<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Explicit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Graphic Depictions Of Violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>M/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Batman (Comics), Batman - All Media Types, DCU (Comics), DCU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Joker (DCU)/Bruce Wayne, Batman/Joker (DCU)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Bruce Wayne, The Joker, Original Female Character(s), Stephanie Brown, Diana (Wonder Woman), Walon Jones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2017-04-27 Completed: 2018-03-12 Chapters: 45/45 Words: 194746</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Made For The Journey**

by [Merixcil](http://archiveofourown.org/users/Merixcil)

**Summary**

When Superman falls, the world doesn't end. Bits of it die, and all of it changes, but life persists.

Bruce picks his way through the remnants of American society, desperate to get back to Gotham and piece together whatever fragments of his life are left standing. Along the way he picks up unwanted baggage.

**Notes**

Housekeeping notes:
- The fic will update every few days
- Tags will be updated as appropriate as the story progresses
- This takes place in...some sort of amalgamated comic canon.
- This is gonna be one long ass fic. Strap in and enjoy the ride
See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

There’s bitter irony to be found in the letter S. Bruce sees it everywhere, scrawled into the corners of disused motel rooms and sprayed across high rise tenements. The motels and the flats are abandoned but then again so is everywhere else. The number of people who can survive out here is pathetically tiny, a crucial miscalculation when it came time to kill gods.

Clark explained the symbol on his chest to Bruce years ago. He talked about hope and family crests, things that were familiar and understandable. To most people it looks like a letter, to those in the know it will always mean more. The people who paint Clark’s symbol on the burnt out wreckage of their hometowns don’t know any better, so it always looks like an S.

Bruce pauses by a billboard that once advertised super whitening toothpaste and now advertises hope. The incongruity borders on farcical, people painting the world with reminders that Superman fell. It’s supposed to be morbid, nihilistic nonsense.

If his sense of direction is to be trusted (and it absolutely is), Bruce is getting close to Gotham. Signs for Metropolis have become a common feature of the roadsides, the last one he passed putting the city at two hundred miles eastwards. Under normal circumstances that would be a three day walk for him, but normal circumstances are a thing of the past.

He’s thought about it, after all it would be much faster to head to Metropolis and cross the bay back to Gotham. After much toing and froing Bruce has had to concede that the stories about Superman’s once home town are too persistently awful to have much basis in falsehoods and assuming he can find a boat, that’s a long row even for him.

Two figures approach up ahead. Bruce chides himself for only spotting them now, but it’s too late to duck out of sight. Besides, the roadsides are no doubt full of their friends. Once you’ve been spotted there’s no turning back.

One of the figures wields a baseball bat, the other has a hand shoved so deep into a pocket there’s no way they’re not concealing a weapon. Bruce hates how readily people resort to violence, especially when they have the gall to cover their homes in all Clark’s hope that they could all be better than this. He misses the optimism behind the symbol, his belief that people will endure a very different creature from the notion they can be good on their own. That had been Clark, Dick, Diana, his parents. The best Bruce could do was to look at Jim Gordon and remind himself that not everyone has something rotten lurking at their core.

Names cross his mind in the past tense. He hates it. He’s returning to Gotham to save it, not to sing it its last rites.

“Nice mask!” One of the figures calls. They’re close enough now to see that they’re both female, wearing identical smiles that scream calculated disinterest. The same face worn by every not-quite-adult Bruce has encountered since he crossed the border back into the states.

People take one look at the cowl and assume he’s trying to be intimidating. They’re not wrong, but very rarely does anyone think he’s the real Batman. He doesn’t do much to discourage the notion that he’s just faking, it’s safer for everyone that way.

Bruce keeps his voice and face as neutral as possible. “Just passing through.”

“Yeah? Well there’s a toll in this town.”
“I don’t have any money.”

“Money?” The girl with the baseball bat scoffs. She’s the taller and skinnier of the two, her dirty blonde hair drawn into a ponytail. “That’s precious. Are you stupid or did the aliens drop you off a couple of hours ago?”

“I don’t want any trouble.” Bruce glances behind the two girls, formulating an exit strategy that should produce minimal casualties.

The girl with her hand in her pocket flashes a smile from under a long dark fringe. “Neither do we. So seeing as we’re all on the same page, how about you throw that pack over here and we’ll call it even?”

Bruce is willing to make a lot of allowances for the children left to fend for themselves in this corner of the world, but he’s not going to hand over his pack. He’s more than happy to share food and water but no one gets to look at the grappling gun, the handful of batarangs he has left or the partially damaged gauntlets he’s saved from his last batsuit.

He affects a nervous grin. “Come on, ladies. I’m sure we can agree on a more reasonable price.”

“Nope!” Pockets grins, “the pack or your life.”

“I’m not handing over this bag.”

Moving a whole lot faster than the average street gang member, Pockets pulls out a butterfly knife and hurls it at Bruce’s head. He ducks out of the way, but it’s a surprisingly close call and by the time he’s recovered both her and Baseball Bat are charging at him.

Just as Bruce suspected, Baseball Bat calls out a watchword and bodies begin to pour from the nooks and crannies of the wayside. No one looks older than twenty five, and most appear to be teenagers.

He grabs the knife off the ground before Pockets gets to him but in doing so leaves his right side open for attack. He receives a hefty whack to the ribs courtesy of Baseball Bat but it’s nowhere near hard enough to shatter his bones. It’s depressing to think of these kids living out here, fighting for their life and unable to get in a proper hit. He grabs hold of the bat and twists it out of her hands, knocking her on the head with and sending her to sleep for the next ten minutes.

The other children are converging on Bruce wielding makeshift weapons. He brandishes the bat which is enough to give some of them pause for thought but most are too starved to notice that he’s a threat. Pockets gets hold of his right arm, snarling like a feral dog and just heavy enough to prove bothersome. She bites at the exposed skin below the hem of his shirt sleeve, drawing blood. He tries to shake her but her grip is tight and he can’t deal with her and the encroaching masses at the same time.

A genderless little thing holding tight to a broken glass bottle darts forward to slash at his leg. Bruce sidesteps and lashes out with the bat, hitting the child’s hand and dislodging the weapon. He winces when he feels the crunch of breaking bones reverberating through the wood. The child falls back, screeching in pain.

A broken hand is just what the others need to act as a deterrent, and the flurry of assailants reduces rapidly. There are still a few brave souls willing to risk it as long as Pockets is on him though. They claw at Bruce’s legs, trying desperately to leave a mark on him with equipment that was never designed to seriously wound. He kicks them away but they keep coming back, insistent and obsessed.
The sad thing is that if they really wanted his pack there are more than enough of him to have created a suitable distraction as cover. Despite the size of his adoptive family, Bruce has never considered himself particularly parental, not until he was out on the road, wishing he could sit down with these rag tag street gangs and teach them what they really need to know to survive. Fights like this give him a good measure of a kid’s capabilities, he could plan a whole training regime around them.

Now is not the time to start creating an army of Robins. Bruce backs towards one of the support posts holding up the signboard. He swings the wrong end of the bat in a wide arc, knocking two kids back and catching a third hard enough on the temple that they fall to the floor unconscious. With a grunt, he raises his right arm high enough to pull Pockets off the ground and jerks his arm back so that it comes into contact with the cool metal of the post. It takes a few tries but once he catches her at the right angle she goes limp. With her down, the other children crowding around his feet fall back without a second thought.

Bruce sets Pockets down carefully, straightening her out where she lies on the tarmac and putting her into the recovery position. He does the same for Baseball Bat and the other kid knocked unconscious, then digs through his pack for a full canteen and a couple of jars of peanut butter. He sets these out between the three of them, a contribution to their continued survival.

Finally, Bruce takes the butterfly knife he had stashed into his back pocket and sets it next to Pockets’ face. The baseball bat is, unfortunately for Baseball Bat, too valuable a commodity for him to get rid of. In a world where his main adversaries are feral children he needs as many non-lethal weapons as he can get his hands on.

It’s as much as he can do for them with the resources available and a whole lot more than anyone else would have managed. Bruce turns away and keeps walking into town. He’s accompanied by the rustling of small bodies, moving through the undergrowth unseen. He doesn’t think they’ll try to attack him again, not after that. Like Selina, they’ll retreat when the prize isn’t worth their life.

He hopes Selina’s alive. He really hopes that Gotham lived on, unscathed by the mass extinction event occurring around it, but Bruce knows not to ask for the world. The best he can hope for is that some of the elite supervillain squad have been killed off by sickness from the radiation.

Laughter sounds in the distance, faint enough that Bruce isn’t entirely sure he’s not imagining it. It’s high and cold and sets his teeth on edge, calling up memories of fights that spanned the length and breadth of the city yet never left the confines of a skyscraper roof. Barbara had tried to psychoanalyse him once, after a week spent trawling through the Gotham University library for information on trauma victims. She had explained triggers and he had done what he could to brush her off, but Bruce had known that laughter had been irrevocably ruined for him.

As he walks, Bruce takes stock of the handful of injuries the children managed to inflict on him. The bite wound on his upper arm is bleeding, but not heavily and in amongst barbed wire scratches there’s a cut on his left leg that reaches just below the dermis. None of it’s serious by his reckoning, but he should probably clean the cut as soon as possible.

He has to assume that he won’t be welcome in any of the houses he passes, so he keeps going till he’s out of the residential quarter. The buildings get less uniform but this town isn’t big enough to have a real centre. There’s a sad looking mini mall that’s long since been looted of anything useful and a handful of corner stores that look like they served as combined green grocers and newsagents. A bar, a school. Everything looks like it fell into disrepair long before the bomb went off.

Ten blocks on from the signboard and Bruce is definitely still being followed. He does what he can to make as much noise as possible, forcing coughs and hitting his feet hard against the tarmac but none of it serves to startle his pursuer into retreat. His fingers tighten over the handle of the baseball
bat – he has a nasty scar on the back of his calf from two months ago from when a boy no older than ten came at him with a meat cleaver. He’s in no desire to repeat the experience.

“I don’t want to hurt you, but I will.” He announces. The bushes rustle excitedly, and once again Bruce could swear he catches a breath of laughter on the wind.

A church spire is visible a couple of blocks up. Once he spots it Bruce has no doubt as to where he’s headed. Churches are always safe. Some people say it’s because they’re spooky, others that they don’t want to risk offending the Almighty. Ironic that it should be churches that are held in such high esteem after everything, but it works for Bruce. He’s unfussed by the traditionally spooky and his faith is so lapsed he’s sure entering abandoned holy buildings is the least of his sins.

Gotham churches had been shaped by waves of Italian and Irish immigrants, ensuring that every last one of them was Catholic in origin or practice. The Episcopalian church his parents had frequented was no exception, boasting ornate sculpture work and high ceilings that he had assumed were the norm. There’s an architectural purity to New England churches, all those clean white lines and boxy little halls. Bruce thinks he likes it.

The walls of the church are littered with S symbols, black and red paint standing in stark contrast to the white plaster. Watching from the gate to the churchyard, Bruce keeps his ears and eyes sharp, trying to work out if there’s anything hiding in the surrounding foliage. It looks like it must have been quite nice when a gardener could get to it, but now everything’s just a little too overgrown, the leaves clearly not swept since the autumn. Taken in conjunction with the graffiti it leaves the place looking dilapidated and sad.

Birds are singing from somewhere within the churchyard, a welcome novelty. Animals seemed to die in much the same numbers as humans while plant life lived on unaffected. Bruce has his suspicions that that might just be an East Coast thing, Ivy spreading her roots so deep that her babies need never be hurt, even by something so powerful it can destroy a God.

Satisfied that no one’s waiting to spring out of the bushes to ambush him, Bruce lets the gate swing shut and steps into the churchyard. He’s headed for the church door when he sees it, it’s not visible from the road but a few metres inside the grounds and perspective shifts to reveal the lines of something that’s definitely not an S scrawled on the eastern wing of the building. It’s not unusual in and of itself, plenty of places are rife with gang signs and original artwork but as the only graffiti here that is not a misremembered Superman symbol it stands out. Bruce doesn’t think twice about turning off the path to get a better look at it.

It’s not clear what it’s supposed to be until he’s right up close. It’s wrapped around the contours of the building in such a way that viewing it from anything other than the perfect angle distorts the image. First it looks like an overenthusiastic crosshatch underneath some semicircles, then like a badly drawn tree. Bruce is about three metres away when he twists his head to just the right angle and swooping lines meet jagged edges to form a complete picture. It’s a fine piece of art, every stroke exactly where it needs to be and the level of detail quite astonishing for work done with a spray can. Bruce’s blood runs cold to look upon it.

It’s a jester, like the ones that appeared on the joker cards in his mother’s old packs. These days people call any set of cards missing its jokers a Gotham Deck, and no self-respecting Gothamite would ever play with any other kind.

A deck of cards should be fifty two strong with no extraneous mischief added in. Bruce tells himself that the jester was probably painted by someone who fled Gotham and decided to mark the world with the worst image they could imagine. They picked a clown, with its mouth stretched wide open and bells hanging from its pointed cap. The people of his city often forget that the wider world
knows about their damage. They consider every supervillain that has ever graced their shores to be a deeply personal affair.

Bruce tries to rationalise it, running through all the reasons that a person might paint this precise image right here, where it would stand out to someone who has a knack for picking up on detail. It looks fresh, but when he steps forward to touch his hand to the paint it comes away dry.

Somewhere someone is laughing at him and Bruce is going to hope that just this once it’s all in his head. He moves back the way he came and up to the church door, a heavy oak thing that feels like it’s been bolted from the inside.

A year is nowhere near enough time for rust to break through iron fixings, strong as Bruce may be he’s not going to be able to kick the door down. He assesses the problem, trying to work out what he can do to get into the building that doesn’t require bolt cutters or a hacksaw. In the end he decides to use the gauntlets and hope that he’s wrong about the bolt.

The keyhole is huge compare to the tiny inner city locks the lock picking tools on the gauntlets are designed to deal with. The spikes repeatedly fall into empty space as Bruce searches frantically for tumblers to flip. He has no idea what he’s going to do if the door doesn’t open after this.

He’s been at it for ten minutes before anything happens. The sound of metal scraping against metal is reassuring at first, till Bruce realises that it’s coming from the other side of the door and has nothing to do with a picked lock. He falls back, resisting the urge to vanish into the undergrowth. The bushes whisper to him, tails of dark spaces where creatures of the night can make their nests. Instead he raises his fists, ready to fight should the occupant of the church prove hostile.

The door swings open to reveal an elderly woman. Over a head shorter than Bruce, her grey hair is pulled back into a tight bun and her eyes are sharp enough to bore into his skull. She’s dressed in a curate’s cassock that looks like it’s seen better days and she holds a brass cross above her head like a broadsword.

They stare each other down, each trying to get the measure of the other. Bruce isn’t particularly worried that she’ll hurt him, but he’s interested to see whether or not she’ll try.

“What are you supposed to be?” the woman snaps. She’s got an accent that reminds Bruce of the month he spent picking his way through the Central American volcano belt.

He blinks, “isn’t it obvious.”

The woman lets out a bark of mirthless laughter and tightens her fingers around the cross. “You expect me to believe that you’re the Batman?”

“You can believe what you like.”

“I can and I do. What do you want?”

Relaxing one of his fists, Bruce gestures to the bloodstains on his torn jeans and the bite taken out of his arm. “Got jumped by a street gang. I’m trying to find a safe place to clean up. If you can give me a couple of hours under your roof I promise I’ll be out of your hair by sunset.”

The woman’s eyes narrow, “you let some kids do all that to you?”

“There were a lot of them.”

“Oh yeah? You kill any of them?”
“No,” Bruce nods towards the baseball bat, now lying on the stoop, “but I had to knock a couple of them out.”

Silence falls, the woman looking Bruce up and down with the kind of intensity reserved for tailor’s sizing up their clients. When she’s satisfied that he’s not trying to trick her, she drops the cross and kicks the door open. She gestures for him to come inside, holding out a hand to be shaken.

“Camila,” she says.

“Thomas.” Bruce replies, the first name that comes to mind.

“We got ourselves a doubter,” Camila is unsmiling. “Ok, I tell you what mister Thomas Batman: you are gonna come inside, take off those trousers and let me fix you up. Then you’re gonna sleep here tonight and be on your way tomorrow morning, understood?”

“I really don’t need to stay-“

“Understood?”

Camila’s eyes are uncompromising and stern. Bruce is forcibly reminded of the woman his mother had employed for a short time to try to teach him piano. She had kept him for hours, till his fingers managed to follow the relatively simple patterns of scales and arpeggios just the way she liked them. The last thing he needs is to waste time on convalescence he doesn’t need, but the alternative is passing up the first adult company he’s had in over a month.

Bruce nods. Camila lets out a huff of acquiescence and stands aside to let him inside the church.
Chapter 2

The church quiet in the way holy places are always quiet. Not because the world has stopped turning, but because they are micro climates designed to keep The Word in and the world out. Bruce’s breath catches when his boots click against the tiled floor, startled by how loud they sounds. That’s how it’s supposed to be, he supposes. No one should move quietly in the face of God.

From time to time Bruce has found himself accidentally equating Clark with a higher power, the way he had looked upon the world with a mournful sort of kindness, descending from the sky with open palms begging for a better world. His father would be disappointed in his blasphemy, but Bruce has seen more than enough to convince himself that the prophets that pepper history were benevolent aliens of some form or other.

He hasn’t heard so much as a whisper of a Lantern over the last year, nor of Arthur’s people. Not so much as a peep from the demon’s head. The world feels very dark.

“Come down the front. My first aid kit’s out back,” Camila walks ahead, ushering Bruce towards the steps leading up to the altar. He creeps along behind her, trying to tread softly. The interior of the church is as different as could be from the one he visited as a child, devoid of ostentation save for a pair of crucifix and a painting of the Virgin Mary on the back wall. The pews are painted white and the walls pastel blue, presumably to give the room a plain and pious atmosphere, but to Bruce it just feels cold.

Camila watches him settle himself on the bottom step. “Stay there and try not to bleed on anything.”

Looking back the way he came, Bruce can see flecks of red lying on the tiles. He rolls up the legs of his jeans and sees that some of the barbed wire scratches he’s sporting are deeper than he’d realised and are seeping blood along with the deeper cut on his left calf. The blood has soaked down to his socks, leaving a dark sheen around the lip that vanishes into his boots.

Camila vanishes through a side door that Bruce assumes leads to the vestry and returns a few minutes later with a large green box in one hand and the brass cross in the other. She pauses a short way off to give him a good view of what she’s packing.

“This is a house of God. I don’t much care what you believe but if you so much as try to break my nail I assure you, you will burn in whatever Hell you know to exist.”

“You wouldn’t have let me in if you thought I was going to cause trouble.” Bruce reasons.

Clicking her tongue, Camila sets herself down at Bruce’s feet. “That would not be very Christian of me.”

The brass cross is laid on the floor next to the first aid kit which Camila opens to produce a surprisingly diverse array of bandages and disinfectants. Bruce keeps a careful eye on what she picks out, allowing himself a small smile when she passes his muster.

“You know what you’re doing.” He intends it as a compliment.

“I was a nurse,” Camila snaps, “If I had a nickel for every time someone had something smart to say about little old ladies who know how to fix up a few cuts… Dios mio.” She crosses herself, looking
past Bruce towards the altar. “So tell me Thomas, are we saving the trousers?”

Camila raises a pair of scissors and snaps them menacingly in front of Bruce’s face. Bruce has been living in the same t-shirt and jeans since the last few shops were looted out and he doesn’t much fancy having them damaged more than they already are. He feels very exposed changing below the cold washed walls and Camila’s unflinching stare. When he kicks off his boots his socks stamp bloody footprints on the floor and she purses her lips in disapproval.

When he drops his trousers, the blood on Bruce’s legs has smeared itself in such a way as to make his injuries look significantly worse than they really are, especially when combined with a week’s worth of accumulated filth.

Camila hisses like she’s been burned. “That’s not good.”

“It looks worse than it is.” Bruce assures her.

“Who’s the nurse here? I’ll decide how bad it is.”

Bruce wants to laugh. He’s travelled the world over on foot, tending to broken bones and wounds far worse than this. He wants to use near death experiences and the times when he’s operated on three hours sleep in as many days as medical currency, evidence that he really does know what he’s talking about. He doesn’t say anything of course, but the temptation is there.

He doesn’t need to speak a word. Camila reads him like a book. “If you’re about to feed me some nonsense about how you’ve gotten by with worse injuries than these, save it. The face that you’ve survived worse without seeking proper medical attention doesn’t make you tough, just stupid.”

She opens a bottle of rubbing alcohol and tips some onto a ball of cotton wool. Before Bruce can formulate a response she’s pressing it up to one of the weeping wounds and the kick of ethanol on open flesh is enough to shut him up.

The corners of Camila’s mouth twist into a wry smile. “You see that Thomas? If it hurts it means you need someone to fix you up.”

Once the blood and grime is cleared away, Bruce’s leg really doesn’t look so bad. The deep cut Bruce is glad to have seen to, but Camila sews up no fewer than three scratches and practically mummifies his calves before she’s done with him. A small war is fought over whether or not the bite wound on his arm needs stitches, a war that Bruce eventually wins under the proviso that Camila be allowed to drench it in disinfectant.

When she’s done Camila steps back to admire her handiwork, eyes fixing just above Bruce’s knees. “You sure you’re not the Batman?”

Bruce follows her line of sight to what’s visible of a particularly nasty scar running from his hip to just below his patella on the right leg. He’d gotten it from a Talon, almost four years ago, an ugly looking thing that chooses odd moments to revive its phantom ache.

“I never said I wasn’t the Batman,” Bruce drops his voice into a growl. He doesn’t have the cape, most of the suit is long since abandoned by the wayside and he’s wearing nothing below the belt but a worn pair of boxers. Still, the cowl usually counts for something.

Only it doesn’t. Camila stands solid as a rock, her whole aspect hovering somewhere between derision and sympathy. She sighs, shakes her head, holds out her hand, “Whoever you are, those clothes need a clean.”
It transpires that when Camila says ‘those clothes’ she means everything except the gauntlets and the cowl. Bruce balks when, after removing his socks, trousers, t-shirt and the hoody he had in his pack, she clicks her fingers and gestures to his underwear.

“I don’t have anything else to wear.” Bruce’s voice doesn’t squeak. Not quite.

“I’ve been a nurse and a priest and now I’m an old lady. You think you have anything down there I haven’t seen before?” Camila clicks her fingers again, more forcefully this time. When Bruce still hesitates she vanishes into the vestry in a huff and emerges with a cassock identical to hers. “You can wear this.”

The black fabric of the cassock is clearly not meant for comfort, scratching unpleasantly against Bruce’s skin. It was cut for someone a whole lot thinner than him and where the arms are supposed to be loose he fills them out. The skirt stops just above his knees rather than falling to the floor as intended. When he pushes up the sleeves he regains some freedom of movement but it’s not exactly comfortable.

Not to mention he must look ridiculous. “If only I had a camera.” A smile plays just behind Camila’s eyes.

With his dignity preserved, Bruce removes his underwear and hands them over to Camila. She moves back towards the door she had produced the first aid kit from and motions for him to follow. Unused to wearing skirts as he is, Bruce has to keep checking that the cassock hasn’t ridden up where it creates air currents around his nether regions.

Camila leads him through to the vestry, which is remarkably well stocked for a small town church. There’s a hot plate set up in one corner next to the wardrobe Bruce suspects provided his cassock. There’s a sink just inside the doorway and a full washer and drier set pushed up against the back wall.

It’s incongruous. Bruce frowns under the cowl. “How much have you brought in since…”

It always feels wrong to try to put a word to it before someone has offered their own. Mostly people do what they can to refer to it in abstract terms: ‘The Incident’ or ‘The Apocalypse’. ‘The Bomb’ is quite a popular one. Bruce strives not to tie it down too tightly, letting his mood dictate his euphemism of choice. Sometimes it’s the day the world ended, others the day the new world begun. There are days when America lost Superman and days when Bruce lost Clark. It’s difficult, he doesn’t much care to give it a definitive name.

“I brought the hotplate with me. Otherwise this was all here when I showed up.” Camila says, sidestepping the issue altogether. “And don’t ask me who fixed up the generator. I wouldn’t know how, I’m just grateful I can actually use this stuff.”

“You didn’t…wait,” Bruce watches Camila throw his clothes in the washing machine along with a scant handful of detergent, “you’re not from round here?”

Camila snorts, flashes Bruce a look that leaves him in no doubt that she considers him an idiot. “How many people do you know round here who sound like me? No, I’m not from round here.”

“So how did you wind up out here on your own?”

“I like my privacy and I help out the kids if they really hurt themselves. Once they worked out that I was willing to kick a little ass for the privilege they learned to leave me alone.”

Bruce smiles at that, imagining Camila coming at Pockets and Baseball Bat with her brass cross
raised high. “I figured you were here as a priestess.”

“I am,” Camila shrugs, “or I was. But unlike this church, I’m Catholic.”

It’s Bruce’s turn to make a face. “Unlikely.”

“Hey! We may be officially excommunicated but you better not be under my roof doubting the faith of me and my sisters.” Camila’s voice drops into something low and menacing that Bruce is sure intimidates him far more than he could ever intimidate her. He closes his mouth and stands back as she starts riffling through boxes and cupboards pulling out tapers and paper, a can of beans and a loaf of bread. She finishes up by pulling a bottle and a rag out from under the sink.

The food would suggest that Camila intends to eat, but the extraneous supplies imply she has other plans. Bruce has no idea what she must do all day, what she would need to do to survive out here beyond beating back the occasional intruder. Most of the people he’s met heading north have been living hand to mouth, or monitoring networks of underlings that they’ve persuaded to slave under them in the wake of the disaster. Camila is the first person he’s met who looks like they might just have a stable living environment, if the stack of tins lining the broken church safe are anything to go by.

Camila waves the rag and bottle under Bruce’s nose. “You wanna be a ‘sit down and stay silent’ type of guest of a ‘help around the house’ type of guest?”

Sitting in a corner doing nothing all morning sounds dreadful. Bruce takes the offered cleaning supplies, checking the label of the bottle and seeing that its wood polish.

“That’s what I thought.” Camila nods approvingly, “been meaning to give the place a good clean. C’mon.”

The church doesn’t look particularly dirty, but Camila wipes away a line of dust from the lectern and crosses herself in alarm. She points Bruce at ever flat wooden surface in sight, demanding that he scrub them down till they shine with their own light. Bringing the feet of the altar up to her standards is a whole lot harder, they’ve carved into the shape of folded vine leaves and dust has settled thick in barely accessible nooks and crannies.

While Bruce scrubs. Camila hoists a ladder out from underneath one of the pews and pulls herself to the top to swipe spider webs from the window brackets. After she nearly falls overreaching, he suggests they swap places. “I’m quite a bit taller than you.”

“You’re injured.” Camila replies, like Bruce isn’t kneeling on the ground with most of his weight resting on his bandaged legs.

Ruthless efficiency is the name of Camila’s game. She leaves no stone unturned, vigorously pursuing every scrap of dirt that has taken root in her kingdom. She’s not as warm and she lacks the grandparent sparkle, but Bruce is reminded of Alfred. When he was young, and his butler-cum-guardian had been at a loss as to how to punish a sullen child who wanted for nothing and revelled in solitude, he’d been forced to assist with the cleaning of the manor. He must be out of practice because when she comes to inspect his work cleaning out the lime and debris from the font she makes a face.

“Give me that.”

“I’ll have another go!” Bruce protests, holding the rag just out of her reach.

“You will do no such thing.”
Next up the tiles need scrubbing, a cloth and bucket job that Bruce finds particularly unpleasant. He drenches the front of his cassock so that it sticks to his skin when he moves, leaving him uncomfortable as well as tired when he polishes off the last corner of the floor by the door. Unbeknownst to him, the day has drawn on into long shadows, the sun sitting low on the horizon.

Bruce looks up, cold fabric clinging to his body, blue walls swallowing all the warmth in the room, and is overtaken by a deep seated internal discomfort. The image of the jester’s face flashes across his mind and he shudders involuntarily. He wonders if Camila keeps track of the graffiti on the church walls. Not because he’s worried, but it couldn’t hurt to put his mind at rest.

“Camila?” Bruce calls.

Her voice echoes from somewhere up near the altar. “Wait!”

Bruce picks up the bucket and heads back towards the vestry, pausing to watch Camila at the altar. She’s set the brass cross back in its rightful place and has lit two candles to flank it. Their light doesn’t stretch far, casting the rest of the church into darkness. But the little orange flames bleed heat, enough that Bruce doesn’t feel the chill of wet clothes when he looks upon them. He wants to step into the pool of light so they might wrap him up and never let him go.

Camila kneels at the foot of the altar, hands pressed together and eyes screwed shut. She prays in rapid fire Spanish that Bruce could probably decipher if he cared to.

He leaves her be, continuing on into the vestry, dumping the dirty water from his bucket down the toilet and emptying his bladder. The wash cycle is done, so he moves his clothes into the drier. It starts up with a low rumble, one of the most anachronistically normal things Bruce has heard in some time. He thinks of warm fabric pressing against his skin, trailing behind Alfred on the way to iron the shirts. There’s nothing like the end of the world as you know it to place urgency on the little luxuries in life.

The clatter of feet in freshly cleaned tiles signals Camila’s arrival. “What do you want?” She asks, brushing Bruce aside as she reaches for the food she had set out earlier.

Bruce’s stomach roars into life. “I wanted to ask you about the graffiti outside.”

“You sure you don’t want to ask when dinner is?”

“No, I—“

“Because it’s gonna be soon.” Camila tips the beans into a pot, sizes them up, then reaches into the safe for another tin.

Bruce presses on. “Do you know who paints it?”

“The graffiti?”

“Yes.”

“The kids of course,” Camila says, obvious really. “All those little heathens. They paint my church with their Superman S thing like he’s some sort of God then they come crying to me when they hurt themselves.

“And the jester?”

Camila frowns. “What jester?”
“The jester on the East Wing.”

“I don’t know about any jester.” Camila fires up the hot plate and sets the pan on top of it. “Must be very small. Or it looks too much like an S for me to tell the difference.”

“It wasn’t small, maybe two metres across. It’s difficult to see what it is unless you’re right up close, otherwise it looks like a tree. It’s painted red, looks fresh.”

Camila shakes her head. “I haven’t seen that. It must be new.”

“How new?”

“I was out and about yesterday, went all around the grounds. I didn’t see any new graffiti and usually notice stuff like that.” Camila smiles to herself. “I caught a crow though. She was a messy little thing but I ate so well last night.”

Bruce offers a weak smile in response. It’s probably nothing, because most things are nothing, but every now and then terrible things are forecast to those sharp enough to read the signs. He’s been looking out for storms on the horizon for years.

The news that there’s a jester painted on her church doesn’t seem to faze Camila though, no matter how out of place it might be amongst the rest of the local youths’ art work. Bruce takes the silver chalice full of beans when passes him and sits on the vestry floor. It takes several tries to settle himself so that the cassock covers everything he wants covered.

Camila sits opposite him, setting up a candle to light the room. She hands Bruce a chunk of bread which he sinks his teeth in to eagerly. It could be several days old and stale for all he cares, it’s been so long since he’s eaten fresh food. He asks where it comes from and Camila explains that there’s an old bakery two streets away that she makes weekly trips to under cover of dark.

“I have to set the fire myself, mind. This is the only working generator in town as far as I’m aware and it doesn’t even stretch to the lighting circuit. I can’t be the only one using it though because someone keeps restocking the flour. Yeast is gonna run out sooner or later but I guess we’ll deal with that problem when we have to.”

They continue eating in silence, till Bruce has scraped the chalice completely clean.

“So,” Camila starts around a mouthful of beans, “What brings you here, Thomas or Batman or whoever you are? Shouldn’t you be back in Gotham?”

“I’m trying to get back to Gotham,” Bruce explains. “I was in Sao Paulo when the bomb hit.”

“No way! My neck of the woods!”

“You’re Brazilian?”

Camila looks at him, despairing. “You hear me speaking Português? I’m from Costa Rica, but I know you Americans see anything south of Texas as ‘down there’. ”

“That’s quite some distance to come on foot.”

“I’m sure it is but I came by bus. And all my papers are valid thank you very much.”

Bruce frowns, “but the radiation knocked out vehicles all over. I’d be surprised if it left an engine running anywhere on Earth.”
“Not all of us crossed the border after the bomb,” Camila reminds him sharply, “I don’t know if you ever turned on the news back then but this country’s thought it had an immigrant problem practically since it was founded.”

“Sorry,” Bruce ducks his head, hoping that the cowl’s ears don’t distract too far from his sincere attempts to look sheepish. “I just-“

“It’s fine.” Camila cuts him off, returning to her dinner, which she’s eating out of a silver case tat may once have held communion wafers.

