

Even the hardest detectives never liked when the city dug her claws into the kids of the city.

Him reporting to Central was a bit of a stalling tactic this time, though. Bruce detected that something about the case wasn't "on the books" just yet. The situation, gruesome as it was, simply didn't make too much sense.

A copy cat after nearly half a century? Why? And why were the Network files being placed under extra locks?

Though Dick had let the Commissioner know that their shared mentor had a habit of accessing the files, that would not have been enough for her to change the safety protocols and put even more protection on the server. Not yet, in any case.

Something else was going on. Dick was supposed to get to the bottom of it.

Only five minutes after entering the complex, the current Batman got his answer in the form of a "familiar" unfamiliar face standing guard next to the second Commissioner Gordon's door. They locked eyes only momentarily just before the door flung open.

"Grayson!" Barbara snapped at him, waving him into the office.

He blinked, feigning cluelessness, and looked to the rest of the office. He was met with a sea of equally perplexed faces. Without catching sight of his sister in the shadows, Dick turned and made his way in with the "boss lady" and shut the door behind him.

His eyes were immediately drawn to the badges of the suit-and-tie individuals in the office. Checkmate.

Dick made a mental note to pester Roy about his former allegiances again.

"Yes, Commissioner?" Dick questioned.

"Do you know the proper protocol for orphaned children involving homicides, Officer?" she asked sharply, looking over her glasses with some disguised pain.

In response, Dick immediately tightened his features and stiffened in a more formal position. "Usually after initial investigations and interrogations from Homicide, a child is released to Child Protective Services. They’ll be kept in a proper facility to protect their identity and provide support for them emotionally or mentally until a suitable housing and custody arrangement is made. It's usually a next of kin or an appointed guardian that takes them after that. Some cases, albeit rare, have the state award custody to other parties."

The Checkmate representatives looked unmoved.

"Do you deal with these cases often, Officer Grayson?" she asked, her voice hardened to mask sympathy. Dick knew her too well to pretend it wasn't there.
"Not on an official basis, Ma'am," he answered.

"Then why are you so familiar?"

He felt his frown tug at the corners of his mouth. "Because I'm a product of that system, Miss Gordon. Particularly the latter arrangement. My appointed guardian - and, later, adopted father - as well as some of my siblings are similarly products of CPS. We support the local orphanages' functions and charity events frequently. You could say I'm hands on."

Barbara's gaze narrowed. She was closing in on her point. "And, knowing your circumstances in particular, that system had been denied to you from the onset, could you imagine the frame of mind you would have been in as a child?"

Deep down, Dick allowed his guts to twist painfully. He hoped desperately that Barbara's painful use of his history had a rewarding purpose. "I would have never healed properly and grown to be the man I am today, Commissioner. I… owe my early support a lot for how I was informed as a man."

She nodded before curtly turning toward the others in the office. Her gaze was, at the very least, fearsome.

"That, gentlemen, is enough to assure me that I will be grounded in directly defying your orders and mine," she said venomously. "I don't know what's going on, and I'll hand this case over to the FBI should proper procedure and a call from the governor make me sure that my men and women here aren't capable of handling the investigations. But you will not step in and interfere with a child's welfare." She flung her door open. "You are welcome to leave."

Hesitantly, one of the men made his way to the door. The second stood and looked directly to Barbara. "We'll be back, Miss Gordon. And you'll regret your resistance."

"Not in the foreseeable future," she returned without missing a beat.

She shut the door the moment they were through the doorway.

Dick rounded on her. "Mind explaining the third degree?"

"Only so far as to say that you might have just witnessed the cause for my encouraged, early retirement," she responded before making her way to her desk. Her eyes leveled at him. "This is shaping up to be a caped matter if I ever saw one."

He gave her a small, knowing smirk. "Well. You know how Bats are, good hearing and all that. And you never know what belfry they're stuck in." He strolled over to the chairs the two men had occupied and gently turned them up enough to check under them. As soon as he located the one-way radio he pulled it out and showed it to Babs.

She looked less than amused. He smashed it between his finger and thumb.

"Hope that hurt the guy in the truck outside," he said with a sigh. "And here I thought we were putting ESPN in the lounge."

"Funny, Grayson," she huffed, putting her head in her hands. "Why is Checkmate involved?"
Dick shrugged, mostly for effect. "I'm sure I'll find out. Do we know the current head over there?"

Babs smirked. "Like I would ever not know the answer to that," she said with a sigh. "It's our favorite White Queen."

Really, Dick felt his mild surprise was unwarranted. "Really now? Is she ever going to retire?"

"Is Bruce?"

"Hmm," Dick returned before looking through the blinds. "I have our favorite ninja in the shadows. Figured you'd already know. I came down on orders to figure out who else was hacking and fire walling our network. Guess I got my answer—"

When he turned, he saw a desperate look in Barbara's eyes that he honestly hadn't seen in years. She was lost and bewildered with the situation at hand. Overwhelmed.

Almost on instinct, he moved to close the distance, leaning against the desk as he pressed his forehead against her's and cupped her cheek. She didn't move away or stop him, but rather closed her eyes and leaned with him.

"Careful, Officer," she said quietly. "A Commissioner isn't supposed to be so intimate with one of her up-and-coming officers, certain candidate for a detective."

"And here you just told me you were working on early retirement," he joked softly. "How's the kid?"

Barbara pulled back enough to look him in the eyes. She slipped a hand over his to keep it close. "Lost, at best. I need to either go in myself and make sure he eats the lunch I got him or have someone do it for me. He wanted apple slices, too."

Dick nodded. "I can do that."

She grimaced. "Dick, I know it was cruel - what I made you say earlier about… your parents and everything. But, if it's too hard to work at this case without the mask between you and the kid, you don't have to go back in there. I can manage, I just really needed you this morning when it was at its worse."

In return, Dick could only show his sadness at the entire situation. "That's… that's not the worst, I'm afraid," he informed her before straightening up, squeezing her hand on his. "But I don't mind. It's… painful, sure. But I think, maybe for the first time, I really get it. I really get why Bruce took me, and everyone else, in." He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I guess I'm trying to say… I know what's happening in his head. I know what's going to happen next. I can help. I want to. I think I might even need to, Babs. In every way I can."

They held each other's hands in silence for a few moments before she at last relented and released him.

"Don't get swallowed up by this one," she cautioned.

He only managed a nod before heading out.

*
There was no indication that someone had visited with Terry since Barbara had managed to get some lunch to him. That was, other than the bewilderment of the child in question and how he craned his neck to look at every corner and shadow around the ceiling. He seemed almost lost.

Dick made a note to get the full report from Cassandra later.

For that moment, however, he waited patiently as Terry's attention finally rested on him and then held up the Ziploc baggie of apple slices he had obtained.

"Hey, Terry," he greeted gently, not letting on that he was aware of Terry's previous company. He approached the boy and took the seat across from him. "Don't suppose you remember me from this morning?"

The boy was quiet, looking over Dick cautiously. But he didn't seem otherwise alarmed. Dick was encouraged by how alert the boy appeared to be.

"That's okay," Dick filled the silence, looking down to the baggie as he opened it and began to pull out an apple. "I'm-"

"Dick," Terry ended the sentence.

To that, Dick looked the boy in the eyes only to find the eight year old staring disdainfully at the offered apple. He blinked. "Something the matter?"

"Did you wash your hands? Mom said to never take food until you washed your hands," Terry replied, shooting an accusing look at the officer.

In surprise at both the talkative nature Terry had took on and at the statement itself, Dick let out a small laugh. It made the boy's cheeks blush.

"Sorry," Dick excused himself, covering his grin partially with his free hand. "It's just that what you said is such a Li'l Brother thing to say. But, yes, I washed my hands. Officer's honor."

Somewhat assured, Terry reached forward and took the apple. He bit into it and seemed to take a deeper breath. The way he quickly devoured the rest of the slice told Dick that Barbara's concerns about the boy having not eaten yet were true. Dick felt a tinge of pain spread over his chest as he remembered taking a long time to eat properly again as well.

"Whizit a 'Little Brother' thing?" Terry asked, mouth still processing the remains of an apple slice.

"Oh," Dick responded smartly before coughing into his fist and rubbing a hand through his hair. "Well, it's sort of a particular little brother. I'm actually the oldest in my family."

Terry looked jarred by the announcement. The hand he had been using to reach for the Capri Sun slowly made its way back to the boy's lap. For a moment, Dick thought he had lost the boy to grief again, but Terry's eyes lifted back up to meet Dick's. There was a spark still, behind the sadness.

"Is your family big?"

Dick couldn't suppress his grin. "Huge. I have three younger brothers and a little sister. Technically two little sisters, but it's complicated and not on paper. I have nicknames for all of them, though. They think it's to annoy them, but I actually put a lot of thought and consideration
into those nicknames! But only one of them is *Li'l Brother.*"

The simple facts were, apparently, not so simple to the mind of an eight-year-old. He scowled instead, something Dick was beginning to believe was a default facial expression. "Why is he Little Brother but the others aren't?"

That got a soft laugh out of Dick. He reached into the baggie and pulled out another apple, offering it to Terry. It was with quite a bit of pride that Dick saw Terry eat a second morsel. "Well, it's a long story, but I guess the best answer is the same one for all my family's nicknames. It's less about what nicknames they want for themselves and more about what they need it to be. It's hard to explain."

"Oh," Terry responded, looking off as he crunched on his apple. He grew a strangely blank expression. "I… I was going to have a baby brother."

Suddenly, Dick felt his veins run cold.

When Terry looked back at him, the spark still showed through his eyes. "I… I know what Mom and Dad were going to name him. We have a picture of him on the fridge - from the doctor's. But… I never got to meet him." The scowl returned. "Guess I never will."

Collecting himself, Dick closed his eyes before taking a breath. Once settled, he looked seriously to Terry. "I'm very sorry to hear that, Terry," Dick said with more truth in his words than he had ever felt before. "But… I know how you feel."

Almost as if a switch had been turned, Terry slammed his palms against the table, his red rimmed eyes glared intensely at Dick as he snarled. "No you don't! Why does everyone keep saying that!? Mom and Dad are gone and I was just… just…"

With trained skill, Dick did not flinch or make any moves as Terry's rage lost steam. He stared coolly at the boy, watching as the boy heaved with tears he could no longer shed. When weariness took over the hysteria in the boy's body, Dick made his move.

He reached over and put his palm gently on the boy's head, feeling the boy's hair. "I know how you feel, Terry," Dick said again, quieter, like it was a secret between the two of them. "My parents died, too. I was there and I wasn't much older than you."

Sniffing, Terry looked up from underneath Terry's palm, his eyes still glistening with water, but the anger had subsided. He could hear that Dick was not lying. "You… you said you have a family…"

Dick nodded. "I… it was hard. It's still hard. I love my parents as much today as I did the day they died. Maybe even more," he admitted candidly. "But I know they'd be happy today because I became part of a new family. And I love them all just as much as I did my parents." He brushed some of Terry's longer strands behind the boy's ears. "I guess what I'm trying to say, Terry, is that I understand your hurt. You and I, we've gone through the same thing. I'm not working your parents' case, but my boss thinks - and I agree - that as long as you're here with the police, you may need someone who understands what you're going through. You might need that person to talk to and to always be there for you to rely on."

When Terry eased back into his chair, Dick reached for his pocket where he had written his number on a stick-it note earlier. He got up from his chair and leaned over to put the note securely in Terry's jean pocket.
"I want to be that person for you, Terry," Dick continued, looking Terry assuredly in the eyes. "That note? It has my number. I might have to leave, but I want you to know that the second you call that number, I'll answer. And as soon as I can, I'm going to come to help, okay?"

Slowly, Terry nodded and sniffed.

Smiling, Dick took the wrapped sandwich from Terry's side of the table and began to dutifully unwrap it for him. "Okay, good," he said pleasantly. He handed the boy the sandwich. "I want you to try and eat good, too. Keep yourself healthy."

Terry took the sandwich into his hands and Dick thought he had never felt more successful.

They entered a comfortable silence as Terry ate a bit of sandwich at a time. Dick suspected that if the boy ate half of it it would be better than he or any of his family had done in similar circumstances. It almost tricked Dick into reassessing the case itself, thinking of how Batman was going to approach the Checkmate lead.

But then Terry stopped chewing and, with large blue eyes, looked vulnerably at Dick it struck the officer straight at his heart.

"Someone earlier… they asked me if I knew what going to a funeral was like…" the boy said slowly, chewing as much on his words as he was his sandwich. "I said… I'd gone to my grandma's last year… but never alone…" Terry stopped, his brows knitting together tightly as he seemed lost on what he was trying so desperately to get at.

Without a second for further thought, Dick reached forward and held onto Terry's tiny hand. "Like I said, Terry. I want to be there for you, no matter what. Do you want me to go to the funeral with you?"

Slowly, Terry nodded.

"Then count on me," Dick assured the young boy. Yet, all he could think was Watch yourself, Grayson.

Chapter End Notes

I've been fairly miserable this week with illness, so please let me know if the pacing is off or if I blundered anything these last few chapters. It would be very much appreciated!

And general critiques too! I can always improve!
Thank you to everyone for the support so far, especially to a2zmom for the helpful advice last chapter. And a special shout out to my main buddy, Effar, for all the work she does behind the scenes.

It wasn't entirely unusual for the Red Hood to approach her, especially when she was patrolling on what could be appropriately called "his turf." Nightwing even prided herself on the fact that she was one of the few individuals in Gotham who could successfully not flinch under his full attention, as well. Still, there was just something about his approach that was almost too casual for the night.

Instantly, the eggplant crime fighter assumed trouble.

"Solo night?" the older vigilante questioned with an easy smirk.

"Some people have semester exams," Nightwing said with a simple shrug. She had made it clear to Batgirl from the beginning that if she was going to be wearing the crest of the Bat at night, it couldn't effect how well Nell Little performed at school in the mornings.

"Ah, I remember those," Hood said, rubbing roughly at his chin with a gloved hand. "Remember 'em being a bitch. Man. Talk about things I don't miss at all."

Nightwing laughed at the absurdity of the situation. "You remember my day job is a juvenile councilor, right? I feel like, for the sake of my profession, I should be sitting down with you and drawing up a career path."

"You can do those for Hoods?"

"Every day," she said with an arch of her brow. "But skip the small talk, Rojo. I'm way more interested in the real reason I have the pleasure of your company this evening."

He looked over her with feigned disinterest and then checked the surroundings. "How much of the news have you been paying attention to since last night?" he asked.

"Enough to guess correctly that tempers were too hot to chance a fated encounter between our current Batgirl and Robin," Nightwing sighed. "Is 'A-Team' tackling the murder case with the McGinnis family?"

Red Hood whistled in an exaggerated fashion. "Well, look at you. It's like you're getting good at this whole vigilante thing!" he exclaimed, grinning widely. "But, you're right. I come with a message from on high - possibly because our mutual friend has concerns about throwing bricks - that certain people would be appreciative if you and I looked out for the city while the rest of the clan works on other things."

She sighed. "Oh, ex-boyfriend," she said, looking in the direction of Wayne Towers. "You should
know by now that if I want to brick you in the face, I'll damn sure find a way to do it: one way or another!"

"Kinky," Hood mused before giving his newly assigned partner a look. "You still have my frequency?"

Waving dismissively, Nightwing smirked at him. "Of course."

"Alright, and keep an eye out for wandering Robins. The Demon's not got anyone to hold his leash with the others distracted so it'll be up to us to reign him in," Hood explained.

"And you are going to make Robin play nice?" Nightwing asked skeptically.

A dangerous gleam from the Hood's teeth proclaimed mischief unspoken and Nightwing had to sigh.

"I don't deal with children all day just so I can put up with you all on the night shift, you know!"

The Hood was already gone and, with a smirk of her own, Nightwing followed suit. It was their city tonight.

Benign satisfaction filled Barbara Gordon as the director of Children Protective Services himself came into their offices. He looked flustered, his face red with embarrassment which meant that the commissioner's spent favor on the mayor had done wonders.

It also probably helped that she allowed a leak to the fervent presses of Gotham that an unprecedented twenty-four hour stall had been seen as allowable to CPS when a poor little boy's welfare was on the line.

Terry McGinnis' hand was in her own as he stood by her. He was looking apprehensively as the director approached them. Babs gave his tiny hand a squeeze.

An uneasy smile grew on the man's face. With practiced finesse, he dropped to one knee and proceeded to engage Terry in a very one-sided conversation.

The way the boy's face hardened said quite plainly how little of this formality he was willing to put up with. He was dressed in clothes Barbara had sent one of the precinct's secretaries to the nearest dollar store to collect and his face was pink from being rubbed raw with tissues.

As the CPS director talked the boy into taking his hand, Barbara scanned the floor for two reactions specifically.

Dick was halfway between the nearest window exit and the scene itself. He was hesitating his exit just long enough to assess the situation and whether or not he would need to intervene. The man did not look haggard by the standards of anyone in the department, but Barbara knew him well enough to see the physical drain of his day-long vigil. And, knowing Dick, he wasn't about to sleep before he moved on to his second job either.

If Dick ever bothered to cash in his checks, Barbara would suggest a raise for him.
When Terry seemed to ease into the concept of leaving Central, Dick glanced to the shadows meaningfully. When his silent order was apparently intercepted by Terry's newest shadow, Dick expertly began to disappear as well. His departure would go unnoticed with how the entire floor of detectives and officers were concentrating on their former charge.

With Dick gone, Barbara looked to the Federal agents who had stuck around despite the earlier altercation.

The displeasure written so clearly on their features was something that filled Barbara with an inexpressible pride.

To ensure further tricks were not pulled, she was going to pull strings quite a bit more powerful than Gotham's petty mayor. It would all be very much worth it to make sure that no one else got the idea to interfere with a little boy's fleeting chance at recovery and happiness.

Barbara was going to get on it as soon as CPS and Terry were out of her building.

"Hmm."

"And they really want a press release from Bruce. Dad said that he's handled as much before on his own, but since you've become more of the face of the company Tiffany thinks you should be there with him. I agree. We'll need to make a small statement - more hopeful than condemning. Even despite the funding we gave the police department recently for a new crime lab, I get the impression they still don't like you very much."

Tim stared at the connections on his tablet. He had been drawing them up all day, allowing files to build up on his desk which he then took to the apartment and dumped unceremoniously on the kitchen table. It wasn't like he used it for eating. He pressed the face of the tablet to link to another article. It was a digital copy of the diploma Warren McGinnis had earned at Gotham University. Double major. It was impressive.

"Hmm."

"I went ahead and moved your morning appointments - all of them. Even if we won't have the interview for you and Bruce until ten, I figure you could use the extra time. Possibly sleep for an hour or two. I'm pretty much ready to start calling you 'caffeine boy' these days."

Mary McGinnis was more enigmatic. Tim minimized the diploma and pulled up her minimal files up for a second review.

She had become a stay-at-home mother after the birth of their son, Terry McGinnis - enrolled at Thomas Wayne Elementary. When he turned five and began school, Mary presumed work at a middle tier real estate agency. She had started as a receptionist. It looked like after a while she had moved up in the office and was on her way toward earning certification as a realtor when she left her job again just four months beforehand. Tim had yet to uncover why.

The mystery in Mary's profile presented enough holes that could hold answers. Perhaps she had made an enemy, was in some sort of trouble they couldn't find on paper yet. Tim would find it soon enough if it existed. Warren was certainly more concerning, finding out that morning that Warren had been an employee of WE had ignited both Tim's suspicions and the prying of multiple...
Tim had a list of reporters to expose some dirt on for bothering the family. He would do little with it, just enough to toe the line of passive aggressive.

"Hmm."

"I fired you this morning. I decided to declare myself Queen of WE and kick all Wayne stocks to the curb. Call Daddy Warbucks and tell him I'm moving into the palace and I expect to keep Alfred on staff. He needs to find somewhere to live. Probably your apartment. The whole family gets along well enough to sleep in your cozy place, don't they?"

With a flick of his finger, Tim closed the files and looked at the phone laying by him on the desk. He liked the freedom of speakerphone. It was a bad habit according to everyone who knew it came from his "Night Job."

"I was listening," Tim clarified. "You can't have Alfred, it's the only way anyone will stay alive - in my apartment or otherwise. But you can keep Damian. We contend that access to the basement must be kept available for our operations or else we might have to pull dirt on you."

He could almost see her beautiful smile as Tam laughed. "Smart ass."

Tim grinned. "Smartest in the family," he responded easily. "Everything's fine, Tam. Thank you for arranging it all. I maintain that I don't like giving the press a statement, but I understand why we have to. I don't like the Wayne name being tied to this tragedy for any reason. But most of all, it feels like we're losing sight of the fact that it wasn't the Waynes who were murdered again. It was a different family, and it's that little boy's loss. Not ours."

"That sounds good," she said lightly. "You should get Bruce to use that line more or less. But I guess he might not feel the same, huh?"

He frowned, sat back in his chair and glared at the family picture currently on his tablet. Tim knew every feature of Thomas and Martha Waynes' faces from years of looking on the family portrait in the study. They all had. Their ghosts had walked the halls years before any of the current Wayne children had been born. Looking at the family picture of the recently deceased told Tim very clearly that they were no Thomas and Martha Wayne.

Didn't mean either couple deserved to go in such a terrible and vile way.

"I think it's hard to see any tragedy with families involved," Tim said, not sure if he was waxing philosophically or speaking specifically of his mentor and adopted father. "But, the fact that Vicki Vale thought it was poetic to remind the public of the Wayne murders, and because Warren McGinnis was one of our companies' engineers, puts us in the limelight. We have to say something."

Even if they really didn't.

The Wayne Family was Gotham. And she thirsted for their tragedies the way a wolf cornered lambs.

Tim stared harder at the family portrait. He leaned forward toward the tablet and desk again. "Tam?"
"Yes, O’ Sage One?"

"When did you take Genetics?" he asked as he began to plug into Oracle’s network and dive immediately into hospital records.