After they’ve eaten Camila sets a pot of water on the hot plate and sends Bruce to was their unconventional crockery in the sink. When the water comes up to simmer she tips it into the tips it into the bucket Bruce had used to scrub the floors earlier and hands it to him along with a freshly lit candle, a sponge and a dry cassock.

“Take yourself to the bathroom and clean up. You smell like you haven’t washed in weeks. Try not to get the bandages wet.”

Bruce doesn’t say anything about how scrubbing tiles on his hands and knees has already done plenty to wet his bandages, it’s true enough that he hasn’t washed in a while. He locks the bathroom door behind him and sets the candle on a pile of dried wax crowning the toilet cistern. He hangs the dry cassock on the back of the door and dumps the wet one on the floor when he’s wriggled out of it.

When he peels away the cowl, dead skin floats to the floor, flickering in the candle light. It’s been days since he’s been a secluded enough location to risk baring his face and the area around his eyes had dried out and started going scaly, to say nothing of the volume of dandruff that lifts from his hair. There’s a mirror hanging over the sink and it’s impossible to resist the temptation to take a look at the mess he’s made of himself. Half of Bruce’s face is caked in grime and the other is peeling. He’s lucky enough that his facial hair doesn’t grow all that fast, but what he’s sporting now could definitely be described as more than a five o’clock shadow.

He looks atrocious, and entirely unlike himself.

The twin blessings of warm water and soap are a transcendent experience, the water tracking rivulets through the dust and sweat coating his body. Bruce scrubs down his face as best he can, wishing he had some of those exfoliating soaps Dick used to ply him with to help shift the dead skin. When he’s satisfied that he’s shifted as much of the dirt as he is able, he sticks his head in the bucket to rise his hair.

It’s difficult to tell in the half-light but the water in the bucket looks grey. Bruce soaks the sponge through and runs it over his groin and armpits once again to be sure he’s removed as much body odour as possible.

The last thing to be washed is the cowl. After sloshing it through the filthy water a few times, Bruce does what he can to dry it on the discarded cassock before pulling it back over his head. He dons the dry clothes and flushes the water before heading back into the vestry.

Camila looks up as he comes in and sniffs pointedly. “Much better.”

The drier has come to the end of its cycle and Bruce’s clothes are dry. He can’t be bothered to change tonight but he takes a moment to hug them close, soft warmth radiating through his body. Camila doesn’t let his indulge for longer than the time it takes for her to vanish into the church and re-emerge with a pile of blankets out of which she forms a makeshift bed.
“Which side do you want?” She asks, as if Bruce cares.

It can’t be later than nine and on any other night Bruce’s bedtime would be far off, but it’s been so long since he’s seen anything like a proper bed. As far as he can recall, he’s been sleeping rough since Alabama and the common exhaustion of something as mundane as cleaning is eating into him like he wouldn’t have thought possible. Camila blows out the last candle, plunging them into the complete darkness of a life without electricity, and sleep comes fast and easy.

Chapter End Notes

If church cleaning montages aren't you're thing then sorry lmao. I invented Camila thinking she'd have like two things to do and then Bruce would move on but she had other ideas. I consider the whole thing worth it for the mental image of Bruce Wayne in a cassock several sizes too small.

For those of you who are wondering - female Catholic priests absolutely are a thing despite the Pope's insistence that they shouldn't be. They are formally excommunicated from the Catholic church but keep doing what they're doing.
The rumbling of the drier wakes Bruce long after sun rise. Encased as he is by the mismatched blankets of the bed, he’s trapped in a blisteringly warm cocoon that he has no desire to leave in a hurry. He thinks he can smell coffee brewing, swears he can hear birds singing outside. It’s disconcertingly normal and Bruce starts to wonder if he hadn’t dreamt up the past year.

He’s waiting for Alfred to burst in with breakfast and a jab about lazy slugabed billionaires, or for Titus to start barking outside his window, but then he roles onto his back and feels the cowl digging into his ear. The whitewashed walls of the vestry come into focus and just like that the spell is broken.

“You awake?” Camilla asks.

Bruce opens his mouth to speak but a complacent groan comes out instead. Camila tuts in disapproval and he can hardly blame her, imagining he sounds like Jason on the mornings he had had to be up before nine. He can hear her poking through the cupboards on the hunt for something.

“You drink coffee?”

His usual stance on coffee is not positive but right now Bruce feels uncommonly sluggish and jumpstarting his body with a heavy dose of caffeine sounds like an excellent idea. “Yes please,” he mumbles, pulling himself into a sitting position.

Half the blankets have already been tidied away. Bruce struggles to his feet, hurriedly rearranges the cassock where it had ridden up overnight and starts clearing away his share of the bed. Camila watches him carefully, eyes sharp for toes placed out of line. She doesn’t stop him, so he figures he’s doing something right. Bruce piles the blankets against the wall, then straightens up to accept the offered coffee.

“There’s no sugar, no milk, and it’s one of those shitty instant brands,” Camila shoves the chalice Bruce had eaten out of the night before into his hands, this time filled with warm brown liquid. “But hey, who knew there’d be coffee at the end of the world?”

Bruce raises the chalice to his lips and feels his synapses come alive. Most of America is ghost towns and cities too rife with violence for any sane man to risk setting foot in. By comparison this church feels like a little slice of heaven.

Out of the corner of his eye, Bruce could swear he sees something moving through the window. It sets his skin crawling but when he points it out to Camila she rolls her eyes and reminds him of the birds.

Of course it’s the birds. Bruce can hear crows bickering in the graveyard, another layer of normal on this sweet little fantasy. He downs the rest of his coffee then starts looking around for his clothes.
“I put them back in the drier.” Camila tells him.

“Were they still wet?”

“No, but you looked like you liked them warm.”

Bruce nods like the wind hasn’t just been knocked out of him. “Thank you.” His voice is almost steady.

“It’s nothing,” Camila shrugs, “They’re probably good to go. I’m gonna go do my morning prayers if you wanna change in here.” She moves towards the door but stops to look back at him. “Maybe you can join me, when you’re ready.”

It’s a very long time since Bruce last prayed and he was never Catholic. All the same, he thinks it might be nice to pray with Camila. He nods after her then goes to retrieve his clothes.

Bruce has never felt anything so soft as warm cotton against his skin. Logically, he knows that’s the year without fabric softener talking, that and the extreme discomfort of wearing a garment that doesn’t fit for the past twelve hours but he doesn’t care, he means it. To be standing under a roof, his wounds bandaged, the grime scrubbed from his skin and his clothes clean; he needs a moment to take it all in. He’s never let his anxiety take up too much space at the front of his mind but there are moments such as this where he can feel the tension bleeding out of him, reminding him how tightly wound he can become.

His eyes glaze over, till the white of the walls and the green of the graveyard merge into one. There are vague shapes moving through the foliage, the crows Camila had been so pleased to catch for her dinner. Bruce doesn’t know what he’d do if he had the opportunity to eat a bird, he craves fresh meat but he can’t say he approves of killing endangered species for food.

The birds move in odd patterns, strange enough to snap Bruce back into the present. As his vision swims into focus the movement comes to a halt and when he steps forward to get a better look at the grounds he can’t see any birds.

Or anything else, for that matter. Certainly not what he thought he saw. Bruce wracks his brain, looks to the tree line and the pale stone of a grave marker directly in his line of sight. He can sort of see how he might have mistaken the two paired together for a human figure.

His pulse jumps, relief is only ever fleeting. Bruce shakes his head, trying to dislodge the last of the daze from behind his eyes and this time when he catches something in his peripheral vision he knows he’s seen something that’s not supposed to be there.

Bruce’s stomach drops. He turns his head, knowing exactly what he’s going to see in the opposite window.

There’s a face pressed up against the glass, entirely too familiar, sporting a wild grin and a mop of green hair that looks like it hasn’t been cut since Bruce last saw him. He’s not wearing his usual makeup, leaving his lips as pale as the rest of his skin, bared open to reveal teeth too long and sharp to belong to a normal man.

Rooted to the spot, Bruce is unable to breathe around his shock. Of all the people to have survived the blast and the radiation and the year in a lawless no man’s land, it’s both depressingly predictable and a crying shame that the man at the window should be one of them.

The Joker fixes Bruce with a manic stare, eyes like poison dart frogs boring into his with uncomfortable intensity. Time stretches out between the two of them, confirmation that the death of
Superman is not enough to end the dance.

From outside the vestry, Camila curses something wicked. It breaks Bruce’s trance, head whipping round to follow the direction of her voice. When he looks back to the window, not two seconds later, The Joker is gone.

Bruce’s hands don’t shake. He won’t see anything more from the windows but if he hurries he might be able to sweep the graveyard before The Joker can get too far. He doubts he’ll find anything, because the clown is smart and fast and if he doesn’t want to be caught there’s rarely much that can be done about him, but it might stop the blood from screaming behind his eyes.

He barrels out of the vestry, bare feet slapping against the tiles. He heads for the door but when he tries to pull it open it stays firm. “I need to get outside!”

“You need to calm down.” Camila is already at Bruce’s shoulder, delivering a sharp kick to his shin. “Don’t think I wouldn’t have slapped you if you weren’t so tall. What on Earth is going on?”

“There’s something out there,” Bruce fiddles with the lock, trying to pull it loose.

Camila’s face darkens, “There’s a whole lot of somethings out there and you won’t do anyone any good getting killed by one of them.”

“You don’t understand-“

“I understand plenty.” Camila reaches out to pry Bruce’s fingers away from the door handle. When he refuses to budge she grabs his thumb and pulls it back far enough that it’s in danger of breaking.

Bruce drops the handle. “Camila…”

“Don’t you ‘Camila’ me! You’re not wearing any shoes or any kind of protection and you want to go fight some evil thing hiding in the bushes? I don’t think so.”

“He’s a very bad man.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Camila’s face doesn’t soften as she stalks back towards he altar, “but right now I have a security breach to deal with. So how about this: you help me seal this place up and I let you run off and play superhero. Sound good to you, Thomas?”

It sounds awful to Bruce. He closes his eyes, breathes deep and sees The Joker’s smile painted on the back of his eyelids. He has never let this threat stand, he won’t make an exception, even at the end of the world.

He could break a window or slip out through the rafters if he had to, but Bruce takes a moment to think through his options and decides to focus on the security breach Camila mentioned. It won’t do to leave here without helping her to plug it.

Reluctantly, he stalks after her, expecting to find the altar smashed or her brass cross missing. To his eyes, however, everything looks as it had yesterday, from the polished wood of the pews to the candles burned partway through. It gives Bruce pause, time to remind himself of all those little foibles a brain can indulge in when presented with unprecedented circumstances. Nothing looks amiss and he can’t hear screaming in the distance. He tries to believe, if only for a moment, that it’s all in his head. It doesn’t stop his heart jackhammering in his chest but it stops his fingers twitching like the latch of the door is still beneath them.

“Some kids got in last night,” Camila grumbles, jerking her head towards the font. “Come see for
yourself. These little cretinos think they’re funny.”

There’s nothing out of the ordinary about the font as far as Bruce can see. It’s plain plaster, none of the ornamental carvings that adorned the churches of his youth. It looks the same as it had the day before and even after circling it he can’t find anything untoward. He turns back to Camila with a shrug and she scowls at him.

“You know, the Batman is supposed to be this great detective. You, Thomas, would make a terrible Batman.” She points to something inside the font, half way up the side, just above the waterline.

It’s a Superman logo. A real one, the curved line contained within the diamond swelling in all the right areas and tapering around the middle. Clark tried to teach Bruce how to write it properly on several occasions but he never quite got the knack. Instead he wound up with a detailed understanding of the Kryptonian symbol for hope and the knowledge that the makers of cheap Superman t-shirts weren’t even trying.

This is nothing like the S symbols scattered across the outside of the church. Bruce’s stomach lurches in excitement, then in dread as he runs through the number of people who had the knowledge to paint it properly. He wants to believe that this is a sign Clark has returned to them, but even if it were remotely in character for him to come creeping into churches to leave behind mementos of his survival it wouldn’t change the fact that he’s long gone.

Besides, perfect as the symbol may be, it’s upside down. Bruce isn’t sure what that would mean in Kryptonian but he’s pretty sure he knows what message an Earthly author would be trying to send. Hope turned upside down. It’s a bad joke.

“Camila,” Bruce does his best to keep his voice steady, “you need to let me go. Right now.”

“You need to help me secure this building!”

Bruce shakes his head. “You don’t have a security problem. This wasn’t painted by some kid.”

Hard eyes scan his for some trace of a lie. “You know who it was?”

“Yes.”

“So what? They have some kind of teleportation power? They can walk through walls? Sounds like a security breach to me.”

“It’s not… Camila, this man can do the impossible.”

“If he can do it it’s not impossible.”

Bruce glances over his shoulder, fighting back the paranoia trying to overwhelm him. “Have you ever heard of a man called The Joker?”

He hadn’t seen any sign of humour in Camila’s aura but it must have been there because Bruce can tell when it vanishes altogether. She shakes her head. “You don’t know it’s him.”

“Yes, I do.”

“How?”

“Because I’m Batman.”

It’s sunny out, light streaming through the windows and washing out the blue of the walls. Bruce’s
clothes used to be black but the trials of the past few months have reduced them to a half-hearted grey and he’s missing most of his suit and gadgets. The only thing left to signpost his identity is the cowl and every costume shop on the eastern seaboard sells replicas.

It’s been a long time since he’s had to announce himself though, and the confirmation of his identity gives him power. Rising up to his full height, muscles tense and ready to strike at a moment’s notice. Bruce is dangerous like this, because he has to be dangerous. He sees disbelief bleed out of Camila but she’s not scared.

Alfred was never scared either. She fixes Bruce with an indomitable stare. “What do we do?”

“We run.” Bruce turns back to the vestry, intending to grab his things and leave. “I need to search the town, see if I can find where he’s hiding.”

“Will you kill him?” Camila asks, trotting along at Bruce’s side.

Bruce shakes his head. “I don’t kill. We can take him back to Gotham.”

“Gotham?” Camila looks at him like he’s grown a second head. “And what’s this ‘we’ nonsense? I don’t want to go to Gotham, it’s supposed to be a radioactive wasteland.”

“Everywhere’s a radioactive wasteland.”

“Well yeah, but Gotham always had to be special. You should go ahead and finish him off, you’ve been trying for long enough.”

“I’m not going to kill him, Camila.” Bruce says, as much to reassure himself as anything else.

The hard line of Camila’s mouth barely breaks. “Well, I have the seventh commandment and the Hippocratic oath binding my hands on this one. And I’m not going to Gotham.”

Bruce can see where this is going. “Camila…”

“There’s a crypt below the altar, through the grating under the carpet. Comes out the other side of the graveyard. You can leave by the front door, I’ll wait it out below and make my move when you’ve secured the area.”

“You can’t stay.” Bruce pulls on the gauntlets and fishes a couple of batarangs out of the bottom of his pack. “If Joker knows that you sheltered me he’ll do everything in his power to get back here. He’ll kill you if he gets the chance.”

“Yes I’m well aware that you’ve smoked me out of my hole.” Camila marches over to the safe and throws Bruce a couple of tins, “but I have no intention of getting any further involved in this nonsense.”

Bruce is almost certain this isn’t going to work. The Joker no doubt knows who Camila is by now and will track her down regardless. The only way to be sure of her safety is to keep her with him where he can keep an eye on her.

Or at least, that’s his usual excuse. At the end of the day Joker only ever comes after the people in Bruce’s care because he thinks it will mess with his mind. If Camila can strike out on her own, if she can get out of the way before Joker wreaks any more havoc…

“Take the cross,” Bruce tells her. His stomach lurches with pre-emptive guilt.
“Like I wasn’t going to anyway.”

It takes no more than five minutes to ready themselves. Camila packs as much tinned food as she can carry along with one of Bruce’s spare water bottles and together they move the altar to expose the grate.

Bruce pulls the grate away and stares down into the crypt. It’s a considerable drop, Camila letting out a soft ‘oof’ as she hits the stone floor. She looks up at him and her face is the only part of her that’s visible in the encroaching dark. She reaches up, holding out a set of keys. “The lock at the top right, then the middle one and the bolts on the bottom of both door.

Bruce nods and takes the keys. “Thank you. For everything.”

“Yeah, well. Thanks for nothing.” Camila steps into the dark. “Good luck, Thomas.”

The grating slides back into place and the carpet and altar follow suit. With the candles out and the cross absent the church looks pitiful, the soul dragged down into the crypt along with Camila.

There’s no time to mourn the spark of life in lifeless buildings. Bruce shoulders his pack and makes for the door. Matching keys to locks takes him a minute but the hinges barely make a sound when they swing open.

Outside the morning is bright and warm. It could be a normal day in small town America, the sleepy joy of an early summer rendering the residents sluggish and slow to leave their houses. A handful of crows are screeching from the treetops, surely not all that loud though they sound like a cacophony to Bruce.

He thinks he can hear something shifting in the undergrowth. He thinks he can hear someone laughing.

He moves cautiously, eyes peeled for something hiding amongst the foliage. In the grey landscape of Gotham, The Joker had always stood out like a sore thumb but bright green hair is less of a liability when the landscape matches you almost perfectly.

Gravel crunches under his boots and the crows disperse in a flutter of wings. Bruce scans the edges of the graveyard, looking for some indication of where Camila might come out. He makes his way back along the path till he can see the lines of the jester painted on the east wing. There are no new S symbols decorating the church, approximated or accurate.

Nothing has changed but something is about to. The suspense is torturous. Bruce doesn’t know where to start looking, away from home and out of his element. He starts with the gate, tracing the path he had trod the day before until he comes to the steps leading up to the graveyard.

His feet hit the top step and he doesn’t need to wonder to know that the stone wasn’t this lose yesterday. Shock claws its way up Bruce’s windpipe but is lost below the racket of the ensuing explosion.

Bruce doesn’t turn in time to see the initial impact of the blast but he feels the force of it. It sends him flying down the stairs and tripping over his own feet till he lands on his front on the opposite side of the street. He leaps up as fast as he is able, ears ringing, and looks towards the church in time to see the roof collapse in on itself as fire begins to lick around the spire.

It looks like the explosives were hidden in the rafters, which means that if Camila is fast she has a good chance of making it out before the crypt caves in. Bruce could kick himself, he used to be better than this. A year ago there’s no way he would have failed to consider the possibility that Joker
was hiding his grand entrance just out of reach.

Opposing instincts fight it out for preferential treatment. The human instinct to flee versus Batman’s instinct to rush into the fray. He’s sure now that the laughter ringing in his ears is not a trick of his imagination. This is real, this is a problem he will never escape.

A second explosion to the south stops the fight between Bruce and Batman short. It sounds close and sure enough, when Bruce reaches the end of the street and gets a look back the way he had come the day before, he sees far greater damage than what was done to the church. No fewer than five houses have been torn from their foundations, leaving a chasm in the middle of the road that would take weeks to fill under the best of circumstances. He thinks he sees bodies on the other side but it’s hard to tell at this distance.

No sooner has he caught his breath than another blast sounds to the west, close enough to send Bruce stumbling forward once again, leaving him at a crossroads with two routes closed off to him. The explosion cuts through the graveyard and though the church is retaining remarkable structural integrity the fire is burning hot enough that it will all go up in smoke soon enough.

Bruce thinks of Camila, stumbling through the dark, the western end of the graveyard about to be engulfed by the wreckage when the church inevitably falls. He dashes back the way he came, disoriented by the barrage of sound but still able to stand. Peering through the fire he thinks he can see something moving, grey hair and a black cassock. He has all of a moment to imagine Camila’s eyes burning bright enough to cut across the flames, then the cracking of tarmac and cement heralds another explosion to the north.

With a great heaving and tearing, the church crumbles in on its own foundations, dragging half the graveyard with it. Bruce is all but surrounded by fire and noise. This town will not stay standing for much longer.

The road east is the only route passable, which means that’s the path designed for him to take and he is likely walking straight into a trap. For lack of another option, Bruce wills his teeth not to turn to jelly and psyches himself up for the worst as he follows the trail set before him.

His sprint soon mellows to a jog. When he’s far enough out that he can no longer feel the residual heat from the flames, Bruce stops, breathing heavier than he would care to admit as he collapses onto the pavement. His pulse is racing, still trying to decide if he really saw Camila through the chaos. Looking back the way he came he can see smoke rising from the town centre. He supposes he should count it as a positive that nothing else has blown up since he started running.

Even through the ringing in his ears, the sound of laughter is clear and high in the warm spring air. Bruce’s fists are clenched in the gauntlets, spine wound tight enough to snap. Moving back towards the residential part of town sets him even further on edge, questioning every movement through the once so perfectly tailored front gardens. The Joker always did like to strike where his presence was most incongruous, except for when he wanted to make a spectacle of himself, which was always.

Bruce pinches the bridge of his nose. Rationalising Joker is pointless, not that that’s ever stopped him from trying.

There’s a buddleia bush across the road, lit up with purple flowers. Something shifts around its base and Bruce swears he can see the outline of a man hiding beneath the branches.

There’s a beat of total silence, Bruce’s hearing too dulled to catch the residual sounds of destruction drifting over from the town centre and any birds that have survived on the edges of civilisation have returned to their nests. Then laughter shatters the scene into its component atoms. Not the mocking,
far off laughter that has followed Bruce for the past two days but something visceral and present and entirely too loud.

“Oh darling!”

Bruce’s head whips round to follow the sound of that voice, stomach falling even as the music swells within his breast.

Chapter End Notes

Bruce Wayne being a bit soft and bad at life when he first wakes up is one of your five a day.
Warning: This chapter contains a fairly gruesome murder, and detailed descriptions of mutilated dead bodies.

Joker hasn’t aged a day, white skin stretched the same as ever over the bare bones of his skull. He smiles at Bruce, a caricature of warmth that looks like jagged ice ready to tear limb from limb. He looks waifish without his lipstick but his hair and eyes are still violently green and even at a distance Bruce can see danger catching between his teeth. He’s lent against the side of the house, sheltered from the sun by his shadow. He wears matching purple suit trousers and waistcoat paired with a deep green dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a black bowtie. It’s extraordinarily well put together, not a scratch on him and not a thread out of place.

In one hand, Joker has a throat, in the other a knife ready to make the killing stroke. Bruce looks to the victim, straining to free herself from her captor and she looks back at him, pleading.

It’s Pockets.

Bruce’s stomach drops even as he starts running through plans of attack. He knows, with the dull certainty of a Gothamite faced with their worst nightmare, that there’s almost no chance of her getting out of this alive. He opens his mouth to speak and almost apologises to her.

He catches himself at the last moment, turning his attention to Joker. “Let her go.” His voice echoes off the surrounding houses, pathetic and strained. Bruce sounds tired, like he’s already given up.

Joker’s still smiling but his brow droops into a frown. “C’mon, Batsy. One more time, with feeling.”

There are two batarangs in Bruce’s pocket. If he can get to his feet and get them free without Joker realising he might be able to knock the clown out before he can do any serious damage. There’s no way he’s going to be allowed enough time to retrieve the grappling gun from his pack and the distance between the two of them is too great to clear with any speed.

It’s probably not going to work, he can almost guarantee. That kind of thinking does nothing to increase his chances of success, however and Bruce forces himself to enter the state of mind he used to occupy so readily as Batman, back when everything and anything seemed possible. He gets to his feet with calculated nonchalance and uses the fraction of a second that his body is angled away from Joker to pull a batarang from his pocket.

“Let her go.” This time Bruce sounds confident, like if Joker doesn’t do as he’s told he will be forced into cooperating.

As if brute force ever bothered Joker. He tips back his head and laughs, the knife slipping at Pockets’ neck so that a thin line of blood starts soaking into her collar.

Pockets whimper, Bruce fights the creeping blackness in his gut.

Joker’s laugh cuts off abruptly and he snaps back to attention. “That’s more like it, love. Now, why
don’t you show me just what you’re willing to do to make me let go.” His tongue slips out to wet his non-existent lips and he presses his fingers into the cut on Pockets’ neck.

Some nights it seems that The Joker is the only thing Bruce has left to dream about. The way his laugh, his smile, his whole being permeates every corner of his night terrors until they’re dripping purple paint. He prides himself on his attention to detail, spotting things that other people would miss at first glance and he’s spent so long looking at that face that, if he had an ounce of artistic talent, he could paint it from memory.

He’d forgotten how it always startled him, how cruel and wild The Joker always looks. The clown is more than a face, more than a person. He is the changing air of a legend made reality, a bed time story gone wrong. Bruce wishes he were rotting in the belly of Gotham.

Out of practice as he is, Bruce is still fast with the batarang. It’s a good throw, he knows as soon as his fingers slip off the metal that it’s going to land right where he intends it to.

He’s so focused on the projectile that he misses The Joker. Hatefuly fast and with a wicked sense of timing. It’s easy to forget, between the theatrics and the advanced chemical weaponry, that he cuts a formidable figure in a physical fight and is a whole lot faster than anything that goofy looking should be.

So the batarang sails through the air, right where Joker’s head had been a split second before. It’s where Bruce wanted it to land, but the mark is gone.

Once he’s done gawping at the empty air, Bruce sees that Joker’s done nothing more than sidestep the batarang, his fingers all the tighter around Pocket’s neck.

“Oh no, that won’t do. That won’t do at all. Care to have another crack at me? Oo! I know, we’ll make a game of it. Best of three.” Joker’s eyes gleam wicked over his smile. Pockets looks like she’s having trouble breathing.

Bruce flies forward, trusting that Joker would rather meet him in the middle of an out and out brawl than try to back out of a fight. He’s not disappointed, and when he reaches out to grab a fistful of acid green hair he doesn’t miss his mark.

“That’s more like it!” Joker cackles, before swinging his right arm out, knife in hand as he slashes in Bruce’s direction.

On anyone else it would be an overextension resulting in a broken arm but Joker snaps back into position as soon as the blade has torn through Bruce’s shirt. He’s not precious about the cotton, but Joker cuts a line dangerously close to his armpit and he leaps back, berating himself for not being more careful.

He’s out of practice. The lack or armour doesn’t help but Bruce knows that a year ago he would have stayed the course and kept hold of Joker regardless. Underprepared and unfocused, hair slips between the fingers of the gauntlet like so much water, leaving nothing but a few green strands to remember The Joker by.

The batarang, Bruce’s attempt to get a hold of Joker, Joker’s strike with the knife. Best of three. When Joker plays games he doesn’t mess around. Before Bruce can tell him to stop the knife is back at Pockets’ throat, pressing down hard, tugging against the skin. Blood gushing down her front and onto the pavement.

She doesn’t manage so much as a scream, though her eyes go wide in shock when the knife severs
her windpipe and she lets out a horrific gurgling sound. Joker sends her off with a single bark of laughter, pushing her body forward before any of her blood can stain his suit.

Pockets lies in a rapidly growing pool of her own blood. Her limbs twitch like a dying insect and Bruce knows she’s gone, her muscles caught in a grim parody of movement as they settle into rictus. He’s partly disappointed that he failed to save her, mostly glad that she went quickly.

Scratch that, he’s all blind fury, familiar though he hasn’t experienced it in over a year. Every instinct he’s developed for fighting street gangs tells him to swing hard and fast so that’s what he does and just like always his fists can’t hit home. Joker dodges and ducks, impossibly quick, giggling to himself like this is a private joker between the two of them.

“You didn’t have to kill her!” Bruce roars when the fifth blow in a row fails to make contact.

Joker looks at Bruce like he’s the most ridiculous thing he’s ever seen. “I didn’t have to do anything, darling. It’s like comedy. No one has to commit to it but we all have a lot more fun when people do.”

“She was a kid.”

“And you’re a big old grown up.” Joker grins, going tow to avoid a kick to the gut. When he straightens up he’s pulled a wrench out of nowhere, clutched tight between spiderlike fingers.

Joker has always been fast. Luckily for Bruce, so has Batman.

“If you can dodge a wrench, you can dodge a ball,” Joker singsongs as he hurls the tool at Bruce’s face.

Bruce can dodge a ball. The wrench nearly catches his shoulder but nearly isn’t worth jack in this game. The gratifying thrill of a near miss reawakens something, more than the clown induced rage he’s learned to live without, more than his disgust at the casual murder of teenagers. If you want to win a fight like this, you need to be more alert than you ever would be otherwise, you have to be faster, stronger, better. Beyond better, you have to be your best.

You have to listen very carefully to what Joker says and assume he is simultaneously unaware that words have any meaning at all and that he’s telling you everything. The word that stands out to Bruce is ‘ball’.

When Joker reaches into his pocket to withdraw what looks like a little green bouncy ball, Bruce is ready for him. The moment in which Joker makes his move he’s at his weakest, because that’s the moment he’s more focused on what he’s doing than on what’s happening in the rest of the world. It’s a fact the clown uses against everyone, that their strikes are little more than openings for someone to step in and attack. Bruce loves using that knowledge against him.

Like now, Bruce sees the hand go to the pocket and by the time he’s caught sight of the ball his fingers are about to close over Joker’s wrist. This time, he’s too close for his quarry to wriggle free but for a split second he imagines that he will grab a hold of Joker only to watch him turn to dust beneath his hand.

Of course, this is the clown prince of crime, the ace of knaves. The limitations placed on one limb won’t stop the rest. No matter how Bruce tries to twist the arm in his grasp, the bone doesn’t snap and Joker doesn’t let go of the ball.

He’s so bendy, Bruce had forgotten that, like a slapstick cartoon some to life. Joker manages to maintain his balance even as he twists one leg around Bruce’s, locking them both in position as he brings his free hand up to snatch at the nape of his captor’s neck.
His fingers are frigid, pressing light enough to tickle. Bruce has himself under control but he’s always been ticklish and he very nearly startles. Very nearly is all Joker needs. He tugs forward with the leg he has wrapped around Bruce’s and sends them both tumbling to the ground.

Bruce falls hard, The Joker’s body pinned between him and the concrete.

“Is this the part where we get more intimately reacquainted?” Joker lurches into Bruce’s personal space and tilts his head like he’s going in for a kiss.

It wouldn’t be the first time. Whether as a distraction tactic or just because he enjoys it, Bruce has been in the unfortunate position of having to wipe the clown’s lipstick off his face no fewer than four times. He has no desire to repeat the experience, even sans lipstick, but he has enough presence of mind to twist his head rather than pull back and give his opponent room to move.

Cold lips press against the point where his cheek meets the cowl. Joker lets out a high-pitched flurry of laughs. “What’s wrong? Don’t you find me attractive anymore?”

Bruce glances down and sees that Joker still has the ball clutched in his right hand. He’s got the upper hand here and judging by the nervous note creeping into the clown’s laugh, he knows it. There’s still a hand pressed to the back of Bruce’s neck but if it had a hope in hell of disarming him it would have done so by now.

Bruce grabs a handful of Joker’s hair, giving him leverage to slam his head into the concrete. It takes a couple of tries but the clown eventually goes limp, muscles relaxing into a stupor.

Except for the hand holding the ball. Bruce needs to keep an eye on that. He has no idea how long it’s going to take Joker to come round but unless he’s seriously miscalculated the strength of the blow he’d estimate he has two minutes to secure the prisoner. He looks around for something to tie him up with and spots the familiar green of a plastic washing line through the alleyway leading to the back garden. He dashes to the post it’s tied to and rips it down, scattering pegs across a lawn that was probably once kept neat.

It looks like it had been a nice neighbourhood, the kind of place cable TV took great delight in mistaking for Stepford. The matching patio furniture and solar powered lighting for the flower beds haven’t entirely lost their charm. Bruce can practically see Dick laid out on the sofa, watching something about a place just like this featuring a robotic housewife in her mid-thirties grinning ear to ear and offering her guests cookies.

It might be funny, if Dick weren’t most likely dead.

Bruce rushes back to Joker and rolls him onto his side to tie his arms behind his back. Complex knots will do more to slow him down than actually restrain him, but that doesn’t stop Bruce from revising every trick in the boy scout handbook. He’s got a few metres of twine to play with, and digging up long unused binding methods is a good mental workout.

He binds Joker’s hands to his ankles, which are then bound to each other. Bruce is careful with how he tightens the length of twine that links one end of the clown to the other, trying to account for ease of transport and maintain good blood flow throughout his body. He has no desire to play nurse in the wake of a mistakenly applied tourniquet.

Once satisfied that he’s done all he can with the available materials, Bruce peels Joker’s fingers back from the bouncy ball. He’s relieved to see that it’s definitely made of rubber and doesn’t appear to have a pin or trigger. Holding it up to the light, however, Bruce can see liquid moving at its centre. If he had to guess he’d say it’s probably part of a Joker toxin.
A soft whimper alerts Bruce to the fact that Joker is coming to. He throws the ball into the bottom of the pack and swings it back over his shoulders.

Then he has to deal with The Joker. Bound like this there’s no way he’s walking on his own so Bruce is going to have to carry him. His options are bridal style or a fireman’s lift.

Fireman’s lift it is. Bruce folds Joker over his right shoulder before getting to his feet, putting his buttocks next to Bruce’s ear and his feet down his front. The clown grunts in discomfort but he doesn’t say a word, clearly not properly awake.

Bruce had forgotten how deceptively light The Joker is. All the same, carrying him all the way back to Gotham is going to be uncomfortable and unwieldy. He supposes he’s under no obligation to take him along, he could leave Joker here and within the hour he could be loose. He could be another town’s problem, playing in the washed-out remnants of small town America, fully embracing his status as a piece of folklore and fighting of street gangs wherever he goes.

Joker would probably like that, Bruce thinks, if only he could get over his obsession with the Batman, if only he could get over Gotham.

No one gets over Gotham, not once it’s worked its way under the skin. It would be hypocritical of Bruce to leave Joker by the side of the road and expect him to find a new life somewhere far from his hometown. If he doesn’t take the clown back with him, he’ll come anyway. Better he be kept under lock and key than trusted to find his own way home.

Bruce turns to leave and is shocked to find Pockets still lying in the driveway with her neck carved open. He’d almost forgotten she was there, just another dead kid in a country of dead children. Her blood has pooled and run down the driveway to collect in the nooks and crannies of the pavement tarmac. He forces himself to look at her as he passes, letting anger and pragmatism temper each other into something he can work with. She’ll still be warm, her muscles not quite completely under the spell of rigor mortis. She looks to be in her late teens, probably one of the other members of the gang she had run with, a pseudo parental figured who’s absence will be felt by the community she leaves behind.

Only she wasn’t left behind, she was taken. Bruce tears his eyes away and sidesteps the stream of blood. He makes his way back to the road any heads east.

One of the great advantages of the New England countryside is how heavily wooded it is. There’s no great forest trailing up the East Coast like there is in the North West but there’s enough for some decent cover. Bruce can make for the trees then move from copse to cops. This close to Metropolis and he guesses Gotham’s got to be about a two week walk away.

Two weeks till home. After a year spent trekking through jungles and desert and who knows what else. It sounds too good to be true. He craves skyscrapers and smog and endless rain in a way he has always freely admitted to, knowing that it makes him look a bit odd.

Joker slurs out something that sounds like it was intended to be words. He wriggles his feet, testing the limits of his restraints and when he finds his range of movement is limited to a few millimetres he lets out a sound that is far more recognisably a giggle.

Bruce doesn’t pay him any attention. Two weeks to Gotham means two weeks of having to put up with Joker and he refuses to make that task any harder than it already is.

After five minutes’ curious wriggling, Joker settles. He’s laughing to himself, under his breath but just loud enough to be heard. It sets Bruce’s teeth on edge, makes him want to start looking over his
shoulder despite the fact he’s already caught the most dangerous thing he might find eyeing up his back.

The edge of town is fast approaching before Joker tries to sleep again. “I said, aren’t you going to bury her?”

A proper burial hadn’t even occurred to Bruce, not that he has time to feel guilty about it. He hasn’t buried any of the other bodies he’s encountered heading north. “No.”

“Heh. Some hero you are.” Joker hums. “What happened? End of the world beat the goody two shoes out of you?”

“World’s still here.”

“Yes, I suppose it is. Your super boyfriend whatshisface isn’t though.”

Bruce’s heart clenches the way it always does when someone has the gall to remind him that Clark really is gone. People say it as an afterthought, like the destruction of American Gods is a fact of life best gotten over quickly. The hope if this nation, this planet even, was built on shaky enough grounds when it’s avatar walked amongst them.

Joker would laugh at that, so Bruce skips the lecture. “Superman might-“

“He’s not.”

“You don’t-“

“Honey, please. I’ve been to Metropolis. Have you been to Metropolis?” Joker waits a beat for Bruce not to reply. “That’s what I thought. It was like a great big model village. A model city, only I was the tiny one. Wish I’d had a working camera on me, looking back. I had a lot of fun playing in that sandbox. It’s funny, you know, as I was approaching the city I kept running into these gangs of kids, you know the sort. They wanted to go in to loot or party or fuck or whatever it is kids do these days, but a few miles out they just sort of-“ Joker blows a raspberry. “Human bean juice, the lot of them. The radiation over there is something wicked.”

He laughs, hard enough that his body jerks under Bruce’s grip and it’s an effort to keep him balanced. He could well be lying about going to Metropolis. Bruce doesn’t see why he would, but that hasn’t stopped Joker in the past. The idea that the radiation around the city is so strong it can stop the resistant in their tracks is troubling and pervasive. The idea that Joker is so resistant he can approach ground zero unharmed is hardly surprising.

The reach the outer edge of town without Joker managing anything more troublesome than a loud and irritatingly conspicuous giggle here and there. He’s not exactly going to be a stealth asset. Bruce starts to strategise how best to get a gag into his mouth.

Bruce would be happy to leave town and never look back if Joker didn’t start laughing a breathless cackle as they cross the boundary. On the one hand, the clown needs no encouraging. On the other, anything provoking that sort of reaction in him is something Bruce needs to see.

Bracing himself for the worst but unable to brace himself hard enough, Bruce turns to look back. His eyes slip from the wall marking the border between the town and the woods to the body propped up against it. It’s Baseball Bat, her belly ripped open and her guts missing, leaving a great gaping cavity that’s attracting an impressive swarm of flies. Her hands have been bent back at odd angles, fingers twisting into unnatural shapes and her head has been hacked clean off her shoulders, leaving behind the fraying stump of her neck.
It’s only possible to tell that it’s her because her head has been placed in her lap. The whites of her eyes stare Bruce down from underneath a thick mat of dried blood.

Bruce doesn’t flinch, but it’s a near thing. Joker is positively howling with laughter, even as he assesses the scene. The grass has been smoothed down a few feet north and on the other side of the wall specks of blood mark the way she came. It’s clear that the body was dragged here.

“I thought I did a pretty good job with her the first time round, but this-“ Joker cuts himself off with another peal of laughter.

Cold settles over Bruce’s chest. Of course this was the clown’s doing. There’s not enough space in this town for a gang war that large and Baseball Bat had appeared to be in charge of her own range of mooks just yesterday. It’s unlikely she was executed for insubordination. Joker didn’t bring her out here though, that much is obvious. It’s hard to read over the black lettering of the sign hanging over the road to divert traffic that no longer exists, but Welcome to Constance has been crossed out, replaced with a message written in blood.

*We know that you killed her and we’re coming for you*

Only then does Bruce remember the baseball bat, left back in the vestry where it was blown to smithereens along with the church.

Chapter End Notes

There is a Watchmen reference in this chapter - your mission is to find it
The first thing Bruce does once they’ve found some decent cover amongst the trees is gag Joker. He rips a sleeve from his t-shirt and balls it up in the clown’s mouth, tying it in place with the loose end of the cord. It does nothing to stop him laughing beyond muffling the sound and he stares up at Bruce from where he’s been propped up against a tree with eyes that speak of a deep-seated self-satisfaction.

It’s times like this that Jason or Damian would have made a comment about the unnecessary rigidity of Batman’s ‘do not kill’ policy. If Bruce didn’t have it in him to kill Joker any of the other hundred times he’s discovered him doing something awful there’s no way he’s up to the task right now.

Tim had once set up an algorithm that calculated how many lives would have been saved had various supervillains been taken out at specific points in their careers, accounting for how they contributed to the schemes of their peers and how many additional births might have taken place has potential parents not been killed. He’d claimed it was a theoretical exercise, something to keep his mind active during a time of relative peace in Gotham but Bruce could practically hear him crunching the numbers the next time they were trying to get Clayface behind bars.

Bruce himself had never taken a look at the final data. He hadn’t wanted to know then and he doesn’t want to know now. Not because he doesn’t think Jason and Damian had a point but because looking at the problem in that much detail would feel an awful lot like admitting guilt. The Joker has killed hundreds, possibly even thousands of people and like a good martyr Batman will accept the responsibility for those crimes on an emotional level but he’s far too rational to pretend that he’s directly to blame.

It must be murder on his knees, but Joker manages to keep himself upright. With the gag in place his grin is almost entirely vanished and the lack of rouge to mark his lips makes him look like he has a great gaping hole in his face where his mouth should be. The front of his shirt is ruffled from where he had lain across Bruce’s shoulder but otherwise he still looks presentable. Trouble slides right off him, and is transfixed by him and is started by him. A neat little paradox that the clown no doubt enjoys. Up close and with time to go looking for detail, Bruce can see that his hair is longer than it had been the last time they fought back in Gotham and he’s sporting the faint but unmistakeable shadows of weariness below his eyes.

What is there in this world that could tire out The Joker? Bruce has seen him laugh as his clothes burnt off his skin, has pushed him in front of moving vehicles knowing that he’ll walk it right off. He’s lived with the assumption that Joker is unflappable and has never had cause to rethink that stance.

The Joker has killed kids in the last twenty four hours. If he has a sob story it can wait.

Bruce needs to decide what he’s going to do with him, both in the short term and on the road to Gotham. Right now, he just wants to hit him. And Joker is all tied up, looking not quite like his usual self but close enough, laughing around a wad of cloth. He looks up through eyes that Bruce has
spent years trying to find a non-romantic descriptor for. The best he’s ever managed is ‘acidic’ but he’s had Joker holding beakers of corrosive substances over his head, whispering sweet nothings about the pain of melting flesh and rebirth too many times for that to pass muster.

Joker watches confusion pass over Bruce’s face and laughs himself out hard enough that he has to pause to suck air through the fabric of the makeshift gag.

With the clown bound and gagged, it’s as good a moment as any to pat him down to be sure that he’s not carrying anything more dangerous than a fluid filled bouncy ball. Crouching down in front of him, Bruce starts probing Joker’s pockets and the clown reacts like he’s ticklish, jerking violently enough that when Bruce searches his sides for weapon he loses his balance and goes crashing to the ground.

If he weren’t gagged he would probably be saying some awful things. Bruce tries not think about it, the insinuations that their relationship was less than professional, Joker pushing his way into his personal space at the most uncomfortable moments. He sticks his hands into Joker’s trouser pockets and pulls out a straight razor and a pack of playing cards.

When he reaches round to pat down Joker’s behind, as cold and calculated as possible, Bruce makes the mistake of glancing at his captive’s face. The clown wiggles his eyebrows suggestively, moves around in his bindings like he’s trying to grind into Bruce’s touch. He doesn’t need to say a thing.

“Stop that,” Bruce snaps, like it will make a blind bit of difference. Joker lets out a strangled screech that would probably pass for a grating cackle if not for the gag and keeps shuffling backwards, seeking his touch.

It’s a relief to be done with him. All Bruce finds is the switchblade, the cards and a strip of bubble-gum that he doesn’t trust isn’t chemically altered. He throws everything into the bottom of the back and makes a mental note to burn the gum and cards the first chance he gets.

Joker feigns upset at having his toys taken away, eyes welling up with comically overblown emotion that does nothing to curb his laughter.

“Not like you ever needed tools to cause mayhem,” Bruce mutters. He tugs Joker back into a sitting position and hoists him back over his shoulder. He takes in the angle of the sun and starts heading north. Another three days in this direction and he can turn east.

The walk is hard work, made harder by the extra weight Bruce is carrying. Joker seems to gain pounds by the minute and though Bruce knows that’s just muscle fatigue catching up with him, it has him daydreaming about walking Joker back to Gotham on a leash. There’s a lot of daylight left for them to use, not to mention the few hours Bruce will spend on his feet once the sun dips below the horizon. So much has happened since he woke that the day feels unnaturally stretched out. The rumbling of the tumble drier, the smell of coffee. It feels like something that happened to someone else, in another lifetime. Not something that happened to him that morning.

The memory keeps corrupting into ash and charred tarmac, the half-imagined figure of Camila vanishing into the smoke. Thinking about her gets him thinking about Alfred, which starts Bruce off down a slippery slope. Dick, Jason, Barbara, Tim, Kate, Cassie, Stephanie, Harper, Luke, Jean Paul, Helena, Duke… Memories are one thing but the weight of speculation is too much. He keeps telling himself that it’s likely at least one of them was resistant to the radiation but once he starts he can’t stop wondering which one of them it might be. He discards Alfred, Dick, Barbara and Kate off the bat. They’re all above the ages that resistance regularly occurs in.

Joker makes a noise around the gag. Bruce comes to from a domestic daydream he hadn’t realised
he’d been having and finds they have come to the edge of a copse of trees. He glances round, temporarily disoriented. Looking back he can see the path he had taken through the forest and the smoke still rising back in Constance. It could take days for the fire to burn down and the dust to settle. He wonders what happens to gangs of street kids that lose their leader.

Bruce ducks back into the trees and sees S symbols painted on every second trunk. He doesn’t like it. He likes it even less that Joker keeps straining against his bindings to get a better look at them, making it hard to keep him balanced.

“We need to get out of here,” Bruce says, mostly to himself. He pushes on, unsure how far the treeline will stretch, till he comes across what looks to be a camp.

Perhaps ‘camp’ is too generous an epithet. There’s a rather sad little twig built structure that could maybe pass for a shelter and a blackened patch of ground where a fire had once been. It looks like it’s been uninhabited for some time. Bruce crouches to peer into the shelter and finds it empty, no supplies or personal effects.

Joker makes a noise of discomfort at having to twist himself around Bruce’s shoulder at this angle. Bruce doesn’t move for a full thirty seconds, just to spite him, before lurching to his feet with uncharacteristic gracelessness. He tries not to take too much pleasure in the clown’s grunts but it’s honestly the least he deserves.

They both still when the sound of something moving echoes through the trees, trying to stay hidden as it approaches. Their camouflage might be good, but these kids aren’t particularly subtle.

Batman has always been good at keeping quiet and shadows are all the camouflage he needs. Bruce abandons the camp and starts moving further into the trees, carefully avoiding dried twigs and treading softly. Joker is still a massive liability, but when he stops at the treeline Bruce can’t hear their pursuer anymore, so they’ve either lost them or the children have changed tactics. Regardless, it seems unlikely that they won’t be hearing from them again. It doesn’t do to write out threats in blood that you can’t follow through on.

There are some miles between them and the next patch of trees, the landscape dissolving into patchwork stretching off to the horizon. The hedges bordering the fields are still unbroken lines, but the crops they contain have grown wild. It’s mostly corn round here, the new shoots just starting to gain height amongst the stalks that were never harvested last autumn. Carefully hoed lines have been broken by the scattering of seeds and the collapse of old stalks under their own weight and a few rogue plants have started making their way up the hill. In a few years’ time, they’ll meet the treeline and the distinction between forestry and agriculture will be gone for good.

Down south people had still farmed, back where the radiation hadn’t completely destroyed the adult population like it has in the north east. Bruce has been counting, and assuming that Camila had to travel at least a hundred miles north or east to reach the church, the only person he’s encountered over the age of twenty-five to survive the initial fallout zone is Joker.

Farm houses are scattered through the fields, shining white in the afternoon sun, machinery sitting unused in their driveways. They’re tempting, farmers tended to preserve the excess fruits of their labour and whilst that usually means pickling it can really take the edge off a diet of tinned vegetables. The trouble is that farm houses are built sturdy. They’re excellent places for a person to make a home and the chances of the locals not taking first dibs on what’s available seem pretty slim. If he didn’t have Joker with him, Bruce might risk a raid, but as things stand he has to admit that the chances of someone getting the jump on them are too high. Maybe once he’s back in Gotham he can come back out into the countryside and pick through farm houses for anything left behind. He can start his own farm in Harlow Park; neat rows of carrots rising against the skyline, fighting decades of
heavy pollution. The image is so bizarre Bruce allows himself a bark of laughter that he immediately regrets when Joker starts twitching through a giggle fit of his own.

“Keep quiet!” Bruce scolds. He ignores the sound Joker responds with that sounds suspiciously like ‘hypocrite’.

Across the farmland, just shy of the next block of trees, a smaller holding is just visible against the encroaching green. It’s difficult to be sure at this distance but it doesn’t look like a farm and its distinctly human architecture makes it as good a spot as any to use as a location marker. Bruce takes note of how it’s positioned compared to the surrounding fields, then sets off down the hill.

The lack of uniform lines in the crops combined with negotiating Joker’s bulk makes the trek a harder one than Bruce was anticipating. It doesn’t help that corn stalks are too thick to plough through like he would with rape or barley. The corn is high enough to provide decent cover but it’s such an effort to move through it that anyone with a vantage point will be able to track them by the movement of the stalks.

Joker’s laughter had faded to irregular grunting that, judging by the way he jerks with each one, punctuate him getting hit in the face by the corn. It’s some small comfort, but soon the rustling of the corn behind them starts to drown out Bruce’s footsteps.

“Are they following us?” Bruce asks, like Joker’s in a position to answer. The clown rocks forward in parody of a nod. Sure enough, when Bruce stops it’s possible to pick out the sound of footfall through the foliage behind them.

There’s a crack as a stalk hits bare flesh, accompanied by a yelp that doesn’t belong to The Joker. Bruce presses on, forcing the corn aside and ignoring Joker’s muffled protests when he gets hit all the harder for it. In an ideal world, Bruce would have a machete with him right now, or he would have at least not buried the switch blade at the bottom of his pack.

Or he wouldn’t have left the baseball bat back at the church.

They come to the first hedge and Bruce has to rethink his strategy. He can see a few holes in the bottom of the brush that were made with children in mind. He’s much too big to fit through, even if he isn’t as thick set as he had been a year ago. The hedge rises almost to his chin, making vaulting it impossible, so he swings Joker off his shoulder and dumps him unceremoniously on top of the shrubs before clawing his own way up and over to the other side. With his feet back on the ground, he swings his charge back onto his shoulder and keeps moving. When he glances back, he thinks he can see the corn moving.

What are you so afraid of? He dares ask himself as he pushes the corn aside as fast as he is able. That’s Batman talking, unafraid and used to dealing with so much worse. They’re just kids.

But they’re not just kids, they are the last stragglers of humanity and their bodies have born the weight of the apocalypse and survived. They have had something taken from them and they are made strong by their fury.

What really makes them dangerous is that when Bruce looks at them he still sees children. Sees Damian, Cassie and Duke staring back at him, remembers how small Dick had been when he first arrived at the Manor. There’s no way Bruce can bring himself to hit them hard enough that they’ll stay down.

You hit them just fine back in town. Batman reminds him. Bruce grits his teeth. Pockets and Baseball Bat had been older, the kids caught in the crossfire were unfortunate accidents. He had been enough
to subdue them then, but he can almost guarantee that it will take more than a couple of unconscious generals to settle the score this time.

The corn parts slowly but surely, interspersed with hedges that have to be crossed. Every hedge they come to has the same hole in the bottom and Bruce has to wonder if they were made by the children from Constance or whoever’s currently residing in the farm houses. Maybe they consider themselves one mighty tribe, the town and the fields coming together in perfect symbiosis.

Bruce loses count of how many hedges they’ve jumped, but they’ve spent some time on the run before he thinks to check on his captive. He swings Joker onto the crest of the next hedge to get a better look at him and sees where the corn has scratched and bruised his skin. He can almost guarantee that all signs of injury will be gone by nightfall.

All the same, Joker looks furious. His eyes flash danger and his teeth clench around the shirt sleeve in his mouth. His clothes are miraculously untorn but his hair is full of leaves and dust and somewhere along the line his bowtie has come undone.

He could have it so much worse. “You alright?” Bruce asks, repressing the urge to smile.

Joker nods, a strained, jerky motion. Bruce swings himself over the hedge and they continue on their way.

From the angle of the sun, Bruce would have to guess it’s been about three house since they left the trees. He’s kept them moving as fast as he can but he hasn’t lost track of their intended destination, so it’s a relief more than a surprise when they drop down over a final hedge and onto a road leading up towards a house.

It’s definitely not a farm house. Bruce can hear the children that have been following them moving through the corn but that’s only possible because everything is so quiet, the thrum of animal life he associates with the countryside nearly absent. Their pursuers are a way off catching up to them, which isn’t to say he and Joker aren’t fast running out of time.

Bruce sets off at a jog, revelling in the feel of tarmac below his feet. The closer they get, the more confident he is that he made the right choice bringing them out here. There’s a car in the drive that looks like it’s been picked over for useful components but no barns and no tractors. It’s a residential home, the kind of place middle class Gothamites used to drool over and upper class Gothamites would peer down their noses at. He steers them past the front door and takes them round to the back garden. When he looks over his shoulder he sees a figure emerging out out of the hedging and onto the road. They’re closer than Bruce was expecting, they must have known he was headed out this way.

The garden is extensive, stretching to the tree line and backing onto the woods. Like everything else that was once carefully managed, it’s become overgrown, an explosion of colour in every flower bed with what looks to be potatoes and onions growing further up the garden. Bruce can hear the cries of the children calling out to each other, coordinating an attack strategy. He needs to do something with Joker. They’ll be after him before anything else and working out how to fight them without seriously injuring them will be hard enough as it is. There’s a statue sitting in one of the flower beds closer to the house, a plaster replica of David. Bruce throws Joker against it and pulls the string from the bottom of a trellis to tie his bindings to the figure.

“Stay still and don’t make trouble,” Bruce tells him. Joker looks a mess, hair unkempt and skin bruised blue, the danger in his eyes still palpable even as he tries to smile around his gag. He starts laughing just as the children’s hubbub reaches an apex before going silent.
Bruce has just enough time to acknowledge the swooping in his gut telling him that this is going to go horribly wrong before a boy appears around the corner of the house. He can’t be older than twelve, his face still soft and his back straight. He stares Bruce down with admirable confidence, walking forwards until they’re barely two metres apart.

“I-“ Bruce starts, then realises he has nothing to say.

The boy scowls. “We said we were going to come for him, and here we are.” His eyes dart to Joker, who is struggling to breathe around his gag from laughing so hard. “Give us the clown and we’ll let you go.”

Bruce shakes his head. “I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

“You gave us food and water yesterday, you’ve earned a favour. This is the favour we’re offering.”

“I can’t accept.” Bruce points to Joker, “He’s nothing but trouble. I know he hurt your friend but you’re better off leaving him to me.”

“If that were true you would have killed him already.”

It seems pointless to quote his usual line about how cold-blooded murder is unforgivably awful, so Bruce doesn’t bother. In the silence, he can hear the children whispering, just out of sight and the mournful call of a dove, distant and achingly normal.

The boy steps towards him. “If you don’t give him to us, we’ll take him.”

“No, you won’t.” Bruce sighs. He settles into a defensive stance and readies himself for the first blow.

“Very well.”

The garden goes from deserted to uncomfortably full in an instant. Bruce doesn’t have time to take note of where the children are coming from, but they appear to rise from the earth like daisies. Twenty of them step onto the lawn in the blink of an eye and his stomach churns thinking about how he’s going to have to knock them all down.

First comes the boy, lunging at Bruce’s midsection. He’s pathetically weak and under different circumstances would be easy enough to mock for his hubris. Bruce hauls him back by the collar and uses his free hand to hit him hard enough to render him unconscious.

It’s easier after that, or at least, the animal part of his brain takes over and he doesn’t need to think too hard about what he’s doing. Bruce knocks out a girl in her late teens before she can lay a finger on him and bashes heads together with abandon. He’s sure it should be harder than this, not just the way his stomach isn’t falling every time he hits one of them but the fight itself. They’re coming at him slow, putting none of their weight where it needs to be. Once again, he’s seized by the desire to stop the fight and correct everyone’s stances before they continue.

He doesn’t spend too long daydreaming about training exercises. The fray may not be all that thick but it’s distracting enough to take his attention off Joker. Bruce doesn’t realise that the clown has gotten partially free of his bonds until he looks up and sees him standing in the middle of a flower bed.

Bruce’s heart turns to ice. He has no time to scream before Joker whips round, bringing the statue still tied to his wrists dangerously close to a girl’s face. There’s a sickening crunch as it makes contact, followed by stunned silence. Blood drips down the girl’s cheeks in great sheets, her eyes
going glossy before she crumples to the ground in a heap. Just like that, the fight is done.

You don’t need to be a doctor to see that she’s dead. Bruce barely notices the children pouring out of nowhere to scoop up their fallen friends as he lunges towards Joker in a rage so complete it’s a wonder his eyes don’t catch fire.

Joker’s nose sounds delightful when it breaks, the blood dripping from his nostrils matches perfectly with the scratches littering his face. There are things Bruce wants to say, awful, horrible things that won’t do a thing to cow the clown but might make him feel better if only he could get them out.

Around the blood and the gag in his mouth, Joker grins at Bruce. He appears completely unaffected by his broken nose, so Bruce hits him again and feels bone fragments mashing into each other beneath his fist. He doesn’t try to curb the sick pleasure he takes in sees flecks of red land on the black of the gauntlets.

Joker grunts in pain, still smiling but obviously dazed. He’s definitely conscious but he goes limp when Bruce gets a hold of the back of his neck and starts dragging him across the lawn like a ragdoll.

Bruce breathes heavy with anger and exhaustion, the image of the girl falling to the ground replaying over and over in his mind’s eye. He hadn’t been fast enough, or smart enough. He hadn’t been watching Joker carefully enough. Like so many deaths, this one is not his fault but he’s going to have to take responsibility for it because no one else will.

Joker is so preposterously light that even after carrying him for the better part of the afternoon, Bruce doesn’t realise he’s still holding the statue until they’re half way up the garden. He stops to kick it out of his hands but doesn’t want to watch it roll back down the garden. He doesn’t want to know if David’s hands are stained red.

He should really stop to dig up some of the vegetables growing in the flower beds, but cooking potatoes is hard when building a fire is almost always out of the question and onions are terrible by themselves. Bruce should go back into the house, see if he can find anything worth taking with him but he can’t bear to look back. There’s a sheet of tarpaulin propped up next to a greenhouse that’s more fruitless tomato plant than glass that might be useful though. Bruce grabs it with his free hand before heading for the treeline, trying very hard to ignore Joker’s laughter as he’s dragged across the grass.
Chapter 6

It puts undue strain on his biceps, but Bruce thinks it’s worth it for the two hours Joker spends being dragged across the forest floor. It might be a more successful punishment if the clown were at all phased by his treatment but it puts a few more tears in his suit and does wonders for the stress Bruce is carrying in his shoulders, so it feels like a win.

The ground is thick with decomposing plant matter, giving uncomfortably with every step. Bruce craves something sturdy, the neat grid system of his city to surround and support him. Nature is chaos that can be explained away if you so desire, but as long as he’s away from Gotham he’s out of his element. Which is ironic, really. Stephanie and Tim spent far too much time plugged into the internet for recreational reasons and it was hardly uncommon for him to catch them comparing results from online quizzes that were supposed to determine their Hogwarts house, their daemon, what their star signs said about them. They had been obsessed with people’s spirit elements for a while and had insisted that Bruce was earth.

Satisfying as it may be to know that Joker is feeling the full effects of woodland detritus scraping across whatever soft parts he has left, eventually he becomes too cumbersome to drag. Bruce pauses to retie the clown’s bindings, knotting and re-knotting until they’re as tight as he can make them. Joker glares at him, eyes sharp and unsmiling. The diminishing light casts his skin in grey shadows and makes the blood drenching the bottom half of his face and the top of his shirt look black. His nose is little more than a deformed heap on his face, though it will probably look good as new in a few days. He doesn’t have a healing factor, as far as Bruce can tell after years of blood tests and careful monitoring. Injuries don’t quite slide off Joker so much as progress at a pace entirely of his own design. Bruce has seen him walk off a broken leg in a couple of weeks and let open wounds fester for months on end.

Bruce hauls Joker back over his shoulder and continues through the woods. He doesn’t know how far the forest stretches, but he’s hoping they can stay behind the treeline for the best part of the next day. Having lost the children from Constance, he’d rather stay off their trail. A few days without incident and he’ll be satisfied that they’re in the clear.

If he had handed Joker over to them, Bruce would already be in the clear. He thinks about the position they left Baseball Bat in, the girl in the garden dropping to the ground with a smashed skull, forcing himself to focus on the bloodiest parts of those memories. He has to be clear with himself that Joker is responsible for all of that, and that none of that changes his right to keep living his wretched life.

Bruce’s hands tighten over Joker’s legs, the gauntlets biting hard enough to make his captive jump. He could have handed him over to the children, stood back and let them try to kill the clown only to get torn apart themselves.

He’s not sure which is worse, to let children become murderers or to rob them of their chance for revenge.

The cowl’s night vision, so carefully restored by a tech savvy farmer’s son down in Texas, have held up fine the past few months. Bruce activates them as the sun dips below the horizon and five minutes later he catches a pair of eyes reflecting infra-red through the trees. He’s already preparing an attack strategy when a fox steps out of the shadows, skinny but very much alive. It peers up at him with more curiosity than fear and Bruce is struck by the oddest compulsion to feed it. It gives him hope, that a predator might have survived this close to Metropolis.
The fox quickly loses interest in him and trots on. Bruce is unable to stop a smile creeping up his face.

He latches onto the idea of feeding wild animals. Bruce has no idea what Joker’s nutritional requirements are, his doctors at Arkham having torn their hair out for years trying to get him to so much as maintain a bodyweight let alone combat his chronic malnourishment. From junk food to highly regulated pro biotic diets, it never did any good. Joker always left incarceration skinnier than when he arrived.

There are S symbols painted on the trees, even out here. It’s unlikely that these are hangovers from Constance, they are ubiquitous for miles in every direction, not even letting up to mark the boundaries between one territory and another.

After dark, it’s easier to lose track of time so most nights Bruce winds up walking until he can’t walk anymore. Right now, exhaustion is creeping over him, compounded by stress and the extra weight he’s carrying. He grits his teeth and presses on, the longer he can ignore the question of what to do with Joker while he sleeps, the better and the longer he goes without sleep, the easier it is to let himself go on autopilot. He’s not thinking about direction or shelter of the practical limitations of trekking through the wilderness with his arch nemesis in tow, he’s not really thinking about anything. Often that’s the best he can manage, the peace that comes in letting his brain go quiet and the steady repetition of physical movement take over. It happened back in Gotham, too. Bruce staying up long after Alfred’s pleas that he sleep faded from the cave as he methodically cleaned his equipment.

It had been relaxing, but it had still been important work. Even when the family were all together, they were either working or pretending they weren’t thinking about work. The Sunday roasts Alfred would prepare every week, so good even Jason would put in semi-regular appearances, are some of the happiest memories Bruce has, but they’re not particularly calm. During the worst times, they would each take a plate down to the cave to discuss strategy over Yorkshire pudding.

A sound jerks Bruce out of his stupor, a low rumbling that sounds far too close for comfort. He immediately starts running through all the local wildlife that might make a noise such as that and has to concede that it’s not impossible that a bear could have survived out here. He stops, ears strained to catch the rustling of something in the undergrowth. Through the green of his night vision, he can’t see anything.

The rumbling growl comes again, it sounds like it’s directly behind him, so close that Bruce can almost feel the air shift. He turns through three hundred and sixty degrees, looking for eyes in the dark.

Nothing. The next time the sound echoes through the trees it sounds like the source is sitting on his shoulder. He looks up into the trees, trying to spot sleeping bears in the branches, hoping that it’s just snoring.

Snoring. Of course. Bruce doesn’t know whether to laugh or kick himself. Once again, the sound runs through the woods, rhythmic and deep.

It’s Joker. Bruce hadn’t even considered that the clown would need to sleep too. The hours he kept back in Gotham never left much time for anything as mundane as proper rest.

The image of The Joker, curled up on the floor of a riverside warehouse with his suit jacket folded under his head a pillow, suggests itself to Bruce. In his mind’s eye, the man is smiling, even in sleep, like a particularly murderous baby. Now would be the time to find out if he’s anywhere close to the mark.
With The Joker already asleep, Bruce has less cause to worry about what might happen if he were to catch some shuteye of his own. He walks on till he finds a tree with roots large enough to provide some shelter and sets Joker down against the trunk, noting with some amusement how the clown strains against his bindings, trying to push himself into the foetal position.

The trouble is, Joker’s still snoring. It could be that that’s just what he does or the gag might be restricting his breathing, which leaves Bruce with a choice to make as to whether or not he should ungag him. If he does, The Joker will be free to start making as much noise as he pleases when he wakes but if he doesn’t the snoring definitely won’t stop. He’s far too tired for that sort of noise to bother him, but the clown’s not exactly being quiet and the sound does nothing to cover their position.

So, the gag is going to go, though getting it out of Joker’s mouth without waking him is going to be a challenge all of its own. It would be just like him to fall asleep while being hauled through the woods only to wake when someone touched his hair at just the wrong angle, like a perverse retelling of the princess and the pea.

Bruce starts by laying the gauntlets aside, not that they’re indelicate but they’re heavy and cool to the touch. He feels over the knots at the back of Joker’s head, reminding himself of the order in which he’d tied them. The tricky part is identifying the end point of the twine, so once he’s found that it’s a matter of retracing his steps, unlooping strands and loosening twists. After the first few knots have gone, the twine slackens over Joker’s face, leaving a crosshatch across his cheeks.