"Sophomore year in college. I won't say the year. You're being impolite." Tam had taken it upon herself over the years to inform Tim of when he was unintentionally missing social cues or behaving otherwise uncultured. It was her contribution to keeping the secret. It was only slightly more annoying than her nicknames.

When he stared at the certificate pulled up, Tim rubbed his chin thoughtfully. It wasn't making any sense. "Do you remember Punnett Squares?"

"Is this a clue or are you making fun of me?"

Tam was a sharp girl. She remembered Punnett Squares.

"If a woman was a natural red head," Tim hypothesized, pushing off the floor to roll his chair to his preferred position in the sea of monitors, "and had a child with a man who was naturally a brunette, what are the odds said child would have black hair?"

"None?" she questioned, her critical tone raising slightly. "Am I missing something?"

Tim scowled as he began typing furiously. "No," he responded, his voice edging into the darker tenor of Red Robin. "But you could always join me in hoping that Mary McGinnis has been faithfully receiving a dye job for the past eight years."

Something told Tim that she hadn't, that this was their first real clue. That the murders hadn't been senseless.

It didn't make them any less cruel.

"Is there a toy or anything from home that you would want us to get for you, Terry?" Mr. Michael asked, his smile stretch a little too thin as he led Terry down the hall.

Terry stared at him levelly before shaking his head. He clutched the strings of the sweatshirt and pulled them tight, closing the peep hole until the peep hole almost closed around his nose. He could feel the eyes of the man still on him, but at the very least Terry couldn't see those thick framed glasses.

They were rapidly approaching the end of Terry's patience. The nice woman in the toy room who talked to him for the past several hours was alright. Until she asked him about if he thought going back to school was a good option.

If anything, Terry felt like he had safely earned the right to never enter Thomas Wayne Elementary again. He didn't have that many friends there anyway, and he was fairly sure that his teachers thought he was stupid. It was okay, Terry didn't think they were that smart either.

The building they had brought him to smelled like his school. They had the same tile, too. Terry idly wondered if this contributed to the smell somehow.

For a fleeting moment he had the urge to ask his dad about it. It was immediately beat down and
sunk to his gut.

"We'll be taking you to a nice place across North River," the man chatted over the click of their footsteps. "There are other children there, you'll have plenty of time to get to know them. We'll get you anything you need to be comfortable from home, you just need to tell us what you want."

Terry scowled at the tile. His vision was becoming bleary and he didn't want to be walking.

Officer Dick probably would have carried him.

When they came to an oak door with a thin window - convincing Terry he was, in fact, in a classroom setting after all - Mr. Michael stopped, turned, and dropped to one knee in an almost mechanical fashion. The way he placed his hand on Terry's shoulder did not invoke comfort. Mr. Michael let it slide when Terry rotated his shoulder to shrug it off.

"Terry," Mr. Michael said, seriousness drawn on his face despite the blithe way Terry was treating him. "I want you to know that if you want or need anything, someone will be around. You let us know. Alright?"

They locked eyes for only a second before Terry yanked the draw strings closer until only his nose poked out. They remained that way a little longer before Terry felt a half-hearted pat on his head and was promptly turned and guided toward the door.

Mr. Michael carried on a little longer, but Terry opened his hood enough to look around the room, find what could be loosely identified as a bed, and proceeded to make his way for it. The sheets were stale, but Terry didn't find it in himself to care. It had been the first bed he had the chance to sleep in since the night before the movie. He climbed onto the bed, noting its creeks, before curling up over top the covers, face first on the pillow.

The way Mr. Michael hesitated before drawing a blanket over Terry irritated the boy more than anything else, but soon after the lights were turned off and the door carefully closed.

By himself, Terry somehow realized that he did have it in him to cry again. Everything going on around him was too big and too much.

He exhausted himself into a blessedly quick slumber.

Dick remained quiet, allowing the dreamlike quality of the moment take hold in favor of interrupting his mentor and father.

It felt like it had been a long time since he saw Bruce wear the cape. Despite severe injury and a notable stiffness, it was still intimidating to see how the cape draped over Bruce's shoulders. It was daunting and stirring all at once. It made Dick feel like he was in the Robin suit again, following Gotham's own shadow.

He still wasn't sure if he appreciated that feeling yet.

The crime scene had been cornered off and marked by the police - checked over by the Gotham CSI and trampled subsequently by detectives and attending officers alike. Ideally, the Bats got to the crime scene before it was interfered with that way. Bruce's Batman had always had the knack for that type of unobtrusive detective work: there and gone without a trace. It was how he earned his merits with the PD to begin with, and why Jim Gordon learned to take Bruce's hunches on
faith alone.

Even if the rest of the family, Dick included, was happy to have Bruce retired and resigned to cold case work, there was no denying that, by its very nature, the forgotten cases of the GCPD failed to give Bruce what he needed most: the scent of the hunt.

"When did you look over the scene?" Bruce asked, his voice never shaking from its Batman tenor, as he inspected the still present stains of blood. He bent, careful not to tip too far in either direction, moving only with his knees. The reinforced kevlar was almost as unforgiving as the back brace.

"I only got a casual look over in uniform," Dick admitted as he stepped up behind Bruce. He pointed to the alley. "That was the direction of arrival as well as the escape route. It's been combed, but the PD didn't find any leads. Not even a shoe size. Considering how cold it's been, the sediment should have been compact enough to preserve some sort of imprint once the assailant got to part of the alley where the pavement's broken, but there wasn't anything. And there wasn't another way to leave the alley before then."

Bruce's vision was locked on the stains. Dick thought for a moment that he hadn't been heard, that his words were lost on Bruce as he relived the defining night of his life. The younger Batman reached for his mentor's shoulder only for Bruce to rather suddenly stand back up.

"Unless they were able to climb," Bruce surmised, looking to the rooftop. "The McGinnis family wasn't robbed and there weren't any demands according to the statement taken from the son."

Dick frowned. "Terry. But there wasn't much of a statement we were able to get out of him to begin with - he was in shock. And his description of a Grim Reaper could either mean we're dealing with a Costume or a very traumatized little boy," he reminded Bruce. "Let's not be too hasty to jump to one conclusion or the other."

The original Batman moved toward the alley, studying the brick wall facing them. He then reached toward the grime of the wall and struck his finger against it - smelling it.

At such a curious sight, Dick could only raise an eyebrow beneath the cowl. "B?"

"This residue smells like ethanol," Bruce enlightened him before turning to face Dick more directly. "In his description, did the boy say there was a thick fog?"

"Yeah, he did," Dick responded before stepping up to examine the wall for himself. "Do you think some sort of fog machine was used? Using a glycol like ethylene?" Dick asked before looking back. "That'd be difficult to do on such a cold night. You'd have to use a heated fog to get the effect. But it being such a cold night would explain why residue was left on the surfaces it touched. And why our suspect didn't use something that left less of a trace like liquid nitrogen."

"It's also very theatrical for a basic mugging or a senseless murder," Bruce responded before reaching for his grappling gun. Dick followed suit. "But if those add up to a Costume, that increases the chances that something is on the roof. Something the police would miss."

They grappled in near silence, gliding and landing with perfected ease. Once on the rooftop, their scouring of the properties began, with delicate steps taken to make sure nothing was disturbed if it could be helped.

It didn't take long for the silence to wear thin, however.
"I can't think of anyone we've come across recently to fit this," Dick admitted as he ran his hand over the ledge. He narrowed his gaze as he began to theorize that this was the point of ascent. "They must have some nice equipment. On par with ours - the scrapes on the ledge are hardly noticeable if you aren't looking for them." He turned to look as Bruce examined an indent on the rooftop tarmac. "Awfully expensive for someone new. Might travel around. An assassin maybe. Fit any descriptions you've come across through Interpol?"

Bruce leaned down, examining the imprint better for his cowl to take a shot. "No one with a size eleven."

Standing up, Dick moved toward his mentor. "You sure? You're being rather quiet."

"I'm allowing you the chance to be chatty without retort," Bruce responded as he looked to his son. "From my understanding, Robin rarely gives you the luxury."

Dick grinned. "He's not that bad."

Before the moment could carry on much further, they both stiffened instinctively at their cowls being hailed. Automatically, they reached to the radios.

"Batman," they both shot out quickly, though only Dick glanced to the other in the aftermath.

"I've got an interesting... well, it's a possible lead," Red Robin's voice said without hesitation over their cowls. "I'd rather give it to you in person, though."

The younger Batman waited for the executive decision of the elder. Bruce barreled through with orders like he had never left the streets to begin with.

"We'll be there in less than twenty, Red Robin."

Chapter End Notes

Just some general notes on this one: Stephanie and Jason are somewhat important to a secondary plot element and I realized, with quite a bit of horror when I was planning out the pacing last week, I had done a dumb and not brought them into the narrative until like... chapter six-ish. It's an oversight that has been corrected, but also brought up something about myself I really don't like: I really worry I don't do a good job with either of these characters. Which is a terrible, terrible shame on my part and I'm working hard to correct it. If someone would like to give me advice on either of them I'd greatly appreciate it!

Secondly, I really enjoy writing Tim, and I'm also a huge fan of Tam Fox. She, unfortunately, will not be a major player in this story, but if I plan on expanding this little AU I've got going, we might see some more of the goings-on in the WE offices ;)

NEXT TIME (which might be either Saturday or Sunday dependent on how long it takes for me to move back into the apartment Friday): Tim's got a clue that could turn this investigation on his head! And the "Bad Robins" Club unites, meeting an
unexpected "old friend" of the family! And Commissioner Gordon confronts an old nemesis when the White Queen of Checkmate comes to Gotham Central! Stay tuned! SAME BAT TIME, SAME BAT FIC!
I absolutely cannot apologize enough for not having this out over a week after I promised it. A lot happened in that week - my move back into my apartment got delayed, as apparently a water pipe had burst in my room over the break and it needed to be replaced along with my heating unit and ceiling tiles. It also didn't help that the temperature last weekend was, oh, around 10 degrees with windchill. Not fun. Then school got started back, and I got distracted again.

But, mostly, I'm lazy and I didn't get this edited/posted nearly as fast as I should have. I really apologize, and just want to assure everyone who's been so supportive of this story that I'm not losing steam or abandoning it. I'm just pretty terrible at keeping on schedule. I hope you guys can forgive me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The takedown Robin implemented might have been a touch too brutal for his partner's taste - the enforcement in their gloves only made that popping sound when the force applied to their fists was enough to crack a nose. But Batman was working with Batman. Not Robin. And in Damian's mind he was completely justified.

Mostly justified.

When the alley was quiet save for the moans of the would-be attacker, the woman pulled herself to her feet. She looked like a deer in headlights, staring at the hooded vigilante like he was a manifested figment of imagination.

"Th-thank you," she near whispered.

Robin glared at the man on the ground before looking back to her. "I think you earned a night off," he said shortly. "It's too cold to bus tables. Call in sick after you call the police to report him."

She nodded, clutching her coat over her uniform before taking off, one shoe left abandoned in her frenzy. Damian waited before securing the attacker for police pick up.

"Gettin' a little rough, Kid."

Damian could hardly suppress the roll of his eyes as he tied off his package for the GCPD. "No one asked for your opinion on my methods, Hood."

Todd dropped from the fire escape and strolled casually. He faintly tilted his head to look at the unconscious goon, a pleased smirk lazily crossing his face. "People rarely acknowledge brilliance among their peers."

Damian may also have felt an immature twinge of something when faced with the one sibling in their rather large clan who could still be considered "bigger" than him.
It was an annoyance he could only hope wouldn't last much longer.

"Are you keeping watch on me? Did our Oracle-lite hide a tracker in my boot heel again?"

Red Hood had the audacity to dramatize looking offended. He hit his leather clad hand against his chest and staggered. "Does that sound like something I'd agree to? For the Pretender? Hell, for anyone?"

The current Robin released a "Tt," and looked off. It went without saying that out of spite, Jason Todd rarely did such things for the other members of the family. It also went without saying that he would very much participate for his own reasons and desires. "What is it that you want?"

"Well, in the rare event that your damsel actually reports her attempted assault, perhaps we should carry this somewhere more secluded?" Todd suggested with a subtle kick at the fallen man's groin. "I can make it worth your while."

Damian growled because he could practically see the Grayson-esque wiggle to Jason's brows. This shared amusement at Damian's torment that was going on between his older siblings would be the death of him. It may or may not have been the greatest contributing factor to his current demands for a penthouse as he attended Gotham U the following fall.

Still, he complied with Jason's suggestion and soon enough they were above the city streets and far away from conceivable interruption.

"Out with it," the younger Robin snapped as he removed his hood. He discovered it helped with the full glare he worked on his siblings. Not that any of them blinked at it anymore. It sometimes sucked being the youngest. "I'm in no mood to pander to your sense of nostalgia, also. So no requests of the 'Morally Dubious Dynamic Duo.'"

Other nights perhaps. When it wasn't prominently on Damian's mind that his partner had abandoned him for the sake of reuniting the original Batman and Robin.

"I want information, s'all," Todd said with a shrug. "And maybe a little Dynamic Duo. Not enough to make Lil' Red think I'm backing out on him. I just need a partner willing to let me punch one or two unnecessary times."

"As opposed to one that lets you light up the entire harbor," Damian snapped in return. He made a mental note for the next "Family Meeting" to bring up shortening Jason's leash. They were all partially responsible for his recklessness - even Father. Especially Father. "Speaking of which, I can't help but remind you that he is, supposedly, our information jockey. Could you not get anything from him?"

Hood shrugged easily enough. "Less fun. Not to mention he's in on whatever they're working on right now. I'm more curious about what's the deal with Bat Daddy coming out of retirement. Again. He'll never get his pension at this rate."

Damian felt the snarl before he could think to stop it. He threw up his hands. "Father is being completely illogical! And Gr- Batman is incapable of telling children no. If Red Robin is in on this mayhem as well... well, far be it for me to feel the least bit surprised by any of it."

For a moment, Todd seemed to listen dutifully, but he quickly shifted into leaning back against the roof access door of the building and tilting his head. "Was any of that supposed to be new
information? What case are they working on, Bat Brat? Details!"


"I saw that, figured as much," Jason said with a sigh. He seemed almost disappointed at the simplicity of the case.

It was enough to make Robin grit his teeth and reach for his grappling hook. "Then you've wasted both of our time. Content?"


"I've kept minimal tabs on the case, mostly for the fact that it has made my father's home a media circus and interfered with my school attendance," Damian explained crisply. "The amount of attention it is receiving is... honestly disconcerting. But I don't appreciate the mood it's put Father in. And I'm concerned about how much worse things will become should further connections between the family and this homicide be drawn."

For a moment, they let the admission sink in with silence. Todd, however, could rarely allow such moments to go unaided.

"Yeah. Sucks," he said with purposeful understatement. "But no reason for the bad Robins to not take advantage of some time to hang out."

Robin glared for a moment, but did not descent on the subtle offer before firing off his grappler.

The Red Hood followed suit.

Barbara leaned forward, steepling her hands to catch her forehead. Her hair, usually so neat and trim - the very reason she cut it all to begin with - hung around her in disarray. The only reason she balanced her head above her desk was because after nearly forty-eight straight hours of keeping in her office, the desk calendar was looking surprisingly comfortable, and her overtime had just overlapped with her second next day's shift.

There was a tightness in her chest that would prevent her from properly going home and receiving any real rest. She wondered, rather idly, if Dick was feeling something similar at this point.

It was only years of Bat-training and even more years of implementing it that she noticed the shadow in front of her window or was even aware when her unlocked door eased open.

Hesitant silence filled the office for a moment as a detective peeked in at her.

"Yes, Detective Harris?" she sighed without lifting her head, taking mild amusement in the way Harris straightened up almost immediately like a soldier brought to attention.

"Geezus, Commish," he huffed. "I can't stand it when you do that!"

Lifting up her head at last, Barbara fitted the man with a sardonic smile, knowing it didn't quite reach her tired eyes. "You should try to come in quieter then, Detective. You'll remember the company I entertain most normally at these hours," she reminded him as she achingly returned to a more proper position in her chair. "Is there something I can help you with?"
Harris' frown tightened just slightly. "Yeah, sure. But.. first? Are you alright Commish? Allen and Cohen were talking about how they don't think you've gone home yet..."

"I haven't," she said snappishly. "Is that a problem, Harris?"

His eyebrow lifted subtly. "If you don't think it is, Commish? Then absolutely not!" Harris then slid a little further into the office. "But, uh… those government guys? The ones you talked to earlier?"

"Yes?"

"They came back," he continued. "With a lady they said was their superior. She says she knows you personally?"

Barbara's features tightened, she stared intently at him. The puzzle pieces were beginning to make all too much sense. Her hands reached down to her wheels and she quickly began wheeling her way around the desk and toward the door.

"I'm aware of who she is," Babs admitted as Harris began to take the hint and head toward the door as well. "Thank you. I'll handle everything from here."

There was still quite a bit of insecurity in Harris' eyes, but he followed the cues and walked out the door. "If you say so, Commish."

"I do," Barbara returned haughtily before swinging the office door wide open and glaring directly to the hallway benches.

Sure enough, her old adversary sat in waiting. She was a vision of tact and professionalism, but her eyes were complacent and reassured even behind dark glasses. Her smirk was all Barbara needed as an excuse to lay her out right there in the office, in front of everyone. But the federal badges and expensive suit seemed to hint to the idea that that was not a good decision.

When the White Queen saw Barbara, she easily slid out of her chair and walked over, boots clicking on the floor. Her agents remained still as statues, as did Barbara's detectives and officers.

"Commissioner Gordon the Second," Checkmate's leader drawled.

"Agent Armstrong," Babs returned, just holding back a hiss. "Would you come into my office, Katarina?"

The insufferable smirk only grew. "I'd be honored."

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Tim's apartment wasn't far from the scene, but it took them almost a minute longer than usual to reach him.

When they were in the car, Dick felt like he had slid backward in time and was reliving the original Dynamic Duo years again. It had made him feel nearly twenty years younger and he could easily let the obvious and subtle changes from the years gone pass him by. Even at the crime scene, though Bruce's stiffness had been unavoidable, there was something distinct about watching the old man work that put Dick back in awe.

The moment they began to move across the rooftops to get to Tim's, the years caught up with them both and became glaringly obvious.
It wasn't simply the fact that the newer equipment and training regiment with Dick at command of the family involved more aerodynamics and gliding to cut down on travel time. And while it was a part of it, it wasn't really that Bruce was far less practiced than the days of old.

To ensure Bruce's additional padding and kevlar was supported, his de-cel lines were thicker and slower. His landings required a firm, two foot parallel placement without much elbow room for variation. He was stiff and old, and Dick was beginning to doubt the wisdom of allowing Bruce to take the case to begin with.

Still, they managed to make it to the building and into Tim's bunker without a problem. Tim carried on at the computer with only a wave of his hand to acknowledge their presence.

Dick didn't bother to mention to Bruce that his flat landing on the rooftop had set off one of the sensors. The grimace his mentor had given upon doing so made it apparent enough that the miscalculation hadn't escaped his observation.

"You summoned, Tim?" Dick broke the ice, easily striding over to the computer chair and leaning against it.

"I did," Tim replied simply, typing a last line of code before looking over the shoulder opposite Dick to look at Bruce. The old Bat had silently taken to standing, arms crossed, on the other side of the chair. "You sure about working this case, B?"

Bruce looked directly at Tim, warning written all over his face. "I'm fine, Tim."

One look at Tim and Dick knew the younger vigilante did not buy the act at all but, like Dick himself, Tim caved with a sigh and turned to the monitor pointing to the files he had compiled on the McGinnis family. In particular the latest family photograph. Dick noted the imprint of the GCPD computer database but decided against mentioning to Tim that it could be considered a breach of trust.

Honestly, at that point Babs would be more surprised than anything else if she learned one of them wasn't hacked into her system. Maybe even a little disappointed in Tim.

"I was compiling histories and drawing connections to perhaps discover some sort of motive behind the killings," he explained. "As you both know, Warren McGinnis worked for our biology division at Wayne Tech and was up-and-coming. It's impressive, especially for a native Gothamite. Other than other graduates who applied to the program and didn't get in, he seems to not have any enemies to speak of - and it's been a few years too many to still be holding a grudge for a graduate internship and job."

"Anything on the mother?" Dick asked.

"Not as much as I would like," Tim admitted before looking to them. "She was a stay-at-home mom since Terry McGinnis was born until about three years ago."

"When he started school," Dick said with a sigh.

"Yeah, that's the strange part," Tim admitted. "She took her job back up again in real estate - nothing big - but just before a promotion, she left again. Just a few months ago. Nothing's in any of the computers as to why."
Bruce grunted, glaring at the photo. "But it's most likely family related again. If no one was reported ill recently in their family unit and there are no extended family members that CPS can find, then it's most likely because they were expecting a second child."

Something Terry said suddenly flooded Dick's memory again and he reached up to rub his eyes tenderly. "Damn it."

The other two looked at him expectantly. Dick continued.

"Terry. When we were talking earlier he mentioned that he was supposed to be a big brother." Dick shook his head. "I didn't think much about it, I spent a few more hours with him."

"Then we're looking at a triple homicide," Bruce ground out, fists clenched. "Did the coroner know this?"

Tim frowned. "That's one of the reasons I wanted you to come here. There's still no coroner's report uploaded to the system for either Warren or Mary McGinnis, and the files that are up on the case haven't been updated since noon yesterday."

As the attending officer, Dick straightened up and scowled. "That doesn't make any sense. Today had more momentum on the case than the previous forty-eight hours combined. CPS was supposed to file a report after coming to get Terry - basic psyche evaluation at the least. Not to mention the coroner's reports and the interviews Babs sent her detectives to conduct with neighbors and coworkers."

"This sounds like a classic Checkmate takeover," Bruce snarled. "I want to know why they're interested in this case. If they suspect someone big or someone government affiliated involved and they're keeping the information from the GCPD, then Armstrong has gotten out of her head. A child's involved. I used to assume she was better than that."

"Someone international is what I'm leaning toward," Tim agreed, leaning into his chair and rubbing his chin. "If that's the case I have concerns about the kid's safety. Can't imagine why a professional would leave a witness. None of it makes sense."