Loop out of loop, line out of line. Untying the gag is relaxing, just another repetitive physical task to get lost in, keeping Bruce’s body occupied and his mind blank. Joker’s hair is soft, like he stole the last of the conditioner when the looting started. Once the twine has been removed, Bruce allows himself to run a hand through those green locks, just one, a private indulgence that he need to examine too closely.

Pulling the gag out of Joker’s mouth is the hardest part of the operation. The cloth may have been clean that morning but it’s now caked in saliva, dust from the cornfields and a whole lot of blood. Bruce pulls it out by the millimetre, watching lips go slack as the obstruction is removed.

Under the night vision, everything looks green and the absence of Joker’s classic lipstick is all the more pronounced. Even in Arkham, he’d always find some kind of makeup to make use of, so even if he wasn’t sporting red he never looked so strangely naked. There was one month during his third stay at the Asylum where all he could get hold of was an eyebrow pencil and his lips were a dull shade of brown until the thing ran out.

The staff were never able to find where he stashed his makeup. Or at least, that’s what they told Bruce Wayne at board meetings. He can’t imagine that rummaging through the belongings of a man best known for his ability to turn children’s toys into murder weapons was ever going to be a popular job.

Joker’s teeth close over the tail end of the gag, sticking it at the last when Bruce tries to tug it free. He slips a hand under Joker’s head to adjust the angle of his neck, jaw falling open so the fabric can be removed. He looks at the rag in his hand and even through the green it looks filthy. If he wants to gag Joker again come morning, he’s going to need to use something else to do it. A tricky task, when he’s loath to shred any part of his hoodie and the t-shirt he’s currently wearing seems to be held together by willpower alone.

Before he can remove his hand, Joker stirs in his sleep. He doesn’t wake but he does lean into the contact, nuzzling up against Bruce’s hand and sighing happily. He doesn’t grin wide in his sleep; his face is slack, brows unclenched and smile retracted to something disturbingly normal. He looks as
ordinary as Bruce has ever seen him, just a man with a broken nose, sleeping on the forest floor. The only thing that gives away his identity is how pale he is.

The nose is already starting to straighten out, just as Bruce expected. Distance is already spreading between himself and the day’s carnage and he knows that come morning, he’ll feel just guilty enough to want to clean up the blood caked to Joker’s face.

Right now, he is exhausted, and though Joker’s breathing is heavy he’s not snoring anymore. Bruce pulls open the tarpaulin he had taken from the harden and rolls himself up in it as he settles between the roots, across from Joker. Nothing starves off the cold like sheet plastic.

Bruce tries to ignore the memory of waking up that morning, how delightful it had been to find that he’d overslept, the thick fog of heat that had threatened to drown him beneath those blankets. It’s impossible not to think about it, but it makes the tarpaulin seem all the more unpleasant against the exposed snatches of his skin.

Bruce hasn’t prayed in years, not properly, but he sends a silent plea to any greater powers out there that Camila is alive and surviving. He follows up with a hope that she doesn’t think too little of him, but he might as well ask for the world.

Before his eyes slip closed, Bruce slides the gauntlets back over his hands. The last thing he wants is to wake and find Joker in the wind with that kind of weaponry. Most of their functionality has faded, but they really help pack a punch in a tight spot. He adjusts his position till he’s satisfied that he’s maximised his chances of being disturbed should the clown break free without winding up with an armful of Joker in the night.

With a few blinks, the night vision cuts out and the forest around him is plunged into darkness. Bruce falls asleep almost immediately, to the sound of Joker’s breathing painting colour on the great silence twisting through the trees.
Chapter 7

When Bruce wakes, the world is not quiet. It takes him a moment to remember why that’s odd and then to remember why he’s wrapped in plastic rather than the silk sheets of Wayne Manor. He feels awful, like he’s just gone a year without proper rest or reprieve and his shoulder aches like he’s carried something heavy long distance.

If he were honest with himself, Bruce would admit that he likes these moments best. The confusion that comes to him first thing in the mornings, however temporary, is the only respite he gets from the harsh reality of his day to day life. He tries to play along with his post sleep daze for some time after he’s remembered where he really is, but he never was much interested in escapism.

But the world is not quiet and that is odd beyond belief. Bruce opens his eyes and terror claws at his lungs. Joker is laying across from him, eyes open, staring him down with uncomfortable intensity. Bruce takes a moment to recall Constance, Pockets and Baseball Bat and the girl in the garden. He’s taking Joker back to Gotham with him because he can’t see what else he’s supposed to do.

And the birds are singing. Not the symphony that used to pour through the gardens of the Manor when he was growing up, but Bruce can pick out the songs of at least three different species. He sits up, pulling the plastic away and catches a flash of something blue lifting off the forest floor a short way off.

A blue jay, alive and singing for the morning. Bruce is taken aback by how hard his heart clenches, he never did care much for wildlife watching, though his father used to put out seeds for the birds and would delight in the flocks that came to eat from the feeders in the garden.

A year is nowhere near enough time for animals to unlearn the instinct to run when something larger than themselves comes lumbering through the trees. Bruce gets to his feet and the blue jay flies off, birdsong fading to background noise.

An odd, rasping sound drags Bruce’s attention back to his captive, who’s glaring at him with the kind of unbridged hatred he normally reserves for the final stages of a complex scheme. The ice in his eyes strikes Bruce right in the chest and he has to look away to hide his discomfort.

“Water.” Joker hisses, voice like sandpaper over broken glass. His eyes are dull and he appears to be shaking in his bonds.

Bruce doesn’t think he’s ever seen Joker drink anything that wasn’t a toxic substance, and that always seemed to be more for show than anything. He knows most people would be knocked back by a day without water but he’s somewhat surprised to find the clown so affected by dehydration. It’s tempting to let him stew in it but rather predictably the immediacy of the anger Bruce had felt the day before has faded and he’s left with the weight of responsibility occupying the same hole in his chest. He can’t justify taking Joker with him if he’s not going to see that his basic needs are met.

After packing away the tarpaulin, Bruce pulls Joker would so that he’s propped up against the trunk of the tree in some approximation of a sitting position. It must be murder on his knees.

The birds are still singing, too far off to feel real. Bruce crouches down in front of Joker and looks into eyes that flash like knives and are no one’s idea of romantic. They might as well be back on top of the world, chasing each other through a never-ending thunderstorm, stirring the imagination of the city below.
“Water.” Joker is louder this time. Bruce’s hands twitch towards the pack, fumbling with the straps to retrieve a canteen. He doesn’t miss the flash of triumph that crosses the clown’s face when he all but follows given orders.

It’s difficult to trust that Joker has been bound tight enough that he couldn’t get free if he wanted to, even when Bruce has tied the knots holding him down. There’s a very real possibility that the desperate act is just that, an act, concocted by Joker because he thinks it will put Bruce at a disadvantage, giving him room to break free. On the other hand, it has been at least sixteen hours since he had anything to drink. Bruce unscrews the cap of the canteen and tips it forward, letting the water run straight into Joker’s mouth.

He doesn’t let him drink long. Joker whines when the canteen is pulled away. “I’m still thirsty.” His voice is clearer, jarringly loud against the wind and the leaves and the far off sound of birdsong.

Bruce fights the urge to reach forward and clamp a hand over Joker’s mouth to shut him up. He’s going to be fighting that impulse all the way back to Gotham.

“You can have some more after breakfast.” Bruce keeps his voice neutral. “After that you get water rations three times daily.”

Joker starts to laugh but his throat is still rough and he cuts off after the first giggle. “Breakfast, eh? And here I thought you were just gonna let me starve.”

“Can’t say the thought didn’t crossed my mind.” Which isn’t entirely true. The thought is crossing Bruce’s mind right now, not that he should starve The Joker but that he should be careful about how much he’s given. In a weakened state, he’ll be easier to transport.

Bruce can practically smell the badly disguised scent of stale cigarette smoke as Jim Gordon wrestles with his moral compass and his desire to see Joker suffer for crimes against the city and his family. Gordon’s aompass always won out, however unwillingly. Prisoner starvation definitely counts as cruel and unusual punishment.

Unconstitutional. Bruce wants to laugh. As if the founding fathers would have defended vigilantism.

Bruce hasn’t eaten since the previous morning himself and he has no idea how long it’s been since Joker last ate. He pulls two tine from his pack, one of beans and one of tinned peaches, along with a spoon.

“Oo, fancy!” Joker squeals on seeing the cutlery. It doesn’t feel particularly fancy to Bruce, even in a world where most tableware as been reappropriates as weaponry, it feels like a necessary tether to the civilisation slipping through his fingers.

It has the additional benefit of allowing him to feed Joker without shoving sharp metal between his teeth. The clown would either find a way to get the sharp edges of an opened tin free, or would purposefully cut himself on it just because he could.

Bruce pulls the lid off the beans and starts shovelling them into his mouth.

“Well, that looks apetising.” Joker’s voice is thick with sarcasm. “I suppose to expect me to share with you.”

“If you want to eat, this is what’s on the menu.” Bruce looks into the tin. It’s almost half empty. He figures he can justify three more spoonfuls before he has to cede the rest to Joker.

Joker makes a face, the corners of his mouth twisting down in displeasure. Without makeup he looks
more than a sourpuss than a jester. Bruce sort of wants to hit him or feed him or whatever it’s going to take to bring him back to himself.

He has to pay for what he did, Batman growls, all of it. Yesterday and everything he did back in Gotham, everything he’s done since.

Having started eating, Bruce’s hunger returns full forced, glaring jealously at the less than half funn tin of beans. It doesn’t want to share, so much so that he debates finishing off the lot and cracking open another ton.

If he eats two tins of beans now, he won’t be able to justify eating later. Bruce swallows his hunger down with promises of tinned fruit to follow.

“Here comes the choo choo train!” Joker titters, dropping his jaw and letting Bruce spoon beans into his mouth. He chews them slowly, swallowing with a shiver of revulsion. “Sure you don’t have any jellybabies in that bag with you, Bats?”

“If I did, I wouldn’t share them with you.”

“Your funeral. You’re the guy who’s gonna have my ass pressed to his ear all day.”

Bruce lets his confusion show on his face and Joker cackles. “Beans, beans, good for the heart. The more you eat the more you-”

“Shut up.” Bruce wrinkles his nose.

Joker talks while he’s fed, to himself and to Bruce. Once he’s had a few mouthfuls he runs out of complaints and starts taking what he’s offered without fuss. He goes so far as to lick away a stray drop of bean juice rolling out of the side of his mouth, though that could just be a nervous tick.

The tinned peaches Bruce opens next may just be the best thing he’s ever tasted. He’s never cared all that much about what he puts in his mouth, ironic given the fine dining he grew up on, but he’s eaten nothing but tinned carbohydrates and protein for the past four months and the sugar hits him like an avalanche. He digs his teeth into the soft flesh of the fruit and sighs with relief. He hadn’t even realised he’d been missing this.

The last fruit Bruce can remember eating was an apple given as a parting gift by a family he had stayed with for a few days, just south of Mexico City. One of a few complete families hanging on in the area, much further north and people started dying in earnest. Further south population is less of an issue, but the lack of electronics was causing mass panic.

Bruce can’t bring himself to be gracious with the peaches. He allows Joker a single slice before retreating to a safe distance to finish the rest himself.

“That’s more like it.” The clown hums. “More, please.”

“No way.” Bruce prays the peaches will start multiplying before his eyes so he never has to finish them.

Joker’s face falls into a scowl. “C’mon, you’re supposed to be feeding me.”

“You’ve been fed.”

“I need sugar, Batsy. At least give me some of the syrup.”
“Killers don’t get syrup.”

It’s more than a little satisfying to watch Joker realise that he’s really not getting anything more to eat. His mouth curls into a horrible sneer and when he’s run out of swear words to throw at Bruce he rocks himself off balance and lies there, wriggling on the ground. Bruce isn’t smiling when he drains the last of the syrup from the can, but it’s a near thing.

Joker’s eyes bulge in horror. “Batsy, how could you?”

“I was hungry.” Bruce replies, keeping his voice as flat as possible. It’s not as if he’s lying.

Joker grumbles about the injustice of his incarceration all the while Bruce packs away empty tins and clears away the tarpaulin. They both get a swig of water and then Joker is settled over his shoulder to begin the day’s hike. The clown is far too loud but there’s nothing left to construct a gag from. If they happen to pass a pet store or a sex shop, Bruce will look into shutting him up more effectively.

Their first priority is refilling the canteens. They’re on an incline and the obvious path between the trees trails up the rise. The ground isn’t noticeably damp but there were enough birds in the woods that morning to convince Bruce that something in the area makes it more accommodating to animal life, and that something could be running water.

Bruce starts off, gripping Joker’s legs tight to try to stop him from wriggling.

“Where are we heading?” Joker asks.

“To get water.”

“Really, that’s it? You’re gonna dump me in the river then watch me float away?”

“No, we’re going to get water and then we’re going to keep going.”

“Together?”

“You are coming with me, yes.”

“I like the sound of that.” Joker giggles. “Joker and Batsy, alone in the wilderness. Fighting off bandits, sharing body heat to ward off the cold, dark nights. The big bad Bat taking advantage of his prisoner.”

“You wish.” Bruce snaps, unable to keep the disgust from his voice.

“Oh, I do, honey. I’ve had some wonderful dreams that have taken me down that path. Thought I was going to have to go back to Wondy for some proper bondage but you tie a pretty decent knot yourself.”

It takes Bruce a minute to work out that ‘Wondy’ is Diana. He’d met up with her, very briefly, right back at the beginning of this crisis. He was still in Brazil, fighting his way through the never-ending traffic jam blocking every major road in the country. She had been so certain that whatever was happening up north, he could handle it, while she stayed there to mediate the riots.

If anyone can handle that kind of power imbalance, it’s Diana. Bruce hasn’t heard anything of her whereabouts since El Salvador and that was just a rumour. He hopes she’s ok, he wishes he could have her faith that the rest of the Justice League could handle the mess the bomb made in their back gardens.
He knows there’s nothing she could do to fix the empty cities or stitch the diasporic communities peppering America back together, but Bruce wishes Diana were here. She’s the oldest person he knows and whilst she thinks of his as an independent adult, it’s difficult not to pigeonhole her as the matriarch of meta humans. He misses Alfred because Alfred is his father figure, he misses Diana because she makes him feel like a child looking up at an adult with all the answers.

“You know, she got me with her whip once.” Joker starts.

“It’s a lasso.” Bruce responds, automatically.

“Well, it felt like a whip. Made me feel very unlike myself, she got me spouting all sorts of gobbledygook.”

Bruce is positive that Joker and Diana have never been in the same room together. “You’re lying.”

Laughter brews behind Joker’s voice. “And you would know, how?”

“She would have told me.”

“Ha!” Joker rocks forward, almost unseating himself from Bruce’s shoulder. “You mean, you’ve never let me out of your sight for long enough for her to have a go.”

They reach the top of the rise and find that it’s the ridge circling a well like crater. At the bottom is a rather sad looking pool of water, up to its eyes in algae. Bruce isn’t nearly desperate enough to consider drinking anything like that.

“Do I hear birdies again?” Joker asks

He doesn’t. Straining his ears, Bruce can’t make out any birdsong, though there are a pair of crows down by the water, looking up at the two of them with mistrust.

“I could catch us one for dinner.” Joker twitches excitedly.

“No, you couldn’t.”

“I could if you untied me.”

“Not going to happen.”

“You catch one then.”

Camila had spoken about crow’s meat like it was fine dining. If his reaction to real sugar was anything to go by, Bruce can believe that fresh animal protein would he a transcendent culinary experience. He’s tempted. But birds are so rare, he doesn’t think he can justify killing one off for the sake of a decent meal.

He doesn’t dignify Joker with an answer. Bruce starts walking the perimeter of the crater, trying to work out where the water came from, reasoning that if he can follow its path it might lead to fresh water. The living green of low lying ferns and weeds is more concentrated to the north east, which is as good a sign as any so he starts off in that direction.

There are more S symbols than ever painted on the tree trunks surrounding the top of the crater. Red, black and blue paint are the primary tools of the artist but there’s are a handful of purple symbols thrown into the mix. Bruce can’t put his finger on why that surprises him, he’s pretty sure that the standard colour scheme of the local graffiti is a product of what’s available rather than symbolism,
but it puts him on edge nonetheless.

Joker picks up on the way Bruce tenses. “Something spooked you?”

“No.” Bruce tries to relax his shoulders as he starts down the hill.

About two hundred metres onward, the sound of running water starts to echo through the trees. It sounds like the source is small, hopefully discrete. Not that Bruce has any reason to think they’re still being followed, but he’d like to make life as hard as possible for anyone still on their tail.

Or anyone new that might have picked up their scent. Anyone who’s been living in the woods for the best part of a year will have learned how to hide themselves by now and that would make them dangerous.

Bruce hits upon what’s bothering him about the purple paint. Red, black and blue S symbols are ten a penny but it looks like only one person’s been writing in purple. He pauses to examine one and almost convinces himself that it’s been drawn differently from the others.

“Oo! Purple!” Joker shrieks, evidently having caught sight of one of the symbols himself. “I like purple.”

“It’s just a colour.”

“Just a colour, listen to this guy. Purple is my colour, sweetness. You get black and I get purple.”

A thought occurs to Bruce. “You didn’t draw these, did you?”

Joker lets out an incredulous little laugh. “Oh no, darling. You saw my artwork back at the church. I’m a cut above whichever little punch did this.”

Of course. Bruce sets off again but is quickly interrupted by Joker letting out a piercing shriek.

Bruce takes a deep breath to stop himself from shouting. “Would you shut up?”

“Stop walking!” Joker snaps. He sounds sincerely alarmed, so Bruce does.

One step too late.

His feet hit the forest floor and the sound of a spiel winding itself up cute through the still air. Bruce has just enough time to think the word ‘booby trap’ before the ground is swept out from under him and he’s hoisted into the air by a net that had been hidden beneath the top layer of decomposing leaves.

They hang, a good three metres off the ground. It’s impressive work, nothing more than a pulley system set on a trip wire holding the whole trap together. Their held high enough off the ground that he doesn’t want to risk the fall. He starts tracing the line of the ropes holding them up, trying t work out how to lower them down slowly. If he can climb through the hole in the top of the net, he can free the rope to let Joker down, then climb down the connecting tree.

Bruce is about to get moving, mentally preparing himself for an onslaught of inappropriate comments from Joker as they have to move around each other, when he sees what it was that set the clown off in the first place.

Back the way they came, a message is painted across the trees. It would only be visible to someone who, like Joker, had been facing backwards. It spans several trunks, painted in purple so that it
stands out against the red, blue and black S symbols that otherwise cover the bark.

*Mind your step,* it reads. Bruce could have serious words with the artists about placement.

“I told you to stop.” Joker grumbles.

The woods erupt into motion beneath them and the silence is broken by the hoots and cheers of a dozen or more people pulling themselves down from the trees and uncurling from the undergrowth.

“Looks like we caught ourselves a bat.” One of them says, with all the booming confidence of a grown man.

It is a grown man. Not just one, but a whole host of adults. This time when Joker laughs it’s high and manic. “This is going to be fun.”

It’s going to be a lot of things, Bruce thinks, but no part of this is fun.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

There’s a couple of mentions of past instances of Joker being abusive to Harley Quinn in this chapter along with some homophobic language

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The commune is filled with adults, enough to make Bruce think that they must have moved here from somewhere else. He’s been flanked constantly since they brought him down from the net, keeping him docile with a few well place thwacks to the heck with a baseball bat – not enough to knock him out but enough that he’d rather wait to he gets all his assets back under his control before attempting an escape. As far as he can tell he’s not in any imminent danger. His hands are tied behind his back and something sharp tipped was aimed at the bottom of his spine as he was frog marched towards a rag tag units of tents and twig huts growing on the edge of the woods.

Their captors had taken one look at the knots binding Joker and decided that untying him was more trouble than it was worth. A wooden stake had been produced and forced between the twine, allowing for Joker to be carried between two people. He and Bruce have been kept separate from each other, or at least, as separate as the facilities will allow. The commune isn’t large and the guards by and large are untrained young men who pose little threat. More than anything, Bruce is waiting for the mild buzz of immediate concussion to wear off so he doesn’t hit any of them too hard when he makes his escape, he’s terrible at judging his own strength after a hit to the head.

More irritating than failing to knock him out, they’ve removed the gauntlets and taken his pack and he’ll have to find them again before he leaves, which makes a bold public escape attempt difficult. Just because he could easily take out the guards doesn’t mean that Bruce is particularly interested in having to fight off the rest of the commune residents simultaneously.

Not to mention the problem of Joker, who’s lying a few metres away, still bound to his post and trying to flirt with the guards.

“Hey, kid! Yeah, you. I’d be ever so grateful if you could undo these knots a smidge.” He bats his eyes, runs his tongue across his lower lip. Bruce is of the opinion that anyone caving to their prisoner’s demands more or less deserves to get shanked but his instinct is still to scream at the guard to back away from the clown.

Despite how preposterously ugly he is, Joker can be deceptively charismatic. He reads people like a book and in the absence of any real meta human abilities that’s always been the most dangerous thing about him. Bruce used to be horribly dismissive of the troubles of Doctor Harleen Quinzel but in time has had to concede that the clown can be charming when he wants to be. There have been moments when they’ve been fighting, fist to fist, face to pavement, when Joker’s looked up at Bruce with just the right mixture of submission and excitement that Bruce has wondered what it would be like to kiss him.

“Oh course.” Joker continues.” Whatever you do, you’ll have to make sure my boy toy over there doesn’t catch you at it. He’s the jealous type, doesn’t like to share.”

“I’d sooner eat pig shit than touch you.” The guard snaps. His voice is heavy with revulsion that
Bruce doesn’t doubt it’s real but his reaction still prompts a round of laughter from his colleagues over by the fire.

Joker continues undeterred, twisting round to look at Bruce with shining eyes. “What d’ya say, Batsy? Threesome?”

Bruce doesn’t tell him to shut up, but only because the look of disgust that crosses the guard’s face is worth the fodder to Joker’s ego. Getting the clown to come with him when he wants to go is going to prove very tricky. At this stage Bruce is rather counting on Joker to slip his own knots first and leave him with no choice but to rush in and save their captors.

Letting Joker run free or doing everything himself. It’s not a choice Bruce relishes having to make.

“Shut it, fag!” Rising from the fire, the presumptive leader of the commune cuts an imposing figure. He’s stocky in that way people misread as chubby, hiding strength. He’s wearing Bruce’s gauntlets and staring Joker down over the sight of a crossbow. He probably hasn’t been through the pack yet, he seems like the type to make the worst kind of use of a grappling gun.

Joker’s mouth droops downwards, unimpressed. “If you’re going to shoot me at least stick an apple in my mouth before you start.” Then to Bruce. “Can you believe this guy?”

Bruce absolutely can believe him. This isn’t the first presumptive king he’s encountered in the past year but he’d rather hoped he’d left this sort of nonsense behind months ago. This is the final complication in any prospective escape plan, the self-declared leader who takes out his anger on his own people. He escaped a similar scenario down in Texas, and when Bruce was found missing the former sheriff bringing the town to heel had shot four guards before coming after the escaped prisoner. Regardless of intent, if they’re not quick to incapacitate the head of the snake, leaving here will bring misery down on the rest of the commune. It’s bad enough having to keep everyone safe from Joker.

The clown starts up laughing, the way his restraints have been tied have him twisting like a pretzel with the force of his mirth. He avoids the crossbow bolt loosed at him only by virtue of his strange twitching and stares the arrow down with manic glee.

The leader snaps his fingers and there’s a flurry of movement as the group of women surrounding him start fumbling for another arrow. When one of them places a fresh bolt in his hand she looks relieved and proud of herself and it takes Bruce a moment to work out why the picture is so familiar. The image of a charmed Harley Quinn, grinning up at The Joker when she managed to contribute to his plans without incurring his wrath.

“Get them out of my sight.” The leader grunts. “Take them to the Hole. I don’t wanna hear them.”

“You sure that’s a good idea, Horne?”

The leader – Horne – glares at the guard. “You think you know something about good ideas that I don’t?”

“N-no. It’s ju-“

“Take ‘em away, then!”

The guard is right, stationing your captives out of sight is a terrible tactical move, out of earshot is even worse. Two guards carry Joker and a further two escort Bruce away from the fire. As they move, Bruce notes that the commune is made up of two concentric circles of tents and shelters with little sign of life beyond the fire save for a couple of guards at the perimeter. Their numbers can’t be
higher than forty, and not all of those are combatants.

In Texas there had been more than a hundred people to negotiate in his mission to take down the sheriff. The advantage of a larger population is that disloyalties are easier to hide and so there are usually dissenters to ally with. A group this size, however, will be easier in a fist fight but the chances of any of them wanting to take Horne down are almost nothing.

The Hole is a pothole of sorts, just past the edge of the commune and marked by a ring of rocks. It looks deep; a wave of nausea washes over Bruce as soon as he starts thinking about how the black below the lip reminds him of wells and bats, and he’s set upon by a spell of vertigo from the concussion that he wasn’t counting on. His eyes slip from the Hole to the splash of purple he sees covering the rocks. The same paint from the forest.

The guards notice the paint a second later. “It’s like those words, back in the woods.”

Joker giggles. “Yeah, that was a good one. Remember how I told you to stop, Batsy? And you didn’t? So we got scooped up by that net? Classic slapstick.”

“Shut it.” A guard cautions.

“It’s a compliment!” Joker protests. “Lil tip though, next time you should include some razor wire in the punchline. Lops a head clean off.”

Each of the seven rocks marking the edge of the Hole has a circle with a line through it in the purple paint. It looks like another warning, one that’s fresh enough that when the guards bend down to get a better look at it his hand comes away purple. “Horne’s not gonna like this.”

“It’s not like he can do anything to us for it. It wasn’t our fault.” Bruce doesn’t miss the note of panic in the guard’s voice.

They throw Joker down the Hole first, not bothering to untie him before they drop him through and he lands with a soft ‘oof’. Bruce tries to gage how far the fall is but he’s still a little dizzy from the vertigo and he can’t get a good handle on how long it takes for the soft thump of the clown’s body hitting the ground to echo back up to them.

‘The Joker survived it’ isn’t a glowing review of the safety of an activity. The Joker survives just about everything.

Bruce is led to the edge of the Hole and tries his best not to look down. The guards are nervous, regardless of whether or not they believe he’s the Batman, they know he’s a good deal bigger than them and even tied up he could probably do some damage if he wanted to make a fight out of it. One of them thumps him hard in the small of the back and he lets himself stumble before he pushes back the concussion and finds his feet but that moment of weakness is all they need to convince themselves that they can do this. Four pairs of hands line up across Bruce’s shoulders and push him forward and he more or less trips down the Hole.

The drop is fifteen feet at most. Not exactly pleasant, but Bruce has fallen further in the past. The ground inside is soft peat, scattered over with smaller rocks that hit his joints at uncomfortable angels.

Save the moonlight streaming in from the opening overhead, the Hole is dark. Bruce looks up and sees four faces staring down at him, checking to make sure he’s safely inside.

“We’re fine, thanks.” Joker calls up to them. Bruce can’t see him, but he sounds close.

The guards don’t reply. Bruce waits until they’ve gone before he steps into the dark and blinks
rapidly to initialise his night vision. They shouldn’t have trusted him with the cowl.

The roof is opening is high enough that climbing out is out of the question, and even if it weren’t the concave walls would be impossible to scale. It’s a fairly large space, a lazy oval that shifts from peat to stone only at the very edges. It’s relatively dry, and warm, and hidden from sight on the surface.

What a terrible waste of resources. With a decent rope ladder and a fire this place would be better suited as a living space than a prison. Bruce sighs, nothing irritates him like a misused asset.

“So do you think they’re gonna give us any food and water or are we supposed to make small talk until we starve to death?”

Joker still sounds close but Bruce can’t see him. He turns round fast, trying to get a visual on the clown but is cut off by the world suddenly shrinking as his windpipe is forced closed.

For a moment, all Bruce can do is stand there, mouth flapping as he tries to suck in air. Then he recognises the cool tug of plastic against his skin and reasons that there’s no way Joker could hide from him down here if he were still tied up. The clown must have slipped his knots and is now using the twine to strangle him. Bruce feels a flash of annoyance that Joker would choose now of all times to pull a stunt like this.

There will be more than enough time to overanalyse how he misjudged the situation later. Bruce leans back into Joker before surging forward to throw him over his shoulder. Joker’s always been a lot stronger than he looks and his grip doesn’t break, dragging Bruce head over heels so they wind up tangled together on the floor.

Joker pulls sharply on the twine, gleeful laughter echoing around the cave as Bruce reaches up to get a finger underneath the twine before the pressure bites down on his windpipe again. He tries to pull it away but the angle’s all wrong and there’s no strength behind the action.

Curling his free hand into a fist, Bruce throws a punch behind his head, hoping to hit Joker but smashing into the peat instead. Bruce flails with his hand until he feels skin underneath his fingers. He gropes at Joker’s face, pressing hard against his cheeks and scrambling for something more persuasive to hold on to.

When Bruce finds the bridge of Joker’s nose, he pushes down hard and is rewarded with a yelp of pain in amongst the laughter. It’s not enough to slacken his foe’s grip but it’s heartening nonetheless. Bruce rolls them both to the side, then jerks to his feet with Joker still holding firm around his neck. The finger he has between his throat and the twine is going numb very fast, but it’s all that’s keeping him from imminent strangulation and there’s no way he’s going to sacrifice breathing for its sake.

Bruce has a vague plan that he’s going to move towards the rocky walls of the cave and bash Joker’s head against the stone till he’s dazed enough to be shaken free. Joker has no intention of going along with this plan, twisting his preposterously long legs around Bruce’s every time he tries to move.

A particularly insistent limb pulls Bruce’s left leg out from under him and he doesn’t have a good enough position to maintain balance on his own. He starts to fall but is caught by the twine around his neck Joker holding him up as if it were nothing.

“Careful, darling. Wouldn’t want you to trip and crack your skull open.”

Bruce opens his mouth to speak but he doesn’t have the breath for it. He’s lost all feeling in his finger and is distantly aware of a desire to break Joker’s nose all over again.

Regaining his balance is a graceless task, made no easier by Joker’s refusal to grant Bruce full use of
both his legs. The clown keeps trying to trip him up as he drags himself into a more or less upright position, it’s worth it though, for the minute slackening of the twine once Bruce is done.

Joker presses up close behind him, breath hot on the back of Bruce’s neck. “You’re out of practice. We really must do this more often.”

If he had full control of his vocal chords, Bruce might have devised a witty rejoinder to that. He can’t do much more than let out a half-hearted grunt as he takes advantage of the closed space between them to reach back to grab a handful of Joker’s hair, matted with peat and weirdly soft. He pulls as hard as he can and feels Joker’s body go rigid at his back. The twine loosens and Bruce is ready for it, wrenching it over his head before rounding on Joker, slamming a fist into his side with as much force as he can manage.

It’s not enough to drop Joker to the floor, but he flinches.

Joker’s not entirely freed from the twine. It’s still wrapped around his middle, tight enough to constrict and his hands are no longer locked together but still bound. It’s still an impressive feat of escapism. He had less than a minute to untie himself before he attacked Bruce.

Bruce snatches up the tail end of the twine but before he can use it to reel Joker in the clown gets a leg up and kicks him hard in the stomach. The wind rushes out of him fast enough to feel like choking all over again. He groans against the pain and staggers back, bent double. He looks up and sees the clown advancing towards him, mouth stretched wide beneath the high arches of his furrowed brows. In night vision he’s all green, but his eyes still flash in the dark.

Bruce is fairly sure that Joker shouldn’t be able to see him in this level if light, but Joker surveys him with the calm determination of a predator with a weak deer in its sights.

The burning fades from his lungs but Bruce stays hunched over, breathing heavily. He waits till Joker is nearly upon him before rushing forward. The cave reverberates with the satisfying tear of fabric as the ears of the cowl puncture Joker’s shirt. Bruce hits hard enough to lift his foe off his feet, sending them both sprawling across the floor facing each other.

As he fumbles to get a hold on Joker’s wrists or the twine or his neck or something, Bruce forgets to put his weight where it’s needed and he’s flipped onto his back. The clown presses an arm up under his chin to put the pressure back on his windpipe but he can’t ground his knees fast enough to avoid being usurped by Bruce all over again.

The fight descends into the type of brawl best had on a bar room floor. Fists fly, but never hit home with enough force to break bones. They each have a go at strangling the other but well timed kicks to the soft, squishy parts of their bodies distract from the task at hand. Joker laughs loud enough to wake the dead, his face twisted into a cruel parody of the rictus seen in Smiles victims. Eyes never leaving Bruce’s, wild and familiar as rain soaked streets.