Dick narrowed his eyes, looking to Terry's smiling face in the family photo. "Unless leaving him alive was somehow the point..." his thoughts trailed off as he got his first real look at the parents.

Terry McGinnis didn't look like either of his parents.

"Is that Mary McGinnis' natural hair color?" Dick asked.

He saw Bruce's attention immediately shift back to the photograph in the corner of his eye. The original Dark Knight took a breath and Dick could have sworn he saw gears physically turning in the side of Bruce's head.

"Ah, you noticed my second lead for the night," Tim noted as he leaned forward and pulled up the birth certificate for Terry McGinnis. "She is, in fact, a natural red-head, and Warren is a naturally brunette. His DNA is on file, part of Wayne Tech security policy after the incident involving an experimental mutagen ended badly five years ago. He has no DNA coding for pure black hair that he's carrying and not expressing. And his eyes are brown with no mutated genes for eye color."

"It should be impossible for any child he conceived with Mary McGinnis to have the phenotype that Terry McGinnis has then," Bruce clarified, jaw setting.
"Exactly," Tim said with a nod. "There has never been any written claims that state he suspected as much, no DNA tests for the son on record, but I think it's safe to say Terry isn't his biologically."

Dick could feel his gut grow cold. The biology shouldn't matter - their family knew that more than anyone - but it mattered to a lot of people. It was possible that Terry's biological father was responsible for the murders.

"I'll need a DNA swab from him to confirm it, though," Tim pressed on, turning to them. "And I'll also need someone to grab the physical reports from the GCPD for us. I'm going to go to the Wayne Tech labs and check into anything Warren McGinnis was working on to make sure there's nothing on that front we're missing. And I'd feel more comfortable if Terry was checked on periodically by someone on our side. I don't trust Checkmate and I definitely don't trust whatever assassin was responsible for this."

"I have Cass on watch duty," Dick reminded them both. "But Officer Grayson is someone Terry's familiar with. I might be able to get the sample and to tell him what to look out for without scaring him too much. I could even pick up the reports by morning without much of a stir."

"We're working against time," Bruce shot him down immediately.

For just an instant, Dick felt something ugly flare up in his gut and he leveled a look at his once-and-future partner. One that was almost instantly disregarded by the elder Batman.

Rather fortunately, Tim's tapping on the desk drew Dick's attention away from his mentor and back to one of the various alarm feeds plugged into the vast Network. It was the silent alarm that Babs carried in her chair, and it was coming from the GCPD. It could mean anything, really, even just that she needed Dick to pick up his civilian phone. It had happened once or twice before.

Yet, instantly, they all knew that could not be the case.

"She's in her office, it looks like," Tim clarified as he looked to the traceable GPS. He frowned, his mouth pulling downward tightly in one corner as he went deep into thought. "It's not an emergency beacon, though. It might just be something on the case has come up."

"Then she'll be wanting your Batman to be responding."

At the same time as Tim swiveled around in his chair, Dick spun on his heel to watch Bruce's retreating back. "Your Batman?" Dick remarked, flustered almost immediately.

"Pick up the coroner's report and any other new case files after you meet with her. We can meet at the lab with Tim afterward. Before the media circus in the morning," Bruce ordered with only a casual look back. "If this is an international killer that Checkmate's after then we may already be too late to stop them from leaving Gotham."

Without further protest, Dick and Tim watched their mentor leave them in the dust.

The moment the sensors on the roof blinked off, Tim gave Dick a knowing look. "I don't like him doing this. Again."

"You and me both," Dick sighed, rubbing his face roughly. "If I had my way about it, he wouldn't be doing this. But since when have we had our way when it comes to him and the cape, Lil'
Brother?"

He wasn't entirely sure whether he was trying to convince himself or Tim more that it was just another case of "business as usual."

For a moment, pure worry showed on Tim's face. "Last time he fought Ra's," he muttered, almost not meant for Dick's ears. "He'll do something stupid like that again. He's emotionally compromised."

Dick hesitated on that note, frowning. Emotionally compromised was something *Batman* couldn't afford to be. Nightwing, Robin, Batgirl, maybe. But *Batman*? He had to be thinking clearly. He had to be in charge of himself and his soldiers. It was the duty of both setting up an example and of making sure everyone got home at night safely.

He - *Batman* - couldn't see this as more than a case…

When he looked over, he saw Tim's sympathetic look. "You okay?" he asked, a bit hesitantly. "It must be hard taking orders directly again, I guess." He scowled a bit at the computers. "I can sort of understand."

"Yeah, that's part of it," Dick admitted, checking over his brother's shoulder once more to be sure that Babs' alarm wasn't on its emergency setting. "Say… Tim?"

Attention drawn away from the monitors, Tim swiveled and looked owlishly at him. "Hmm?"

"How certain are we that there are no family members for Terry?"

Blinking, Tim seemed to be trying to look straight through Dick before he finally shrugged. "Almost completely certain. Both Warren and Mary McGinnis were single children. Their parents had no nieces or nephews. The grandparents themselves are dead, the most recent one being a few years at this point." He sighed and shook his head. "It's pretty terrible, really. No one's stepped up as a godfather or godmother either. I don't think he has anyone."

Dick locked eyes with the family photo on the monitor. Without even realizing it was slipping from his lips, he said, "He has me."

By the time his own words caught up with him, he turned and saw a rather shocked looking Tim. Dick felt the same queasiness from when he spoke with Terry in the interrogation room earlier that day.

"Dick?"

"I… What I mean is," Dick said, managing to draw a breath, "I've been through that when I was his age. And I'll be sure to be there while I can."

Tim's eyebrows reached for his hairline. "Like Bruce?"

"No," Dick responded immediately. He shook his head. "I mean, not really. Look, I'm not putting another kid into this lifestyle. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about doing my best to stop him from blaming himself and making mistakes - going after vengeance."

There was a bit of a cynical edge to the way Tim tilted his head. "Just the pursuit of Justice."
Glaring, Dick crossed his arms. "I'm not doing that, Tim. I just… Look. I've spent a lot of time with this kid. I'm not emotionally compromised, no more than any other time I wanted to solve a case for the sake of the family involved."

"Except he's the only family involved," Tim added, crossing his leg and leaning back into his chair. "Dick, when I said Bruce is too emotionally involved, I meant he's making this about his parents' murder and it's going to blindside him. He's ignoring the kid because he is the kid in this case. He's not letting himself get involved with the survivor and that's…"

Dick hung his head and drew another breath. "So unlike him," he finished.

"You're walking a much more dangerous line," Tim said as easily as he could possibly manage. He stood, placing a tender hand on his brother's shoulder upon doing so. "I think you should put some distance between you and the kid on this one. You and Bruce need to work on balancing each other out."

Shaking his head, Dick looked at Tim. "Can't, Lil' Brother. Not yet anyway. I promised Terry I'd come to the funeral with him."

Tim's frown was like a knife to Dick's gut. "Okay, but be careful, Dick. Don't hurt yourself on this one."

"Like you guys would let me," Dick responded, grabbing Tim's shoulder and giving a gentle squeeze before heading out himself.

The Red Hood's reputation fluctuated. Sometimes it was not far off from the first time he came onto the scene of the Gotham Underworld, guns blazing, and a known disdain for the worst type of offenders. During those times, merely the outline of his shadow would often be enough to stop most drug dealers and pimps in their tracks. Other times he was feared as another Bat - a sleuth and vigilante with an axe to grind and a harder punch than Red Robin or Nightwing would ever dare deliver.

But tonight, those were all opinions laying by the wayside. The Red Hood was being upstaged by his more colorfully dressed brethren.

Which should have been more odd than it actually was, but every now and then even Jason Todd could appreciate being able to step back and watch their little Assassin Baby work.

"Pick up the slack, Hood!" Robin ground out as he took on three of the gang members at a time, his eyes darting to follow the two making their way toward the building exit.

"What, don't you trust me to take out the trash when it's my turn?" Hood responded before easily tossing one of his own combatants into the runners.

All three collapsed into a heap just near the exit door.

Just as one from the bottom of the pile was beginning to push up off the floor, an escrima stick with eggplant accents found its mark with his temple. He went back down like a sack of rocks.

Nightwing entered the building just as Robin and the Red Hood drug their fallen adversaries toward the newly formed pile. She put her hands on her hips and looked around the warehouse. Her face could never hide her amusement well enough.
"Some sort of illegal goods and services?" she quipped, the sharp domino over her eyes doing little to hide the quirk of her brows.

"How'd you guess?" Hood responded as he rotated his shoulder. "Tell me, Blondie, are you starting to feel the nights in your bones?"

"No," she said easily, ducking down to pick up her escrima stick. "But I also take better care of myself than you do." She flashed her tongue at him before looking over to Robin just as the youngest vigilante kicked out at the legs of the unconscious felons. "Robin, that's rude. They already are going to feel every nerve in their body."

He leveled them with a sour look that the older vigilantes responded to in kind: Nightwing with feigned disappointment, Red Hood with smirking approval. It was all too expected that Nightwing then lashed out with a firm smack of her escrima stick against Hood's backside.

"Ah! What the hell was that for?"

"You said you were going to keep him under control," Nightwing reminded him.

"No one's dead, are they?" he asked critically.

By the time they stopped glaring at each other and noticed Robin, he had already passed the stage of gapping and was merely standing, hands on hips, with his eyelets shuttering as the lids beneath twitched erratically.

"Oops," Nightwing voiced.

"I knew you were babysitting, don't flatter yourselves!" Robin spat, but his olive skin was already flushing a cherry hue in his ears and cheeks saying otherwise. "But if you're both quite done inhibiting my patrol-"

Robin stopped, his body stiffening into a prepared stance as he looked out the exit door. Wordlessly, the older vigilantes followed suit and all quickly raced out into the alley, pausing only for an instant when they saw the figure that had caught Robin's attention on the nearby rooftop.

It was a tall, slender figure. Black and gray - a billowing torn cape, with a skeletal face eerily looking out to them from beneath a tattered hood. A long silver scythe decorated its right hand.

The moment it realized it had been spotted, the figure took off across the rooftops, pilfering smoke beginning to release from beneath the robes.

"Shit," Red Hood hissed as the Bats simultaneously pulled out their grapplers and shot for the roofs in mid-stride.

En masse, they leapt to the building roof and quickly took after the Reaper. Robin, far faster than his predecessors, neared the rogue first, reaching into the growing billows of smoke to find purchase on the Reaper's person only for the thick smog to surround them both. Hood swore when the fog quickly became too thick for him to see his younger brother through.

As the fog enveloped Nightwing and himself, too, Hood heard Robin coughing. Relying back on old training, he knew that the former trained-assassin would have already dropped below the gas for more air. Hood's helmet was venhelated, but Nightwing and Robin both had to rely on safety tips and rebreathers.
Hood waved his arms through the smoke, watching it dissipate. At the very least, it didn't seem dangerous, and it was disappearing rather rapidly.

Nightwing immediately fell to his brother's side. She placed a gentle hand on his shoulder, helping him find steady feet again.

The Red Hood glared out into the surrounding area as the fog finally left. There was no sign of their mysterious onlooker.

"Who was that?" Nightwing questioned.

"I..." Robin wheezed, shaking his head as he did so. "Files... Seen that image before... recognized. Did you... Hood?"

Beneath his helmet, Jason frowned. "Yeah, I've seen the file, too. Never saw her though."

Her attention captured, Nightwing looked to Hood. "Her?"

"A former... acquaintance of Father," Robin hissed. "The Phantasm."

Chapter End Notes

To make up for the absence, I let this chapter run on a little more. Again, I'm really sorry for that!

For anyone confused about the White Queen, Katarina Armstrong is a government agent of the D.E.O., Checkmate, FBI, Homeland Security, NASA, CIA and more who was an old classmate and rival of Barbara's from college. They're both highly intelligent, competitive, and stubborn and faced off against each other in Birds of Prey.

She's the reason I debated for a while on whether or not I should also list this story under the Birds of Prey fandom, but I ultimately decided against it as she and Babs are all I'm drawing from there for now.

;) Hope you'll all stay tuned! And same as usual, if there's anything funky with the chapter or story in general feel free to tell me/critique me! And thank you SO much for all the support, guys. It means so much!
Katarina followed Barbara into her office, posture excellent as she allowed her shadow to tower over the commissioner. Agent Armstrong knew better than to assume that this tactic would intimidate Barbara Gordon, but she used it maliciously as a taunt. To anger her. It was the first feint of their match.

Even if Barbara no longer answered to the title of "Oracle," she still maintained her tactile mind and fierce composure.

She stared down Brainiac. She could weather anything the Spy Smasher threw at her.

Rounding to her desk, Barbara motioned toward the office seats. Katarina smiled behind her smart sunglasses and promptly ignored the gesture. Instead she began fiddling around with the desk. Classic power play.

Barbara allowed it with a stony glare.

"I heard the prior commissioner kept a game clock on his desk," Armstrong said idly, seeming a bit disappointed as she leaned onto the desk and reappropriated the corner as a seat.

"The former commissioner wasn't a Gordon," Barbara responded icily. "He didn't know how to take the more colorful offenders on the street more seriously. It cost him dearly, and he didn't last long. But I expect you have done your research on that front quite well already."

The blonde's eyes almost glittered over the rims of her glasses. "I did."

Taking a breath, Barbara sat back into her chair, showing her opponent just how seriously she took the threatening tactics the agent was employing. Swiftly, as she lowered her hands into her lap, she pressed the first alert of many hidden underneath the armrest. Her hands slipped neatly into one another as her eyes never left Armstrong's face.

"Let's not play coy, Katarina," Barbara continued. "Revealing Checkmate's involvement in the rather nasty obstruction to our investigations is near negligent. Either you're playing make-up for a larger, more important department, or this is a situation of international magnitude. In either case, you are not about to look good to your superiors."

Smirking, Katarina pushed off from the desk. "I've never been the biggest fan of them."

"Are you attempting to threaten my job?" Barbara cut to the chase.

"Your family name, maybe," Armstrong shrugged as she hesitated near the far wall. She tapped the framed picture of Barbara's graduation. "But that'd never work in Gotham, where Gordons are Saints. Ousting you from your hard earned seat as commissioner would only stand to turn you into a martyr. Every women's group, disability lobbyist, and retired cop in Gotham would have your mayor's head on a platter. Not that I'd be particularly burned by that bit of business. But fact of the matter is, either you're a small bit officer on a sinking ship here in Gotham, or you're causing me actual problems as the 4-1-1 to the Caped Community. I'm rather fond of choosing a laxative over arsenic these days. Though, I suppose I do miss being mildly challenged by you."
Unimpressed, Barbara simply kept her eyes locked on the Spy Smasher's every movement. "You're condescending me? For being a law enforcer?"

Immediately, Katarina spun on her heels and faced Barbara directly. There was nothing but solemn truth on her features as she replied, "I am nothing but proud to say I know you for your choices to abide by the law rather than find yourself above it. Make no mistake, Gordon, I see a sister in arms in you. I always have, even if your stance in most fields is less than savory. You've done good work. Gotham is a much more manageable cesspool after two Gordons have kept it clear of trash and scum."

"Why are you here then, Spy Smasher?" Barbara pressed in exasperation. "I am attempting to do that very job. Your people are making that impossible."

"And for that you receive my condolences," she said emphatically. "But you will not get an apology from me for doing our job."

"I don't want your condolences or your apologies," Barbara snapped. "I want you and your suit-and-tie friends out of my offices so we can attempt to solve a murder that is going colder by the second thanks to you."

The White Queen crossed her arms. "Absolutely not. This is a matter of the Federal Government. You are out of your jurisdiction on this case."

Commissioner Gordon grit her teeth and narrowed her eyes. "Who sent you, Katarina? Do you even know why the government doesn't want the investigation of a little boy's parents to go underway?"

Katarina made no physical tell. "That is classified information, Commissioner. But in twenty-four hours you will be returned the case with any and all information our investigators have found. Including psychological profiles."

"Forged information, you mean," Barbara growled before feeling her entire body tense. She jerked slightly in her seat as she looked to her former friend in horror. "Psychological profiles? You're taking the boy?"

"He needs to be in protective custody."

"Like hell!" Barbara hissed. "Katarina, this isn't a match of chess between us. This is a life. A child's life. What the hell are you bureaucrats doing!? What is this all about?"

Armstrong turned for the office door. "Sorry, Commish. That's all I am obligated to tell you."

Her mind reeling, Barbara frantically attempted to meet this unexpected move when it all came to her in a flash. The second she stopped thinking like an officer and more like an Oracle.

"Absolute pin, my queen," Barbara called out just as Armstrong began to open the door.

Most likely out of curiosity as opposed to anything else, Katarina actually stopped in stride and turned to face. "Excuse me?"

"With Checkmate's interest in this case," Barbara continued, a quaint grin on her face, "and the description of the perpetrator given to us by our only eye witness, I must assume that this involves
an international Masked Criminal. You're correct. This isn't the jurisdiction of the Gotham City Police Department. It's the Justice League's."

The immediate look of disgust on Katarina's face told Barbara she was on the right trail.

Stephanie had come to pride herself on the lasting friendship she shared with her ex. It had been a rather long journey to get them to that point, they certainly had made their share of questionable choices in regards to each other over the years, but the kinds of people who continue to show up in your life prove that romantically or not, you're meant to be together. It was comforting to know they would be able to share secrets together even years later that they might not even have with their romantic partners. If she could get Tim hooked up with someone. Eventually.

Still, she had to admit that no amount of platonic love would probably spare her from that look after she, Jason, and Damian broke into his little sanctuary.

"DRAKE!" Damian snarled as loudly as possible as he burst through the safe-room door and into the bunker Tim kept hidden in his apartment.

"Stealthy as an elephant," Jason cooed, removing his helmet and revealing that, as Steph expected, it was unusually hot under the Hood on this winter night. Jason's normally thick brown hair was slick and plastered tightly to his skull.

The current Nightwing couldn't help but release a snort when the way Jason's hair curled out over his ears caught her eyes.

He gave her a look. "What?"

"Oh, nothing," she said with a wave of her left hand as her right played carelessly with an escrima stick.

"I swear, you are the most useless information jockey in the world!" Damian roared as he stormed back to where the two elder vigilantes stood at the entrance. He looked as petulant as he ever did at 10. Steph wasn't sure if she wanted to squeeze his cheeks or punch him in the nose. Neither would play out nicely, she imagined. "Drake isn't here."

"No dip, Sherlock," Jason retorted, look disdainfully at his helmet.

Steph leaned enough to look inside it and twitch her nose at it. "Does it ever stink in there?"

"Hah. That's an original question, Barbie," Jason responded as he messed with the catches a bit.

She rolled her eyes. "Like I've never heard that before --"

"Can we not fornicate with our eyes and get back to the manner at hand?" Damian snapped.

They both gave him disdainful looks, Jason even dropping the helmet a bit in order to straighten his shoulders and tower over Damian what little he could. Stephanie, perpetually glad that she could still at least claim heights over Tim and Cass, settled for a hand on the hip and cocking her head to the side. Together, the Dead Robins Society was a bit of brick wall of bad-ass-itude. She made a note to tell it all to Nell first thing tomorrow.

After only a few moments, Damian threw up his hands and rotated on his heels to get to the computer system Tim maintained. His Arabic muttering was something like music to Stephanie's
"Can you believe the nerve of him?" Stephanie asked in a stage whisper as she and Jason made their way to the computers. "It's as if we didn't raise him at all."

"I blame your side of the family," Jason responded, grabbing onto the back of Tim's chair and leaning against it, eyes settled on the screen as Damian attempted to hack. "You could just log onto your own account."

"Tt," Damian hissed as he was denied a fifth and sixth time. His fingers were beginning to move so fast Steph was losing count. "Do you know that Drake told me he hasn't changed his password since I was ten years old?"

Stephanie thought back to what that might have incurred, but it had been almost eight years since then. And a lot had been going on eight years ago. It wasn't exactly like they were at their closest as a family back then either. There had been so many changes over the years, for better or worse. And eight years ago hadn't been a particularly good time for Tim or Damian. Especially when you put them in the same room.

"What? And you still haven't cracked it?" Jason snarked. "Did he ever give you a clue?"

"My sixteenth birthday he told me it 'was from a television show I never watched," Damian growled.

"You haven't watched any television shows for as long as I've known you," Steph laughed. "He could be changing it every week based on that criteria."

Damian shot her an ugly look and continued typing. "That's not how Drake operates. He will lord that single password over me until I finally crack it and--"

Having about enough of the nonsense, Steph sighed and bumped the chair out of the way with her hip, causing Damian and Jason both to splutter. "You men and your dick waving contests," she grumbled before leaning over the keyboard and easily entering her access code and password. The Network opened up to them, lighting the room with a soft eggplant glow. "Aw. He does care about my favorite colors."

"You two are disgusting," Damian hissed, almost catching Stephanie's foot with the wheel of the chair when he hastily slid himself back into place.

"My view screen doesn't light up green when I log in," Jason said with a hint of mock jealousy.

"He must not love you enough then," Steph said with a shrug.

Ignoring them, Damian pulled up the criminal files and hastily searched for PHANTASM, the profile complete with pictures in and out of the costume littered the monitors. The black and white of a lovely, pale, dark-haired woman caught Stephanie's eye immediately.

She read the caption. "That's her? She's pretty," she observed.

"It's an old picture," Damian scowled.

Jason lightly bopped him over the head. "Hey! Old women can be pretty, watch your mouth."
Continuing to glance over the pictures, Stephanie found herself staring at a grainy security camera still of the Phantasm in costume. She leaned over and clicked the picture to enlarge it. Sure enough, a skeletal figure reminiscent of their ghostly observer could be easily seen through a billow of smoke on the old footage. "That looks like our girl," she commented before looking to the boys. "You two know the history on her?"

"What's documented," Damian said quietly, his scowl locked on the civilian ID. "Andrea Beaumont, daughter of a banker named Carl Beaumont whose affiliation with known Gotham gangsters Chucky Sol, Buzz Bronski, and Salvatore Valestra led to his death. After a stint abroad, Beaumont returned to Gotham both as herself and as the vigilante the Phantasm. She was successful in murdering Sol and Bronski. Somehow Joker got involved and killed Valestra."

Stephanie felt her eyebrows raise. "That's rather intense. Any reason you guys seem so solemn about it? Looks like this file hasn't been updated since almost twenty years ago."

With a grunt, Jason nodded his head to the file tab display. "It's a red book."

Taking a breath, Stephanie closed her eyes and let the moment sink in.

Over the years, with the multitudes of nemesis their various clan members acquired, they had developed a simple three colored system. Green, yellow, and red. The colors didn't indicate danger level, they had a more specific class system for that, but instead were a means to alarm them to a much more personal threat.

Green files were of rogues with no knowledge or real invested interest in their identities. Yellow files were of any threat, civilian or not, who had an interest or had before attempted to uncover their identities.

Red files were of any threat that had confirmed knowledge of their identities.

"We have to tell Tim and the others," Steph said resolutely.


Without a word, Damian pushed off from the desk and exited the room in a huff. The elder vigilantes allowed him to go in peace.

"What else about this is bothering him?" Stephanie pressed, as quietly as she could manage. Her eyes never left the door.

Jason grunted. "She's the Old Man's first love or something. They were engaged. 'S'how she knows."

Sighing, Stephanie followed after her Robin. She knew Jason wouldn't have to be told to hang back for a few minutes as she dealt with the deep rooted parental issues for the night. The Bad Robins had gotten pretty good at operating within their circle over the years. And Damian needed space. And he needed Stephanie, too.

Cassandra did not even move from her position on the roof. After giving Bruce enough time to pull out of his landing and near noiselessly cross the distance, she tilted her head and nodded to him. Her eyes were locked on the window across the street and one floor down.
The aging hero stood over her, following her gaze to the window. He had no doubts that Cassandra had managed her post all night without the slightest bit of unrest or boredom.

She had always been good, but her year away from Gotham, the year Bruce was… indisposed, had brought them an even more determined Cassandra. Her goal to stop the enigmatic assassin Cricket along with most other associates of the former League of Assassins had sharpened her focus and trimmed what little excess she had had before she left. It would had been cause for alarm had similar goals not led to a growing bond between her and Tim. Bruce respected the decisions, though he found himself forever wondering what had inspired her new rigidness.

He never asked, and she never told him. They, more than anyone in their immense family, could allow silences to go on forever.

Still, he had an objective for being there.

"No trouble?" Batman prompted his daughter.

She shook her head once.

He made a small, acknowledging noise back before nearing the ledge. They both stared at the window. "The boy?"

Drawing her knees to her chest, Cassandra showed the first signs that her vigil had caused her some soreness. Her shoulders popped with a single rotation. "Silent. Asleep. He doesn't… say much… to their questions. Been in the room. Two hours," she drawled, her hands fluttering just slightly to sign her words quicker than she could say them. Bruce watched them just in case Cassandra's true meaning went beyond her verbal abilities. "But not… sleeping well. Woke up twice. Bad Dreams."

Suppressing a grunt from the pang he felt in his chest, Bruce nodded. "That would be typical. Given the circumstances. It might even be good for him if I wake him up." He met Cass' eyes with a firm look. "It's for the case. It's necessary, and it won't take long." After a moment's hesitation, he added, "I can see to it that you're relieved in the morning. We can have Red Hood or someone else continue watch duty."

To that, Cass stretched and hugged her knees. She seemed to be the only one of his children who was more relaxed with the original Batman looming by her side. But he still caught the subtle raise of her brow.

"I'm fine," he almost growled out, aiming his grappler toward the ledge above the boy's window.

"If… you say so," Cass responded quietly before resuming her watch position. "His name… It's Terry."

He didn't look back to her as he launched the line. "I know."

Batman soared over the street, landing with firm contact of both his boots with the window ledge. The chink of the line in his hands told him that the grappler had locked. He rested his weight on the arm holding it as the other hand reached for the picks in his belt pocket, just where he always kept them. With one, he made quick work of the window's lock from the outside and carefully slid it open. With one leg inside, he pressed the catch of the grappler with his thumb, releasing it from the ledge above, and continued to slide inside.
Had Terry been trained even the least bit, he might have heard Batman's weight shift as he landed, but as it stood the boy remained fitfully asleep on the bed.

Bruce Wayne had nightmares his first night after as well. If his memory served correctly, Dick’s first night had been an ordeal.

But Dick had had Batman, and a promise that his parents' murderer would face justice. It may have made the difference, made Dick the man he was today rather than another Bruce Wayne. Another Batman like Bruce Wayne.

For a fleeting moment, Bruce wondered if Batman and a promise would be enough for this boy. If it would have been enough for himself.

The boy huffed hot air, and clutched at his sheets. His hair stuck up, fringed slightly against his pillow, but his bangs were sticking to his forehead. He was not tossing so much as he was jerking his shoulders.

Swallowing dryly, Bruce crossed the distance and stood by the boy. By Terry.

There was something haunting, like Dick had said before, about seeing familiar pain so clearly in another person. One with slick black hair and familiar cheekbones -- but this wasn't about Bruce, or Dick. Seeing the boy for himself reminded Bruce of just that.

He reached out, cautiously, and placed the palm of his gauntlet gently against the boy's forehead just as he was beginning to bite hard into his bottom lip. Batman watched as the jerked shoulders eased back slowly against the pillows and the boy released a shuttering breath. He was quietly waiting for some sort of sign to continue. When Terry took a deep breath and exhaled more smoothly, more calmly, Batman continued to soothe the boy the way he had Dick so many years earlier.

Without completely removing his hand from Terry's forehead, Batman used broad sweeps of his thumb to clear the sweat soaked face of any stray strands of hair. For one reason or another, he took note of how more than a few stubbornly resisted being smoothed out.

Once Terry had quieted down almost entirely, the boy moved more deliberately, rolling his shoulders and back just before squinting through rubbed-raw eyes.

Batman shifted his hand from Terry's forehead to his shoulder. Before the boy could jolt awake or react really at all, Batman said, "Don't be alarmed."

That made Terry's eyes open completely, not looking at all convinced.

"It's okay, Terry," Batman continued, saying Terry's name for the first time. It sounded… strange somehow.

If possible, the boy's eyes widened further. He pulled back quickly, pushing himself up from the sheets.

Batman allowed his hand to fall back against his body underneath the cape. He waited a moment to see whether or not Terry was going to scream. When he didn't, Batman tried again. "I'm here to help the police with investigating what happened last night."

That seemed to pull Terry from the minor panic slightly and his shoulders dropped. "You're…
you're Batman."

"Yes."

Terry blinked a few times, processing. "Batman… knows my name…"

More for the child than himself, Batman allowed a small smirk. He looked down to his belt and unlatched the pocket for his evidence kits. "Yes, I do."

When he looked up, Batman saw that Terry was still frozen on the bed, apparently working desperately to process the new found information. Deciding to let the boy work it all out in his own time, Batman neared the edge of the bed closest to Terry. The boy looked up and Batman held out a cotton swab.

"I need you to open your mouth," he explained gently. "I'm going to swab your cheek. It's for evidence."

Bright blue irises widened slightly more. A glimmer was there that was both familiar to Batman… and uncomfortable. "Is it going to help catch him?" Terry asked quietly.


That seemed to do the trick as Terry quietly opened his mouth wide and scooted closer to the edge of the bed. Batman carefully swabbed the inside of Terry's cheeks.

He tried to think of a good explanation for why he was swabbing Terry's cheeks for DNA in order to catch his parents' murderer. It was a question he was sure the boy was bound to ask. But, to Batman's surprise, once he finished swabbing and dropped the swab into a saline tube to be locked away within the evidence pouch, Terry simply sat back up straight and stared right up at Batman quietly. There was a fire in his eyes.

Batman carefully locked the evidence away and met Terry's eyes again.

"When you catch him," Terry said with utter confidence of that inevitable outcome, "Do I get to see him? Can I…"

Curious, Batman stood straight and studied Terry's features. "Can you what?"

For a moment, Terry's mouth dropped open, as if the response was on the tip of his tongue, but he fairly quickly closed his mouth again and screwed his eyes shut. He drew his knees up and leaned into them, his grubby hands grabbing for his sweaty hair. "I-I don't know! I just want… I just want…"

Batman was prepared for many answers, some from his own mind years and years ago. To hurt him, to beat him, to scream -- any one would make sense.

Terry shuddered from head to toe. "I just want M-mom and D-Dad," he breathed into his knees. "I-I just want to do something. I want them back."

Quietly, Batman eased himself onto the bed, ignoring the slight creak caused by the extra padding. He sat, quietly, before reaching his hand out and resting it on the boy's shoulder. He wasn't good with physical contact, and in a moment of silent regret he almost wished he had allowed Dick to take his place. He tried, though, and it seemed to be enough to ease the shaking.
"I know," he managed to say soothingly.

Sniffing, Terry eased his head off his knees just slightly. "You-you're the second person I b-believed when they said that," the boy said. He rubbed his nose roughly against his pajama sleeve. "O-Officer Dick said it, too," he continued as if Batman needed clarification on who the other was.

"He's a good man," Batman responded. When Terry seemed more composed, he continued. "Terry, I am going to find who killed your parents. I won't stop until I do."

Weakly, without looking at Batman, Terry whispered, "And then?"

"We'll see to it he sees justice," Batman promised. He squeezed the boy's shoulder firmly. "I have to go now. Will you be alright?"

Terry looked to his face and nodded. "Did… Did I really help?"

"Yes," Batman responded almost immediately. "You did. Thank you, Terry."

A small weight seemed to be lifted from the boy. He nodded to Batman.

Getting up from the bed, Batman approached the window and, with his grappler again, exited the very way he came.

Chapter End Notes

I have gotten so many nice and wonderful messages for this story and I cannot thank you all enough for the support. It's been wonderful. I can only hope the long awaited meeting of Terry and Bruce was worth all the faith everyone's put in me and this story!

Just a few notes: I am trying to stick as strictly to the pre-New 52 canon as I possibly can for this universe, but I can't be helped if I *tweak* a few of the gross mistakes made in that universe. And there's also a lot of headcanon shenanigans on my part. To sort of "smooth out" the discrepancies in regards to Jason's hair color I've settled on it being a dark, rusty brown. There's also a lot of gross in regards to how Cassandra's character was handled from the time her series ended until she returned to the Bat Books again in late 2010, but my characterization of her will be almost solely based on her 2000-2006 Batgirl series, some nods to her time in Batman and the Outsiders, and her appearances in Red Robin and Gates of Gotham.

And, in general, since it's been 8 years since the pre-New 52 timeline "ended," I've dealt with a lot of the various Bat conflicts off the page. Particularly, Jason's reconciliation with the Bats, Damian and Tim's issues with each other, and Cass' disappearance from the Wayne family. If there's enough interest in those things, I do have most of it plotted out and may consider doing "prequels" that deal with those stories. I've already almost shamefully planned out a timeline for Damian's Teen Titans that I would love to play with and write out. So who knows ;)

As usual, I hope you enjoyed the chapter! Feel free to critique or just drop a
comment!
Chapter Notes

Oh my gosh, how I cannot apologize enough for how little I've been updating this story. My only excuse is that I've been doing school work and taking exams in the meantime. I never meant to put this off as much as I have and I apologize so much. Everyone has been incredibly supportive and kind toward me and this fic and I can only hope that my updates live up to the expectations.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to comment or leave kudos on this project. That means a lot to me, seriously. I promise even if I don't reply, I see everything.

Hopefully I don't let you guys down!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There had been several changes to Gotham Central since Jim Gordon retired six years prior. A new Batman had been the least among them.

While the newest Commissioner Gordon had made it a point to define boundaries between her department and the ever-present Bats, she was also, in ways, much more capable of aiding their cause by doing so. She gave them large windows to work in and never questioned the evidence and case files that could be removed and returned without the notice of her various detectives. Within reason, of course.

The morgue on the second level of the basement, reinforced to withstand earthquakes and tsunamis alike so that the department would never suffer the massive records loss it had during the Gotham Quake, was intimately familiar to the current Batman. More so than he cared for it to be.

It hadn't taken long to find the files he needed and to upload them with his handheld scanner. With remote access blocked on the Network, Dick felt thankful to have the habits of the aging chief medical examiner as reliable as ever.

As he went through the pages of the report to scan, the Batman read them for himself, his frown tightening at the description of the entry and exit wounds on both victims.

They were unusual, almost completely 180 degrees with no evidence of internal ricochet, despite Mary McGinnis in particular being shot in the chest. The flesh on the outer rims of the holes were also singed, as was some of the internal tissue to a lesser degree.

"It doesn't sound as though they were shot," Dick muttered as he scanned the last pages and looked to the locker. "Not with a bullet."

The coroner had ruled the weapon as "unknown," but Dick suspected he might be more knowledgeable on this front. He replaced the files and moved to the cooler locker to examine the McGinnis's for himself.

Being raised by the World's Greatest Detective, Dick had more experience with examining the dead than he cared to reflect on. Sometimes the graphic nature of these crimes could still get to
him, but it became a rarer and rarer notion as the years progressed. It took much more than the usual Gotham fare to cause his stomach to turn over.

Thus, he had to owe it to his connection with the case that his heart clinched at the sight of Warren and Mary McGinnis once he removed them from their slots.

The momentary setback did not stop his progress, though, and he very quickly moved on to compare the wounds with his suspicions after reading the medical records. Unsurprisingly, the singed flesh and tissue was hardened, slightly black, and the exit wound in both cases was not much larger than the entrance wound.

"A bullet would have caused a larger section of damage on exit than it had entry," he muttered, carefully putting the bodies back as he found them. "And it also would have traveled too fast to cause the amount of burning they have on their tissue. This looks like a laser weapon."

Which was not nearly as common as a bullet, even in Gotham.

Despite advances in technology around the world, lasers as weaponized technology remained difficult to manufacture and to maintain. They were expensive weapons, even the majority of the Rogues kept to the tried-and-true bullets no matter the firepower and lack of tracing that came from lasers.

Dick knew that the McGinnis murderer then had to either have little regard for the profit margin in their crimes, a megalomaniac with enough funds without hits, or had an expensive backer supplying them with weapons.

If it were the latter case, Batman knew where to look next.

He locked up the morgue and made his way silently to the second ground floor and finally answer an old friend's call.

*

Through the alley access and onto the street, it was a simple grapple to the Commissioner's office window which, unsurprisingly, was open for him.

Barbara sat at the desk with her computer screen lighting her face in a familiar green glow. It almost made Dick feel nostalgic.

"Old habits die hard, Commissioner," he said from the window ledge.

"You took your time," she responded before turning to face him more directly. "It's a good thing I qualify as an expert when dealing with government agents by this point."

He slid further into the office and approached her, eyes soaking in everything. Very unlike Barbara, the desk contents were more cluttered to the center than spread out evenly, her computer was not making any bones about being infiltrated by the ORACLE network, her hair was slightly less neat than usual but nothing indicating physical struggle, and there was a faint blush across the bridge of Barbara's nose and the tips of her ears that Dick was willing to bet had been a much brighter color earlier.

Few people were capable of getting Babs so riled up.

"She was here?" he asked seriously. "Why didn't you turn on the alarm instead of the notification?"
I would have come immediately."

Her emerald eyes burned as they looked at him. "Because I don't need help dealing with her. I only wanted to let you know of the development. It seemed like something Batman needed to know."

Sucking in a breath, Dick turned slightly back toward the window. "I'll be sure to let him know that Checkmate's more involved than we even thought."

"Hey."

Slightly surprised by her tone, Dick turned to look at the commissioner again only to see purely Barbara in her expression. Stern but mothering look on her face as she said, "You're the only Batman I'm interested in at the moment. Remember that."

"It's been a tough night, Commissioner," he responded apologetically before looking to the computer. "I see that you've caught a Proxy on the database. Those can be rather invasive."

"Can't they?" Barbara responded bemused. She turned to face the computer again, a knowing smirk back on her face. "It was the strangest thing. Our system seemed to be down on all the mobile units our detectives logged into outside of Central before this Proxy hit us. Now it's slowly being brought back up. Isn't that just the damnedest thing? By this time tomorrow everything should be back up and running."

"That's fine, but as they say, time is of the essence on this case," Batman responded, producing his scanner for her to see. "I took the liberty of going over the coroner's report myself. There are a few holes in it that could be filled."

Commissioner Gordon looked at him over the rim of her glasses. "Oh? Anything you could clue us in on?"

"As a matter of fact," he responded before putting the device back in its pouch. "Mary and Warren McGinnis were shot, he was right, but he seemed perplexed by the logistics of the wounds. Because those wounds weren't made by a bullet, they were made by laser fire."

That seized her attention. "Lasers? That's high end. Even most mercenaries haven't switched to those yet."

"You're right," Batman responded. "But I've seen similar wounds before. They burned the dry skin on entry and exit, as well as the dryer first level of tissue, but the more internal tissues and organs which were more fluid filled were not."

"Which allowed them to bleed out like a normal wound," Barbara finished the thought, the gears visibly working in her head. "It would explain the lack of sound, too. The son was the only witness despite them being between a theater and a parking garage. No one heard gunshots."

"There was also no ricochet inside the body, despite Mary McGinnis' ribs being hit," he elaborated. "Your coroner also missed another point that could be essential to this case."

Curious, Barbara raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

His frown tightened as Dick explained, "Mary McGinnis was also pregnant."
Seemingly surprised, Barbara settled back in her chair some, eyebrows arching high. "Then it's a triple homicide," she echoed the original Batman. Shaking her head, the commissioner seemed to loosen her emotions for the moment. There was danger in her eyes when she looked back at her old partner. "Then this case continues to warrant a more hands on approach by my estimations. Good. If I ever had any doubts about my actions then I've certainly lost them now."

Batman tilted his head curiously. "Did you throw a federal agent out the window? Should I be concerned for your position?"

"The latter maybe, but I didn't get around to the first as much as I might have wanted to," she admitted candidly before looking over Dick's shoulder just as a breeze rolled in. "By the way, that window wasn't open for you."

Dick turned just as the silhouette hovering outside the second floor window appeared, flowing cape and all. He smirked. "No kidding? Calling in more than one favor from the League, I see."

Tam had mentioned calling off his morning meetings and clearing the board for him so he could rest before the press conference. It was almost adorable how she still thought he had the capacity to relax that way.

Before leaving his residence, Tim had managed to shave, comb his hair, and bring a spare suit because he always ends up needing a spare by the end of the day for any number of reasons. But he had not managed to rest. Rest was simply an allusive demon by that point in his life and Tim had learned to live with that fact.

Instead of resting, he was resigned to toiling the morning light away with the various toys available to him in their private lab at WE.

The former crime lab had been reappropriated a number of ways over the years, mostly suiting whatever needs were had by the current case work the family. There were usually patterns to streams of crime and they had all gotten shockingly good at rearranging equipment and making due with the "general" supply at the offices.

Before Lucius had handed the majority of his holds to Tamara and Tiffany, it had nearly drove him mad to have an entire basement floor taking up space for no discernible reason. Especially when WE publicly dismantled relations with Batman Inc. and supposedly stopped all "crime fighting" manufacturing. Brucie lost some brownie points at a board meeting when he referred to the floor as the "store room."

It was a comment far funnier in hindsight than it was when Tim was sitting between two members of the Fox family.

With the many items "stored" in the basement, Tim easily procured a temporary link to the Network and then proceeded to put together the DNA sequencer.

By the time he had finished, his first suit's jacket was crinkled on the far counter, his shoes scuffed from kicking the corner of the machine so it would slide into place, and a bit of sweat had embarrassingly made itself known on his shirt.

Looking to the clock on the wall, Tim undid his cuffs and began to roll up his sleeves.

If Bruce came soon, Tim could get the equipment running and have enough time to change while the sequencer went to work and perhaps still have enough spare time to chide Bruce to get ready

"Hmm," Tim hummed as he looked from the clock to the door and tried, in vain, to ignore the wet sensation of his hair curling on his neck from the sweat. "We've got to do something about the ventilation in here."

Another minute passed before he produced his phone from his back pocket and scrolled through his many, many contacts - a part of his mind daring to point out that the majority of these 'business associates' had never been contacted once - before he got to the P's. He touched the first number on the list and waited for the ringing to stop as he got a hair tie from his front pocket and begun to make his earlier grooming counter productive.

"Greetings, Master Tim," Alfred's voice came over the speaker.

"Morning, Alfred. Hope I didn't wake you," Tim responded, partially in jest.

"Perish the thought of one sleeping in this household, Sir." There was a momentary pause before Alfred cut to the chase. "May I inquire as to reason you called my personal line."

Tim started up the equipment in hopes that it would be warmed by the time Bruce decided to arrive with their DNA sample. "It's two-fold, Alfred. I didn't want to get my call redirected from the house phone with it averaging, what, thirty reporters an hour?"

"Not since midday yesterday. Master Damian found it interfered with the dog's behavior and took it upon himself to cancel our service, as it were."

"He can't use Titus as an excuse for cutting the lines every time and expect to get away with it," Tim said with a roll of his eyes. "He needs to get more inventive with his excuses."

"One would think with you and Master Jason around him enough he would have a nose nearly as long," Alfred deadpanned.

Growing a smirk, Tim huffed out a small laugh. "Ouch. Harsh. But I guess I can accept that. My second reason for calling is, we've got this press conference in just a few hours. I'd like to think that'd be enough to convince Bruce to get ready, but I know I'm not the expert in that field."

There was a certain clipping noise in the background behind Alfred, he was apparently walking across the foyer. "Very well, I shall be there within a half hour, Master Tim. I would assume Master Bruce has not brought a change of clothes for himself."

That was not something Tim knew for sure, but Tim did know Bruce for certain. "I'd be willing to bet he's planning on using one of the suits stowed away around WE somewhere. Which is --"

"Unacceptable for an event of this magnitude," Alfred agreed crisply. "No reason to give the less than gentle gossip columns of Gotham something more to talk about than they already will."