Bruce hasn’t missed this one bit. He hasn’t missed the way they always slip below each other’s defenses at the last moment, or the fact that there’s no need to pull punches when they fight. He hasn’t missed the rising tide of his blood in his ears and he definitely hasn’t missed Joker pressing against him at every available opportunity, unnecessary and uncomfortable. He hasn’t missed that laugh.

Maybe, just maybe, he’s missed fighting someone who trusts him not to die. He can’t say he’s a fan of the clown’s jokes in general but that one almost gets him. Everyone else draws out their plans to let the Batman suffer, Joker throws everything he’s got at him safe in the knowledge that it will never be enough.
A final fist, aimed at Bruce’s head but easily dodged, and Joker collapses on top of him. “Truce?”

Bruce is only too happy to call it a day. The singing in his blood has faded to a dull throb and he’s exhausted like no day’s trek can leave him. They have more important matters at hand than all the conflict they’ve missed out on in being apart for the last year.

There’s also the small matter of Joker’s erection digging into Bruce’s thigh. Hardly the first time he’s been in this position at the end of the fight but unpleasant all the same.

“Truce.” Bruce agrees, and pushes Joker away.

Joker rolls across the floor and swings himself into a sitting position, fiddling with the last of the knots on his bindings. It takes a minute or two for him to get them free, which is an age with his escapology skills, then he throws the twine back to Bruce. “Better luck next time.”

“You know I’m going to have to tie you up again once we’re out of here.” Bruce starts coiling up the twine absent mindedly.

“Not that I don’t enjoy our little bondage sessions but I gotta ask, why?”

“Because as long as there are people alive for you to kill, the only safe place for you is in custody.”

Joker’s grin tightens. “You’re saying you want to be my custodian? For the greater good, of course.”

“I’m saying you’ll always find a way to do harm, unless I stop you.”

“Oh but darling, you’re my muse! How am I supposed to stop being such an awfully bad little boy when you inspire me so?”

“Have you tried being a decent person?”

Joker sticks out his tongue and blows a long raspberry that choes off the walls of the cave. “That would be boring. Why on earth would I do that?”

They’ve had this conversation more than a few times with the reinforced acetate of an Arkham cell between the two of them. Bruce finishes coiling the twine and pockets it as he sits up. They don’t have much to work with. Only a handful of the big stones scattered across the cave look like they can be moved and even if they can be stacked together, those that will won’t reach high enough to use as stepping stones out of here. Ideally, Bruce would find a way to get himself out and leave Joker down here while he deals with Horne. That’s not going to happen though, if Joker sees him make it out of here, there’s no way he won’t follow.

The obvious solution to their predicament is to wait till someone comes to get them. Bruce is reasonably certain that they haven’t been left down here to die. Not only would that defeat the point of holding them prisoner but the lack of decaying corpses in the cave would suggest this isn’t a starvation tank.

“What’s thinking about?” Joker asks, leaning in over Bruce’s shoulder.

Bruce doesn’t jump. “How to get out of here.”

“You mean getting thrown down here wasn’t part of your plan?” Joker scowls. “Dear me, Batsy. What’s gotten into you? If I’d known you didn’t have a plan I would have sprung us myself. I was ready to go round the fire, had a mind to shove that arrow Fatso fired at me where the sun don’t shine. But it’s been so long since I saw the Batman pull off one of his daring escapes, I was excited
to see how you were going to manage it.”

Bruce purses his lips and doesn’t say anything. He tries not to think too hard about how he had say at the edge of the fire, hands tied, waiting for Joker to make the first move. He gets up and moves to start examining the stones to see which ones might be useful to them.

Joker watches him like a hawk. Bruce knows because he keeps looking over his shoulder to be sure the clown is still there. It would be just like him to vanish into nothing, only to poke his head through the Hole and reveal that he knew how to escape all along.

“Wanna know what I think?”

“No, Joker.” Bruce keeps his attention predominantly focused on the stones, the largest of which is connected to the main body of the cave and impossible to move, putting him a few steps back from nowhere.

Joker continues to talk like he’s forgotten anyone else is in the room. “I think you were trying to be a goody two shoes. You think Mister Big Fat Crossbow Man is going to do mean things to the other folk he’s got living with him. Funny, isn’t it? Haven’t seen anything but kids since I left Gotham but everyone here is a grownup. Wonder what they’re doing round these parts.”

“Maybe they wanted to group together with other people in the area who could act their age.”

“Pah! They’re not from round here.”

Bruce doesn’t know how Joker knows that, but he believes him. Partly because it makes sense and partly because when you’ve known the clown for as long as he has, you get a pretty good handle on when he’s actually telling the truth. There’s a particular lilt to his voice, like the smile cracked somewhere off screen. It’s nice to know he’s something more than laughter and rage.

There are just five large stones in the cave that Bruce can move and he can’t see how to stack them in a way that will form a stable tower. If he can, they won’t bring him close enough to the hole to climb out easy, but he might be able to make it with a running jump if he can build a ramp at the right angle.

Bruce manages to get a total of three stones to stay on top of each other for no more than ten seconds before the tower collapses. Joker positively shrieks with laughter, curling over to pound the ground.

“What the hell are you trying to do?”

“I’m trying to get out of here.”

“Why don’t you just use the rope?”

“What rope?”

Joker leaps to his feet with inhuman speed and dashes over, slipping his hand into Bruce’s pocket and pulling out the twine. “The fairly decent rope than can be woven out of this if you put your back into it.”

Obvious, really, Bruce snatches the twine out of Joker’s hand and bends back his fingers till he drops the stolen batarang he’s also holding.

Joker shrugs. “Figured it was worth a shot. No idea what I would have done with it, tee, bee, eich. I can’t throw those things for shit.”
“There’s a knack to it.”

“You’ll have to teach me sometime.”

Bruce goes to the other side of the cave and seats himself against the wall as he considers the various ways the twine can be retied and the tensile strength of each method. Keeping it long enough to bridge the distance between either one of them and the lip of the whole while being able to hold their weight leaves a very narrow margin for error. He can tie a rock to one end to give it some heft but he’s got no idea how he’s supposed to fix it above ground. Some bridges need to be crossed in order.

Joker saunters over to watch him. It makes Bruce feel like an animal in a zoo. “You got a plan yet?”

“There was always a plan.” Bruce tells him. “Get out of here, get rid of Horne, get my supplies and get out of here.”

“Ooo!” Joker squeals. “I knew you wanted to play the Big Tough Defender game! Beating up kids getting you down?”

Honestly, it is. That’s probably got a lot more to do with why Bruce wants to go after Horne than he’s readily willing to admit.

Settling himself a short way off, Joker watches Bruce fold the twine in on itself in various patterns as he considers his options.

“You know.” Joker starts. “I’ve got a pretty good idea as to how we get out of here, if you wanted any pointers.”

“No.”

“Aww, c’mon” You didn’t even remember the twine, you can’t be trusted to plan this all on your lonesome.”

“Just-” Bruce resists the urge to play the broken record and tell him to shut up. “Fine. Tell me what you’ve got.”

“And you promise not to dismiss me out of hand?”

“Joker…”

“Fine! Fine.” Joker’s eyes flare against the green of the cowl’s night vision. “First, we wait till nightfall…”

Chapter End Notes

Writing fight scenes between these two is always so satisfying hecky
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

More murder and general gore in this chapter. All told it's quite a murderey fic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

If Joker’s plan required Bruce cooperate with anyone else, it wouldn’t be all that bad. At things stand, Joker is the only person here who can help him and Bruce is frantically trying to keep track of contingency plans should anything go wrong.

When Joker said they should wait till nightfall, he had meant the following day, which might be part of an elaborate plan to lull the commune into a false sense of security or it might be arbitrary. The guards come by a few times during the day to drop handfuls of sweets through the Hole, which makes sense. Bruce wouldn’t trust any prisoner of his with anything that could be repurposed into sharp edges and he certainly wouldn’t try to lower them food on a rope – too much opportunity to get dragged into the jail cell yourself.

Which isn’t to say that he hadn’t been hoping they would be so careless. Pulling the guards into the cave by a food basket and scaling the rope left behind sounds a lot more sensible than what they’re about to do.

Joker is buzzing with energy, a proper dose of sugar having given him new life. His laughter, impatient and unyielding, flickers off the walls around them, till it sounds like there are a hundred clones of the clown in the cave.

The curvature of the walls must prevent his laughter from leaking out of the Hole, because no one comes by from the commune to tell him to be quiet. Bruce strains his ears, tries telling Joker to shut up a couple of times, and tries to work out what’s going on above their heads. Some light chatter can be heard drifting across from the compound for most of the day, rising to a clamour in the evening that probably indicates dinner time.

Nightfall passes, the commune quiets down as everyone heads to bed. Bruce has no idea how long The Joker plans on waiting before they attempt to escape, if he’ll even remember what he’s doing when the time comes.

There’s no signal, but in the blink of an eye Joker changes. No longer content to play the deranged lunatic, he uncoils himself from the cave floor, grinning wide and no longer laughing. Bruce has seen that expression before, and though he’s built up a tolerance for the bogey man of Gotham his gut clenches as Joker approaches.

The Joker doesn’t need to know that Bruce blinks the night vision away for a moment to see him emerge from the dark. The picture looks incomplete without lipstick, but shadow cuts across his face, the rises of his cheekbones lighting up under a sliver of moonlight, and they could almost be home.

“Let’s get this show on the road.” Joker hisses.

Bruce lurches to his feet. “I still don’t like this.”
“I know you don’t. But be honest with me, if you had any better ideas would we still be down here?” Joker’s eyes are fixed on the Hole. He holds his hand out for the twine rope and Bruce hesitates, scrambling for a good reason not to give it to him and coming up with nothing.

Bruce braces himself as he lets the rope slip into Joker’s hand, waiting for the twine to reacquaint itself with his windpipe. But the clown’s attention is fixed firmly on the sky.

“Here.” Joker clicks his fingers and points to the ground at his feet. Bruce steps into place, promises himself that he will never be so compliant with him again, and drops to his knees, curling his spine to explode his back.

Joker spreads cold, spiderlike hands between his shoulder blades. His laughter is hidden just below the rush of his breath.

“Get on with it.” Bruce huffs.”

“In a second! Gotta take a moment to enjoy this though. The Bat on his knees, just for me.”

“Joker!”

“You’re no fun.”

Long legs hook over Bruce’s shoulders and despite having spent the best part of two days carrying him, he’s still surprised by how impossibly light The Joker is. He almost calls the whole thing off right there, because it doesn’t seem possible that the clown can take both their weight.

“Chop, chop! We haven’t got all day.” Joker slaps the back of Bruce’s head.

Bruce stands carefully, one hand locked around Joker’s thigh to stop him from falling. Joker laughs as he’s jerked into the air, keeping hold of the ears of the cowl to maintain balance.

It would be difficult for them to manage the next stage if the roles were reversed. Joker moves his long limbs at awkward angles, pushing down hard on the top of Bruce’s head and eventually pulls himself up to stand on Bruce’s shoulders, digging down with the heels of his dress shoes.

They almost don’t make it, but their combined height just allows for Joker to hook his fingers over the edge of the Hole. He lifts off Bruce’s shoulders like it’s nothing and hauls himself out of the cave.

Bruce stands back with his heart in his mouth. Joker has always been stronger than he looks and he’s vanished through the Hole in the blink of an eye.

At first it seems like Joker might have reneged on the plan. Bruce can hear him trying to muffle his laughter up top but he doesn’t drop the rope down. It’s an effort not to demand that he get a move on, but when it comes to the clown, desperation will get you nowhere.

“Bats, you really wanna see this.” Joker whispers, poking his head back through the Hole.

Bruce stares him down. “I’m sure I will.”

“It’s so great.”

“I believe you.”

“Hilarious, even.”
“Ok.”

Joker breaks off into a peal of giggles. “Ok, you know what? I’m gonna let you up to take a little look see.”

“That’s generous of you.” Bruce keeps his voice carefully neutral.

The rope descends, weighed down by a stone. Bruce has done what he can to thicken the line but it’s still rather spindly. He gives it an experimental tug and hopes that both it and Joker are strong enough to hold him.

If the rope does break, Joker can always hook himself over the lip of the Hole with his oversized feet and Bruce can climb up him. It would no doubt provoke a slew of unwanted comments but it’s nice to have a backup plan.

The rope doesn’t break and Joker doesn’t drop him. Bruce emerges into the night and hauls himself up onto the grass. The night air is cooler than it had been in the cave, a light breeze sweeping through his clothes and raising goose bumps along his arm. The commune is quiet and while the faded scent of smoke still hangs in the air, the fire is out.

Joker is craned over one of the rocks ringing the edge of the Hole, laughing silently. Bruce sidles up next to him and with the nigh vision off, he can just about make out what’s been written alongside the stop signs.

“You should run.” Bruce reads.

Joker breaks out in a new slew of silent wheezes. “Batsy! They knew we were coming.”

Bruce doesn’t like it one bit. “We’re not going to run.”

“I’m not sure the warning was meant for us.” Joker says, then sets off towards the commune, physically shaking with the effort of not laughing.

Bruce scrambles after him, catching him round the middle before he gets too close. “Stick to the plan!”

“I am. Step one – get out of the Hole. Step two – get your stuff back. This is step two.”

“That’s a very simplistic take on what we discussed.”

“Oh Batsy.” Joker’s mouth falls into an empty droop. He leans back against Bruce, tipping his head back to whisper into his ear. “Have a little more faith in yourself.”

The proximity is alarming. Joker is cold but not as cold as he looks and his hair tickles the skin exposed by the cowl. Bruce’s stomach clenches in revulsion. He doesn’t shove him off, but it’s a near thing. “You’re supposed to stay back, remember? Catch Horne if he tries to run off.”

“But what if he doesn’t?”

“Then you don’t do anything.”

Joker pouts. “Boooring! I like my plan better.”

“There is no- Joker!”

Joker slips below Bruce’s arm and darts off into the rows of tents. His laughter marks his progress,
loud enough to disturb the commune. People start to stir, confused mutterings proceeded by the rustling of clothes thrown on in a hurry.

Bruce doesn’t pause to consider what he’s doing, heading to the centre of the commune in the hope of finding something he can use as a weapon before the guards or Joker get violent. The fire pit is abandoned. Sloppy. There should be at least two guards on this area at all times.

Out of the corner of his eye, Bruce sees people moving between the tents. The few guards that are still up move towards Joker without calling for backup and he’s tempted to let them throw themselves on the clown’s mercy, just to teach them a lesson.

It’s hard to make out what’s going on without the light from the fire. Too late, Bruce blinks to turn on the night vision and watches as one of the guards drops to the ground with a horrific screech. Laughter crashes through the night, followed by a moment of absolute silence before the commune springs wholesale into life and people start pouring out of their tents carrying makeshift weapons.

There’s no time to formulate a proper attack strategy. Bruce reacts to the blows thrown his way and starts moving towards the spot where Joker had taken down the guard just as fast as he can. It’s painfully clear that these people have no training, approaching from obvious angles and putting too much energy into their arms. Even the guards, easily identified by their spears, seem too have little idea of how to mount an attack. They hang back while their less adept compatriots receive broken noses and sprained ankles for their troubles before converging on Bruce all at once. Their spears are flimsy and it’s shockingly easy to render them useless.

Having been fighting children for so long, it takes all of Bruce’s willpower not to smile when he doesn’t pull his punches. He’s missed the feeling of hitting someone and seeing them stay down.

Another scream cuts through the night and Bruce whips round to growl at Joker, rising above the fray. The clown’s face is covered in blood that doesn’t belong to him.

“Just tearing a few ligaments over here Bats. Nothing to worry about.”

A woman lies sobbing on the ground at Joker’s feet. Her knee looks a mess. Bruce can’t wait till he has a chance to throttle him.

The commune is more populous than Bruce had originally accounted for. Round the fire it had looked like a unit of male guards with female captives swarming around Horne’s feet but the people coming at Bruce now are far more diverse than that. There are no female guards, but there are plenty of female fighters.

Bruce twists arms, knocks legs out from under people. All the easy stuff that people in his line of work know they are better than but that still works fine on people who have never been in a real fight. As the people start to thin out, he looks to the front circle of tents, trying to work out which one is Horne’s.

The absence of the little war lord is conspicuous. Bruce doesn’t for a moment think that it’s a product of cowardice. No matter how many jokes about his size Joker may have made that afternoon, Horne looked like a man who knew how to fight.

Damian used to scoff at Jason and Harper when they were playing video games, turning his nose up and remarking that he’d never seen such neat curves of difficulty in the thugs he fought on the street. “If the henchmen are easy and the boss isn’t, it’s because the boss planned it that way.”

This feels like grinding through copy and paste skeletons like the kids used to, trying to reach the
skeleton king on the other side. Horne planned to let them throw themselves at the intruders, no doubt so he could step in at the last minute and save the day.

Save the day. Appear strong. People will stay close to a strong man no matter how scared he makes them if they think it ups their chances of survival.

Something moves in the trees beyond the commune. Bruce thinks it’s The Joker at first but when he looks again he sees that it’s too short, and it looks like they’re wearing a cape. Probably someone from the commune, escaping with a blanket thrown over their shoulders. He blinks and the shape is gone.

Bruce fells one final guard by ripping the spear from his hands and hitting him the gut with the blunt end. The guard falls to his knees and the last few people trying to stand their ground scatter. The fire pit is littered with injured people, nursing injuries and trying to crawl away.

The people who fought down Joker’s end of the commune aren’t so lucky. A banshee wail rises from the other side of the circle and several people have fallen silent since they started screaming, passed out from exhaustion or pain. The clown sits next to a twitching figure, holding their hand. The clown methodically takes the thumb and bends it back far enough to snap the bone. A crack echoes through the commune followed by high pitched laughter.

Without pausing to process any shock or rage that he might be supposed to feel on behalf of the fallen, Bruce crosses the circle. He doesn’t look at the bodies he passes, he barely even registers that the hand Joker is playing with belongs to a person. Emotions are rendered superfluous in the wake of the brawl, so Bruce feels nothing, shuts away his anger, and pulls Joker back by his hair.

Joker’s hair is soft, but that doesn’t mean anything. All that matters is punishing this pest, this nuisance, this disobedient little imp who Bruce has been good enough not to kill all these years. He’s so tired of resisting the urge to tear the clown to pieces.

He’s not going to break his streak tonight, but he’s going to break something. Hopefully Joker’s bones, preferably his spirit. Joker seems to sense that he’s not getting out of this beating and rather than fighting back he lets himself go slack and pliant. He allows himself to be dragged across the ground like a sack of potatoes, laughing all the way.

Even as a dead weight, he might as well be made of feathers. It should be so easy to snap him in two, it doesn’t have to be Batman who gets the job done. People assume he’s made of rubber and titanium and they don’t even bother trying.

Bruce reaches the patch of ash left over from the fire, smoke still rising high enough to catch under the lip of the cowl. He gets to his knees and pulls the clown under him to rub his face into the dirt. The embers must still sting, if the hysterical high notes in Joker’s laugh are anything to go by. It takes a while for him to run out of air, and then Bruce holds him down for half a minute more till the clown’s shoulders start to twitch. The ash billows around them, settling on their clothes and for once in his life Bruce doesn’t have to worry about how much damage this is going to do to his equipment. The only thing he needs to worry about is how much damage he’s causing.

When he’s allowed an inch to breath, Joker splutters around the ash in his mouth. His face is covered in soot, sticking in the corner of his eyes to the blood that isn’t his coating his cheeks. It dips into the grooves of his broken nose and blocks out his horrible white lips.

He looks a mess. Bruce doesn’t feel any sort of grim satisfaction because Bruce isn’t feeling right now; he’s reaching for two of the stones that ring the fire and placing Joker’s right hand on top of
one. He’s raising the other stone over his head, bringing it down hard and feeling metacarpals give with the force of the blow. When Joker lets out a real yelp of pain, Bruce doesn’t feel any shade of happy about it.

Not here, not now. Bruce brings the rock down again and again. If this were anyone else he might consider the possibility that the hand would be damaged beyond repair but Joker lost the privilege of restraint a long time ago.

There’s purple paint, just visible through the thinning ash at the edge of the fire. Bruce pauses, the rock settled between the mangled fronds of what was once Joker’s hand, and tries to make out what it says.

*Don’t waste time with the clown*

*He’ll get you when your back’s turned*

Before he has time to parse that, Bruce’s vision whites out. He reels backwards, eyes clenched shut against the sudden intrusion of a light source that the cowl’s night vision is not calibrated to compensate for. By the time he switches it off, he’s flash on his back in the ash, surrounded by a ring of women holding burning branches.

The same women who had surrounded Horne’s throne. They scowl down at him, muttering about senseless violence.

“Horne’s gonna have your eyes out over this.”

“I dunno what you did to Benny, but he’ll do worse to you. Mark my words.”

They think Bruce is solely responsible for this violence. Churlish as it may be, he’s half way through opening his mouth to protest when he stops to consider how this looks. Him, with a rock in his hand and Joker beneath him, limp and obviously in pain as his hand is smashed to pieces.

Bruce sits up, tightening his grip on the rock still in his hand and making like he’s about to throw it. The women ripple away from him, opening up their circle and letting the light from their torches to shine over the rest of the commune.

There are a lot of people still laid out on the ground. Straight ahead of Bruce though, is Horne, staring at him down the sight of his crossbow before letting a bolt fly.

It’s clear that Horne missing Joker had been no fluke. The arrow lands right between Bruce’s legs, scant millimetres away from his crotch. Horne drops the crossbow to his side, rage in his eyes but a smile on his lips.

Joker would likely be impressed, if he were looking. Bruce is pretty sure he’s awake, but he’s unmoving, shivering in the ash.

“You’ve really done a number on my boys.” Horne swaggers forward without getting close enough for Bruce to lay a hand on him. “But you forgot you’d have to go through me.”

“Didn’t forget.” Bruce mutters.

Horne shorts. “Then you seriously underestimated your chances. I know you think you’re a big shot with the Batman mask and all. That’s cute, by the way. I’m glad the boys left it on you. But you’re no match for this here bow of mine.”
A susurrus whips round the commune as Horne reaches for another bolt. This time, Bruce doubts he’ll shoot to miss. A speeding arrow is a tricky thing to dodge at the best of times, with so many bystanders to consider, getting out of here is going to be very tricky. He starts running through possible diversions and lines of least resistance, debating whether he should make an effort to save The Joker or trust that the clown will follow him.

As Bruce frets. Horne raises the crossbow.

The trigger is pulled. The bolt flies. Bruce rolls out of the way and grabs Joker by the back of his shirt, pulling them both to a standing position. He holds his breath, waiting for the clown to come alive and give him something to react to but nothing happens. The world is frozen in time. All the commune focusing on Horne.

Joker looks round in a daze, his face caked in ash save for the twin pricks of green slipping in and out of focus. Bruce keeps a hand on his back to hold him steady and follows the commune’s attention.

There is a bolt stuck in the ground, Right where Bruce’s head had been only moments earlier. He never fired a second, he never even got it loaded in the bow.

Someone fired though, someone in a hood and cape. Someone with a crossbow of their own and purple paint dripping from their fingerprints.

The figure out amongst the trees.

Gratitude and longing and fear surge through Bruce like a tidal wave. Coming to a head at the forefront of his mind where the only thought he can process is I know her.

Chapter End Notes

Can you guess who it is yet?
Chapter 10

If you knew where to look, Gotham had always been full of clues. Batman had started as a means to follow those clues through to their logical conclusion when the police couldn’t or wouldn’t do the same. Then the criminals started getting cocky and started leaving clues for him to find, which sometimes made things easier and usually made things a whole lot harder.

Bruce trained so many people to follow those clues. Not just his family but the Gordons, Montoya and countless members of the Justice League. But there was one protégé who came to him fully formed, and with a knack for spotting the clues building up to a crime that even he couldn’t replicate.

She was hot headed, impulsive, angry. She wanted a normal life and she couldn’t stay away, even when Bruce pushed her. The Spoiler was an ingenious crime fighter but Stephanie Brown was a liability.

And now she’s standing in front of him, looking like the echo of Helene Bertinelli with her crossbow raised high having just fired a bolt into the back of Horne’s head. Her suit isn’t quite the same as it had been back in Gotham, but the hood is still purple and she’s still rangy and quick. Her face isn’t visible but there’s no way it could be anyone else. Bruce would recognise the tension in those shoulders anywhere.

“Here’s what’s gonna happen.” Stephanie tells them all before anyone has time to wrap their heads around the dead body and the crossbow. “I’ll be taking those two with me.” She nods towards Bruce and The Joker. “And you’re gonna sit tight and let us pass. Ok?”

It’s such a relief to see her, to find out that he hasn’t lost everyone, Bruce wonders that he manages to keep the smile from his face. “I need to get my gear before we leave.”

Stephanie turns to look at him, peering out from holes cut in the balaclava she’s wearing in place of a mask. She nods. “You don’t have much time. I’ll keep this lot busy.”

“Like hell you will!” One of Horne’s women spits. She raises her branch up over her head and thrusts it in Stephanie’s direction.

It’s pointless to fight her. The Spoiler was trained in hand to hand combat by Black Canary, it takes a whole lot more than a misplaced stick to take her down. Stephanie skips out of the way of a series of jabs before coming up behind the woman and knocking her to the ground with a well-placed kick.

“She’s one of your rug rats, right?” Joker sounds dazed.

“Not exactly.” Bruce replies.

Joker chokes on his laughter. “What? You mean all those kids weren’t the result of you running riot amongst the female population of Gotham?”

“Ony the fifth Robin was related to me by blood.”

“Out of all of them?” Joker fixes Bruce with a lopsided grin of disbelief. “Wait, there were five Robins? I lost count after three.”

“There were a lot more, depending on how you count.” Bruce watches as Stephanie slings her crossbow over her back and goes to retrieve the one from Horne’s stiffening hands. She raises it up as if taking aim around the circle but she’s not wound tight enough to shoot again.
She had shot Horne. Bruce finally catches up to the bolt sticking out of the man’s head. It’s a relatively bloodless death but it’s still a death. That used to be an uncrossable line. The first time Jason died it had felt like his heart had been ripped out through his throat but he didn’t come back to kill The Joker for it despite how much it hurt.

This doesn’t hurt though. Bruce is going to have words about it with Stephanie, but he doesn’t want to reverse time and see the murder undone.

Stephanie jerks her head towards the tent directly behind Bruce. “That one’s Horne’s, you’re stuff’s probably in there. Move quick.”

Bruce starts towards the tent, hand twisting in Joker’s shirt to drag him along too.

Stephanie clicks her tongue in disapproval.

“What?” Bruce asks.

“Leave him. I won’t let him run off.”

It feels wrong to leave Joker sitting on the ground. Bruce wonders how far Stephanie might go to prevent the clown from running.

So what if she winds up killing The Joker? He can’t deserve it any less than Horne. One less body to keep track of on the way back to Gotham, one less nemesis to contend with. One less killer to have to fight the good fight against.

But Bruce has a jealous streak a mile wide and while he’s not exactly convinced that The Joker deserves to live after everything he’s done, he’s loathe to see anyone else take the clown down. He would sooner die than admit as much out loud though, so Bruce shoots Stephanie a look that he hopes conveys all that and more and ducks into Horne’s tent.

It’s rather small for a king’s quarters, perhaps a little wider than other tents but there’s barely enough room for Bruce to stand. The floor is covered in a mismatched network of blankets and mattresses, presumably to make room for women as well as Horne. It’s a mess, which makes looking for his pack all the harder. Bruce pushes aside piles of clothes and looks under the various pieces of the unified bed.

When he finds the pack, it’s been emptied out. He takes it and keeps rummaging till he finds the grappling gun stashed in the corner along with his still mostly full canteens. The tarpaulin is tucked into a side pocket by the entrance and the gauntlets are hidden under someone’s pillow.

Bruce pulls the gauntlets on, shoves everything else into the pack and swings it over his shoulder. Without the selection of tinned food he usually carries it feels uncomfortably weightless and foreign but hunting for replacements is a task for another time.

When he emerges from the tent, Stephanie is tying a rope round Joker’s wrists. She pulls hard to slide the nots into the place and Bruce hears the crack of broken bones grinning against each other. Joker whines in pain and a pang of guilt knocks on Bruce’s ribcage. He doesn’t know how to ask either of them to stop.

Theres a thin sheen of sweat on Joker’s forehead, shining in the light from the burning branches. He looks up as Bruce approaches, smiling wide. “Look, Bats! I’m being such a good boy, letting your brat tie me up.”

Stephanie wrinkles her nose in disgust. She still has the crossbow aimed indiscriminately at the
gathered commune, shifting it every few seconds to focus on anyone who looks like they might be about to make a run for it. Two of the women are fussing over Horne’s body, weeping and shoving at him like they might be able to push him back to life. The rest sit aside, dumbstruck. Bruce wants to shake them, to remind them that they haven’t lived like this for long and they will survive just fine without Horne so long as they can pull themselves together.

“We need to go.” Stephanie says.

Bruce nods, reaching down to pull Joker to his feet by his collar before Stephanie can drag him up by his broken hand. They walk backwards away from the firepit, keeping their eyes on the commune as they go. They don’t turn till they’re past the second ring of tents, where they can still hear the sobs emanating from the women crying over Horne.

“He was a shit stain!” Stephanie calls out to them, like that might change their minds.

“You can start over.” Bruce follows.

Joker stumbles, nearly falls, then starts laughing at nothing in particular. “Embrace sweet chaos, kids!”

Stephanie kicks him in the backs of his knees, hard enough that his legs nearly buckle. Bruce shoots her a warning look and she doesn’t pay him any mind. They march quickly out over the grass, past the Hole and onwards into the countryside.

The ground beneath their feet soon turns boggy and Bruce has to wonder how the cave was so dry when the commune appears to be situated on the edge of wetlands. As the water starts to rise, Stephanie dashes along a path that keeps her relatively dry, pulling Joker along behind her. The clown is light enough that he doesn’t sink into the mud but it only takes Bruce a couple of steps to realise that he’s too heavy to follow.

Stephanie points to a secondary path, more easily seen than hers by the way the water has collected in it. “Do you mind? Only you might shift the ground and I’d rather not have to readjust my walkways.

It doesn’t bother Bruce, but as something that isn’t quite water or mud rises to his knees he can imagine Camila’s horror. Submerging his legs, rife with fresh cuts, into something so filthy definitely isn’t sanitary. No matter. Bruce has survived trips through Gotham harbour, his immune system can probably handle this.

Up ahead, Stephanie keeps tugging the rope she’s got Joker on, always a second earlier and a shade harder than necessary. Joker’s eyes keep falling to the second crossbow, clipped to the back of Stephanie’s belt and trying to get it between his teeth. Bruce is going to have words with both of them about their behaviour.

“Watch him.” Bruce warns Stephanie, after Joker’s third attempt to get the crossbow almost works. She turns and drives her fist into the clown’s cheek hard enough to leave a track in the ash covering his face.

Joker doesn’t make a sound, but he reaches up to touch his cheek with his good hand. Before he can complete the action, Stephanie jerks him forward and his face flashes pain.

It takes an hour or so to reach the far side of the bog. Stephanie leads them through the thick brush of marsh marigolds that rise up to reach a road. The tarmac serves as a dividing line between the wetlands and a patchwork of fields. Bruce looks up and down the road with his night vision on and
sees no vehicles lying abandoned. That can’t continue for long, they must be fast approaching the suburban strip that lines the north east coast.

Stephanie jerks her head north to indicate a small cluster of buildings that look like they’re loosely connected with one of the farm houses visible to the west. She crosses the road and drops down into the fields, which are populated with barley rather than corn and are short enough to see over the top of. There’s a small purple S at the edge of the road, a warning to stay out of his territory. Bruce follows behind Stephanie and Joker, pulling the clown back whenever he gets too close to stealing the crossbow.

Their destination is a handful of storage barns. Stephanie leads them to the smallest of the three, kicking the door open and shoving The Joker inside. She motions for Bruce to follow, holding the door open for him to pass.

Barn is perhaps a generous descriptor, but it’s much too large to be a shed. There’s an old tractor complete with scrap parts against the back wall that look like they were rusting long before the bomb went off. The door closes behind him with the soft thump of wood on wood and Stephanie sets about trying The Joker to the vehicle before fishing a box of matches out of the dark and dropping sparks into a couple of metal bowls on the floor that are filled with enough flammable material to act as torches. The room is flooded with shifting shades of yellow. At this distance, and covered in ash as he is, Joker looks like a shadow.

This feels closed off, safe. Bruce lets out a sigh of relief and lets the pack fall to the floor. Stephanie turns to him, hood still up but the balaclava pulled away to reveal her face. She’s beaming ear to ear, eyes alight and so very happy to see him. Bruce is already walking to her, arms spread wider to gather her up before he realises that he’s wearing the same expression.