"Thanks, Alfred," Tim said as he sat down on one of the nearby chairs. "I'll see you soon."

"Same to you, Sir."

The Phantasm was not a menace that Damian could overlook or take lightly. He had seen what similar threats had done to his father in the past, including his own mother. The thought of another encroaching on the heels of an emotional case was highly unappealing.
Brown had talked him down from a wild manhunt, but only just barely. She and Todd promised to continue the search for leads on Phantasm while Damian alerted his father.

It had taken quite a bit of energy to keep himself from heading to the East End and afflicting Colin with a long rant on the situation. It would have been a waste of time, though, and time was not something the youngest Wayne had much to spend.

After all, Drake and his father were on a tight schedule this morning from what little attention Damian had bothered to give their midday planning the day before.

He slipped into Drake's office easily enough, knew that his best bet was to intercept his father and Drake en route to their conference, and quickly pilfered one of the spare wardrobes hidden in the storage closet. He would later ask Drake why he felt it was necessary to keep a spare change of clothes for each of the members of their family in his own office, but it was not all that important at the moment.

Not to mention how lax he had been in the past few years toward Drake. After their dealings with Grandfather, Damian had reluctantly grown a certain fondness for the usefulness his adopted brother had proven to have in certain situations. After all, they did not have to particularly like each other in order to respect each other.

Spending weekends with the Titans had more than taught Damian that much.

Changed into slacks and a decent shirt (too tight, he would have to berate Drake later for that), Damian made his way through WE's halls.

Drake's baffled secretary was easily enough ignored. The woman had to have felt less than lucid during her employ under the Waynes as they did have the habit of exiting rooms she surely could not have seen them enter.

Using the back stairs and making it to main floor with a few impatient leaps down stairwell, Damian quickly made his beeline to the elevator and waited with a tapping foot for one from the basement to open.

It did, and revealed Drake and father speaking in hushed tones as Pennyworth dusted their shoulders and generally made them more dignified than either man could have done for himself.

"If you'd come straight away -- "

"It'll be done by the end of the conference, Tim -- "

Both stopped and looked expectantly at Damian. It was almost eerie how they simultaneously straightened and then arched their brows. Damian could only hope that Grayson did not rub off on him nearly as much.

"I have an interesting development to report," he explained with a dour tone. "I can very well assume it shall take precedence to the current business."

"This couldn't be said over the comms?" Drake said, already beginning to look ruffled in the way only WE business and press attention could make him.

Damian glared back defiantly. "I went to your base to have it handled but you were neither there
"Not now, Damian," Father said with a solid wave of his hand to end both Damian and Drake's retorts. "Tell us after the conference."

Pennyworth handed Father his cane and Tim rubbed roughly at his face, only stopping when he received a look from the dignified butler.

Not to be ignored, Damian kept pace with them on the way out the door. "We have a returning Rogue. A major one. And they escaped our grasp this morning."

"Good job," Drake scoffed.

Father reached for the door. "Now isn't --"

"It was the Phantasm."

Both of the older men froze in place, Father's hand on the open button. They turned and looked at Damian like he had Clayface crawling out of his hair.

"What did you say?" Father demanded.

"It was her," Damian continued, eyes steely. "I am sure of it. As is Brown and Todd, they were with me when we were approached."

Drake was shockingly speechless at the development, as was Pennyworth behind them, only getting out a "My word," in the eerie quiet.

Father looked as though he had been shot. His hand dropped from the button and he leaned slightly more against his cane, eyes looking far off as he turned his head. It was a mysterious moment that Damian was not sure what to make of. Surely this development had not been utterly mind blowing.

"I know she's dangerous," Damian said slowly, attempting to get a grasp on the gravity of the moment. "I understand she knows our identities. And that she's murdered. That's why I knew I had to let you know before you went out to a public press conference where you could be a target."

That seemed to shake Father from his momentary stupor. His blue eyes darted to look at Damian. "She is not after me, she would have been to the Manor already," he waved off the concern. "Damian, was she wearing her traditional costume when you saw her?"

Nodding, Damian began to catch on that there was something much deeper going on. "Yes. Almost exactly."

That caused Drake to round Father's side. "You don't think…"

"I do," Father growled out. "It's too much of a coincidence to not be related."

"But then why?" Drake continued, looking more confused by the second. "To what gain?"

Father's face darkened. "I don't know. But I intend to find out."
Raising a brow, Damian stepped closer. "What are you going on about?"

Before either could respond, the door opened to flashing bulbs and the clicks of cameras. Tamara Fox, in a presentable business suit and up do, looked at them all in surprise. She had been on her way to burst in and find them all apparently.

"Oh, uh, the conference… It's time," she got out, looking a bit dazed. She and Drake exchanged a look before she headed back out to begin introductions.

Damian looked to his family. Father motioned at him. "Stay close during this," he ordered. "When it's over we'll go to the lab and discuss this further."

With his marching orders, Damian followed his Father and Drake out and prepared to stand coolly by their sides to look like a privileged and uninterested heir.

He was only mildly surprised when his phone blew up with texts in his pocket. Damian glared into the crowd knowingly and, sure enough, between his mother and a red haired man with a camera, Christopher Kent waved at Damian emphatically, dorky and unnecessary glasses hanging on the end end of his nose.

"Lovely," Damian murmured, only half curious as to why they were there.

Chapter End Notes

Again, I apologize for how late I was at getting this chapter out, especially since so much of it was an exposition chapter, but as you can tell there are quite a few things going to be happening action-wise in the subsequent chapters.

Small note, I'm slowly acclimating some of the technology used in the Batman Beyond universe, such as the doors mostly opening through buttons and technological advances, but not much more developed than the DCU was just prior to the reboot. I'm still trying to find the balance between both so please bear with me.

Also, I'm dropping some hints as to things that have happened in this AU in the 8 years passed - Damian is now on a team of Teen Titans (along with Chris Kent), he and Colin are still friends, and the encounter with Ra's that Tim referred to a few chapters back had quite a bit more going on than Bruce preemptively coming out of retirement, mostly with Tim and Damian. If it's too obnoxious or distracting, let me know, because as much as I want to continue this AU and flesh out these stories, I don't want it to feel alienating.

And please, as usual, let me know what you guys think! And feel free to critique - it can only help me get better!
I bet most people have abandoned this story, but I wanted to finish it up as best I could.

Thank you to everyone who has supported this story. I'm completely serious when I tell you that this update and the updates to follow are purely for you. I can't give you my appreciation enough.

Black Bat’s post had been kept for hours, but it left her with time for some practice. Still across the street from the safe house where the young McGinnis boy was sleeping, Cassandra Cain easily shifted from high kick to low sweeps.

Part of what made her the best was the speed at which she carried from one motion into the other. She was always preparing her body for the position needed three moves ahead, it made her defense and her offense as easily shifted as the snap of a wrist.

Being a move or four ahead of the enemy was a necessary advantage in their world, the world of Batmen and Rogues. It was why she was positioned at the ready there and then, even before Terry was in any danger.

Which was why, as the van and two cars pulled silently into the side of the road by the building, Cass dropped from her stance and into the shadows. Her eyes narrowed, watching carefully as people in suits exited the vehicles.

These were not police officers from Barbara. And these were not disguises from the Bats.

She recognized the posture and the motions. Agents -- like the ones she had seen in the police department just the day before. Checkmate was what Dick and Barbara had called them. And they weren’t happy about them being there, or them wanting Terry.

Reaching for her grappling gun with one hand and her earpiece with the other, Black Bat prepared to cross the road separating her from Terry’s bedroom window.

“Red Robin?” she asked into the ear piece. It was in the early morning, she was fairly sure that swinging across the Gotham road wasn’t the first thing she should be thinking about doing for the sake of posterity. “Red Robin. Checkmate is after him. Do I go?”

The buzz of no response entered her ear. The agents entered the building.

“I go!” she muttered before shooting the hook with a leap from her position on the rooftop.

She stayed in the air, expertly swinging across the road, hopefully fast enough to not be seen, and touched down onto the window ledge.

Using the clawed gauntlet, she picked the window lock -- still loose from Bruce’s entrance just the
night before -- and slid the window open, a bit louder than usual. She waned Terry awake.

The boy opened his eyes wide and sat up in bed, clutching his pillow. He was caught off guard. Cass couldn’t blame him. They weren’t going by the books at the moment.

“Uh-uh, Batgirl?” he asked, a little dazed, eyes blood shot and circled in deep purple. He hadn’t been sleeping after all.

“Not quite,” Cass said softly again, forcing a smile. “Terry. Do you remember me?”

He hesitated but slowly nodded his head. His grip on the pillow lessened.

She reached her hand out to him from the window. “Someone is coming right now. We don’t want them to... get to you. I want to take you somewhere safe. With a friend.”

Terry blinked. “A friend like Batman?”

“Yes,” she responded with a nod. “Please hurry, Terry.”

With just enough time to take a breath, Terry began to slide down from the bed. It was a touch slow for Cass’ taste, but both she and Terry paused and whipped their heads toward the door as the sound of feet coming down the hall became apparent.

“Wh-who are they!?” Terry cried out, dropping the pillow.

“Terry,” Cass said as calmly as she could manage, extending her hand even further.

Quickly turning on his heels, the boy lunged for her hand, wrapping his arms around it. Cassandra pulled him out through the window and into her arms with one motion, already lunging across the window sills, not bothering to close Terry’s.

Instead, she ran toward the side of the building as fast as she could, knowing she’d be long gone before any of the Checkmate agents could think to follow suit.

The Kryptonian smirked, head cocked to the side. “It’s good to be working with you again, Bats,” Superwoman said with an easy smile. “Of course, your JL communicator must be broken because I just know you’d take a call from me the second I gave it.”

Dick refrained from rolling his eyes too much on that on that one. He’d been friends with Kara long enough by that point to take her more biting sarcasm well.

“I’ve had my hands rather tied,” he responded. “I’ve not even been by base for a while. Must have missed it.”

“Mmhmm,” she hummed in return, entering the window with a slight duck. Her eyes checked the surroundings with a soft glow. “Darn. Someone already took care of the listening devices for me. I hate when you guys do that.”

Babs hummed to that notion, leaning back in her chair. “I didn’t have time for you two to show off so I took care of them already.” She glanced between them. “Superwoman, I was just catching our mutual friend here up on the League’s intervention here.”

Kara folded her arms, touching her feet to the ground at long last. “Alright, good. I have J’onn getting things cleared with Metahuman Affairs and the moment I get the word go, I’ll be personally escorting the McGinnis kid --”
“Terry,” Dick corrected almost automatically.

“Right,” Kara said with a furrow of her brows, “Terry to the Hall of Justice. He’ll be safe there until all of this is cleared up.”

Dick... didn’t feel entirely sold on the full plan once it was out before him. He glanced uneasily between the women who concocted it. “I’m not sure. The Hall is far away from Gotham, fine, but it’s also away from everything the kid’s ever known,” he reminded them. “He’s already scared -- traumatized -- and that sort of transition --”

“It is necessary to ensure his safety, Batman, you know that,” Kara reminded him.

“But it’s also in D.C., which is close to Checkmate if you ask me,” Dick retorted.

“Which we didn’t,” Barbara said sharply, making Dick close his mouth with an audible click. He turned his glare toward her, but Barbara held it right back at him. “This is the best solution. He will be safe in the League’s custody and together we’re going to find whoever is responsible for all of this. There is far too much weirdness involved to not make a move as soon as possible.”

He thought on it for a moment, swallowing back further criticism for the moment. “Fine,” he said. “But I want a chance at Checkmate when we get one.”

Almost approvingly, Kara nodded to the sentiment when Barbara’s landline rang.

Barbara turned toward her desk and grabbed for the phone.

“Commissioner. What is it?” she asked sharply. There was a pause, Barbara’s free hand gripping hard enough to her armrest the knuckles whitened. Almost immediately, the Worlds’ Finest tensed. “What do you mean the boy was taken!?”

“What!” Dick and Kara both called behind her.

“By who?” Babs hissed into the phone, ignoring the duo behind her. Almost immediately, her shoulders slumped and Barbara head fell into her hand, a groan escaping. She hung the phone up. “Damn it, Cassandra.”

It was a small relief to have Alfred and Damian present in the background of the conference, a reminder that there was ever more behind him and his causes than just him alone. But Bruce continued to stare forward into the crowds of onlookers and press. He recognized most, though from profiles rather than personal experience. These days were continuously changing.

Fortunately, Tim was on top of things. Perhaps not a natural to the podium but a quick thinker regardless.

“Mister Wayne, Mister Wayne. Was the oldest of the Wayne children a first responder?”

Tim’s nose curled in the way it so often did when he felt the need to bolster defenses for the family, but Bruce easily leaned in to take the question from him.

His large hand wrapped around the mic, Bruce said calmly, “My son, who works for the Gotham Police Department, was not on duty at the time. Since it is now a case in the hands of the upper echelons of the department, and since it has been learned that Warren McGinnis was a Wayne Tech employee, he won’t have anything to do with the case.”

There was a momentary lull as the information was digested and Bruce raised back into position,
looking casually to Tim as the younger man ran his hand back through his hair again.

Behind them Damian released an amused *Tt* at the response. Bruce and Tim elected to ignore it almost simultaneously.

Tim began to address the next question when his pocket communicator began to vibrate. He sent Bruce an apologetic look and stepped back.

Bruce stepped up tiredly, leaning into the podium again. “What was that question again?”

“Oh, no,” Tim muttered behind Bruce. “We’ve got a problem.”

Glancing toward his son, Bruce frowned, his eyes refocusing again as all of the attendees began to move about, most looking to phones and palmtop devices, everyone receiving alerts. Bruce couldn’t help but narrow his eyes.

Lois Lane of all people raised her hand, her camera toting partner her son rather than Olsen. Bruce waved to her.

“Yes, Mister Wayne,” Lois said, no hint of regret in her voice, though there was an understanding look between them, “Do you have any comment on the apparent abduction of Terry McGinnis?”

The four present Waynes as well as Miss Fox all tensed together.

“The what?” Bruce said over the mic.

Tim leaned up, leading to Bruce pushing the microphone away enough to lean down and meet his son.

“Control the situation,” he ordered. “It’s Cass.”

Bruce closed his eyes and took a breath. “I’ll have to play our ace then,” he said regretfully, returning to the microphone and looking to the awaiting crowd. “As many of you seem to already know, this tragedy has taken another unexpected turn. It appears that this case involves the Justice League.”

The conference erupted in chaos.

She was ignoring the run splitting the back of her hose, stampeding toward the main office. The way her coworkers shot her looks, Stephanie was sure they were going to be whispering about their overzealous younger agent behind her back again. But she didn’t let that bother her either.

Her heels were another thing, though, and halfway to her supervisor’s door, Steph had those suckers in her hands and they were readied like -- well, Batarangs, but she highly doubted anyone in the office would recognize the hold should they see it.

With a shove of her hands, the door tore open and Steph welcomed herself in.

“Hey, g’morning, need me to hand you that coffee?” she asked, already walking past the desk and beginning to pour the overweight man’s coffee into the chipped and probably fairly disgusting mug at the ready. At some point she had shoved a shoe in her mouth though she couldn’t be bothered to wonder when that happened.

For his part, the supervisor was burying his face into his plump hands.
The door finally clicked shut in the back swing of Steph’s entrance. She looked to it as she put the steaming mug on the desk and directed one of the man’s hands to the mug handle.

“It’s been a long night and morning and day, Miss Brown,” the man groaned. “If you could please not make things more complicated--”

“Oh, Billy,” Steph sighed, spitting her shoe onto the ground and dropping into the seat across from the desk. “I never make things more complicated than necessary. You know me!” He stared back, unconvinced. “If you’re not here to make things complicated, Miss Brown,” he said slowly, “Pray tell, what are you here for?”

Stephanie smiled gently, sitting upright once more and pointing her other shoe at the CPS supervisor directly. “I want the McGinnis case,” she replied simply.

“Christ,” the man muttered, putting his head back in his hands. “For the love of god, Stephanie, it’s so high profile we barely secured the files this morning--”

“But you did secure the files,” Steph replied, putting her shoes back on.

“It’s no longer in our jurisdiction,” he said sharply.

“But you did secure the files,” she repeated, looking at him with a raised brow.

He scowled at her before pointing toward the thick file on his desk. “I haven’t even finished looking through it before the kidnapping--”

Stephanie nearly fell out of her chair, her head snapping up toward him, eyes wide. Her hair flew out from behind her, curling over her shoulder. “You’re... What? The McGinnis kid? Kidnapped?”

“Aren’t you paying attention to the news, Miss Brown?” he asked sourly.

It didn’t take but a moment more before her cell phone deeted at her side, causing Steph to begin tuning out the man’s continued rant. Her eyes narrowed as she saw it was from Wendy.

URGENT. Your Apartment.

“Oh, great,” Steph growled, shoving her phone back into her vest pocket.

“Oh great what, Miss Brown?”

“Uh, calling a sick day, family emergency!” she called, running out of the office, cursing the clump in her step thanks to the heels. She ignored the calls for her, she had a suspicion of what would be waiting for her at home.

* 

She tore into her apartment building, purse and satchel beating at her back as she raced toward her door. “Crap crap crap crap crap” rang throughout the hallway in a distinct melody as she finally reached the door in question. She groaned, fingers clambering for her keys to unlock the door.

“No no no -- Cass -- dang it -- crap crap,” she continued, hardly coherent even within her own mind before opening the apartment door and peering in.

Sure enough, Black Bat was sitting on the back of the couch, a young boy facing the blaring
television screen just beneath her.

Steph smacked her forehead, peering cautiously through her fingers as Cass and the boy both turned to look at her curiously.

Forcing a smile, Steph slid into the door, checking the hallway behind her before shutting the door and leaning back into it. She smiled as much as she could at the very puffy eyed boy on her lumpy and uncomfortable couch.

“Hi, there,” she said with a tiny wave. “Are you Terry?”

He nodded, hand slipping nervously into the hand Cassandra offered him. He seemed uneasy.

Cass merely locked eyes with Steph. “They were trying to take him,” she said simply, as if that would somehow justify and explain everything all at once.

“Yes, well, it looks like you did take him,” Steph pointed out with an accusatory finger. “That’s kidnapping, Black Bat.”

The costumed vigilante shrugged with one shoulder, putting her free hand firmly on Terry’s shoulder. “He’s safe now. And we’re with you. He’s not kidnapped. He’s... in custody.”

Terry’s face broke even further into confusion.

Steph rubbed her temples at her friend’s circular logic but managed to walk forward, kneeling beside her newest case. “Hi, Terry. My name is Miss Brown. I’m a social worker,” she introduced herself before gently rubbing his head, to the boy’s less than enthusiastic glare. “It might seem a little weird right now, but believe me, we’re going to be good friends.”

"Bruce, wait!” Tim barely gets out before the man is gone, disappeared through one of the many hidden passages throughout the WE building.

To say that the press conference hadn’t gone as planned was something of an understatement.

“Good lord,” Alfred muttered, coming behind Tim as Damian stepped to his side. “As if these times had not been hard enough on Master Bruce. The line of questioning here had been most out of line.”

With a sigh, Tim headed toward the elevator, fingers already nimbly undoing his professional attire. “I couldn’t agree with you more, Alfred,” he said. “But my alert is out, we have a positive on the DNA sequencer, which means the McGinnis kid’s real father is in our system.”

“A criminal then?” Damian asked, following suit, though a few wary eyes were cast in the direction where their father had disappeared off to.

“Not necessarily, but given everything that’s happened...” Tim trailed off as Alfred entered the elevator. He keyed in the code to take them to the blocked off base in the basement.

“Yet another despicable layer to this tragedy,” Alfred replied sorrowfully. “It is terrible how so many lose sight of family. It is family that truly matters.”

Tim and Damian looked to each other, quiet, as they came to a stop.

*POSITIVE IDENTIFICATION* read repeatedly on the Network computer as they approached.
The youngest sons of the Wayne family approached, hackles raised as they looked across the results.

“This... can’t be right...” Tim said, leaning closer in. “I mean. It can’t be right. It’s impossible.”

He ignored as Damian and Alfred gathered beside him. “I mean, it’s not even the fake results, it’s not a setup. It’s not the DNA from the Gotham or government data bases,” Tim said, running a hand through his hair. “It... doesn’t make any sense. It’s our sample it’s matched to.”

Damian and Alfred grew silent, Tim set up the sequencer to run another sample.

It didn’t make any sense for Terry McGinnis to be the son of Bruce Wayne.

She had seen more than enough from the news.

She didn’t need Steel or his men to call her up, or any of the various agents still loyal to her under the banners of Cadmus or Checkmate or even Task Force X to let her know how her unappointed successor was making a mess of things.

That had stared as her personal project. She would see to it that it ended that way.

Amanda Waller slid into the private jet’s seat, waving as the pilot checked on her before beginning to take off. Her personal assistant approached but Amanda didn’t look at her.

“Get me Bruce Wayne on the line,” she said with a flippant hand wave. “And tell Lawton that I want Andrea Beaumont brought to my apartment in Gotham. He knows better than to ever ask me questions. We can trust him to do at least that much.”

She scowled at the screen before her, the news streaming from Gotham was less than pretty.

It would take some work, but she’d cleaned up worse. She just needed to make sure everyone was on the same page.
He didn’t have much time for manners or flattery. He was angry and upset -- they had had plans in the work. And he knew his sister was better than this, that she was as good as any of them (and in some areas, better).

Dick couldn’t even perceive what her plan had been. But he knew where Cassandra would go.

He burst easily enough through the window of Stephanie Brown’s apartment and leered at the two younger vigilante.

One was in civilian dress, the other in costume. They looked at him with an amount of appreciative respect and... annoyance.

Stephanie pointed a peanut butter covered knife at Dick, eyebrows closely knit together. “I know you didn’t just break my window for dramatic effect. *Batman did not just break my window for dramatic effect.*”

Ignoring her, Batman glared at Black Bat more directly. “Where is he?”