She’s skinnier than he remembers, but Stephanie hits him like a storm all the same. Her arms creep up Bruce’s back, gripping tight at his shoulders as he wraps himself around her and holds on tight. Her body rises and falls as she breathes, her heart beating hard enough that he can feel it thumping against his chest. Real and warm and familiar and wonderfully, gloriously alive.

Bruce bites his tongue to stop his breath from hitching as his eyes prickle. “I thought you were dead.”

“Right back at you.” Stephanie sniffs. She pulls back and there are tear tracks running down her cheeks. “God. Where have you been?”

“I was in Brazil when it happened. It’s taken a while to get back up here.”

“I’ll say.” Stephanie’s laugh sounds like all the relief Bruce feels. Something sturdy and recognisable that he can sink his teeth into. “Are we still doing…do we have to…I mean, codenames?”

Bruce glances back to where Joker is slumped against the tractor. He’s not going to let himself risk it. “I’m sorry, Spoiler.”

“No worries, Bats.” Stephanie says. “C’mon, sit down. You gotta tell me everything.”

Bruce drops to the ground and shuffles closer to the warming light of the torches. “I’m not sure we have time.”

“We’ve got all the time in the world, in case you hadn’t noticed. There’s not much else going on out there.”

Bruce thinks there’s more going on than ever before. The world is still out there, still waiting to be
saved. Gotham is still days away from him. Clark is still dead, Diana still in another continent. The exhaustion of the past year rushes up to meet him and he wants to curl up on the barn floor and sleep it all away.

“There’s a lot to tell.”

“Stephanie nods. “You want me to go first?”

“Please. You could start with how you found us.”

“Not…not just yet.” Stephanie’s eyes dart towards Joker, expression unreadable.

Bruce doesn’t like it. Whatever Stephanie doesn’t want to talk about, he’s sure it's nothing good but after a year wrestling with the possibility that everyone he ever cared about might have perished, he doesn’t have the heart to push. “Ok. Then start from the beginning.”

“Ok, so.” Stephanie takes a long breath and focuses her attention on the fire. “I was out of Gotham when it happened. Luckily for me, mum insisted that we go visit one of my aunts or second cousins or something that week. We were still in New Jersey, mind, which wasn’t my dream choice for the end of the world kick off but whatever, I guess I should be grateful. It was so stupid, I…I’d been complaining all morning about how there was nothing to do and we should just go back. I wasn’t even working on a case or anything and my family was right there but I wanted to-“ Her voice catches. It takes Bruce longer than it should to remember that he’s allowed to comfort her, to rest a hand on her shoulder and let her lean into him if she wants.

Stephanie was always adamant that she was not part of the bat family the way the rest of the kids were. She wasn’t an orphan, she wasn’t even missing either parent. But Bruce wasn’t going to leave her with a villain for a father and no recourse when he inevitably disappointed her.

“You don’t have to start from the beginning.” Bruce says, quietly. He stops before he says something about dead parents and how he knows what she’s going through, He’s not going to lie to her. He can’t remember what it was like for the pain to be that raw and she hasn’t had Alfred to help her along.

“I just-“ Stephanie’s mouth flaps, ut whatever words are sitting on the tip of her tongue get swallowed. Instead she goes with. “At least I was with them when they died, right?”

“Right.” Two gunshots, bodies on the floor, the light fading out of his father’s eyes. At least Bruce had been with them when they died.

With mighty sniff, Stephanie wipes her eyes and pulls herself away from Bruce’s hand. “God. Maybe you’re right, maybe we don’t have time.”

Bruce shrugs. “We could make time.”

He has so many questions. He wants to know where the others were when the bomb went off, if Stephanie has heard from any of them. Any reported sightings of a Kryptonian or a member of the Justice League would be welcome, the confirmation that humanity doesn’t have to pick itself up and start all over again.

That’s what Bruce wants to ask her, or at least, that’s what the part of him that has given up on personal relations in favour of being unrelentingly practical wants to ask. But Stephanie is one of his kids, even if he’s not her dad, and she’s saved his life and she’s hurting. They can only make so much time, it has to be used wisely.
“They still had pineapples in Costa Rica.”

Stephanie looks at him and smiles ever so slightly. Bruce starts to talk about fruit and birds, a population depleted but able to recover. In a country with no army, the people were free to make what they would out of the new world order, and they decided to press on. Knocked back, but their spirit unbroken.

He’s not a great story teller, but Bruce does what he can to paint a picture of the streets of San Jose. The flood of pigeons, the plazas full of people ferrying their wares in from the countryside. He imagines Camila, her back unerringly straight and scowling, marching through cobbled streets and barking at the local children to clean up after themselves. It sounds like another lifetime, another planet.

He wishes he could go back.

For now what they get is the warmth of a torch on a farm in the middle of nowhere. The sun begins to rise outside, and Bruce is too distracted to notice.
They barely sleep that morning, slipping in a scant few hours shuteye in between shifts keeping an eye on Joker. Stephanie insists that Bruce sleep first, pointing him towards a bundle of blankets stacked against the wall of the barn.

“Go ahead old man.”

Bruce shuffles around, folding himself into the makeshift bed. It almost reminds him of the vestry floor, except Stephanie’s bedding smells like it has seen better days and the damp ground beneath him seeps into the fabric.

Kicking off his trousers while keeping the cowl in place feels weird, but Stephanie takes it with good grace. She watches him prepare to bed down with undisguised amusement. “You always were a bit of a weirdo, Batman.”

Bruce allows himself a half smile. “This is so far from the weirdest thing I’ve done all year.”

“I can believe that.” Stephanie settles next to the low burning embers of one of the torches. The sun must be crawling its way up the skyline because while it’s not exactly light in the barn, a few stray sunbeams have found their way in under the door.

Falling asleep without having to watch his own back has become a novel occurrence. Bruce thinks back to the tree in the forest, Joker lying a few feet away. Having to trust that the clown wasn’t going to wake in the night and murder him in his sleep had been an act of blind faith. Now all he needs to do is trust that Stephanie won’t lose her temper and have a go at taking Joker down before he wakes. Her eyes are trained on their captive, hatred simmering just below her calm exterior. She always had rage in her bones, less wild than Jason and less noble than Damian but still rage. In the whirlwind of everyone else’s trauma, Bruce has to wonder if she ever felt left out.

Joker is still sat where Stephanie had dumped him. A haphazard pile of limbs propped up by the back wheel of the tractor. His head lolls forward like he’s sleeping, ash darkened hair covering his face.

“Wake me if he does anything.” Bruce murmurs. He doesn’t know what ‘anything’ might entail but he’s sure he’s going to be disappointed if he has to find out.

“Will do,” Stephanie makes a complicated hand gesture that Bruce thinks is meant to encourage him to lie down, “sleep.”

It’s easy advice to follow. Bruce’s consciousness slips away from him before his head hits the blankets, exhaustion dragging him down into a dreamless sleep.
When Bruce wakes, Stephanie is no longer sat directly in front of him. He jerks into a sitting position, looking round frantically and trying to get a visual on her.

“I’m right here.”

Bruce follows the voice and sees Stephanie sitting up by the tractor, watching Joker with hawk like intensity. He breathes deep through his nose and wills his heartbeat to slow.

“You’ve only been out for a couple of hours, ya know. If you want to go back to sleep it’s no worries.”

“I’m fine.” Bruce lies. The sleep he’s had barely qualifies as a nap, just enough to take the edge off his bone deep exhaustion. But the adrenaline in his system doesn’t feel like it’s going to subside anytime soon. “Your turn.”

He pulls himself free of the blankets and walks over to hover at Stephanie’s shoulder. She sits perfectly still, legs crossed and eyes trained on the prisoner. Bruce waits for the clipped response asking him to please move out of her personal space but it doesn’t come, and he starts to worry that Joker has worn her down.

Then Stephanie tips back her head and Bruce sees the bags under her eyes, the slouch of her shoulders. She looks like she hasn’t slept in days. Bruce runs the numbers, assuming that the purple S symbols in the forest were fresh and she didn’t sleep while he and Joker were in the Hole, she was likely awake a couple of hours before them and is now two hours behind him getting to bed.

A flicker of protest transforms into a sleepy smile. “My turn,” she agrees. Bruce holds out a hand to help her to her feet and lets her set her weight against him as he walks her over to the bed.

“Did he do anything while I was out?”

Stephanie frowns, “Who- oh, you mean The Joker? Nah, he’s been asleep the whole time. Lucky bastard.”

“That’s good.”

“Not really. Why should he get to rest up while we’re stuck guarding his ass?” Stephanie’s voice is weak but her indignation is determined to make its presence felt. Bruce bites his tongue and saves his speech on the responsibility of caring for those in custody for another time.

“Oh! I forgot to say,” Stephanie lurches towards the bed, not bothering to disrobe as she pulls the blankets up around her, “there’s a first aid kit in one of the crates by the door. If you need to patch yourself up—“

“Shh,” Bruce hushes her, pulling the duvet up to cover her shoulders. Stephanie murmurs something about how nice it is to have her spot kept warm for her, but she doesn’t carry the thought very far before she taps out.

She looks so young in sleep, the tension bled from her shoulders and jaw muscles. Bruce has to remind himself that she’s just twenty two, not all that old at all. With the notable exceptions of Alfred, Selina and Kate none of his found family ever were. He watches her sleeping figure for a while, processing his joy at finding her alive. It rides high in his blood, thrilling and exuberant in its
need to assert itself over him. It’s easily the happiest Bruce has felt since meeting Diana in Brazil.

People survive, on a larger scale and a more personal one. Even when the slate tries to wipe itself clean, something is always left behind. Bruce refuses to let go of that, even if it doesn’t stop him worrying about what sort of enemies Stephanie’s made for herself in his absence and whether or not she’s maintaining an adequate training regime.

Bruce takes a deep breath and runs a hand over his face, steadying himself. She’s fine. She’s been fine all this time. Stephanie Brown lives to make disapproving faces while Bruce Wayne judges her life choices all over again.

He’s jerked out of his trance by one of the cuts on his leg twinging unpleasantly. Stephanie’s not going to run off in a hurry, the madman tied up behind him just might. Bruce gets to his feet and sees that Joker still decidedly unconscious, face fallen slack so that his brow is unfurrowed and though his smile is present it’s loose. He doesn’t look so intimidating, still unmistakably evil but wearing a different skin.

The blood on Joker’s face is stained black with the ash that covers his entire front save the strip of white that Stephanie’s fist had wiped away. Bruce’s skin crawls with an ugly mixture of guilt and satisfaction. It’s not so much that he wants to fix Joker up, but his conscience won’t let him leave the clown broken.

He can at least see to his own injuries first. Bruce roots through the crates by the door, looking for the first aid kit Stephanie had mentioned. The first one he tries is filled with water, and the second with food. He debates taking the liberty of opening up a can of soup to assuage his hunger and just barely manages to convince himself that he should really ask first. It doesn’t mean that he doesn’t want to eat for a week though, then sleep for a month and stumble upstairs to find that Alfred has drawn him a bath and the whole house smells of the essential oils he’s spiked it with.

Dwelling on those sorts of fantasies doesn’t make things any easier. Bruce opens up the third crate as a distraction and finds what he’s looking for. He had been expecting a bottle of rubbing alcohol and some out of date painkillers, but Stephanie has built up quite the collection. The bandages and plasters are too valuable to waste on his leg but there’s a bottle of disinfectant that just might do along with several roles of string and some surgical grade needles. Along with a comprehensive, if basic, supply of painkillers and antihistamines are: a couple of sheets of penicillin based antibiotics; a few vials on insulin and a small supply of something that Bruce strongly suspects is diamorphine. He does a double take before he remembers that it’s still a legal painkiller in some countries as well as a powerful opioid.

A stock of ripped fabric, not clean enough to bandage deep wounds but good enough for handling surface level injuries, has been stacked next to the medical supplies. Bruce takes a handful of them, along with some thin strips of wood that look like they could be used as splints and goes to sit himself between Joker and Stephanie, facing the clown.

He’s still bare legged and from the knee down Bruce is filthy. He’s tempted to haul over the crate of water and sponge himself down but he doesn’t know whether it’s been set aside for purposes other than cleaning and drinking. Just the idea gets him thinking about the sponge bath back in the bathroom of the church. Those few hours where he was clean and had had clean clothes to wear had been sweet beyond belief. Under the cowl, his skin begs to be freed of its rubber prison and scrubbed free of dead cells. Bruce squashes down the urge to comply and pushes away fantasies of scratching at the dried out planes of his face.

After a cursory and wholly unsuccessful attempt at scratching his forehead through the rubber of the cowl, Bruce picks up a strip of cloth and squirts an extremely conservative amount of disinfectant on
to it. He wipes along the outer edges of the cuts still healing on his legs while a voice that sounds suspiciously like Camila battles the bits of his brain that remain convinced this is wholly unnecessary. He never used to pay wounds this shallow much mind but then again he never used to live without the guarantee of a reasonably sterile environment to come home to. He does it for Camila, scraping the mud from around his cuts and hoping she would approve.

Mostly, everything looks to be healing well. There’s one cut that looks to be growing a low level infection, lending a pinkish sheen to the surrounding skin. Bruce is reasonably sure that it’s not going to fester into gangrene, but he still gives it an extra squirt of disinfectant and wraps it in a couple of spare strips of cloth.

Hiss own wounds tended to, Bruce turns his attention to his charge. Up close he can hear faint snores at the end of Joker’s breath and see that his shoulders are slumped at an angle that looks to be quite uncomfortable. The black ash against his pale skin makes him look grey and sickly and where it’s gotten into his hair and clothes Joker is almost washed free of colour.

Bruce resists the urge to start fiddling with the cloth strips he still has in his hand. It’s one thing to hit The Joker till he hurts, and quite another to leave him looking unlike himself. He balls his hands into fists, trying to concentrate on the rage that he had felt last night round the fire. Tying Joker up, breaking his nose, shoving his face into the ash while he did what he had to with the clown’s right hand – all of it was deserved.

His anger doesn’t quite catch but the memory of it centres him. Bruce runs through a mental checklist of what he has to do. Joker’s nose needs to be set properly and the excess blood cleaned from his face – given the unusual physiology of the patient, it’s possible that the nose may need to be re-broken first. Joker need to be examined for further injuries – this may require trusting the patient’s word or removing articles of clothing to check him over. Joker’s hand needs to be seen to, the bones realigned and splinted – this will be the most dangerous part of the proceedings as the broken hand will have to be unbound before it can be examined.

He’s going to start with the nose. Bruce settles himself down in front of Joker and immediately starts wrestling with the twin demons of good medical practice and appropriate treatment of a felon. He’s tempted to get straight to work, letting the pain of bones scraping against each other wake the patient. He can just imagine Joker’s face, rage and pain mingling with the ash and painting him several shades of pathetic. It’s an alluring prospect, to say the least.

“Did anybody ever tell you it’s rude to stare?”

Instead it’s Bruce who’s caught off guard. He jerks backwards gracelessly and Joker’s whole body tenses, laughter hitting him in spasms.

Bruce recovers his composure, though his heart has sped up all over again. “How long have you been awake?”

“Long enough to know you think I’m pretty when I’m sleeping,” Joker winks, tongue slipping out to wet his lips in a manner designed to look obscene. “Is that what does it for you? You like ‘em all bound up and helpless. That certainly would explain your obsession with being the first on the scene to help damsels in distress.”

Against the backdrop of his shock it takes a while for Bruce to parse what Joker’s trying to imply. A wave of revulsion sweeps through him that he quickly shoves aside for the sake of his temper. He refocuses his attentions on the task at hand. “You need medical attention. I’m going to reset your nose and splint your broken hand to minimise long term damage. Do you understand?”
“Oh you’re no fun. Still, as long as you’re giving me attention. Medical or otherwise…”

“Do you understand?” Bruce growls in Batman’s voice.

A visible shiver runs through Joker’s body. “God I’ve missed the way you talk, baby. Yeah, I understand.”

Ignoring the presumption of intimacy, Bruce leans forward into Joker’s personal space and tries to get a better idea of the extent of the damage. His patient starts giggling as soon as Bruce sets a finger on his nose, tracing along the bridge to find the break.

Bruce almost misses the moment Joker winces when he finds the injury, it’s so brief. The bone shifts ever so slightly beneath his finger, jagged edges honing in on each other, but it’s hard to see exactly where the break lies beneath the ash.

“Wait here,” Bruce tells him.

Joker snorts, “Your faith in my restraints is boundless, I see.”

Stephanie has always been a dangerously deep sleeper and she doesn’t so much as twitch when Bruce passes her. He pulls an un-shredded rag from the medical box and turns his attention to the crate containing the water. It’s possible that it’s has been contaminated, or that it’s being saved for a specific purpose. Bruce doesn’t let himself think about it too much until he’s pulled the newly sodden rag free, he figures it looks more or less clean.

Joker eyes the wet rag with distrust. “You better not be about to try any funny business.”

“It’s just water.”

“Oh thank goodness! Your sense of humour is awful and I really don’t have it in me right now to be nice about it.”

“I can assure you, I have never tried to be funny in your presence.”

Joker raises his eyebrows and lets out a gleeful titter. “You mean you do sometimes try to be funny? Oh darling, I never would have guessed.”

“If you’d ever talked to any of your friends down at the Asylum you would know that I was quite well known for my witty banter,” Bruce keeps his voice as even as he can manage. His attempts at humour had always paled next to Dick’s, but those ridiculous puns he used to spout off could turn a dull night’s patrol on its head. Normally he would save the flippancy for petty thefts and attempted muggings but a few of the heavy hitters had been worthy of it. Penguin in particular – his fascination with birds made him an easy target.

Joker makes a face, “I mean, Eddie did say you used to try to be funny. He never thought much of your jokes though.”

“Of course he didn’t, Riddler’s a fool.”

“That he was.”

Past tense. Bruce is going to ask about that, sometime when he can make information his sole priority. It’s far from a physical impossibility, but the idea of Joker being outside the Gotham city limits when the bomb went off is ludicrous. Save for a handful of ill-fated ventures, the clown always kept his business on his home turf. He never was all that interested in the rest of the world.
For now, he has a job to do. Bruce raises the rag to Joker’s forehead and starts to wipe away the ash and grime. The clown makes a soft noise of discontent, followed by an indecipherable babble that sounds like he might be complaining about the chill of water against his skin. He takes a few minutes to calm down.

Water droplets trickle down Joker’s face, leaving tracks in the ash on his cheeks. It comes away fairly easily, save where it has stuck to the dried blood still coating his philtrum. This takes longer to shift, and Bruce has to press the rag against his patient’s skin to soak it off.

“You missed a spot,” Joker says for the umpteenth time as Bruce pulls away.

“I missed a whole lot more than one spot,” Bruce glances pointedly to the ruined front of Joker’s shirt.

Joker looks down and makes a familiar exaggerated look of displeasure that doesn’t look nearly as sarcastic as Bruce remembers without the lipstick. He doesn’t manage to hold it, wincing when he tries to wrinkle his nose. “You owe me a new suit.”

“Yeah, well. We’re a long way from a tailors.”

“A tailors?” Joker raises his eyebrows, “lar dee dar. Hey big spender. God, who goes to a tailors in this day and age?”

“You must have been to a tailors before. Your clothes were always very well cut and I don’t think anywhere carries your size on the rack.” Bruce ignores Joker’s expression of delighted disbelief and reaches out to trace the ridge of his nose once again. With the ash gone identifying the break is a whole lot easier. It’s not horrifically crooked, but it’s definitely out of line and there’s a fair amount of bruising lingering under Joker’s eyes.

“I’m going to realign your nose,” Bruce says, “and it’s going to hurt.”

This news doesn’t faze Joker, who’s still grinning to himself like the idea of Batman visiting a tailors is the best joke he’s heard all week. He doesn’t so much as move until Bruce takes the two broken half of his nose in hand and slides them back into place. “Yowsers! Fucking hell, you weren’t kidding about that hurting.”

It’s an effort to bite his tongue before an unbidden apology can slip off it. With the bone realigned, Bruce gains a new appreciation for how symmetrical Joker’s face is. It’s shocking how much more like himself he looks when the kink has been ironed out of his visage.

“I need you to tell me if you have any other injuries I don’t know about,” Bruce says.

Caught between the pain in his nose and whatever it is that’s making him laugh this time, Joker makes odd wheezing noises, lurching forward like he might be about to retch. Bruce doesn’t think he’s got enough left in his stomach to throw anything up but it wouldn’t be the first time he’s seen someone vomit in pain. He shifts back slightly till he’s convinced himself he’s out of range.

“I got- haa- lemme tell you Batsy, I got one hell of a broken heart,” Joker rasps through a laugh that is breathy and insubstantial.

Bruce doesn’t know what he’s talking about, “I know it’s hard for you but I need you to be serious with me.”

“I’m always deadly serious.”
“Har dee har.”

“Now you’re getting it!” Joker grins at Bruce. The phantom scent of rain mixed with factory pollution comes rushing in to fill the space between them. Memories of fights had in alley ways and on top of skyscrapers. They used to hit each other so hard. Bruce Wayne would hide bruised ribs and broken fingers and Joker would return just as good as new. There are so many injuries that Bruce doesn’t know about, it doesn’t bear going into.

“I don’t wanna talk about injuries. They’re boring, everyone gets them. And I’ve had sooo many, mostly from you but those Arkham guards were never exactly gentle with me. We should talk about something else.”

Bruce shakes his head, “I don’t want to talk about anything else.”

“Well, you know what I wanna talk about?” Joker wiggles his eyebrows and doesn’t look at all disappointed when Bruce doesn’t reply. “I wanna talk about the kind of guy who not only thinks of a tailor as soon as anyone mentions suits, but who knows enough about high fashion to notice that mine were always cut right.”

“I’m a detective,” Bruce sniffs, “it’s my job to notice these things.”

“I’m a detective,” Joker replies in a voice that manages to be both low pitched and whiny – a facetious impersonation of Bruce. He cuts himself off with a peal of giggles. “Honey, if you’re half the detective I know you to be you went to every tailor in Gotham within a month of meeting me. Even those weird underground types the mob uses. You shook ‘em down, you asked about The Joker, and none of them could tell you shit. I don’t. Do. Tailors.”

“I fail to see your point.”

Joker hums in agreement, “you so often do. The point is: you’re a rich boy who can’t fathom people finding cheap solutions to expensive problems. Dear me,” he whistles low, eyes tracing the edge of the cowl, “I have never once given a single shit about what you’ve got going on underneath all that rubber, but if you’re the type to take me out on a high society shopping spree I might need to reassess my stance on secret identities”

Bruce sort of wants to point out that Joker has propositioned Batman for sex on no fewer than forty nine occasions and on the rare occasion he’s managed to take Batman hostage has spent an uncomfortable amount of time fondling his muscles. He definitely cares about what’s under the suit, but the satisfaction of being right isn’t worth the sting if sexual comments that would follow.

Not that he needs to say a word, Joker can read the rebuttal on the tip of his tongue. “I said rubber, not Kevlar. Don’t think I know what that cup was made from. And now you’re wearing cotton, and not very much of it. Lucky me.”

Bruce ignores Joker’s roving eyes, which travel to his thighs and stay there as a tongue slips out to wet lips that should be red. There’s no way his trousers have dried out yet but he wishes they would hurry up about it.

Clearing his throat, Bruce is entirely unsurprised that he fails to recapture Joker’s attention. “I need to fix up your hand.”

“You break my hand, you wanna fix it. You hate me, you decide you’re going to take me with you. Are you quite alright darling? You seem very indecisive.”

“I’m fine, thank you so much for your concern,” Bruce’s voice is flat as a millpond, “I need to untie
your hand to treat it. I don’t want to hurt you again but if you try to run off you’re not going to leave me much choice.”

That pulls Joker back into the present. Eyes that had settled on Bruce’s crotch flick upwards, peering through eyelashes unnaturally long and green. “Are you sure you don’t want to hurt me?”

Joker’s voice is soft as his hair. Quiet and unassuming and wrong. The stink of the streets from back when they used to paint Gotham red rises once again and Bruce can’t help but follow the thought through to its logical conclusion. He could kiss the clown, he doesn’t think either of them would mind that much.

But why would he want to? Bruce closes down that corner of his mind before it can run him too far off the rails. Not here, not now.

The way Stephanie has bound Joker to the tractor makes it impossible to free the injured hand alone. Bruce has to duck behind him, untie him completely and hope that Joker doesn’t realise he has full reign of his body before he manages to slide the ropes back into place.

“Are you retying my knots?” Joker laughs.

“I’m securing you.”

“Sounds like someone’s trying to change the rules of the game.”

“This isn’t a game.”

“You’re right, you’re right.” Joker’s laughter fades to soft chuckles. He leans back, pressing his body as tight against Bruce’s as possible, “it’s so much more vital than that.”

Extricating himself from the twin dangers of Joker and a rusting tractor, Bruce reseats himself in front of the clown. In the cold light of day and with his rage response long exhausted, he’s able to make out the precise nature of the damage to Joker’s right hand.

It’s bad. It’s very very bad. Injuring people to handicap them and thus prevent them causing further harm is something Bruce has no qualms about, but this is a break he had delivered as punishment. Squashing his occasional desires to mete out justice personally has always been a key part of being the Batman and the mangled, bloody mess that constitutes Joker’s hand isn’t justifiable.

“You’re incredible when you’re angry,” Joker breathes. He’s staring at his wrecked hand with great intensity, an expression of awe washing over him. Like he can’t believe he’s so lucky as to have his hand broken by the Batman.

Bruce isn’t going to apologise to him, even for something that he knows deserves an apology. “Hardly the first time I’ve been angry with you.”

“Oh I know love, but this?” Joker lets out a low whistle, “this is something else. The way you lost control, I—” his voice hitches, melting into a strangled sound that Bruce hopes he’s misinterpreting.

Med school would still prove a challenge, too much that he doesn’t know about the workings of pathogens and parasites, but Bruce has picked up enough about human anatomy over the years to know what to do with the mess he’s made. He ignores Joker’s delighted little grunts and uses the rag to clean the grime from the twisted digits.

It’s a stalling tactic, more than anything. Bruce can clearly see the odd angles of the broken bones and while some of the red lying underneath the ash is bloody it’s mostly just bruising. Fingers bent in
on themselves, the palm misaligned, two fingernails hanging onto their nailbeds by a thread – if it weren’t so awful it would be fascinating. He wishes he could get an x-ray of it, not because he thinks it would give him a better chance of fixing the problem, just to see how many fragments a hand can be broken into.

He doesn’t need any special guidance. If he can get everything back into the right place, Joker’s weird metabolism will take care of the rest. “This is really going to hurt,” Bruce warns.

Joker shrugs, “you said that about the nose.”

“The nose hurt. This is going to hurt a whole lot worse.”

“Care to quantify?”

Bruce feels around the base of the thumb where the first knuckle has split clean in two. He prods at it and Joker’s face scrunches up, so it’s definitely not pleasant, and when he pulls the two halves back into place he’s met with a high pitched whine.

“You tell me.”

“Woah,” Joker chokes out a noise somewhere between a laugh and a whimper, “and you’re going to do that how many times?”

“A lot.” Bruce snaps the second knuckle on the thumb back into its socket where it’s been dislocated and reaches for a splint. In the absence of tape he uses some of the clean cloth, torn into smaller strips, to wrap around the thumb and keep the splint in place. It’s not ideal but in the absence of proper plaster cast it’s the best he can do.

Joker doesn’t say another word as Bruce splints the rest of his fingers, which probably means that the repair job is proving excruciatingly painful. The shapeless noises he makes form a catalogue of pain that Bruce tracks meticulously, laughter that sounds a shade too forced and groans that carry a sharp edge. It’s fascinating to hear what discomfort really sounds like on him.

Over the years, Bruce has had cause to really hit The Joker from time to time, breaking bones and drawing blood. He tries to recall what the clown had sounded like back then, if he had chuckled and growled his way through pain like he does now, but the memory is lost to him. Replaced with the petulant little mewl Joker lets out as the final splint is strapped across his little finger.

“All done?” Joker asks. His voice is light but Bruce can practically hear the growl hiding behind it.

Bruce shakes his head, “not quite.” In three short movements he snaps the broken metacarpals back into line, straightening out Joker’s palm.

Dying cats make more pleasing sounds than what comes out of Joker’s mouth, his eyes growing wide in shock. “Fucking shitting fuck.”

“All done,” Bruce smiles.

Joker glowers at him, “if I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were trying to leave me sore.”

“If my goal had been to hurt you, I would have moved the bones without putting them back into place,” Bruce explains. It’s the truth. He can’t imagine that he would ever want to do such a thing but if he did that’s exactly what he’d do.

“Well it never hurt quite so much when they put my arms and legs back together at Arkham,” Joker
sniffs, reaching up with is uninjured hand to prod gingerly at his bandaged digits.

“That’s because Arkham put you under anaesthetic before giving you surgery.”

Joker shakes his head, dislodging a great cloud of ash, “They couldn’t. They tried super hard though – gave me just about everything under the sun. You know, one time they suggested calling you up to knock me over the head before they started? I wish they had done, darling but as soon as I told them as much they decided it was a bad idea. So disappointing!”

Bruce frowns, “what do you mean ‘they tried’?”

“I mean,” Joker tries to flex his hand, growls at the pain then lets out a high peel of giggles that take a minute to subside, “I mean I’m too far gone for all that stuff. Anaesthetic rolls right off me, same as everything else.”

Bruce doesn’t know what to do with that information. The idea of Joker being sent off to have his body stitched up by professionals without hope of numbing the pain seems justified even as it is uncomfortable. If it were anyone else, he might feel bad about it, but the clown never seemed to mind.

“Now then,” Joker beams, setting his good hand on Bruce’s shoulder, “shall we have some fun?”

His good hand.

The one that’s supposed to be tied to the tractor.

Bruce is an idiot.

“Joker,” he growls, reaching up to snatch at the hand on his shoulder, ready to lunge for the injured hand if that’s what it takes.

He’s too slow. By the time Bruce is where he expects Joker to be, Joker’s gone. Shucking off the ropes and getting to his feet, skipping across the floor of the barn to the bundle of blankets that hide Stephanie’s sleeping form.
“How many times do I have to tell you that the little birds only slow you down?” Joker cranes over Stephanie’s sleeping figure, distaste writ large over his smile.

The pile of blankets lies undisturbed, oblivious to the snowstorm of ash Joker is shedding. Bruce starts towards him, “don’t you dare touch her.”

Holding up his hands in mock surrender, Joker jerks upright, “wouldn’t dream of it. She’s far too blonde for my tastes.” He skips out of the way before Bruce can lay a hand on him, abandoning Stephanie for the piles of crates and containers that skirt the perimeter of the barn.

It’s no great effort to keep up with him, but the exhaustion sitting just below Bruce’s skin weighs him down. He prays that Joker won’t do anything that necessitates taking action.

His prayers go unanswered. Joker is already pulling open the nearest box and riffling through its contents like he owns the place. He makes a show of paying the items he finds cursory attention before casting them aside. Reams of paper drift towards the floor, accompanied by the clattering of pens. Whatever it is he’s found is handwritten and extensive and Bruce’s gut tells him it’s far too personal to be treated with so little respect.

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“Stop that,” Bruce snaps.

“Stop that,” Joker repeats in his farcical impression of the Batman. He blows a raspberry right in Bruce’s face and sends another stack of paper flying.

They fall with snowstorm unpredictability. Bruce snatches a few sheets out of the air, tucks them under his arm and slams closed the lid of the crate. He doesn’t manage to catch any of Joker’s fingers in the seal and he has to say that’s a shame.

“Ha! Someone’s missing his sense of humour.”

“Will you please just stop?” Grabbing Joker by his injured hand would be the easiest way to bring him to heel, but getting him a strangle hold might knock him out for a few minutes while Bruce figures out what to do next. Everything’s that much harder without a clearly defined box to throw the clown into when the fight is over.

Joker grins wide and moves on to the next crate. Bruce follows after him to slam the lid down before he can get too excited but that doesn’t stop him from trying the next one. And the next. And the next.

The snooping continues, Joker taking great delight in Bruce’s exasperation. He keeps going till he’s covered two full walls of the barn and reached the end of the medical supplies.

His mood changes abruptly, Bruce’s hand now an offending entity rather than a source of hilarity.
“Now what?”

“Now you stop.” Bruce says forcefully.

“But stopping is boring. Where are we? It looks like an old barn. Hate to break it to you sweetcheeks but you might just be going mad. This sure as shit ain’t Gotham.”

“This is Spoiler’s home, she brought us here. You were awake for the entire journey, you should know this.”

“Ahh!” Joker’s face lights up, “Yes, the little bird with the bow. It was very rude of you to warn her when I was about to get a hold of it, darling. I understand that it makes the game more fun from your end but it does put you at an unfair advantage.”

“I’m not going to let you carry a weapon, Joker.” Bruce’s voice sounds strained in his ears.