“Oh my god, you *did* break my window for dramatic effect!” Stephanie growled, angrily throwing the knife in the sink. “Do I look like I’m made of money? You high class jerks have absolutely no appreciation for the working class. I work something like twelve hours, bringing home work from a nine-to-five, but they only pay me for the *nine-to-five* part and I just--”

“Brown, it’ll be taken care of,” he snapped back. “Where is the boy?”

Cassandra squared her body toward Dick, stance loose, ready to tackle. Dick had watched his sister in battle for enough years to know when she was ready to lunge and counter. He tried not to feel too offended she was getting ready to do so against him.

“You scared him,” she said accusingly.

“Aw, poor thing,” Steph replied, sending Dick a glare.

“Where is he?” Batman pressed.

She crossed her arms.

“Do you even understand what you’ve done?” he asked her angrily. “We were going to put him in the custody of the Justice League! Everything was going to be fine and then your kidnapping has put everything on hold!”

Stephanie rubbed at her temples murmuring.

Black Bat held her ground. “They sent men to take Terry,” Cass said simply. “I got there first. It was my *job*.”

“There were other ways to handle that,” Dick growled. “They could have sent fifty men and you could have taken them all out without kidnapping Terry. I *know* you could have. I’ve seen you do that. You chose to not engage.”
Blinking a bit in surprise, Stephanie rounded on her friend. “Okay, I hate to say he’s got a point, but he’s right. That’s completely not like you.”

Cassandra kept her eyes locked with Dick, angry. “He didn’t need to see that,” she said darkly. “He didn’t need more violence.”

Dick audibly snapped his jaw closed, taking a deep breath as he processed that thought. She was right. And she had managed to keep Terry from being taken by Checkmate and their dangerous White Queen.

“Oh, you’ve got me,” he admitted. “You’re my sister and I love you, but you drive me crazy.”

She smirked in response.

Steph put her hands on her hips and sighed. “And... my window was broken for that. Gee, thanks, Officer Batpants.”

Dick eased his way off the window seal and ignored the crunching of glass beneath his feet. “We’ll need to play what we do next safely. I can contact the Commissioner and Superwoman easily enough and we’ll have them spin this in our favor. Though I’d be willing to bet Checkmate has already made sure there’s no video footage of their breaking and entering of the safe house where Terry was.”

“Will Terry go with you?” Steph asked, face drawn in concern. “He can stay here as long as he needs to, but it’ll be suspicious if I’m involved with another Bat File in the office.” She sighed. “I already ride that line enough as it is.”

“I might need one of you to transfer him to Superwoman’s custody,” Dick explained. “He’s met me once and I don’t want to risk--”

“So you’re him!” a voiced piped up from the doorway.

The three vigilante turned to stare at the small face peaking out from the corner. Terry’s blue eyes blinked back.

“You’re Officer Grayson.”

Damian glared at Drake as he continued to feverishly flip through the equipment, sweat pouring off his brow. Pennyworth was helping in the same anxiety-ridden way, but as usual with more nuance and less erratic movement.

Still they were messing up somehow, as was clear to see by the results.

“This machine is completely impractical,” Damian snapped. “There must be a hundred ways easier than this to run DNA in the system.”

“I would like to see you produce it,” Drake said, rounding on Damian and clenching his fists. At least he wasn’t punching the sequencer again -- his knuckles were still busted and bleeding.

“It’s not my department, Oracle-lite,” Damian snapped back, leaning forward. “Just tell me what you did wrong and I’ll fix it when I run the equipment.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Drake growled. His arms flailed. “I didn’t do anything wrong. The results are messed up. We don’t know how--”
“If I had to lay suspicion anywhere--”

“Boys,” Pennyworth spoke up at last, not turning from the screen as the next result came to the screen. Another false positive.

Drake and Damian continued to stare at one another, Damian taking solace only in that his height should have made him at least somewhat more intimidating to his brother than when they were ten and eighteen and the heights were comparatively reversed.

They broke apart only when the elevator doors opened, revealing their father, as summoned.

“What is going on?” he demanded, more in reference to the text sent out than their usual bickering.

He then looked to the screen over Pennyworth, eyes narrowing. “What is that to?”

“The paternity test I ran in the system,” Drake spoke up. “There’s something wrong with the machine.”

Bruce Wayne leaned a little heavier on his cane for a moment, eyes never looking away from the screen. He seemed to be processing the information at the same speed as the sequencer.

“Impossible,” he finally snapped. “I never even met Mary McGinnis.”

“That’s what I’m saying,” Drake responded, exasperated.

“Drake messed up,” Damian couldn’t help but put in, to the leering displeasure of Drake.

“Find out what the problem is and run the test again,” Father said darkly. “We don’t have time for this kind of mishap--” He paused and looked to his pocket, his phone seeming to go off.

“Best to take Drake from the wheel then,” Damian said snidely, ignoring the aggravated growl beside him. He then looked suspiciously to his father as the man whipped out something other than his phone. “That was not any of your normal set ringtones,” he pointed out. “What is that?”

“My Justice League communicator,” he responded, glaring at the device.

“Wasn’t that decommissioned, Sir?” Pennyworth asked, nearing him. “How is it still receiving messages?”

Drake scowled. “And why are you still carrying it?”

Damian just frowned. It was a stupid question from Drake. They all knew why he still carried it.

“Run the test again,” the elder Batman said clearly, heading back toward the elevator. “I need to suit up.”

“Sir?” Pennyworth asked worriedly.

“Father? Who was it?” Damian pressed.

The old man glared at them. “Waller,” he said in a growl as the doors slid closed.

Armstrong didn’t bother to move out of the way of anyone she passed by in the corridor, eyes set directly for the office of her longest enemy and challenger. She didn’t need to be bothered by the whispers and curious stares of police officers.
She burst through the commissioner’s door and didn’t even give the woman the delight of seeing her surprise at a Big Leaguer’s ready presence just behind the redhead.

Barbara stared over the rim of her glasses, eyes dark and violent.

“Katarina,” she said shortly, “come on in.”

Superwoman just stared, apparently playing the part of a poignant ornament in the encounter. It only caused the White Queen to grit her teeth as she shut the door behind her.

“Couldn’t get the work done alone?” Katarina baited, eyes focused on the former Oracle.

For her part, Gordon remained seemingly unmoved, her fingers tapping against each other as she sits back behind her desk. “One of my greatest assets over the years has been my ability to grow allegiances and manage my friends and enemies accordingly,” she looked meaningfully toward Armstrong. “It’s what gotten me to the point I’m at today, Katarina. Can you say the same?”

“You don’t make friends to get to where I am, Gordon,” she snapped back. “I have respect and I have authority. I don’t need false flattery and expectations of returned favors.”

Gordon sighed, leaning forward to place her elbows on her desk. “Then you’ve not learned much from our previous encounters. Let me put it to you very simply, one enemy to another: your power here is an illusion. Your guns you are about to pull?” She tipped her head toward Superwoman. “Mine are bigger.”

“I’m not here to be insulted, Armstrong snapped in return. “I’m here to make sure your offices put out an APB for your renegade vigilantes, for kidnapping.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Barbara replied flatly.

“The situation is League business, just as the boy’s custody is League business,” Superwoman said in agreement.

Armstrong turned an eye toward the caped hero. “So it speaks after all,” she mused sarcastically.

Superwoman narrowed her eyes. “Yes. ‘It’ does,” she snapped. “And before you start claiming that we have no grounds for the custody of the boy after he was removed from provided services, allow me to remind you that my cousin once removed a boy from the Metahuman Affairs after their handling of the situation of a new Kryptonian was found to be rather poor by our standards.” Her eyes flickered. “That stuck. And that was with Superman -- who is much nicer and less to the point than I am -- and Sarge Steel -- who is better liked in D.C. than you are, last I heard.”

“It doesn’t matter what you heard, I’m not overlooking what your so-called ‘superhero community’ is guilty of here today,” Armstrong growled out.

“Katarina, listen to us,” Barbara grunted, rubbing at her eyes. “Someone in the higher ups is setting you up. If things don’t go through the way they want -- which, I’m only guessing, but I’d say they’re not -- your are perfectly positioned to take this fall.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Armstrong snapped back.

“I’m giving you a rare option,” the redhead continued. “If you help us here, you’ll complete your objective and be able to survive this eminent fallout.”

Katarina snarled back. “You don’t know my objective, and you don’t know what you’re talking
about.”

Superwoman crossed her arms as the White Queen stood up and gathered her things to make a hasty exit. “Hate to be around when that bubble bursts.”

The Spy Smasher ignored her, ignored everything, her legs carrying her out of Gotham Central as fast as they could.

He silently landed at the balcony as he had been directed.

It was one of the more prestigious hotels in Gotham, and if he knew anything about Waller and her connections, meeting in the eleventh floor room really meant she had cleared the entire floor for their little discussion.

Fine by him.

He checked the perimeter with a thermal scan, not surprised at all by the number of guards posted in the surrounding rooms in wait. He would deal with them if he had to, but he doubted he would need to.

They were merely a deterrent.

Amanda had only one other body beside her in the room he was given from their transaction.

Bruce was fairly sure he knew who that was as well.

Quietly, efficiently, he entered the room. The sliding door was unlocked. Just like it had been the last time he had had serious discussion with her.

Not Amanda Waller...

“Andrea,” Batman said, unable to suppress the growl from his voice, the darkness from his glare toward her.

Andrea Beaumont -- aged but still beautiful, haunted in her features but still stern -- stood behind Amanda Waller. Her mask was off, but her costume was on.

Waller sat on the only available chair, her elbows resting on the armrests. She was a little more worse for wear.

“Bruce, we’re all old friends here,” Waller said. “You might want to take a seat for this talk. It’ll be long and it’ll be difficult.” He didn’t move a finger. She shrugged. “Or maybe you won’t. It’s all fine by me.”

“We’re not friends,” Bruce said, eyes never leaving his former fiance.

“Heard us out, Bruce,” Andrea said tiredly. “We’re trying to make things right.”

He drew silent, but his anger had only started to brew.

With a raise of her brow, Waller turned more directly to the original Batman. “Well, let’s start at the beginning.”

Chapter End Notes
Notes for reference, I’m obviously still leaning heavily on the events of the film ‘Batman: Mask of the Phantasm’ and the Justice League Unlimited episode "Epilogue" for piecing together everything, but there’s also a few comic-related events.

For those unfamiliar with more Super Family related comics, in the storyline "Superman: Last Son", Christopher Kent (who is the son currently paling around with Mama Lois on the case) landed in Metropolis from the Phantom Zone, proving to be a true Kryptonian same as Clark and Kara. Clark broke into the facilities of Metahuman Affairs when it was apparent that they had been lying to him and were trying to steal and hide Chris away for their own needs, igniting Angry Superman to come after them. He took Chris in and it wasn't long before he and Lois both adopted Chris as their own son, giving him his name [a cute nod to longtime Superman actor Christopher Reeve] and making him a part of their family. Everything worked out because, while it wasn't exactly a nice or, y'know, legal thing Clark did, he IS Superman and his wife IS a reporter so they know how to handle press situations and came out in front of it, was clear with the public why he did what he did, and basically shamed the government for trying to pull a quick one on them.

This is what Kara is referencing when she talks about her family having taken custody of children in light of suspicious activity from the government before, and why (in my AU) the JL is respected more to the point of having government affiliation and being able to step in with certain amounts of jurisdiction. Something made a lot easier when you remember several important, some founding, members of the JL have held public governmental positions including Wonder Woman who was an Ambassador to the US for years and Aquaman who has a position for Atlantis in the UN. When he's not angrily storming out, of course.

Anyway that's a lot of information dump, sorry, but I like delving into these intricacies with canon. It's part of my favorite : )
He was just not sure why he said that out loud, why he felt the need to announce anything at all, but he immediately regretted the decision. Stared down by three of the strongest and biggest looking people he thought he had ever seen, Terry thought he could maybe be knocked over with a breath from any of them.

The stunned silence couldn’t last forever, though. And it was Miss Brown who spoke up first, fingers fidgeting uncomfortably.

“Crap,” she said.

The Black Bat and Batman were less reactive, but that was probably why they seemed the most scary to Terry. Even Black Bat, who Terry thought was his friend, seemed different, like he couldn’t know what she would do next.

Batman, though... well, Batman had just seemed angry the entire time he’d been there. That didn’t change much after Terry’s revelation.

“I’m not the police officer,” Batman said firmly. “You’re mistaken.” He stepped down from the ledge, fully entering the apartment and revealing his full height. “I’m Batman.”

Terry blinked, head slightly tilting. “No you’re not,” he said, beginning to scowl at the trickery. “I met Batman already. He was a lot bigger than you. And he sounded like a truck engine. All aghh raggh arghhhh.”

Batman blinked. Miss Brown covered her mouth and snorted, a faint “that’s adorable” whispered between her fingers. Black Bat crossed her arms.

“Can be more than one,” Black Bat said with a sniff.

“Not now,” Batman said, a warning look at the woman he had just called his sister. It didn’t seem to phase her much and Batman soon returned his attention to Terry.

“You’re... you’re brother and sister, right?” Terry continued, hugging himself at the slight chill from the broken window. “That’s what you just said? And Officer Grayson... he had lots of brothers and sisters, too. And... you sound like him.”

Batman’s eyes narrowed. “I assure you, I don’t.”

Miss Brown and Black Bat both turned to face Batman more directly at that one. But Terry didn’t listen much to that, instead, recoiling at the look he was getting. His mouth popped close.

In return, Batman’s shoulders dropped, his eyes widening a bit in surprise. He tightly screwed his eyes closed and took a breath. When he composed himself, he took a step forward toward Terry.

Terry took another step back. Batman lowered down, kneeling toward him.
“Terry,” Batman said clearly, softly -- that was certainly like Officer Grayson. The difference was far more apparent to Terry then after hearing both. “I need you to listen to me. I am Batman.”

It... really didn’t make that much sense to him. Terry blinked. “Then... who...”

“That was also Batman,” he explained gently. “The first Batman. We both wear this costume.”

Thinking of his soccer uniform, Terry tilted his head. “It probably gets really stinky.”

“Yes, it can,” Batman said with a soft laugh, his face resting on a fond smile. It was a good look on him. A natural one. “But the point is we’re both here to help you.” He looked back to the girls. “All of us are here to help you.” He looked more directly into Terry’s eyes, somehow managing to make the hollow blankness of his white eyes full of warmth and understanding. “You shouldn’t be scared of any of us. I’m not here to scare you, and I’m sorry if I did.”

Terry frowned. “But... you’re still Officer Grayson. I’m sure of it!”

Batman’s smile fell, but he didn’t seem angry that time.

Miss Brown stepped up, coming directly to Terry’s side and lowering to the ground beside him, her arm wrapping around his shoulders to hold him close.

“Terry,” the blonde said softly, giving his shoulders a soft squeeze. “We would really appreciate if you didn’t say that. It’s not safe to accuse people of being Batman --” she glanced meaningfully to Batman, “--not that we’re at all saying you’re right. But saying you think someone’s Batman, well... it’s dangerous. Even when it’s not true, bad people can get a kooky idea in their heads about it and try to hurt people.”

Terry shuddered, a gun shot still wringing loudly in his ears. “I... I don’t want that.” Then, quieter, “I like Officer Grayson.”

“And I’m happy to say I know for a fact that he likes you, too,” she promised, her smile soft. “Just remember, identities are very important to superheroes. We can’t go around declaring them in mixed company.”

He curled his nose at the thought before gradually looking up to the Black Bat. She was staring back at him, arms still crossed as she allowed the others to handle the conversation. After just a moment longer in the look between them, though, it was as if the Black Bat understood more than enough about what Terry meant to say.

She dropped her arms from the cross and came to the gathered group, lowering to her haunches before him. She never broke her expression even as she reached forward and poked Terry’s nose. Then she smiled. “You’re part of the secret now,” she said softly.

“Black Bat,” Batman growled as Miss Brown sighed, finally taking her arm from Terry’s shoulders.

Black Bat just smiled into Terry’s face. “I can see... he already knows. I trust him. He’s good.”

Neither of the others had time to respond just as an alarm sounded from across the apartment, causing all to look toward the bedroom door.

Save for Miss Brown who pulled out her phone and grunted at the eggplant flashing screen. “It’s Red Robin and Robin. Can no one use the door?”
The female vigilante was still looking at Terry as he stopped following the conversation from Miss Brown to Batman, her gaze oddly soft. Black Bat placed a solitary finger to her lips and then turned Terry around toward the living room he had come from. “Enough secrets for tonight,” she said assuredly.

“But...” Terry muttered only to get a small shove toward the living room.


He looked slightly toward Batman and Miss Brown only to be met with their expectant gazes. They were more than just a little supportive of the Black Bat’s directive. It seemed Terry didn’t have any choice after all.

Slowly, the boy moved toward the living room as directed, but he couldn’t resist the ideas playing around in his head.

He reached the living room and, reaching for the remote on the coffee table, turned up the television volume. He then edged toward the couch, looking back just as the three adults moved toward the bedroom.

Terry made his move, sliding against the wall until he was just barely away from the door itself.

He had to know for sure if Officer Grayson was Batman, just as he had to know for sure why he was almost kidnapped, and what they knew about his parents.

His mind was still racing with Terry’s revelation. He couldn’t risk letting anyone outside of the family know about his identity -- it wasn’t safe for anyone involved and rarely did it work out well. Dick wondered, only for a moment, if the “outside of the family” part could be rectified, but only for a moment.

He was not Bruce. He had no intention of becoming Bruce.

Instead he remained grateful for Cassandra’s uniquely direct way of dealing with people and hoped that Terry could keep out of trouble while they dealt with whatever news Damian and Tim had brought them.

As usual, Batman suspected it was nothing good.

The two were still bickering, even as they stood in Stephanie’s room all but unannounced. Some things never changed, Cassandra and Stephanie just seemed amused.

Not even paying attention to the first word from the argument, Dick closed the door behind himself, glaring at his little brothers. “Alright, enough you two,” he shushed them, crossing his arms in aggravation. “I don’t even want to know what it’s about.”

“We can’t get a hold of father,” Damian alerted Dick, scowling. “He’s being stubborn... and apparently discovered all of the trackers Drake placed on him because they’re inactivated.”

For a moment, Dick wondered if Bruce was at all aware of the irony of him refusing to let his children track him through the same methods he lovingly used on them for decades.

“Well, this wasn’t entirely unexpected,” Dick grunted. “Is that all?”

“Not even close,” Tim responded, hands on his hips. “The kid?”
“TV,” Cass announced.

“Fine,” Tim said, frowning at the two women. “By the way, thanks for that. It made the press conference just that much more pleasurable. Especially when I was the one who had to break it to Bruce that the kid was missing.”

Merely sniffing at the pointed words, Cass crossed her arms. “You’re welcome.”

“Yeah, Boyfriend Wonder, maybe we were just making it juicy and exciting for you to handle,” Steph snorted.

“Back on topic,” Dick redirected, eyes on his brothers. “What else do we know? With some of our ranks being busy with kidnapping and me having to handle the GCPD and autopsies, I think we all could benefit from some debriefing.” He narrowed his eyes. “For example: Mary McGinnis also happened to be pregnant, making our case a triple homicide, and possibly setting up additional motives. I also found out that our assassin utilized lasers, making them rather high end, even for a rogue or assassin.”

“I can do you one better,” Damian chipped in, cracking his knuckles in the thick kevlar Robin gloves as really only he could. “I know the assassin’s identity, as does Brown.”

Steph put a hand to her chin, concentrating. “It’s a rogue from before my time in the capes and cowls, but Robin and Hood recognized her -- Andrea Beaumont.”

“The Phantasm,” Damian added. “She fits the description, has intimate knowledge of the Wayne murder for recreation, would have access to top of the line equipment and weapons with her family fortune, and has not been on the radar for nearly two decades.”

Dick blinked in surprise. “The Phantasm?” he questioned. He had been just a teenager the last time he had heard that name -- away to Hudson with only the most minimal of updates with what rogues were being thrown Bruce’s way. Still, he knew her significance as both the Phantasm and as Bruce’s former fiance. “But what motives would she have?” He looked directly to Tim. “And what about the DNA? Was Warren McGinnis the father after all?”

Damian and Tim looked to each other in that way that only meant trouble.

“We’ve run the test a dozen times,” Tim explained. “And Alfred is currently in the lab running maintenance to make sure things are performing correctly but... according to every test we’ve run, Terry isn’t Warren McGinnis’ biological son.”

Cass shifted, looking at her brothers almost abrasively. She was seeing something in them that Dick couldn’t just yet, and she wasn’t liking it.

Frowning, Dick tilted his head. “Well, I was expecting as much, I suppose,” he said cautiously. “But I’m guessing that we have a clue as to who the biological father is?”

“Yeah,” Tim said reluctantly. “According to every test we ran so far... it’s... well, it’s Bruce.”

The silence between them became deafening.

“What?” Steph asked, blinking repeatedly, as if unsure she was even witnessing reality.

“You mean Bruce’s randomized strand on the computer?” Dick asked. “Is someone trying to frame him.”

“Certainly someone is trying to frame him,” Damian said, completely dismissing all other
possibilities. “But... it’s not the fake results on the FBI’s database. It’s... ours. The real sample.”

The silence engulfed them once more.

“That... doesn’t make any sense,” Dick said. “None of this is making sense -- the Phantasm? The McGinnis family? Checkmate? None of these really have anything connecting them--”

“Yes,” Cassandra spoke up, eyes focused, “they do. Batman.”

“Bruce’s Batman,” Stephanie pointed out, pouting frown pronounced. “Everything is connected to him.”

“Only if the DNA isn’t altered or planted,” Damian snapped back quickly.

“Has there been any results that are inconclusive or negative so far?” Dick asked pointedly.

Damian withdrew, a deeply troubled line drew across his brow.

Tim crossed his arms, equally as disturbed as their youngest Robin, “There hasn’t been,” he answered.


“Then there’s a heck of a lot more evidence that’s tying Bruce to all of this than not,” Steph sighed. “I don’t like it, but we’ve all been taught to follow the facts.”

Dick soured his expression. “Yes. And we were all taught that by Bruce.”

The discussion hushed again, the young men and women caught between the facts and their senses.

Finally, Stephanie rubbed at her face. “Poor Terry,” she muttered.

“He’s been alone for a long time,” Cass said, settling her gaze on Dick.

“I’ll talk to him,” Dick responded softly, turning for the door. “After that, Steph we’re going to need you to watch him as the rest of us pan out and start looking for Bruce and this Andrea Beaumont. I had a feeling from the beginning that Bruce had more suspicions than he was letting on. I don’t want him to take her on alone, especially after all this. Get the Red Hood, Batgirl -- anyone who can help.”

“Got it,” the others echoed as Dick made it through the halls and neared the living room.

The television had fortunately been blaring the entire time.

“Terry,” Dick called out, entering the room. He narrowed his eyes as he saw that the couch was all but abandoned. “Terry?”

He swept the room quickly, looked into the kitchen, almost moved back to the bathroom before he saw there was a bit of blood on a shard of glass sticking out from the window seal.

Immediately rushing to the window, Dick stuck out his head, seeing that a thin trail of blood continued on the handrail -- as if the boy had gripped it himself as he climbed through to the fire escape.

“No,” Dick whispered, running back to Steph’s room just as everyone was beginning to break apart. “We have a problem.”
Amanda watched Bruce intently. She was far more familiar with the man than he liked to be familiar with anyone. But he would wait and he would listen. He was nothing if not concerned with knowledge and truth, great detective and all that.

It was Andrea in her periphery that the Wall was less certain about. She was wound tight, her nerves threadbare. She could very well be coming to the end of her own rope, but when were one of the operatives in their squad not?

“It began eight years ago,” Waller said lowly, concentrating on the visible face beneath the Batman’s cowl. “It didn’t start with you, it started instead with the division of the Justice League years beforehand, and the death of Superman before that. Heroes were found to be more mortal than the world was prepared to deal with when Superman died in Metropolis, more fallible than the government could overlook when it was learned about the mindwipe of Doctor Light.”

The mention of Light caused a further grimace but otherwise the man was stiff as a rod. Still Bruce after all.

“And specifically eight years ago?” he asked lowly.

“Simply enough, Gotham fell into ruin,” Waller said, intertwining her fingers, “and then two heroes died -- first the Martian Manhunter, who was very trusted as a leader in the League by the various government agencies... and then Batman.”

He narrowed his eyes at that.

“At least, that was all anyone in our intelligence could discern,” she shrugged. “Your people did a good job attempting to cover up any connections. But for any of us -- anyone who knows -- we saw the cracks. And while Gotham was crumbling before you disappeared, it collapsed almost entirely in the months following your disappearance.” She leaned forward in her chair. “I found this unacceptable.”

Slowly, Bruce’s head tilted back. Realization was dawning on him with every word. “It was you.”

“Of course it was,” Waller responded. “CADMUS labs had concerned itself with preserving heroes in the past -- attempts at creating Supermen and women in the event of the fall of our favorite adopted son’s death or implicit turn against the nation were happening long before I ever acquired power over them. Metahuman Affairs and the D.E.O. had spent its time delving into the mystic and supernatural enough to know that those voids in magic and heroism have a record of balancing themselves out.

“But you and I both know that these were never my favored areas when dealing with your ‘superhero community’ -- too uncontrolled, too cyclic,” her eyes rested on the symbol on Batman’s chest. She felt... almost fond. “Those things have their place, but it’s not a place for us, for people. The ones who work their nine to fives, who sleep every night with no promise of tomorrow, but expect to wake up with the same results regardless. We need a hero who speaks from that voice, who lives daily with the same threat, the same humanity as the rest of us, and who was driven to progress regardless.”

Bruce was already snarling. “You wanted to recreate me.”

Without hesitation, Waller looked him in the eyes and said simply, “I did.”

“After all that happened -- after all that I fought to prevent... you brought this... this world onto someone else,” he growled.
“I had planned on it for years,” Waller said firmly. “I planned and did not act upon it for years for that very reason. But you were gone, and the world was in chaos, and I knew that no matter how long it would take or what ethics I would cross, I couldn’t allow for there to be a world without Batman.”

He stared at her. “Eight years ago... Terry McGinnis was born,” he said lowly.

“And nine moths before that, just before your heir claimed your cape, I found a young Neo-Gothamite family which matched exactly the psychological profiles of Martha and Thomas Wayne,” Waller responded. “Warren McGinnis was given a letter from Wayne Enterprises -- something your company never bothered to verify as a discrepancy given their frantic search for Timothy Drake-Wayne in the ensuing year -- prompting him to receive a flu shot.”

Bruce’s fists clenched. “It wasn’t a flu shot. You somehow overwrote his genetic material with mine.”

“Nanites which acted as a directed virus, traveling through the bloodstream until attaching to the sex cells of Warren McGinnis, forcing them to lyse, and injecting your genetic material into the cells produced to replace them,” she explained. “Of course... by the time young Terry McGinnis was born, a new Batman and Robin were in Gotham, and a relative time of rest came over the city and the reconstructed Justice League... just before your return.”

“But it was too late to pull the plug,” Bruce growled. “You set that rock in motion and to stop it would be to put you in the line of fire for your unethical methods--”

“That is true,” Waller said firmly. “But my part in the story did not last much longer. As you and I both know, my spot had been gunned for by the up and coming Spy Smasher -- Miss Katarina Armstrong -- for years leading up to these events. I was no longer in charge of CADMUS or Checkmate or any of these branches four years ago. I was encouraged into retirement, and Project Batman Beyond was to be decommissioned.”

“Then how did any of this happen?” he demanded.

“It was a computer error,” Andrea finally burst out. She stepped forward, only falling back once more when Bruce’s glare was turned on her. “You have to believe me, Bruce... I had no idea...”

“What are you talking about?” he snapped.

Waller held up her hand, silencing them both. She did not take her gaze from Bruce. “Warren and Mary McGinnis’ files have remained targeted for assassination for eight years, a coded computer firewall has remained copied over to every solitary Checkmate operating system since the origin of Project Batman Beyond, counting down until this very year, and releasing a specific assignment to Task Force X. The instructions were to assassinate Mary and Warren McGinnis.” She scowled. “Of course, it would be up to the director of Task Force X -- now also the White Queen of Checkmate -- to authorize the assignment.”

He gritted his teeth. “Armstrong,” he seethed. “Did she not question the validity of the assignment, of everything attached to those files--”

“You have to understand Armstrong, Bruce,” Andrea said, the hollowness and soullessness of her voice never apparent. “It’s not about the individual case, it’s about getting things done and not questioning the real authorities in the government. It’s about advancing her own career and throwing morality to the wind. She wouldn’t question why we would be sent after a family the same way she wouldn’t question anything we were instructed to do from her real handlers.”
“Of course that mentality backfired,” Waller said lowly. “She sent Phantasm on the assignment because she was familiar with Gotham. Then, when Andrea didn’t report back in, she began to look into who had sent her the objective. Armstrong then realized she had made a mistake.”

“A mistake!?” Batman roared. “A mistake!? A boy no longer has a family, he is orphaned, traumatized, and for what-- to recreate what happened to me?” He turned his anger toward Andrea. “To recreate the most miserable moment of my life? And none of you stopped this from happening?”

Andrea didn’t stand down, but she was certainly crest fallen. “I’m sorry, Bruce.”

“Sorry is far from being enough, Andrea,” he snapped in return. He looked back at Waller. “And you,” he breathed. “You begun this -- all of this.”

Nodding, Waller accepted. “I did. But you won’t be accepting an apology from me.”

“How can you say that!?” he roared.

“Because this step should never have happened,” she said firmly, “But the idea... continuing Batman... It is never something I will regret. I saw it work -- just after Terry was born, Gotham was rushed into that era of peace, and it was by no singular force, but by the patchwork of heirs you gave to the city. I saw that it was an identity necessary to the city, and necessary to the people behind it.” She hardened her gaze. “Terry should never have gone through this pain and loss. That is something that all involved -- myself, Andrea, Armstrong -- will speak for. I give you my word, for what it’s worth. But... even should they have all lived, he would have been genetically your son out there, growing up to the sights and sounds of a city protected by Batmen and Women. Growing to possibly aspire to the same, with or without a guiding hand.”

“You would turn yourself in to prison again, Waller?” Bruce scoffed.

“You know I would,” she returned flatly.

“And now?” he asked, skepticism still apparent. “Now what about the boy? What about Terry?”

She took a deep sigh to that. “Well, as we all know, he has a tough road ahead of him. But I think as for what steps are taken next... it’s up to you.”

He stared at them just as his bat symbol on his belt began to glow. He looked to it before removing the alert device, examining the message written on it. His face was kept from reacting, but he quickly put the device away.

“Neither of you will leave here tonight,” he warned.

“We won’t,” Waller agreed, watching as he turned to leave through the window he came through.

“Forget jail,” Andrea whispered. “We’re burning in hell for this, Waller. Jail’s only a delay.”

“We’ve got a lot to answer for,” Waller agreed. “But it’s curious... over forty years ago, a random series of events led to the fate of one boy... it’s curious to think how a different set of events could possibly lead to the fate of another.”

Andrea rubbed at her face. “That boy deserves better than to have the weight of that... that thing on him. You admire the Batman, but I see what a beast it is, how it wears down every person who wears it.”

“Then you’re the one not looking closely enough,” Waller responded. “Where you see a beast, I
see redemption in the wings.”
As far as Jason could tell, he’s the only one doing real work that night already when the call goes out. They lost the kid somewhere around Brown’s apartment and so he curses and heads that way.

He would have to scout the remnants of Black Mask’s empire another time, play catch up with the Penguin, but even the Red Hood wouldn’t leave a defenseless child to the environment of Gotham when given his options.

“How can you possibly lose a kid?” he demanded of Proxy, ignoring how Harris gave that irritated grunt over the transmitter. “Aren’t they professionals?”

“Stuff happens, Hood,” Proxy says thickly. “Keep an eye out. regardless. And stop complaining. No one lost the kid on purpose. He might be more resourceful than we usually give eight year olds credit for.”

Jason gave a husky tsk to that, not even slowing down for a short leap between the rooftops. “Anyone is resourceful under two conditions, Proxy -- when they’re running angry, and when they’re running for their lives.” He paused, looking over the corner of the building toward the intersection of two major alleys -- a perfect cross section for back building deals and for getting oneself incredibly confused. “We’ve just gotta wonder, if you were an eight-year-old who lost everything... which one would you be running under?”

There was a small hum across the transmitter. “You think he’s running angry, Hood?”

The elder vigilante squared his jaw, raking his teeth over each other. “I know he is.”

“Alright, I’ll let the others know,” Wendy responded.

“So do that,” Red Hood said, crouching as he focused on the moving blur coming in from the left. “Meanwhile,” he muttered as he heard the tell-tale signs of Proxy signing off his channel, “I’ll worry about how best to approach the little guy.”

He waited quietly, watched the breathless form slide between a dumpster and trash bin before sliding down the brick wall. The kid was way over his head and only just realizing it.

In a sense, Jason understood entirely.

Climbing down as silently as possible, Jason did his best to not elicit any loud noises, to cut down on any shocks and surprises. Instead, he just calmly approached, leaned back and waited by the wall.

He counted the McGinnis kid’s panicked breaths, mused for a moment that if he listened hard enough he could probably hear the kid’s wildly beating heart, and generally took his own
opportunity to calm, act smooth.

Shakily, the little boy began to come back to his feet, waver slightly, rub as angrily as possible at his eyes. It was almost not apparent that his jacket was at least two sizes too big for him.

Jason crossed his arms and chewed on the inside of his mouth. This part of the game was all about patience, and Jason had plenty of patience.

Then, slowly, Jason cocked his head to the side just as the kid’s sniffs became heftier sobs.

“Hey,” he said casually, as if he hadn’t had his eye on the kid for the last several minutes.

The boy jumped, hackles fully raised, and turned wide eyed toward Jason. The kid had no idea what to make of the situation and, probably more than Jason cared to admit, the devilish red appearance of the unknown character in the alley.

“You’re Terry McGinnis,” Jason continued, watching as the boy took half a step back. “Don’t bother running. I won’t chase after you. I’m just getting clarification before I chastise you.”

Caught off guard, the boy’s shoulders dropped and he cocked his head to the side. “Huh?”

“It means I’m going to lecture you about leaving,” he clarified.

He fidgeted. “You’re... with Batman?” he asked.

“That’s... complicated,” Jason responded in a huff. “But I know for a fact that kids like you are safer with Batman than with Gotham at night,” he said clearly. “Do you even know what part of town you’re in?”

Terry swallowed. “Um.”

“Um is not ‘yes’, so I’m taking it to mean ‘no’,” he continued. “You’re lost, kid, and that’s not smart for you.” He narrowed his eyes. “Unless you were planning on being found by someone to take you to the cops.”

Immediately, the boy’s hackles were raised again. He scowled. “How...”

“Because,” Jason said clearly, “I see behind your scared little rabbit eyes that you’re no dummy. Instead, how about you tell me why you want to go to the cops.”

The boy hardened, eyes narrowing. He held his ground even as his eyes began to water. “Because... Batman knows who killed my parents.”

Jason paused. “You know that for sure?” He watched as Terry nodded slowly. Jason exhaled strongly through his nose. “Goddammit.”

Terry’s head dropped, his wide watery eyes focused intently on his untied shoes. There were a few sniffs that shook the boy’s body but he didn’t fully cry.

Not sure how to fully feel about it all, Jason approached, solidly placed his broad hand on the back of the boy’s head. “You think Batman’s not going to bring the person in?” he asked.

Sniffing, Terry shook his head. “If he was... why hasn’t he?” he asked.

“Maybe it’s not as simple as you think it is,” Jason said. “Maybe he needs to find out why first.”

Terry’s body shook beneath Jason’s hand. Weakly, the boy whispered, “I know why...”

At last, the boy properly sobbed. “B-because of me...”

“I’ve got the signal, thank you, Proxy,” Dick said gruffly, landing on the Gotham rooftop with a crunch. He looked into the HUD scanner, watched the strength of the signal on Red Hood’s tracker increase as he looked forward to the network of alley passageways.

“Sure thing, B2,” she signed off.

It took a moment to not get his hackles down after hearing his own codename -- second Batman -- uttered on the airways again, but it was honestly one of the least of Dick’s concerns at present.

He needed to find Terry.

And, as Red Hood liked to do, Jason seemed to be a step or two ahead of them.

Entering the alley where the signal was transmitting from above, Batman glided to the broken concrete and tried his best to not seem surprised by the casual way his once-lost brother was leaned against the alley wall, or how Terry was sitting on the lid of the closest bin, head lowered, not at all meeting Dick’s eyes.

Jason was, though. His gaze was held on Dick rather sternly actually.

“Terry,” Dick started, taking a step forward only to get no reaction from the boy outside of a flinch. It was enough to make Dick stop his stride.

Kicking off from the wall, Jason neared Dick, cocking his head toward the boy as he did so. Lowly, he said, “I think you left out some pretty vital info on the message board, Mister Big Bad Bat.”

There was a warning bite to those words. Jason didn’t want any talking around the bush.

“I can explain most of it later,” Dick said, holding up a hand in what he hoped was a calming gesture.

“Not going to work,” Jason huffed in return. “Because that kid,” he tilted his head, “seems to have the impression that someone assassinated his parents because of something about him. And he seems to have gotten that impression from you assholes. So some explanations are in order.”

Dick took an unsteady breath. He had hoped Terry had left long before that part of the discussion could be overheard.

He looked carefully at Jason, pressed forward, and lowly stated in his brother’s ear, “The McGinnis kid is Bruce’s son. We don’t know how. We just know that it’s how everything here erupted the way it did.”

Jason visibly jolted with the information, turning on Dick and staring hard and unbelieving at him. “What!” he hissed.

“I don’t have answers yet,” Dick said, looking darkly back. “Not to those questions at least. We’re working on it. But first...”

He quietly approached Terry, taking a deep breath as he did so. The boy was so... broken. Broken
in ways that were far too hauntingly familiar.

It reminded him of a boy in the Big Ring and the boy from another alley so long before that. It reminded him of promises -- the ones that came through and the ones that didn’t. It reminded him of a street lamp keeping vigil on Gotham’s worst streets.

“I’m sorry, Terry,” Batman said, stopping just short of the boy.

Terry shifted, but he didn’t look up or otherwise move to acknowledge Batman’s presence. It wasn’t Batman he was needing, after all.

Kneeling down, Dick placed a solid hand on Terry’s knee, gently rubbed a thumb over the skin above a small cut that was all dried up. “I was worried that you were hurt more than that,” Dick said softly. “I saw that you got cut up on the glass in the window and, well, leave it to me to assume the worst, right?”

It wasn’t Batman’s voice, and perhaps that’s why Terry finally looked at him, looked into Dick’s eyes. Terry’s own were shockingly like Bruce’s -- Dick wasn’t sure how he ever missed it before -- those icy blue eyes, round and wide. Even if Dick couldn’t think of the last time he had seen tears in Bruce’s eyes, Dick knew that these wrinkles and quivers in Terry’s face were all Bruce.

“You didn’t have to run from us,” Dick said calmly. “I know you heard things. I know you have questions. I want to help you, Terry.”

Terry’s fists clenched tightly on the tails of his jacket. “A-are my mom and dad dead b-because of me?” he blubbered, snuffling between words.

“No,” Dick said assuredly. “They were killed by bad people. It’s not because of you. You didn’t do anything wrong, Terry. It’s important that you remember that. Because it’s true.”

Terry swallowed, still visibly shaking. “Am-am I adopted?”

Dick shook his head. “No, Terry. You are the son of Mary and Warren McGinnis. You are their son and they loved you very much. But you already knew that, right?”

The boy’s face crumbled further, he choked, body shaking as he nodded his head rapidly. “Y-yy-yeah,” he croaked.

Swallowing, Dick placed his other hand on the boy’s knees, squeezed them tightly. “Terry, do you remember what we talked about before?” he asked, soft and concerned. He tried his best to keep the boy’s gaze. “I said... you’re not alone. That you’re going to feel alone at times, like all these feelings aren’t felt by anyone else in the world. But it’s not true, and you’re not going to be lonely because... because I’ll be there for you whenever you needed me, right?”

Clear confusion was drawn on the boy’s face. “But... Officer Grayson said that...” he whispered.

“Yeah,” Dick whispered back, “Yeah, I did.” He squeezed Terry’s knee once more. “And you deserve to know, Terry, I meant that. And I trust you, because I want you to be able to trust me.” He turned his head slightly to the side. “Terry, do you need me?”

Terry released a muffled noise before flinging himself off the bin, wrapping his arms around Dick’s neck and burying his face against Dick’s cheek. He breathed a stuttering little cry against Dick, and all the Batman could think to do was wrap his arms back around Terry and squeeze like he wasn’t going to let go.

“Terry,” Dick whispered, “I’m not going to leave you. But we need for you to be somewhere
safe, with my friends. The Justice League. Do you know who the Justice League are?"

“Uh-huh,” the boy huffed.

“Okay,” Dick whispered, rubbing circles into the boy’s back. “Okay, good. We’re going to go with them. Together. And with their help we’ll make sure to stop the people that hurt your family.” He paused. “Is that okay, Terry?”

“Yeah,” Terry muttered. “Yeah, it’s okay.”

“Before you go anywhere,” a familiar, deep voice called from behind, drawing Dick and Terry both to look as the original Batman appeared from the shadows. “We should go to Central.” He looked... oddly distracted as he gazed at Terry. As if Bruce was somehow caught by surprise, but he maintained his posture and his expression. “Terry?”

The wide-eyed boy blinked back. “Y-yessir?”

“You said you wanted to meet the person who did this,” Batman said darkly. “Do you still?”

For a moment, Terry drew quiet, recoiling slightly from Dick as he stared back at Bruce’s form. But his eyes hardened through their tears and he nodded.

“Alright then,” Batman said, looking to his successor as well, “we’ll all go, then.”

Barbara looked into Katarina’s eyes and wondered what could have possibly happened -- how could the years change so much. They were always rivals, but there had been a time where Katarina could have been considered the closest thing Barbara had had to a friend.

But that time and all the feelings that had gone with it were long since gone.

At present there was a world and some cell bars between them.

“Turning yourself in was the best option, Katarina,” Barbara said evenly. “You’ll be placed in the proper authority’s custody in the morning.”

“I almost would have assumed that you’d like to keep this zoo show up and running a bit longer, Gordon,” Armstrong responded snidely. “Thought you would’ve liked to see my humiliation a bit more personally.”

The redhead scowled. “You never did know me all that well then,” she said. “We may equally have enjoyed petty rivalry and the other’s failure in the face of defeat, surely, but it’d take a pretty sick person to derive some sort of pleasure out of this situation, Spy Smasher.”

“Out of my ruined career and life?”

Babs pressed her lips to a thin line, leering at the woman before her. “Out of a brown nosing attempt turned into a horrible, horrible mistake, Katarina,” Barbara reiterated. She folded her arms. “Your life being ruined is low, low on the list of repercussions I’m concerned about after this fiasco.”

The former White Queen audibly shut her mouth. Her eyes narrowed on Barbara but she said nothing.

“God, you really don’t feel any sympathy for that boy, do you?” Barbara muttered, rubbing her hand over her face. Again, she couldn’t help but wonder what had become of the woman she
once knew.

“I suppose that’s the reason I was the agent while you dined to be the hero, Gordon,” Katarina continued. “I was following orders without question. It led to a tragedy, I accept that, but I don’t see how I could carry any more fault than the countless others involved with the situation.”

“You’re right,” Barbara countered. “But it’s not because you’re an agent or a soldier that there’s that divide, Katarina. My father was a soldier. I’ve been an agent and a soldier. Most of my friends and family could be described as much the same. But what we had and you have forgotten is personal responsibility. You had a duty to question your own actions, Katarina. And because you didn’t, a family was murdered. And for what? Silent favors from the people above you?”

Again, Katarina became tight lipped, leaning back against the wall of her cell.