“Why ever not?” Joker scowls, “what’s the point in playing if I can’t win?”

“It’s not a game.”

“Everything’s a game if you try hard enough. God, it must be boring to be you.”

Despite himself, Bruce lets out a laugh at that. Mirthless and cold it may be, but it lights up Joker’s face.

There’s nothing funny about any of this. Bruce doesn’t know where this road ends, and the hardest part is not letting on that there’s nothing he can reasonably do with Joker right now beyond tying him up again.

And he will need to be tied up, before Stephanie wakes.

Joker clicks his fingers under Bruce’s nose and an unspoken stupor is brought to a close, “Pay attention! Pop quiz time: what are we doing here?”

We’re not sleeping, for some reason, Bruce doesn’t say. “We’re letting Spoiler sleep. When she wakes up we’re going to discuss the plan.”

“What plan?”

“The plan to get back to Gotham.”

It can’t be fear that crosses The Joker’s face because The Joker doesn’t feel fear. It’s something though, an emotion that after weeks of painstaking analysis Bruce might be able to call recognisable or human.

“You’ve gotta be joking,” Joker breathes. He’s trying very hard to smile but his voice is steady, unmarred by last second shifts in pitch or strangled laughter. “You don’t want to go back to Gotham.”

“You have no idea what I want.” Bruce turns towards the scattered paper fanning out across the floor. He sidesteps the bedroll and kneels to start gathering it up.

There are numbers scrawled at the bottom of the pages that Bruce uses to put them back into some kind of order. He reaches for a sheet marked with a neat number ten, but it rips where its’ caught under Joker’s foot.
“You don’t want to go back to Gotham,” Joker repeats, emphatic.

Bruce pulls his hand away, taking what he can salvage of the torn page with him. “I do want to go back to Gotham and you’re coming with me.”

Joker’s laugh is an incredulous flutter, “the fuck I am.”

“You have very little choice in the matter.”

“Oh yeah? Because it’s so hard for me to slip my knots and get away? Arkham couldn’t hold me, not even when the power went out and they had me forty feet below with three bulkheads between me and the surface. The bondage is fun and all, but it’s not exactly a challenge.”

“You broke out of Arkham all the time, but only because I kept putting you back in there.”


It’s as close to begging as Bruce has ever seen him. The doctors at Arkham used to wax lyrical about the possibility of a major breakthrough with The Joker and Bruce has the strangest sensation that he might be within touching distance of that particular unicorn. All it would take is a little push, the barest shred of a concession.

After so many years of throwing Joker towards help and watching him bounce right back, Bruce can’t bring himself to close the gap. The vindictive pleasure he takes in sitting back on his haunches, looking up at Joker and letting this abnormal behaviour wash straight off him is immense. A change of subject, the patient’s distress left unresolved. It’s despicably easy to be a bad therapist.

“Do you know how far we are from Gotham?” Bruce keeps his tone conversational and his smile almost indecipherable.

The newly hardened shell of Joker’s exterior shatters and a crack rends the air around them as Joker’s hand makes contact with Bruce’s cheek. Bruce is pushed to the ground, a wiry frame too weightless to harbour that much power pinning him down.

The face above Bruce is damaged and drawn and desperately familiar; wiped free of colour and wrong.

“I did not come all this way,” Joker spits, “I did not spring myself from that hellhole. I did not leave my motherland forever-home city. I did not fucking find you, just to watch you run back the way I came. You didn’t survive this long just to kill yourself for that shit heap.”

“It’s not a shit heap,” Bruce retorts and immediately thinks of five hundred more pertinent responses.

“And lemme guess – you’ve been killing yourself for it since you were in nappies, so what’s one last hurrah?”

“Not quite nappies.”

“Ha!” Joker smiles is worn thin, “and people say I’m nuts.” He sways over Bruce, trying to find purchase in the fabric of his tshirt.

Bruce waits until the fingers woven into the front of his shirt start to slacken and some of the rage has bled from Joker’s figure. “What happened to Gotham?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you. Boy who cried wolf, should have seen this coming. I guess
the joke’s on me.”

Joker pitches forward, limbs twisting at an angle steep enough that he could fold right in on himself. He recovers instantaneously of course, tipping back his head and letting his real laughter echo around the barn. Bruce is almost relieved to hear it, it makes the path ahead that much clearer.

“What’s going on?”

Shoving Joker aside, Bruce looks over to see Stephanie sitting up amongst the blankets, wearing a look of horror and trying to wrestle her way free of her bedding.

“Oo!” Joker squeals in delight, “does the little birdie want to join in the fun?”

Stephanie pulls herself to her feet and glowers at Joker, “I’m not a Robin, ass.”

“Really? Coulda fooled me.”

“Get off me,” Bruce grumbles, pushing Joker out of his personal space.

Joker makes a show of rolling across the floor away from Bruce with a great flailing of his limbs. He stops when he notices he’s rolling across the paper he had displaced earlier and starts playing in his mess.

“Sorry we woke you,” Bruce says to Stephanie. She can’t have had more than two hours sleep and she looks about as tired as he feels.

“Sorry you- What?” Stephanie scowls at Bruce through bleary eyes, “that you woke me? How is that the problem right now?”

Rendered dumb by her outrage, Bruce struggles to work out which part of this scenario is making her so angry. He hazards a guess at ‘everything’.

“He’s free,” Stephanie says slowly, pointing at Joker who’s in the process of constructing a very complex paper plane out of multiple sheets of paper.

Killer clowns with a track record of trying to murder your friends and family don’t tend to go down well as house guests. Bruce does his best to pull his face into an approximation of apologetic. “I’m sorry. I’ll have him tied up again soon.”

“Jesus.” Stephanie hisses. She strides past Joker to retrieve her crossbow from where she had it hidden behind a couple of stray planks. She loads a bolt and aims at Joker’s head, echoes of Helena moulding themselves into her shape. “You better come quietly, shitface. I am so not in the mood for your nonsense.”

“Have I ever come quietly?” Joker looks past Stephanie to cast Bruce a suggestive leer.

There have definitely been times Joker has come quietly and every single one of them can be chalked up to an ulterior motive. When all is said and done, everything Joker does seems to wind up being the set up for something else. Bruce would be tempted to describe it as ingenious if he believed any real thought went into it.

“I’m being serious dicklord. Shut the fuck up and let Batman tie you up again or I will put an arrow through your skull.”

“Just…don’t hurt him,” Bruce cautions Stephanie.
She shoots him a withering look. “How tired are you? You’re not in Gotham anymore, Dorothy and you were never my dad. I’ve only held off killing him up till now as a favour to you. Don’t think I won’t do it if he gives me a reason to.”

“You’re better than that.”

“I’m not. I killed Horne and I will definitely kill this sack of shit if I can. Fuck it, Batman, you know what? I’ll kill him and I’ll enjoy it. If I didn’t know what a demon he is a knife fight I’d make it a real personal affair, draw the whole thing out. You better believe I’d like that.”

“Oh she’s fun,” Joker stares at Stephanie with giddy excitement. “You never told me you bred them fun, Bats. I thought they were supposed to be little carbon copies of you.”

“Shut the fuck up!” Stephanie roars. Bruce can practically hear time worn arguments falling from her lips, the same fight she’d have with any member of the family if they let her work herself up to it.

*I’m nothing like him.*

Joker surges forward till he’s staring down the underside of the crossbow, tip of the bolt poised inches from his forehead. “You gonna kill me? You gonna teach your old man a lesson?"

“He’s not my dad.”

“And he’s not my boyfriend. We all have to suffer,” Joker licks his lips, grinning wide. He looks like an animal, stretched between nails and ready for taxidermy. “But imagine if you really went and did it, little bird. He’d be so angry. God almighty he’d be an inferno. Because no one else gets to kill me, no one but him. He thinks about it sometimes, ya know? I’ve caught him staring me down like I’m a piece of meat, a bloodbank for those great big fangs of his. To tell you the truth there have been times I’ve wanted him to just get the fuck on and do it but you see the whole point is that he won’t. But if you killed me, he’d miss his chance. Gotta admit, it’s not how I wanted to go but it would be enough to know he’d skin you for it after the fact.”

His fingers curl around the barrel of the crossbow, pressing the bolt hard enough against his head to draw blood.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Stephanie breathes

Joker’s smile speaks of a great grey city drenched in rain. “Nothing’s wrong with me, doll. I’m just a little less cagey with my feelings than the average bear.”

“Enough.” Bruce gets to his feet, takes the crossbow in one hand and Joker’s head in the other and prizes the two apart. “Stephanie, don’t encourage him.”

“You’re taking his side?” Stephanie chokes, “what the hell?”

“I’m not taking his side, I’m stopping you from doing something you’d regret.”

“Me? Nah, Batman. I wouldn’t regret it for one fucking millisecond. You would though, he’s right about one thing.”

“Now who’s taking whose side?” Bruce growls. He pushes the crossbow away from Joker’s head but keeps hold of the clown. It takes more effort than it should do, exhaustion however temporarily forgotten creeping out from where it’s nestled in his bones.

The crossbow drops, so that’s all that’s left standing is Stephanie Brown. Hood down, mask pushed
aside and uniform stitched from sack cloth and nylon. “You had a lot of weird shit in that mancave of yours,” she starts, “most of it made sense. The penny and the dinosaur you found. Jason’s costume was a reminder. All those…you never stopped harping on about the importance of remembering where we came from and what we had become like that had anything to do with all that junk. They were trophies. You were collecting trophies from the fucking hunt then lecturing us on the importance of not getting emotionally involved in our cases.”

Joker giggles at the end of Bruce’s arm. “This is like one of those old school television roasts. Someone pass the popcorn.”

Stephanie spares him a look of disgust, made sharp by all the pieces of her friends and family she’s watched Joker syphon off over the years. “So remind me, when the criminals were so good at leaving you something to remember them by, why did you have to go and make a trophy of your own?” She straps the crossbow to the back of her belt and snatches the paper Bruce is holding out of his hands. Turning away, she makes for the crates on the far side of the room and starts putting things back in order.

Bruce is at a loss for words. In his mind’s eye he sees the outline of a jester, painted on the side of a church. He can’t stop himself from filling it in red and yellow and hanging it on the batcave wall. Bruce Wayne had called the print shop with easy-going crassness, some comment about Gotham’s most famous citizens needing to show each other some respect. A particular kind of highly durable card had to be used along with some very costly laser printing and the danger of doing something so overt and stupid had thrummed through his veins for weeks after the fact.

All the while Alfred had hovered over him, unable to get through anything but the weakest protest before being met with a change of subject. When the finished playing card arrived, he had said: “Sir, it appears you have acquired a most unhealthy obsession.”

That was the first time anyone told Bruce his fascination with The Joker was abnormal. The family had been very small back then, but all new initiates heard the story eventually. Dick made sure of that.

“What’s she talking about?” Joker asks.

Bruce shakes his head and doesn’t reply.

The barn descends into an awkward silence in which Joker grabs another sheet of paper and starts on some fiddly origami while Bruce is left staring at Stephanie’s back. When she deigns to turn to face him her shoulders are slumped forward and it’s with some effort that she meets his eye.

“You gonna tie him up again?”

Bruce shrugs, “what would be the point?”

“For fuck’s sake!” Stephanie throws up her hands, “why can’t you just want him dead like a normal person?”

“It’s not normal to want to kill people,” Bruce replies.

At almost the exact same instance, Joker chimes in, “because he’d be so bored without me.”

Eyes not leaving Bruce’s, Stephanie squares her jaw, “it’s incredible what people will do to protect themselves from the truth.” She turns away again, the barn reverberating with the sound of falling supplies when she kicks one of the crates.
The bed lies empty in the middle of the room, and no matter how much of an annoyance or a danger Joker may be Bruce can’t pretend it’s not inviting. He zones out, to the sound of caged chuckles and the steady rumble of Stephanie’s supplies clicking back into place. It’s not cold, and yet the air in the barn goes frigid against Bruce’s skin, reminding him just how nice it had been to let the musty duvet envelop him.

He doesn’t realise that his fingers have tightened in The Joker’s hair until the clown lets out a drawn out whine. “Oh yeah, just like that.”

Bruce drops him in a rush, practically throwing Joker across the room. He thinks he catches the tail end of a shiver running up Stephanie’s body out the corner of his eye.

“Just take it,” she says, not bothering to turn around. “I’ll wake you if I need any help with him.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“He’s dangerous, Spoiler.”

“So am I.” Stephanie jerks her head towards the crossbow. “I’m serious, I’m not gonna be able to get back to sleep for a while.”

It’s an offer too good to pass up. It’s an offer Bruce has to pass up.

It’s not an offer he’s going to pass up easily. “Are you sure? I don’t want to impose.”

“Sure you don’t,” Stephanie mutters. She goes silent, leaving Bruce hanging and Joker making ever more of a mess out of her papers.

A scraping of plastic on plastic as the crates are moved. Locks previously unused clicking into place. Stephanie gathers what paper is still lying at her feet and stacks it as far off the ground as she can reach, she doesn’t bother to check which order the sheets are in.

Hitching her crossbow back up into her hand, she rounds on Bruce, rising onto the balls of her feet so she can almost meet him nose to nose. “Look Bats, I like you. You know I do, even if I’ve always had an odd way of showing it but hey, we can’t all be Tim.”

“I never said you—“

“Let me talk!” Stephanie cuts Bruce off, “I’ll put you up here as long as you need a place to stay but the clown? No way. He’s gotta go. So the next time you think you might be inconveniencing me, don’t try guilt tripping me into letting psychopathic killers live, ok?”

She drops back to the floor and Bruce nods, “we’ll be on the move this evening if you can stand him till then.”

“I’ll manage,” Stephanie makes a face that says things a ‘but’ never could. “Where are you going, anyway?”

“We’re headed for Gotham.”

“Not if I can help it!” Joker sing songs.

“So run away then, if you’re that good an escape artist.”
“Honey, asking me to unwind my destiny from yours is like asking a dog not to lick its nuts.”

“You two deserve each other,” Stephanie rolls her eyes, then catches herself. “Oh God. Fuck. What an awful thing to say.”

Bruce reaches out to lay a hand on her shoulder, then thinks better of it, “it’s fine.”

Shaking her head, Stephanie collapses to the floor. “I just… I found you and I thought everything would be alright. Because things normally were alright with you in a less than normal sort of way. I forgot how fucking stubborn you can be. I guess I figured you might choose me over him. Stupid really, you never have done before.”

“I would never…” Bruce lets himself trail off and he stoops to join her. He knows what she means. Justice above feelings, it leaves them all feeling trapped from time to time.

Stephanie has the good graces not to take him up on it, though her face stays steely even as the damn breaks. “As for going back to Gotham–”

“It’s a dumb idea, right?” Joker crawls forward and makes to pat Stephanie on the head with his good hand. He almost earns himself another two broken fingers for his trouble but that doesn’t seem to bother him. He laughs off the pain and stares at her like she’s a particularly exciting chew toy.

“You could come with us,” Bruce offers.

Stephanie is already pulling the duvets over to crowd around him. “I’ve heard enough stories about that city to not want to find out which ones are true. I’m staying right here.”

“What are the survivors saying?”

“Survivors?” Stephanie scoffs. “There were no survivors, Batman. No one got out of Gotham.”

“I did,” Joker pipes up. Both Stephanie and Bruce ignore him.

“If you change your mind about the city and the clown and… your whole life philosophy I guess, you’d be welcome to stay.” Stephanie pushes at Bruce’s shoulders, urging him to lie down.

It’s a nice lie. Without anyone to act as a buffer between the two of them Bruce doubts they would find a way to cooperate. They’re too stubborn and too proud for that.

“Be good,” Bruce tells Joker, just before Stephanie forces him into a horizontal position and pulls the duvet up to his armpits.

Joker’s eyes light up, green for go. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

There’s nothing smart or responsible to be said for leaving Stephanie or Joker at the other’s mercy. Bruce doesn’t have time to contemplate his bad choices though. His head hits the ground and sleep startles him, opening up its cavernous jaws and sucking him down. Sometimes he feels like he could float into the abyss and never come up for air, and he would be as happy as it is possible for him to be.

Chapter End Notes
I'm not entirely happy with this chapter but I'm not quite sure how to make it do what I want it to do. I may come back and rewrite it at some point.
When Bruce wakes this time he feels properly rested. The bright specks of light that had snuck in under the door to illuminate the barn have faded and the tang of smoke hangs in the air where one of the torches has been relit. He sits up, rubbing sleep from his eyes and trying to gauge exactly how long he’s been asleep.

“Evening, sleeping beauty,” Stephanie says. She’s perched next to the lit torch, doing something complicated with her crossbow that requires a lot of tape.

Bruce grimaces, “how long was I out?”

“Only four hours or so. But babysitting you pet clown doesn’t exactly make the time fly.”

“Where is he?”

“He decided he was going to fix the tractor about an hour ago and has kept pretty quiet since so I’m not complaining. Just wish he hadn’t broken half my arrows before he started.”

There’s a pile of arrowheads sat at Stephanie’s side – that explains the tape. Bruce examines her from a distance and sees flecks of dirt on her cheeks, the muscles in her jaw wound tight. There’s a slight twitch around her mouth every time she moves her left arm.

His stomach sinks, “he hurt you.”

“What, this?” Stephanie nods towards her arm, “It’s nothing, grazed it on one of the crates. He didn’t come at me or anything, I would have woken you if he had.”

If that’s an invitation to pry, Bruce doesn’t take the hint. He’s never been all that brilliant at handling other people’s pain, especially when that pain has been handed out by The Joker. For all their fighting and rage and plots foiled time and again, the two of them have always bounced back from whatever they’ve dealt out to each other. Bruce doesn’t have a very firm grasp on what the clown does to other people.

“Radiation doesn’t seem to have done him much damage,” Stephanie continues. “I mean, after Constance I knew he was still dangerous but he took the lids off some of my locked crates like it was nothing.”

Bruce wracks his brain, trying to work out what’s odd about that sentence. He thinks back to the fight on the driveway when he had found Joker. Back in Constance.

“Just how long have you been following me?” he asks.

“A few days,” Stephanie shrugs.

Irritation sparks hot at Bruce’s temple, accompanied by a stab of hurt that she could have trailed him for so long without trying to make contact. He doesn’t have the patience to temper it into anything kinder.

“Explain,” he barks, the edge of his voice plunging towards a Batman growl.
Stephanie’s eyebrows fly up to her hairline, and her attention stays very firmly on the broken arrows. “My following you wound up saving your life. You might try not to fly off the handle about it.”

“Spoiler!”

“Okay! Jesus,” Stephanie throws down the arrow she’s working on and turns to face Bruce with her best ‘barely suppressing a temper tantrum’ smile. “This is my base of operations, as you know. I’ve been here pretty much since the bomb went off; it’s only about ten day’s out from my Aunt’s. I was gonna head further inland but in the end I couldn’t…you know that feeling? Like no matter how much shit it lays at your feet leaving Gotham would be the biggest mistake of your life?”

“Get to the point,” Bruce snaps.

Stephanie rolls her eyes, “of course you do. Anyway, after about a month of skulking around here by myself I figured the lone hermit lifestyle was gonna make for a pretty shitty existence in the long term. At first I thought I’d have a crack at getting back into Gotham but after a couple of days heading North I decided the stories I was hearing from people leaving the area weren’t worth the hassle so I came back home and started over. There were a whole lot of folk trying to get out of the Gotham suburbs back then, now I barely see anyone round here. I started going on recon missions to see who else was making a go of it out here, and eventually these became pretty big operations. There aren’t many of us risking it this close to the city but let me tell you, the kids over in Constance are far and away the nicest of the gangs. If you head west about twenty clicks you’ll hit Stanton, the kids over there are a nightmare. Horne’s little unit have been causing quite a bit of trouble over the past few months but hopefully that’ll die down now.”

“That still doesn’t explain why you didn’t reveal yourself to me back in Constance.”

“I’m getting there! I’m just getting the details out of the way first. God knows you’re gonna press me for them later if I don’t.” Stephanie draws a long, exasperated breath, “Anyway. I’d gotten to Constance a couple of days before you. They set any purple spray paint they find aside for me and my supplies were running low. I got there, we did a little bartering, one thing led to another and I wound up staying for a few nights. Now, they’re nice kids but they’re really particular about who can do what. I’m a friend, but I’m not part of their clan so when fighting starts I’m expected to keep out of the way.”

“Which is why you weren’t with them when they jumped me coming into town,” Bruce infers.

Stephanie nods, “precisely. I didn’t even get a look at you until after you knocked Bella and TJ out. I assumed it wasn’t really you. You’ve dropped more than a few pound and anyone can find Batman masks in costume shops.”

“You didn’t even suspect?”

“I hoped,” Stephanie says, “but hope wasn’t enough. One of the reasons I’d hung around so long, aside from the fact that some of those kids can cook, was to find out what was going on with some weird graffiti that had been cropping up over town and they weren’t gonna take kindly to me trying to make friends with their marks while I was on a case for them. They were pretty freaked, I’m sure you can work out why.”

Bruce lets out a bark of dispassionate laughter, “laughter in the night, cleaning supplies going missing, uncommonly accurate Superman symbols cropping up around the place?”

“Oh you saw the symbols? The Constance kids were really confused by those.”
“Ironic.”

Stephanie’s smile softens into something warm, “Tell me about it. I tried my best to explain to them that there was more to Supe’s symbol than an S in a triangle but they never caught on. I like to pretend that the bastardised versions are all for me.”

Trading hope for warnings of a dark future sounds like a bad exchange to Bruce. He reflexively starts crafting a response about the dangers of taking on that kind of responsibility. No one can do what Clark did, not even on their best days.

She doesn’t want to hear it. Bruce swallows down his unasked for opinion and instead goes with, “I’m sorry that I hurt your friends.”

“Don’t start that,” Stephanie replies, “You don’t need to apologise for what you did to them. You were easier on them than they were expecting.”

“Still, they were kids.”

“Still nothing. That’s the world now. You can’t always pick on someone your own size.” She shakes herself out, releasing tension Bruce hadn’t noticed she was carrying in her shoulders. “It wasn’t till you shacked up with Camila for the night that shit got weird. Bella didn’t make it back in time for her watch and just…you know how he used to laugh?”

Stephanie’s eyes flash to a point behind Bruce and he doesn’t need to turn round to know that she’s looking right at Joker.

He knows exactly what she means. Laugher is as much the symbol of The Joker as hope is the symbol of Superman; but there’s laughter and there’s laughter. The clown giggles and jokes his way through hostage situations and mass panic, but he has a particular laugh that only sees the light of day when he’s on the hunt.

“My ears are burning,” Joker drawls, voice sinking into the wood of the barn and hanging in the air like smoke. The words come out slurred and heavy with effort. He’s not eaten all that much in the past forty eight hours. Couple that with a metabolism fast enough to keep him that skinny and it’s likely that he’s probably running very low on blood sugar.

Not that Bruce is fairing much better. Hunger is no doubt the primary reason that shifting his exhaustion is proving so difficult.

Mercifully, Stephanie doesn’t take Joker’s bait and Joker leaves his attempts to insert himself into the conversation at that. “I knew something was coming,” she continues “but the rest of those kids weren’t Gothamites. They believed me when I told them it would be bad but I don’t think they understood how bad.”

Bruce thinks back to the figures that may have been bodies, lying across the other side of the ravine the first explosion had torn through the road. He pushes the image down into the place he reserves for things that cloud his mind and slow him down. “How many of them survived?”

“Oh most of them,” Stephanie says with an aggressive commitment to keeping her voice light. “I mean, there were casualties. We found Bella just before the bombs went off.”

“I should have seen him coming.”

“It’s ok, Batman.”
No it’s not.”

Stephanie’s smile has worn small and sad. “She wasn’t like that when we found her, you know? She’d had her head taken off and a queen of hearts painted on the back of her jacket but the disembowelment and the broken fingers were the kids. They figured it would send a message, wouldn’t listen to me when I tried to tell them that stuff like that doesn’t scare Joker. After it was done they passed her to me and told me to dump her at the edge of town and write a message or whatever.”

Bruce hisses, “Spoiler…”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. But I mean, by then it was done, and I was angry. So…” she trails off. “When the street blew I didn’t even pause to see if anyone was ok. I saw you heading north, grabbed Bella and I followed you.”

Her voice catches on the end of itself and she ducks her head. When she looks back the smile is gone completely, replaced by a determined jut of her jaw. Bruce doesn’t think he could stand to hear the final body count.

“You must have known no good could come from trailing after me.”

“Of course I knew, but I was angry. I figured that if The Joker was really in town and if you were really you there was no way he wouldn’t find you.”

The implication of revenge sits between them, retribution pushing grief aside. Baseball Bat – Bella – should have been buried and mourned and instead she was split open and used as a pawn in a fight that neither side had their heart in.

Still, Bruce supposes he should congratulate Stephanie on her stealth. “I never even saw you.”

“Thus did the pupil surpass the teacher,” Stephanie snorts, “I gotta say, all that stuff about blending into the shadows and using the built environment to my advantage really paid off. You were an ass about it back in Gotham but you’ve indirectly saved my life like fifty times for drilling it into me.”

The parts of Bruce that can’t help but worry that the people he cares about aren’t taking good enough care of themselves calms a fraction. “I’m glad.”

“Thought you might be.”

“What did you do next?”

“Oh after that it was easy. He found you. He killed TJ and you two had a go at each other and if I wasn’t lugging a body around with me I reckon I would have burst out of the bushes right there I was so happy to see you back in action. I met up with a few of the others while you got him tied up and we set Bella up by the sign. I put my foot down and insisted I go with the scouting party. I was pretty pissed at you for letting Joker live. I mean, I still am. Especially after he dropped Sierra like that.”

Bruce wishes Stephanie would stop attaching proper names to dead bodies. With the immediacy of his anger behind him, it just makes him sad.

“So they turned back, after the thing in the garden?” Bruce asks.

Stephanie nods cautiously. A slow side to side wobble that doesn’t commit to anything. “They did. But…”
Bruce’s eyes narrow, “but what?”

Her breath stutters, mouth hanging open and gaze turning skyward like she’s praying some greater power will intervene and take responsibility for whatever comes next. “They’ve offered me a substantial reward if I can get Joker back to Constance,” she sets off slowly. “They’ll double it if he’s alive. They want to finish him off themselves.”

“What did you tell them?”

Stephanie shrugs, “he killed my friends. I’ve hated him for years. I told them I’d handle it.”

“So you tracked us through the woods, looking for an opening because you knew I’d never hand him over willingly.” Bruce finishes. He should be furious, the breach of trust so grave he would have sent Stephanie packing were they back in the cave. Instead he’s sheepish, worrying that he’s slipping, and maybe just a little proud of her.

Opening her palms to let the cards settle, Stephanie draws her mouth into an apologetic half-smile. “No flies on you.”

“What changed your mind?”

That same noncommittal nod, “It’s easy to want to kill The Joker when you see him in action. We used to have conversations about it, you know? When enough of us were camped out at the manor, we’d talk about how we’d do it if we had the chance. When he’s with you though, back in the fire pit at Home’s…I’d forgotten how much power you have over him. No one else could have broken his wrist like that, he wouldn’t have let them. I probably wouldn’t survive and all out fight with him, so if he’s gonna live anyway I’d rather you were keeping an eye on him.”

“Who would have had the best chance at taking him down?” Bruce asks. He means to relieve some of the tension, keep his voice light-hearted but there’s accusatory fervour burning up his throat all the same.

Stephanie’s face flashes confusion, till she realises he’s asking about the family. “Babs had some real vindictive ideas as to what she was gonna do with him, but I think I’ve gotta give it to Alfred.”

“Alfred?”

“Yeah! He showed us what he could do with a sharp knife and a chicken a few times, I wouldn’t wanna be locked in a room with him when he’s angry.”

The tension breaks all on it’s own. The mental image of Alfred flashy kitchen tricks that would never transcribe into a real fight enough to snap Bruce out of himself. They laugh together, quiet and careful, like they’ve only been rationed so much frivolity. It’s a relief.

“Ha ha hee hee ho ho…” Joker joins in just as Stephane and Bruce regain their composure.

Bruce turns to look at him. He’s lying underneath the tractor, fiddling with some loose wiring. It’s unlikely that he’s going to be able to build anything dangerous out of it with the electronics shot but he’s doing a very good job at making it look like he’s engaged with the task at hand. There’s a slump to his shoulders, a slack to his smile. He looks tired. He needs to be fed and watered and then to be planted back in the soil that spawned him. If nothing else, Bruce can understand what it feels like to wilt away from home.

He can feel Stephanie’s eyes on the back of his head. “You better not be going soft on him.”
“Never,” Bruce looks back at her, “but that doesn’t mean I’m going to let him die.”

Pulling himself free of the covers, Bruce checks his trousers and finds them dry. Stephanie digs through the crates for supplies she can spare, water and bandages that she piles on top of the pack. When she gets to her food crates she starts with the usual fare of tinned beans but is nice enough to give them some beef jerky and a couple of freeze dried ice cream sandwiches.

Bruce examines the silver packaging of the sandwiches. “Where did you get these?”

Stephanie waggles her eyebrows conspiratorially, “I get out every now and then. Three days south east of here there’s this place – Forest Hill. Not big enough to call it a city but big enough to have a pretty decent planetarium. I raided the gift shop the first time I was out there, and if I’m ever in the area I usually wind up sleeping in the main hall. It’s proved pretty useful, I never needed to know shit about stars in Gotham.”

Together, they put everything Stephanie has seen fit to part with back in order and start shoveling it into the pack. Bruce double checks the outer pockets for anything Horne might have missed and finds the switchblade he had taken from Joker gone but the bouncy ball where he left it.

It catches Stephanie’s attention. “What’s that?”

“I don’t know,” Bruce admits, “a rubber ball, I hope. But I found it on Joker when I first picked him up and I’m not convinced it’s not dangerous.”

Stephanie rolls her eyes. “Classic Batman. You don’t trust the thing, but rather than locking it away and throwing away the key you keep it on you at all times.”

“I can’t have it falling into the wrong hands.”

“Yeah, that’s the usual excuse.” Stephanie’s tone is clipped but her eyes are smiling. Just one of the kids pushing his boundaries, making fun of him for because they can.

There’s a roll of bandages, a healthy supply of clean rags and a handful of painkillers at the bottom of the pile. Bruce protests that he has never in his life tried to dull the pain of healing and Stephanie graces him with a sneer that would make Camila proud. “It’s never too late to start taking proper care of yourself.”

The last few items are thrown into the pack and the grappling gun settled on top of a row of tins for easy access. Stephanie goes to light the second torch, the sunlight that had crept under the door now well and truly gone.

Bruce shoulders the pack and tries to think of excuses to delay the inevitable. “I’ll come back. Once I have Joker locked up somewhere secure and I’ve had time to get the city back on track, I’ll come back.”

“Maybe.” Stephanie says without looking up.

“You don’t think I’ll want to?”

“I think I’ve heard some awful things about Gotham and once you’re in you might not have much choice about coming back out.”

“What sort of things?”

“Similar to Metropolis. Worse, depending on your definition of bad is,” Stephanie says. She does
something quick with a pair of sticks and sparks light up along the kindling, “I saw a guy a few months back who’d tried his luck getting into the city but didn’t make it much past the suburbs. No idea how he made it so far south. His skin was melting, hands so far gone you could see bone. This guy had immunity, you understand. A step too far and he was done for.”

She cuts herself off abruptly, clearing her throat and blinking like she can’t quite remember where she is.

“Melting? Ha!” Joker’s voice trips and tumbles down octaves. “There’s an Icarus joke to be made here, gimme a minute. Kinda reminds me of this guy I met just outside Metropolis. He was so excited to see the place that he exploded! Things got pretty festive after that, that's for sure. His guts made for lovely streamers.”

“Shut up!” Bruce and Stephanie snap simultaneously.

Joker’s laughter shatters on the underside of the tractor, diffracting at odd angles. “Come on now! The world is falling apart because an alien is dead. That thing you used to call society was just a movie set. Welcome to the real word jackass.”

“Ignore him,” Bruce mutters, laying a hand on Stephanie’s shoulder and trying to turn them both away from where Joker is lying.

She doesn’t look away, her mouth curling into a sneer that speaks of years’ of loathing culminating in a begrudging understanding of the clown’s way of thinking. “I wish I could.”

There’s no more time and no more excuses. Bruce looks at Stephanie’s face and sees a welcome overstayed. The hypothetical conversations he’s mapping out in his head cut short but he resolves to come back here, come what may. He’s going to stand in this exact same spot one day as he asks Stephanie to relive the week’s following the bomb. She’ll cry and scream and tell him to go to hell. She’ll let out all that anger that he never found the stomach for before. Because the family will always be the family but no matter who else survived, the family is a thing of the past. Whatever lies in Bruce’s future, he knows with painful certainty it will not involve a rag tag group of orphans and social rejects hidden in a cave below a city he loves. Making battle plans against criminals who exist simply to prove that he is not omnipotent.