Angrily, Barbara breathed through her nose and turned her chair toward the door. “I have to go, Armstrong. You see, there’s a little boy who is the real victim of your so-called chain of command here. And I’m about to witness him be a hell of a lot braver and more controlled than I could ever be around any of you.”

She headed out the door, pausing just in time to look over her shoulder at the so-called soldier. “By the way, it’s nothing personal, but I sincerely hope you rot in there after all of this is done and through.”

With that, Barbara carried forward.

There was a definite scramble throughout the police headquarters after their arrival. It was all a bit of a blur to the boy. People rushing in and out of the room -- Commissioner Gordon came in, then she left, she came back, then had to rush back out.

Terry sat in wait with Batman -- Officer Grayson -- and remained quiet. His heart was racing, though he felt a bit calmer every time he could see in the corner of his eye a subtle movement of shadows. It wasn’t every day someone had two Batmen watching over them.

The door opened once more and Commissioner Gordon came in, a strange but somewhat neutral expression on her face.

At first she looked to the shadows, then to Officer Grayson Batman. She gave a small nod to him, and the man placed a gentle hand on Terry’s shoulder.

Terry looked to him as Batman squeezed his shoulder, and then turned all of his attention back to Commissioner Gordon when she approached him. His heart, if possible, began to race faster.

“Terry,” she said softly, “it’s time.”

Taking a deep breath, the boy did all he could to suppress the full body chill he felt.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” she continued to ask, her stoic face showing true concern for the first time since he returned to the precinct.

“She’s right, you know,” Batman said quietly. “You only have to do this if you want to.”

Terry shook his head. “I want to.”

“Alright then,” the commissioner said, turning her chair to face the door once more. “You’re a very, very brave person, Terry.”
With that, she led Terry and Batman to the cell block.

* Batman -- both of them -- stood behind him and to the shadows. Commissioner Gordon stayed closer to the door but in the light. They all had their eyes trained on the lone cell.

Terry was... confused to see a woman, with greying hair and strong but delicate shoulders.

She looked nothing like the monster in the alley.

The woman stared at Terry, looking more like she had seen a ghost rather than actually was one herself.

Slowly, the woman breathed, put her hands on her lap and swallowed. “Is your name... Terry?” she asked softly.

He looked at her, but he didn’t step any closer to the bars. Instead he tightened his fists. “Yeah,” he said. “Who are you?”

There was a thoughtful pause until the woman announced, lowly. “I am the Phantasm.”

That was an unusual name, but Gotham had taught Terry to know a thing or two about unusual names. Names like Penguin and Mister Freeze and Batman -- they were as common on the TV as Jim or Alice. But they were also not real.

“Is that your name really?” he pressed, eyes trained on her.

Painfully, the woman leaned forward, leaning on her elbows. “No. No, it’s not,” she admitted. “It’s the name I have when I wear a mask, when I do my job. My real name is Andrea.”

Terry memorized that name, branded it into his mind. It was an ordinary name. It made his stomach upset.

He slowly stepped forward, tried to memorize every line of Andrea’s face. He never wanted to forget it as long as he lived.

“What’s your job?” he asked.

She breathed deeply, a strand of hair fell from behind her ear and strayed onto her face, but she didn’t move to do anything about it. Her eyes were still focused on Terry.

“I do what I’m told by the people in charge of my team,” she said simply.

“Your team?” he asked, gripping the bars.

“It’s a team of very bad people,” she said. “Bad people who have done very bad things before. Our job is to do things for the right people and make up for those bad things in the past.”

It was a very difficult idea to wrap his head around, but Terry tried. And he tried to remember those words for later in case it would make more sense. “You make up for bad things... by doing more bad things?” he asked. “That doesn’t make you better.”

“No,” she agreed darkly. “It really doesn’t.”

“Those new bad things...” Terry repeated, “…is it to kill people?”
“Sometimes,” Andrea said truthfully. “Usually they’re other bad people.”

Terry narrowed his eyes at her, his tiny grip growing as tight as it could on the bars. “Not this time,” he said fiercely.

“No,” she agreed. “Not this time. There was a mistake.”

“You killed my mom and dad!” Terry shouted, watching the way his outburst made the woman flinch.

“I know,” she said softly. “And I will pay for that the best I can.”

“You can’t pay for it,” Terry growled. “They’re dead now.”

“And I’m sorry,” Andrea continued. “But I won’t ask for forgiveness.”

“Why!?” he demanded, feeling his vision become clouded in his anger.

“Because I don’t deserve it, and I know that, Terry,” the former Phantasm stressed. She leaned closer to the bars. “I lost my family, too, and I know that suffering better than most. I would have never wanted that on someone else. Never. But here I am, responsible for it all over again.”

Lowering his head, Terry concentrated on his feet. There were hot tears blurring his vision and he had to blink rapidly to get rid of them. He looked back up, staring at her.

“Are you going to go to prison?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“Were you the only one?” he asked.

“No,” she answered simply. “The others will be in prison, too. I think.”

Terry took a steady breath and stepped away from the cell. “It doesn’t make me feel better.”

“I wouldn’t expect it to,” Andrea said back. “But I hope... I hope that someday it will make you more peaceful.”

There was nothing left to say, Terry knew that. He looked to his Batman, and in just that one look, he seemed to know what to do. He held out his hand, Terry took it, and together they left.

*

Together, they waited on the roof of Gotham Central. Terry sitting with his feet over the ledge, Batman just the same beside him.

“Wonder Woman and Superwoman are bringing a Javelin,” Batman had told him. “We’re going to go to the Hall of Justice and stay with other superheroes until everything in Gotham is straightened out.”

“Will you be with me?” Terry asked, twisting his fingers together.

“For as long as you need me,” Batman answered honestly, “I’ll be with you.”

“What if I need Officer Grayson?” Terry continued, not daring to look to his side and read Batman’s expression for himself.
“I’ll be with you then, too,” he promised softly.

“Even if I need you for a long time?”

“Yes,” Dick said back, putting an arm around Terry, draping the boy in both a hug and his cape. “For as long as you need me.”

For the first time in a long time, Terry felt like he could really breathe. He leaned into Dick’s chest and closed his eyes. He never even heard the Javelin’s approach.
It was three in the afternoon by the time Barbara was able to take her real lunch break and use it for traveling down the streets of Downtown Gotham. A few of her pesky lieutenants had been difficult to shake, or at least took longer than 30 seconds for her to lose in a crowd, but she appreciated their enthusiasm in protecting her.

One didn’t make it long as Commissioner of Gotham if they weren’t able to take the city streets and visit old friends without protection from hostility, after all. And Barbara made it a habit of showing the criminal element just exactly how much she feared them on her streets.

It had been a year since her defiance of the mayor’s office could have very well cost her the position her father and step-mother had held for decades in Gotham. And for the first time since that threat was apparent, she felt like it was possible to breathe.

She hoped she could share that feeling with the others soon enough.

Paused outside of the freshly reconstructed building, Babs looked at the tabs ripped from the paper ads on the door listing instructional times and phone numbers, then glanced to the bright red and yellow sign atop the building.

*Out of the Nest Aerial* it read.

Babs huffed in amusement and pressed her way through the automatic doors.

It was still just a little after the public schools had let out so it wasn’t too surprising to find no one on the gym floors yet. She had been there once before when there were rugrats for miles, rolling and tumbling and springing off the walls. It had certainly been entertaining for the few minutes she could tolerate it.

There was even less surprising to see Dick warming up on the parallel bars or Cass, freshly rolled out of bed, only beginning to pad her way across the mats toward the adjacent room.

“Long night for the newest Dynamic Duo?” Barbara teased her former ward as Cass approached her. “I know I had about three coffees after my favorite Batman showed up to get debriefed.”

Cass smiled around her fist even through her yawn and stretched further. “Robin can handle that now,” she said with a wave of her hand. She bent over, still stretching. “Just wanted you to see. New costume.”

“I liked it,” Barbara said truthfully. “We’re very proud.” She put her hands on her lap easily. “And I’m also proud of the self-defense classes you’re teaching, Cassie. It’s nice to be able to send the girls we get at the precinct to someone we can trust to teach them and take care of them.”

Standing straight again, Cassandra beamed at the compliments, only barely looking over as Dick flipped from the bars to the two of them.

“To be fair,” Dick said, taking the towel right from his sister’s back and rubbing himself down with it, “taking the old Wildcat Gymnasium helped that front out a lot, too. Most of the people around here still have fond memories of Ted.”

Barbara sighed happily. “Who doesn’t?”

“Something else going on?” Cass asked suspiciously, crossing her arms. She always was a step
ahead of the conversation.

Dick turned from his sister to Barbara more directly, a focused tight line forming on his lips. That wasn’t a look Barbara saw much since Dick quit the force or since he returned to the Black & Blue night look.

“Is it the case?” he asked, a little darker than his usual tone.

“It is,” Barbara said, growing a smart smile. “Good news. Armstrong is being officially indicted at the end of the week.”

Collectively, the other Bats breathed a sigh of relief in front of her.

“It won’t be getting a lot of news coverage outside of maybe our favorite Metropolis reporters,” Barbara admitted, “there’s a lot of bigger names attached to the murders than will probably ever be public. And well, we all know Waller might not pass the buck on jail time but we won’t be hearing anything beyond that. But Armstrong’s case is covered. She’s not getting away with this one.”

Cassandra put her hands on her hips. “Good!” she said with a stern nod.

Dick seemed pleased, but also weary. “Let me guess about Andrea Beaumont,” he said lowly. “Back to Belle Reeve.”

It wasn’t the best news, Barbara knew that, but she was there to deliver nothing but the truth. “It seems likely. Yes.”

The former Batman huffed and shook his head. “Then she’ll be right back on Task Force X, with who knows who’ll be in charge with Armstrong and Waller behind bars. Hell. Who’d be surprised if Waller just ended up as director of it for her own sentence.”

“I don’t know about that,” Barbara said thickly. “I worked with Waller and the Task Force for a few years, Dick. You can say a lot of things about Waller, but if she feels she needs to serve for her part in this murder, she will. Without skimping out. She’s good for her word on that much.”

“At least,” Cass spoke up, “it’s over now.”

“It will be,” Babs agreed. She looked to the clock -- it was nearly fifteen minutes after three -- they had only a few minutes before Dick’s 3:30 students would roll in for gymnastics, and it’d been quite a bit of time since Terry should have been out of school himself. “I was hoping to tell Terry.”

The two Wayne siblings looked to each other then back.

“He’s with Bruce this afternoon,” Dick said.

“Oh,” Barbara said, finger tapping on her arm rest. In a year since Stephanie helped handle Dick being awarded custody of Terry, Bruce had been oddly hands off with the situation. These turns of events were surprising, even for the Commissioner.

“But,” Dick said, “I’m actually going to pick him up around four thirty, if you don’t mind sticking around with us. We can pick him up together. Um. You and I.”

“It’s not a date, Dick, you could just ask it like a regular question,” Barbara said, raising a brow. “Unless you are trying to convince me of going out on a date.”
Dick laughed and shook his head, but Cassandra took back her towel as she passed them and whipped her brother’s backside for effect, cackling all the way.

“I would like that, though,” Barbara assured him.

“Great,” he responded softly, pulling at his blushing ear.

He’d only been there twice, but Terry couldn’t help but think that Wayne Manor was the grandest place he had ever been. It was the size and scale of a palace. He stood in the hall and gazed time and time again at the vaulted ceilings and grand chandelier.

It was a lot to take in.

Standing in the hall awkwardly, he fiddled mindlessly with the straps of his book bag and chewed on the sides of his mouth.

He had a lot of homework for the night, and he wondered if Dick would have enough time to help him with it.

Fridays -- and weekends in general -- were full of ‘the night life’ for Dick. Terry did his best to understand.

No one knew how much people needed to see Batman more than Terry did.

The click of steps primly sounded through the hall, drawing Terry’s attention to the elderly butler making his way to Terry with a covered tray.

“I do hope you can forgive the wait, Master Terrence,” Alfred said gently as he approached.

Terry turned to him more directly, fingers curled around his backpack straps. “It’s okay.”

“Even so, it’s most inappropriate to keep a guest waiting,” Alfred said, opening the tray to reveal cookies. “Especially family.”

Immediately, Terry felt his guard drop and a smile grew across his face. He looked gleefully to Alfred. “I think I can get used to waiting.”

Alfred’s smile was small, but there was a certain twinkle in his eyes that Terry thought he liked a lot. It inspired the fourth grader to grab for his first cookie.

“Pennyworth!” a slightly haughty voice beckoned, followed by the stampeding of steps from the stairs.

Terry joined Alfred in looking to the steps just as a dark skinned young man came to a stop halfway toward them. His eyes were flickering with intent.

Not sure how else to respond to the look, Terry shoved another cookie in his mouth.

“Ah, Master Damian,” Alfred said, standing up straighter to face the young man as he came further down. “I had not realized you were back from the university so soon. Now I see why Master Bruce had yet to do well on his other appointment.”

Damian Wayne was very tall, and more than a bit angry looking as he came to a stop a few feet from Alfred. His eyes were locked on the butler until he finally looked to Terry.

It made the kid swallow everything in his mouth at once.
“Tt,” the college student said, putting his hands on his hips. “So you finally have come around.”

“Master Damian,” Alfred said in warning.

“We’ve seen each other several times, Alfred, he knows what to expect,” Damian huffed. He then stared at Terry, raising a thick brow. “Don’t we, McGinnis?”

Terry blinked before feeling the connections clicking. “Robin. You’re Robin!” he exclaimed before almost immediately souring. “You broke our television.”

“It was necessary,” Damian sniffed. “It was a plot from Mad Hatter to--”

“Master Damian, you know the rules as well as anyone,” Alfred said, fanning the vigilante away. “There is no discussion of business in the foyer!”

“Ugh, these nonsensical rules in my ancestral home!” Damian bemoaned, moving with Alfred’s pushes all the same. He paused only to turn and point at Terry. “Have you kept your promise?”

Terry smiled and nodded. “I’m watchin’ out for Dick ‘cuz he doesn’t watch out for himself,” he reiterated their deal.

“Good,” Damian said solidly before looking more serious, if possible. “Father is ready to see you. That is, if you are ready.”

Feeling his face drop slightly, Terry swallowed again before gripping to his backpack. Still, he nodded. “I’m ready.”

It’d taken a year, but it was true. Finally, he could speak to Bruce Wayne.

*

There was a long, long hall that led to the office of Bruce Wayne, and though Mister Pennyworth walked each step with him, Terry felt so concentrated and so nervous that it might as well have been alone.

The doors opened, the butler turned to leave after a slight introduction, and Terry stayed stock still in the doorway, eyes focused on the older man sitting at the desk chair.

For what it was worth, Mister Wayne seemed just as confused and taken aback as Terry. After a few moments of gaping, the man stood up, one large, flat palm keeping him steady by leaning on the desk. Already, though, Terry could see a crook in the man’s back.

“Hello, Terry,” the man said, voice a tad dry.

Terry stared back but said nothing. His mind couldn’t even form words.

Swallowing, Mister Wayne then motioned to the seats. “Please,” he said keenly, “take a seat.”

The boy’s grip on his backpack straps tightened. He took a step, but not toward the desk, just further into the room. It was like standing in the jail cell all over again. It had been a year, the people were arrested, but the cause was still here.

Looking Terry in the face.

And they both knew it.
“I... can understand your apprehension in seeing me,” the man continued, sitting back down himself. “It’s... been a very tough year for you.” He seemed, for a moment, to get lost in his thoughts. “I know that very well for myself.”

Terry scowled some before deciding he didn’t want to look at Mister Wayne anymore. He could still feel a burning anger in his chest, even if the man was not personally at fault. Dick had talked him through it many times, but Dick also said he understood. So he would just tell Terry stories. Stories about him. Stories about Mister Wayne.

Looking around the room, Terry’s eyes fell upon the painting of a family of three over a mantle. He stepped toward it.

There was an eerie comparison between himself and the young boy set between the unfamiliar adults.

“Are those your parents?” Terry asked pointedly.

After a pause, Wayne replied, “Yes. They are.”

“And that’s you,” Terry completed.

“Yes,” the man said again. “I had just turned eight when we sat down for that portrait,” he explained. “It took hours to finish. I was told that I was very squirmy.” When Terry allowed the silence to follow go a moment too long, Wayne finished. “They were killed not long after that.”

That hurt -- more like a hard tickle than a stabbing pain, but Terry thought the details weren’t all that important. It still had the power to hurt, even after a year.

He looked back to Mister Wayne, a little less viciously. “That’s been a long time.”

“Very long,” he agreed. “It still feels like that night sometimes.”

Surprised, Terry opened his mouth, but then looked away. There was a stinging in his eyes. He knew exactly what Mister Wayne was talking about. It made his body go cold.

“That’s a long time,” he whispered, almost ignoring the sound of Mister Wayne moving out from behind his desk. “A long time...”

“Missing them... feeling that hurt at them being gone,” Wayne said softly as he neared, “It isn’t something that should have happened to you. To anyone. But it isn’t itself a bad thing.”

Terry shot a glare toward the old man.

“I know,” Wayne said, his face drawn into his frown. “That isn’t the type of thing you ever want to hear. That’s why it took me so long to learn it myself. But. There is truth to it.” He looked almost gently at Terry. “Missing your parents, living for them... it is a way to honor them. To not forget them. And it’s important to remember that.”

The boy rubbed roughly at his face, still trying hard to maintain that even look. “Is that why you became Batman?” he asked.

“Yes,” he said. “There is more to it than that. And with each person who becomes Batman or is inspired by him, it changes into something larger and new. But ultimately, it’s about family. Our family.”
He looked over his shoulder, to the other side of Mister Wayne’s study and its other grand portrait.

“I’m not your son,” Terry said darkly.

“No,” the former Batman agreed. “You’re not.”

“I’m not Dick’s son either,” Terry continued. “I’m my dad’s son. I don’t care what your computers say.”


Terry looked to his shoes, studied them carefully.

“Quitting the police department... it was more than a job to him,” Mister Wayne continued. “Same with Batman. Though, he was always going to be Nightwing before he was Batman... to give those things up. Well. You could say he learned his priorities from watching me, and doing the opposite.”

Looking back at Mister Wayne for a moment, Terry gripped his straps tighter. “You didn’t quit being Batman to raise Dick, did you?” he asked.

“No,” he said. “That was my choice. I knew there had to be a Batman no matter what. Dick knew there had to be a Dick Grayson for you to come home to. It made his decision for him.”

“He’s a good guy,” Terry said, looking back to the second portrait, looking at each one of the faces -- Bruce Wayne and his family. “This is your whole family now?”

“Missing some,” he admitted, putting a hand on Terry’s shoulder. “But we’ll have more some day. And then I’ll build another wall to put it on.”

Terry snorted at the dryly delivered joke. “I like this painting better.”

“I like them both,” Wayne admitted. He paused thoughtfully before looking to Terry. “I am being sincere, Terry. I might not be your father, but I am family. And... no one will know what you’re going through more than me. If you ever need someone to talk to... you can call me ‘Bruce.’”

Terry met his eyes at last, scowling. “I’m still pretty angry.”

“I know,” Bruce said sadly.

“So, until I’m not angry, you can call me ‘Mr. McGinnis,’” he said, crossing his arms. “That seems fair.”

Bruce smirked. “I suppose it does.”

There was a ring from the desk. Mister Wayne shuffled toward it, pressed a button. “What is it?”

“I am just letting you know that Master Richard is here for pickup once Master Terrence is ready to leave, Sir,” Alfred’s voice droned.

“Thank you, Alfred,” Bruce said, looking up just in time to see Terry walking toward the door. “I suppose this is goodbye.”

Terry nodded, hand on the knob, before pausing. He looked back toward the desk, his question still tickling at the back of his mind.

“What’s another reason to become Batman, Bruce?” Terry asked with a bit of bite coming through
his voice.

Wayne looked at him carefully before giving a small huff. “Perhaps one day you’ll let me know, McGinnis.”

He thought about it, rolled the idea around in his mind, before opening the door. “Maybe.”

Dick rolled his head some and frowned at the container. “You sure I have to keep it sealed until I get back to the gym? I’m sure Cassandra wouldn’t--”

“Master Richard, you most certainly will be taking some of these back to your sister,” Alfred said with a raised brow of serious intent.

Laughing, Dick raised his hands. “Alright, alright. I won’t eat all of them on the drive back.”

He could hear the familiar tapping of sneakers on the foyer floor which was one of the main deterrents from further arguing. Dick faced the door, beaming as his “li’l man” walked through, looking suspiciously at him.

“Hey, slugger,” Dick said jovially. “Sorry if I cut the visit short, but Babs is out in the car and I didn’t want to make her wait for, y’know, hours. I’m sure she’s been on her phone the whole time anyway--”

“It’s okay,” Terry said, sniffing some as he walked over. He stopped short, looking up at Dick. “I’m ready.”

Dick and Alfred looked to each other knowingly before chancing a look back at Terry.

Crossing his own arms, Dick tilted his head at Terry. “Did you say everything you needed to be said?” he asked.

“No,” Terry said. “Maybe next time.”

The boy then walked by Dick and toward the door. Alfred and Dick blinked at each other.

“Next time?” Dick repeated. “Is... that... good?”

“I’m not certain it’s bad, Maser Richard,” Alfred responded, grabbing the tin of cookies and putting them assuredly in Dick’s arms. “Though I will be happy to have you home more often.”

“Yeah, me too. I guess,” Dick said before pulling Alfred into a gentle one-armed hug. “See you soon, Alfie!”

“Of course,” the butler chuckled, waving as Dick released and followed after the younger boy.

Terry was already partially to the car when he paused, looking back at Dick. “Hey, Dick?”

Dick blinked as he came up to Terry. “Yeah, buddy?”

“Thanks,” Terry said, full of meaning. “Thanks a bunch for everything.”


With the hand on the other foot, Terry looked utterly confused, tilting his head just the same. “Huh? For what?”
“Well,” Dick said, ruffling Terry’s hair as he walked past, “you’ll maybe understand some day.”

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