The pack hangs heavy at his shoulders. The canvas straps grating against the thin cotton of his t-shirt provokes a Pavlovian response in Bruce, the need to move. “So,” he starts, hoping that the rest of the sentence will happen on its own.

“Here,” Stephanie presses something into Bruce’s palm, “I know you won’t use it, but I think you should have it.”

“Since when did you start looking out for me?” Bruce’s fingers curl over the object, feeling its smooth edges and the sharp edge where something has been retracted.

It’s a switchblade. When he holds it up to examine it, Bruce could swear it’s the same one he pulled from Joker’s pocket.

Stephanie smiles up at him, “I was looking out for you long before we met.”

“Thank you, Spoiler.” Bruce opens his arms and she falls into him. It’s a less desperate hug than the previous night. She doesn’t grab the back of his shirt like she might be able to anchor him to her new version of the universe; she’s testing to make sure that he’s ready to fly free.

The hug doesn’t last long. In the end Bruce has to push Stephanie away – he can’t have both her and
Joker in his sights at once. He marches up the length of the barn and pulls Joker out from underneath the tractor. He wriggles, serpentine and ugly, his impossible strength somewhat faded with his energy. Before he can get a word in edgeways Bruce flicks open the blade of the switchblade and presses the tip to the back of Joker’s neck.

The room stills, waiting to see what happens next. Joker stills in anticipation, the corners of his mouth just visible where he’s smiling as wide as he can.

Bruce grabs a handful of Joker’s hair at the base of his skull and uses the switchblade to cut it away. It’s still blackened with ash but when he wipes it against his trousers the green starts to come through. He closes the switchblade and deposits it in his pocket before taking hold of Joker’s shirt and frogmarching him towards the door.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” Stephanie asks when Bruce hands her the hair. She watches it sitting on the palm of her hand and she has nothing to say about how soft it is.

“For the kids back in Constance,” Bruce explains. “It’s not perfect, but I figure you can use that to buy some favour with them. Maybe you can convince them you held up your end of the bargain.”

Stephanie fixes him with an unreadable expression, something a little sad and a whole lot something Bruce expects he’s not supposed to understand. She ducks her head and tucks the hair into her belt.

“I thought you wanted a lock of my hair as a keepsake,” Joker sniffs. “Or that you were going to make a voodoo doll out of it. It’s nearly my birthday, you know, I deserve a fun little surprise like that.”

Picking up the tarpaulin from where she stashed it behind one of the crates, Stephanie stands by the door and offers the plastic for Bruce to take. An animal trapper, luring the beast out of its hiding place with promises of fresh meat.

“Take care of yourself,” she says as he takes the tarpaulin from her. “I mean, I know you won’t. But try not to die.”

She hits him once again with that strange stare as he mumbles a farewell. He doesn’t spare her any words of encouragement, she doesn’t need them. She needs to keep living as she has been. Thriving in a world that makes more sense to her than it does to him.

They nod to each other, just once, short and sharp. The military precision of a plan well formed. Then Bruce throws open the door and steps out into the dark.

Joke tries to make himself a dead weight at the end of Bruce’s arm, tripping over his own feet and laughing to himself. As if he hasn’t tried this lame excuse for a prank a hundred times over.

They’re still treading through the pool of light created by the open barn door when Stephanie calls out, “hey Joker!”

The clown twists round fast, bending Bruce’s arm at an uncomfortable angle. It could be a trick of the light, but Bruce thinks there’s malice dancing in Joker’s eyes the likes of which he hasn’t seen in over a year.

“Don’t let him kill himself for that city.”

Tipping back his head, Joker laughs long and loud, clutching at his side with his uninjured hand screwing his eyes tight shut. “Silly girl,” he gasps, “I’d sooner feed him his own intestines than let him fade away on his own terms.”
Chapter End Notes

Stories I am one day going to write:
- What happened to Camila
- What went down between Stephanie and Joker while Bruce was asleep
They’ve gone three miles or so when Bruce’s fingers start cramping around the handful of Joker’s shirt collar he’s holding on to. He watches Joker stumble out from under his grip, apparently unaware that he’s been let loose.

They head out across the fields pushing north from the barn. Through the dark it’s hard to tell what lies ahead save a steady rise in the land but Bruce is hoping they’ll find a treeline soon enough to duck into. He maps the area out in his head, trying to remember the lie of rivers and towns.

Soon enough they’re going to hit the suburbs and if they want to get any closer to the city they’ll have to kiss the natural cover afforded them by the landscape goodbye. There’s no way they’ll pass unaccosted through the greater Gotham area, but for the time being they can move freely.

If Alfred were here he’d no doubt have something to say on the nature of men that pursue goals which will most likely spell their doom. Bruce chooses to ignore the imagined warnings, same as ever, and instead starts crunching the numbers on the chances of finding something to slow the advance of the radiation sickness between here and home.

“What’cha think’ about?” Joker purrs, close enough that his breath tickles the shell of Bruce’s ear.

Bruce supresses the urge to jump out of his skin and shoves him away. “Which route did you take out of the city?”

“Which city?”

“Don’t be coy.”

“Coyness has never been my strong suit when it comes to you,” Joker chuckles, “I’d say we’re more of a clubs pairing.”

“I thought you were the joker.”

“It’s a metaphor.”

“Which part of it?”

“Oh all of it,” Joker dismisses the question with a wave of the hand, “of none of it. I forget. The point is, Batsy old chum, you’re a card. I’ve always thought you’d make a wonderful addition to my deck.”

“Which is why you always run away from me, I presume?” Bruce says, words heavy with sarcasm.

“There you go again, taking everything far too literally,” Joker lays an affectionate hand on Bruce’s shoulder that is quickly swatted away, “why on Earth would I want you in my pocket? That would be a terrible waste of a good nemesis. Rivalry keeps you on your toes, see. Take yourself as an example, how much of your fancy shmancy tech would you have bothered to develop if you didn’t have little old me to use it on? No, the point is that when I run, you chase me and we’ve always been better for it. Why, I reckon I could run off right now and you would follow after me, and as long as I kept ahead of you, you’d never get back to Gotham.”

He leaves out the countless times Bruce has caught up to him, and how very many of them have ended with Joker being dragged off kicking and screaming, his plans soundly foiled.
Bruce shakes his head, “I’d bring you back. I wouldn’t let you run free – you don’t get to be anyone else’s problem.”

“Except I do, but only because you twist my arm,” Joker lets out a high peel of cackles at the dirty look Bruce shoots him, “don’t look at me like that! I never wanted to be anyone else’s problem but you’ve got a horrifically short attention span. So what if I had to step over a few dead bodies to get you back on track?”

“They were people,” Bruce growls, rounding on Joker and getting a fist into the front of his shirt. He means it, he can see Sierra falling to the ground in his mind’s eye, but the argument feels tired and lacklustre on his tongue.

Joker slumps, so that Bruce is supporting all of his negligible bodyweight. “People are so boring, don’t you think?”

“I’m a person,” Bruce reminds him. You’re a person. You with the white skin and the green hair and the laugh like a million worst nightmares rolled into one. You are a person you retched excuse for a waste of space.

“Darling!” Joker gasps, wrenching himself free of Bruce’s grip and twirling out of the way of the arm that tries to stop him going any further, “don’t you dare put yourself down like that! The birds and the beasts that you had at your beck and call, sure, they were people. Better than the average crop I’ll give you that but people nonetheless. But you were above them Batsy, you were the Bat King. Fuck it, you’re my Bat God.”

Once upon a time Bruce was desensitised to Joker’s insistence on his divinity, but now it stirs something in him, like the old days. Something unpleasant and arrogant, something that wants to run The Joker ragged between here and Gotham and hit him hard enough to draw the word out of him in shaking breaths, broken ribs and eyes alight with the dance.

He dreams about it sometimes. Or at least he used to. Back when he thought, hoped, that Joker was lost to the world.

Joker leans in, presses his chest against Bruce’s arm and hisses into his ear, “my God.”

He’s gone before Bruce can react, a hair’s breadth out of reach. There’s little that can be done but to follow.

They come to the edge of the fields, marked by a wooden fence beyond which lies a meadow. There’s something painted on the top rung, words that are easy to decipher up close. Bruce doesn’t need to see all that clearly to know they’re painted in purple.

An S symbol, followed by directions. West to Chicago, east to Metropolis, north to Gotham, south to everywhere else. You don’t want to go to Metropolis or Gotham.

“Well she’s not wrong,” Joker leans in to peer at the paint before straightening up so fast he looks like he’s about to overbalance. “I rather liked her, she had spunk. So much more fun than that sanctimonious bitch you used to have manning your telephones. I never could understand her deal, like was she really that upset by a measly little gunshot wound? Last I saw she seemed to be getting on just fine without her legs so I have no idea what all that fuss was about.”

The ghost of Barbara Gordon rising from Joker’s warped morality hits Bruce like a sucker punch to the gut. “You tried to break her,” he snarls, launching himself forward at the exact moment that Joker puts on a burst of speed and steps out of his way.
“Yes well, I failed. No shame in admitting it. Though it’s a pity I never got the chance to finish the job.”

Before Bruce can summon the strength to hit Joker, the clown hoists himself up and over the fence. His figure is embossed on the muted grey of the cloud covered moon, elegant and unnatural.

In another lifetime it’s a move that would have served at the prelude to a fight, a physical challenge just crude enough to set the pair of them on edge. Bruce can’t scale anything with that much gymnastic flair, he’s too heavy set. So he glowers up at Joker, resisting the urge to fall back into old habits.

“Something the matter?” Joker makes a cradle for his chin, resting his elbow on the top of the fence. Barbara would tell Bruce that his bait is never worth rising to. She would have come in through his earpiece and told him to hold his temper, then she would have run a short fuse for the rest of the week.

“I’m peachy,” Bruce replies with false sincerity and hauls himself over the fence.

The meadow slopes downwards, funnelling them through a shallow valley at the bottom of which lies a road. There are no cars lying abandoned out here. It’s an emptiness that speaks of isolation, completely unlike the stretches of motorway Bruce ran across south of the border that had been stripped clean of anything resembling scrap metal.

Their isolation can’t last much longer, and Bruce would rather they struck out for the suburbs than ran into them by accident. He takes a tentative step out onto the tarmac, turning on the cowl’s night vision to scan for signs of booby traps.

“It’s just a road, it doesn’t bite.” Joker announces as he steps onto the road with heavy feet.

Bruce ignores him, still examining the terrain. There are no signposts in sight but it doesn’t look like there ever were. The tarmac is evenly laid with no foliage poking through any surreptitious holes so they must be somewhere where the roads were regularly used. He’d guess they’re maybe five miles from the suburbs, on one of the not-quite-country roads that connects the sort of sleepy village that the moneyed like to say they can afford to live in to the main urban centre.

Not that he can talk. Wayne Manor has a lovely view of Gotham, but it’s definitely outside the city limits.

Joker jerks his head slightly east of due north, “Gotham’s that way.”

“I am aware,” Bruce says, looking off to the west where the road follows the hills down into the lowlands, “but I doubt it’s going to be all that easy to just walk back in.”

“All that easy-“ Joker cuts himself off with his own laughter, “it’s a radiation dump, not Mordor. If you want to get in all you gotta do is go.”

“There could be people guarding the border, and who knows what might have happened in the inner city over the past year. If a group like Horne’s has managed to get a foothold that could spell real trouble.”

Joker stares at him, bewildered, “what part of ‘radiation dump’ do you not understand?”

“A lot can change in a year,” Bruce shrugs, like he doesn’t have the equivalent knowledge of several PhDs in nuclear physics.
Stepping in close, Joker sets his right hand on Bruce’s shoulder. He winces, thinks better of it, and swaps for the left, “listen, love. I don’t think you’re thinking about this very clearly.”

“I am not in the mood for a lecture in clear thinking from you,” Bruce jerks out of his grasp and goes back to trying to size up their options on how to proceed. To the east, the road curves round between the shallow dip of two hills and to the west a wide plain is just about visible.

East would be more direct, west would provide them with better cover. Again Bruce asks, “which route did you take out of Gotham?”

Joker throws up his hands in mock despair, “how am I supposed to remember?”

“You were the one who made the trip. You must have had some kind of plan.”

“I’m sure I did but there’s far too much going on in my pretty little head to remember extraneous details. All I know is that I was running around my city and you weren’t coming after me and there wasn’t anyone left to perform to and it was the most bored I’d ever been in my life. So I left.”

“You left Gotham to find me.” Bruce repeats.

“But of course darling. No point staying in that dusty old cesspool without you to play with.”

“And it never occurred to you that I might be dead?”

For a moment, Joker’s face is the picture of sincerity. Mouth turned flat, eyes dulled with conviction. “I honestly believe that on the day you die I will crumble into dust.”

The night stills around them, crowding Bruce till he and Joker are sharing personal space whether he likes it or not. There’s so much distance between the two of them but it’s not enough. Because Joker has eyes like emeralds, like acid, like the lurid decorations that used to plaster the streets of Gotham on St Patrick’s Day. There’s nothing romantic about them, except the words that jump to the front of Bruce’s mind.

Whatever hangs between them isn’t exactly tension, but it breaks much the same. The corners of Joker’s mouth twitch up into a proper smile and he barges past Bruce, humming and old circus tune.

“What are you going?” Bruce calls after him.

“Gotham.” Joker singsongs as he starts off west.

Bruce should probably have a host of objections when it comes to Joker choosing their path. But his gut tells him that west is the right way to be headed, so he keeps quiet and pushes on behind him.

For the next hour, Joker doesn’t make any attempts at conversation. It’s a blessed relief on Bruce’s nerves, even if Joker does manage to maintain a wide enough distance between the two of them that catching up with him is never quite possible.

With nothing else to distract him, Bruce focuses in on the way the cowl sticks uncomfortably to his skin. He can feel a rash starting to form where the thick growth of his facial hair is trapped beneath the rubber, the beginning of a sore lingering over the shell of his jaw. He can only hope that somewhere in the burned out shell of the Gotham suburbs there’s a usable razor that can take care of that.

The chill of the night starts burrowing its way below Bruce’s skin. The weather is clement enough during the day that cold is rarely an issue when walking but having set out not long after sundown...
he’ll have to contend with it till morning.

This is going to upset his sleep schedule. Bruce has to laugh at himself for that, for the years spent rushing through the night and sleeping through the day. He doesn’t know where he found the time or energy to pretend to be a well-meaning if naïve trust fund brat for the tabloids.

His laughter piques Joker’s interest. “Something funny.”

“No.” Bruce lies.

“Oh ho!” Joker stops so abruptly that Bruce nearly crashes into him. “After all this time you still think you can get away with telling porkies? Honey, I’m hurt. Come on now, I deserve a good joke.”

What Joker deserves is a broken nose and a ruined hand but he already has those. “I thought about how weird it’s going to be sleeping through the day tomorrow. Then I remembered that I used to sleep through the day all the time.”

Joker screws up his face, hand on his chin. He lets out a thoughtful hum, “it’s not a great joke, but then again you never had much of a sense of humour. You wanna hear one that’s actually funny?”

“No.” Bruce tries to walk past Joker but is stopped by a hand to his chest.

“Knock, knock,” Joker grins.

Bruce stares back at him, unamused.

“You’re supposed to say ‘who’s there?’ C’mon, it’s easy.”

“Who’s there?” Bruce sighs.

There are many variations on the classic Joker Smile. It’s not really a point of pride but it’s certainly saved Bruce’s life on more than a few occasions to be able to read the subtleties in its different forms. Right now, Joker is wearing the smile he saves for when he’s genuinely happy, the one that doesn’t just reach his eyes but overwhelms them.

Bruce is struck by how close they’re standing and desperately wants to back away.

“Clark.” Joker says.

“I don’t have time for this.” Bruce puts his weight into the push when he shoves Joker off, moving past him as quickly as possible and ducking his head just in case the alarm crawling up his throat is written on his face.

Joker doesn’t know. Joker can’t possibly know. If Joker does know, how long as he known for? What could be worse than hope turned upside down?”

“The punchline is: ‘clark, clark, clark I’m a chicken.’” Joker grumbles. In an instant he’s at Bruce’s shoulder, frowning down at him, “you really don’t know how a good joke works.”

Just a silly children’s joke. Nothing to be worried about. “It’s a bad joke,” Bruce informs him.

Joker shrugs, “better than yours.”

The land evens out and up ahead of them a handful of buildings come into view. Bruce scans the area as best he can for farm machinery and finds nothing, leading him to believe that whatever he’s looking at, it’s not another abandoned farm.
Joker stops below a road sign and motions for Bruce to join him. The most exciting thing about it, as far as Bruce can make out, is that Gotham is marked down as less than two hundred miles away. Still a good few days’ walk ahead of them, but if they can brave the roads the whole way they might just make it within the week.

“We’ve got a long way to go,” Bruce turns back to the road, “let’s keep moving.”

“Do you want to die?” Joker asks, eyes still very much on the sign.

Bruce shakes his head, “what kind of question is that?”

“Well, it’s hard to tell. You talk a big game but you’re also heading back to Gotham which is practically asking to be turned into a can of soup without the can. Aside from the flat ending to the story, it just doesn’t seem like the kind of thing you should be doing if you don’t want to die.”

Bruce cocks his head to the side, “I thought you said you could withstand the radiation levels.”

Joker’s attention temporarily diverts itself to Bruce, “are you suggesting I eat you up, darling? Watch you fall to pieces then pour you into my belly where you belong. Can’t say the thought hasn’t crossed my mind.”

“You know that’s not what I’m getting at.”

“I only ask,” Joker continues, eyes back on the sign, “because it wouldn’t be that great a detour to head to Morestown before we hit up the old homestead.”

“Why would we do that?”

“Because Morestown, my dear Bat, has a nuclear power plant.”

“You can remember which cities have nuclear power plants but not the route you took out of Gotham?” Bruce takes a step towards Joker, intending to drag him back on the move, “the last thing we should be doing is exposing ourselves to the kind of radiation that will definitely make us sick.”

Joker nods along, “couldn’t agree more. But the word on the street is that if you can pick up some sharp threads lined with the right material, lead for example, you’ve got a much better shot at staying fighting fit against all kinds of radiation.”

Bruce sees exactly where he’s going with this and he’s got to admit, it’s not a bad idea. “You think we should head that way and try to pick up a pair of hazmat suits.”

“Precisely!” Joker claps his hands excitedly, skipping ahead of Bruce and barrelling towards the buildings up ahead, “Who knows? We might survive this after all, but only if we can unlock the power of friendship. Now, if I remember correctly, we gotta head into town, past the rotting deer carcass, third street on the left.”
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

It's not at all gruesome or graphic, but this chapter comes with a cannibalism warning. Also some fairly grim descriptions of the effects of napalm. Joker’s an awful person.

By the time the sun peaks over the horizon they are both exhausted and starving. The slouch Joker tends to walk with has deepened into a full blown hump and he’s been sneaking furtive glances at the pack when he thinks Bruce isn’t looking.

They really should have eaten as soon as they left the barn, but Joker is so much easier to handle when he’s hungry and Bruce isn’t sure how to go about feeding himself without having to share. His behaviour has been saintly by clown standards. Annoying as his attempts at banter may be Joker hasn’t tried to make a break for it and he hasn’t started picking bomb ingredients out of the houses they’ve passed.

They’d had an argument about it, Bruce warning him to watch out for gas taps left open and liable to explosion when they’d taken shelter from a passing shower by ducking through the back door of a house and hiding in the kitchen. Joker had gone into excruciating detail on the difficulty of setting up the explosions back in Constance. In the absence of a workable electric charge he’d had to abandon fertiliser based recipes and had instead produced large quantities if nitroglycerin for his big finale.

That hadn’t been what the argument was about. But Bruce has a pretty in depth knowledge of a wide variety of bomb making techniques and it’s a subject that he’s learned, over the years, can be used to distract Joker from more damaging pursuits.

No, the argument had been about bodies lying in the street, the blood on Joker’s hands. It’s a well-worn conversation, but it felt so fresh. Bruce’s moral outrage had risen to fever pitch, his voice had cracked and the look on Joker’s face…

Compassion, confusion, betrayal. Bruce doesn’t know what to call it, his stomach twisting when Joker leaned in, till their foreheads nearly touched.

“Don’t do that, love.”

Now though, the insistent gnawing of his stomach can be ignored no longer and they need to get off the road to sleep. Bruce tells Joker to wait by the roadside as he ducks into a seemingly abandoned semi-detached to be sure that it’s as unoccupied as it looks.

Joker ignores him, following on Bruce’s heels and muttering furiously under his breath.

It takes Bruce a moment to place the diatribe. The Anarchist Cookbook – recipes long since edited out of the published edition. The formula for napalm trips off Joker’s tongue just as easily as it had once graced the pages of a very irresponsible book.

As far as Bruce is aware Joker has never made napalm.

“I tried it once,” Joker’s voice rises above his own susurration, “Worked perfectly. Had this whole scheme set out where I was gonna put it in the pipes at Gotham Central. All those little cancer
kiddies running around screaming because their skin wouldn’t stay on – I laughed myself silly thinking about how hard the papers would have to work to cover up the fact that they only had nice things to say about sick children when they were cute.”

“You’re disgusting.” Bruce shatters the lock with a well-placed kick and falls back into a defensive stance. Beyond the doorway the house is dark, no sign of any occupants.

Joker continues unperturbed. “Anyway. To cut a long story short the stuff kept sticking to me, and the papers already hated me despite what I did for their sales. Smelt up my pad something awful, phew-ey. A whole host of dogs without noses if ya know what I mean.”

Bruce doesn’t. He crosses the threshold, keeping his eyes peeled for signs of movement as he moves through the entrance hall and into the living room. He makes a thorough search of the furniture, moving through to the kitchen when he’s satisfied that no one’s hiding there.

Leaning on the doorframe, Joker bars the way. “Come on, you must know that old joke! My dog’s got no nose. How does it smell? Awful.”

Barging past him, Bruce dives under the table to check for warm bodies. The thick layer of dust and the fact that everything is standing firmly upright would suggest that no one has been through here in the past year but he has to be sure. There’s a voice at the back of his mind that almost sounds like Alfred telling him to keep calm and breathe deep. The rest of him is already planning a search of the upper floors, trying to anticipate the number of bedrooms and whether or not he should prepare for clutter.

He’s thinking about children drenched in napalm, right there in his city. He’s thinking about Joker laughing as his hands are worn away by the toxic sludge. High, shrieking notes that haunt his worst nightmares. Bruce shudders, clenching his jaw where his teeth stand on edge.

“What’s eating you?” Joker’s tone is conversational.

“I need to be sure there’s no one in this house.”

“Well of course there’s someone in this house. We’re here.”

“That’s not what I meant. We need to—” Bruce pulls himself out from under the table and the words die on his tongue. Across the linoleum, just in front of the sink, a large dull puddle can be seen. It’s dark, stiff and unmoving where the liquid has dehydrated to settle in its final form.

He’s seen things like it before, though they’re mercifully irregular. His first encounter had been back in Texas, in a cave at the edge of the desert. He had toed at it to see what it would do, and when he caught the looks of horror on his hosts’ faces had resolved to never touch one again.

Joker follows Bruce’s line of sight, eyes lighting up when they fall upon the puddle. “Oo! People pancake. My favourite.”

Bruce gets a hand around Joker’s ankle and pulls him to the floor before the clown can get too far. He drags him back, wrapping his arms around Joker’s torso to pin him but it’s not enough. Joker’s too long and too strong. He wrestles an arm free, and there’s a sound like a breaking flower pot when he snaps off a corner of the dried out puddle.

Long white fingers push the shard between non-existent lips. Green eyes roll back in that gaunt skull “Mm, that’s good.” Joker hums. The quirk of his mouth speaks of the obscene, his voice slipping low into sultry registers.
Something in Bruce’s gut curdles, sucking moisture from his moth and sending a wave of nausea washing over him. He wants to do something, anything, to remind them both that what Joker has done is not ok, will never be ok.

But he’s still watching that expression of ecstasy play out, letting the momentum from their momentary scrap send them crashing to the floor together. He needs to catch up, there’s no point punishing a dog hours after the fact. Retribution needs to come immediately or not at all.

“See something you like, Batsy?” Joker wriggles further into Bruce’s personal space. For once, it’s easy to see why his mind would go there.

“Why did you do that?” Bruce asks, unable to conjure enough anger into his voice to cover his shock.

Joker starts laughing, twitching in Bruce’s arms. Bruce reaches down to grab his injured hand, squeezing tight until the clown winces. It takes more force than he was anticipating, the hand is healing fast.

Still, it makes him feel better and once he’s seen pain flash across that garish face Bruce is at liberty to push Joker out of his arms, leap to his feet and push him hard enough against the kitchen cabinets that his head cracks.

“Oh please, how could I resist?” Joker grins up at him. Bruce can see flecks of blood on the pale wood of the cupboard. “I’m starving. When are we going to eat?”

“When I’m sure we’re alone.” Bruce holds Joker steady for a long moment before releasing him and taking a step back. He can feel it in the slack of the clown’s body, the moment for effective punishment has passed.

Joker manages a truly spectacular eye roll, he always did have a talent for belittlement. “There’s a human splat in the middle of the kitchen floor and you think there’s a chance there’s still a monster in the closet? No way Jose.”

“You’d be surprised what people can live with.”

“I really wouldn’t darling, people are very boring in that department. Trust me, it’s a rare slime ball that can stand to be in a building with that sort of thing.”

“Because you’re the expert on humanity.” Bruce can’t catch himself before he risks another glance at the dark puddle behind him. Right where someone was cleaning the dishes when the bomb went off, watching green light peaking over the horizon and the next second rendered incorporeal.

“Oh pish,” Joker punctuates himself with a drawn out raspberry. “My outsider’s perspective gives me a more objective view. I’m an excellent judge of character, you know?”

“You don’t judge. You tar everyone with the same brush.”

“I assure you,” Joker starts, “I would never issue a snap judgement, but I can’t help it if the rest of the world is too bland and unimaginative to pass the auditions. Let me explain how this works. People make it out the other side of the apocalypse and they can’t appreciate the comedy in being one of the last few standing in a world they don’t recognise. They don’t appreciate the free reign they’ve been given. They want their tidy little worlds back. Before you try to tell me that that’s a perfectly understandable reaction I want you to take a moment to consider just how terrible it is to be anyone else but us. They go to work and get married and die. You and I play with their fate for fun.”
Joker doesn’t understand anything. “I’m trying to save them.” Bruce reminds him.

A cold hand breaches the distance between them, coming up to thumb at the stubble bursting out from under the seam of the cowl. “If they weren’t quite so simple, they wouldn’t need saving.”

Bruce slaps the hand away and starts backing towards the kitchen door. The threat of whatever might be hiding upstairs looms large, but he doesn’t want to leave Joker alone with the remnants of the house’s last owner. It’s not a matter of respecting the dead, just of preventing cannibalism at all costs. For all his protests to the contrary, Joker is still human.

“As I was saying,” Joker continues, his eyes flashing an uncomfortable level of understanding as he watched Bruce edge towards the door, “the man-pizza is a dead giveaway. The factory line standard model human person doesn’t want to live under the same roof as the dead. I can guarantee, any house that has been broken into between here and Gotham will have had the Detol raided.”

“People can’t have just cleared them all away. They weren’t always puddles.”

“I mean, some of them-“ Joker makes an exaggerated slurping noise, “but who can blame ‘em? Some of the last fresh protein on the East Coast, you’d be a fool to pass it up.”

Bruce shakes his head. “You’re wrong.”

Joker laughs low in his chest, “tell me, my dear, how many of these have you seen on your travels? Millions of people used to live in this country, but I’ll bet you haven’t seen millions of splats.”

He hasn’t. Enough to know what he’s looking at but nowhere near enough to have become desensitised to the shock. A fair few people dropped down dead, but for anyone who was really sensitive to the radiation, this is what awaited them. The further north Bruce has come, the more he’s seen. The sheer heat enough to rip apart internal organs this close to Metropolis. Even if the survivors had a vested interest in the burial and sacrament of their loved ones, nowhere near enough people made it out the other side to handle that much death with dignity.

“That’s it,” Joker soothes, “just let it wash over you.”

There is no one in this house save the two of them. The world is beginning to light up, sun peaking over the edge of the rooftops. Bruce’s stomach screams to be filled.

Slowly, Bruce steps away from the door, pretending he can’t see Joker’s grin stretch itself another inch wider. He dumps the pack on the table and takes out the first two tins he lays his hands on. The lids are pulled open and shoved back inside the pack before Joker has a chance to spirit them away. He reaches around the bottom of their food supplies, hunting for the spoon, only to remember that it was one of the items that never made it out of Horne’s tent.

Bruce’s fingers tighten over the canvas. The spoon had been such a small thing, but it had felt significant.

The sound of a drawer sliding open echoes off dusty tiles. Bruce’s head snaps up, running through a list of all the potential weapons Joker might be able to dig up out of an abandoned kitchen. He has a fairly sizable scar on his left calf from a garlic mincer that the clown had deployed during a fight in an industrial kitchen.

Joker looks back at him, eyebrows raised high. He reaches into the open drawer to produce two spoons before nudging it shut with his hip. He finishes off by rooting around in the cupboard below to grab them each a bowl. He makes it look natural, like this is his kitchen and Bruce is his guest.
“Are you sure you didn’t stop here when you were looking for me?” Bruce asks.

“Nope!” Joker drops a bowl and a spoon in front of Bruce and sets himself round the other side of the table.

“You seem to know your way around the kitchen.”

“Pfft. Like it’s hard.” Joker waggles his spoon in front of Bruce’s face. “Gotta maintain some semblance of normality, amirite?”

“I thought normal was supposed to be boring.”

“Oh it is,” Joker upends one of the cans and laughs uproariously when its contents leave in a single lump, “but see, normal’s changed, and people keep trying to pretend it hasn’t. Now that’s comedy gold and I gotta get me a slice of the pie.”

Bruce sits, reaching for his own can. He checks the label before tipping it into the bowl in front of him. Some kind of vegetable soup. “I would have thought you of all people would have been able to see the value in this much chaos.”

“Chaos, Batsy? Where? Everything’s stayed exactly the same since Supe’s tapped out, it’s been dire. And no one appreciates my performances anymore, they run off screaming. At least those kids had a go at getting back at me but God darling I’ve missed your righteous anger.”

In a roundabout way, it makes sense that Joker would find little to satisfy himself in the new world order. An agent of chaos he may be, but his chaos was always relative. A mirror to be held up to laws and societal mores. Gotham was a grey, miserable thing at the best of times but Joker had been a man on the edge. Daring his city to be its brilliant, bright, best self or die trying.

They eat in silence, each too worn down by hunger to make a show of resilience in the face of canned slop. When he’s scraped the bottom of the bowl clean, Bruce is still hungry. He feels more alert though, less like his limbs will fall off if he doesn’t stop them even if the hunger headache that had faded to a background concern has become more acute.

Grey shadows fall across the floor, brought to life by the rising run. “We should sleep,” Bruce says. Joker pouts. “But I’m not tired.”

“Jason used to say that. But he’d be out like a light every morning.”

The sleepy air of truce hovering between the two of them changes on a dime. Joker snarls, feral and dangerous as he launches himself across the table to snatch at Bruce’s shirt. “Who the fuck is Jason? And what were the two of you doing that kept you up till morning?”

Bruce doesn’t know whether to laugh, cry or punch Joker in the face. “He was my son, the second Robin. You killed him.”

“Oh.” Joker sits back down with a thump. “Oh yeah now I remember. The one who healed up nicely and developed one helluvan anger management problem. Did he crave brains when he came back? Or is that just a big ol’ Hollywood lie they tell you so they can keep suppressing Zombie voter rights?”

“I’m going to bed.” Bruce snatches Joker’s spoon out of his hand and deposits it in the pack before reaching for the tarpaulin.
Joker drops the matter of least importance like a grenade. He never cared about Jason, dead or alive. He was just angry that someone else required Bruce’s attention. “Oo! Are we going to keep playing house.”

“We’re not playing house.”

“We’ve had a lovely dinner together, and now we’re done you’re proposing an early night so you can whisk me up to the master bedroom. I see right through you, hotshot, don’t think I don’t.”

“I’m not sleeping upstairs.”

Joker’s mouth flips into an exaggerated droop. “But…the beds! Just think about the opportunities for jumping on mattresses.”

“If you want to break beds, be my guest.”

“But I wanna break beds with you. It’s no fun by myself.” The chair squeaks against the linoleum as Joker gets up and circles the table. His good hand shoots out, catching Bruce by the chin and turning him so they’re looking right at each other. “None of it’s any fun without you. Killing’s no fun unless you’re trying to stop me, Arkham’s no fun unless you’re waiting on the other side. Living’s no fun if you’re not musing on all the ways you’d like to kill me if you’d just give yourself the chance.”

“I don’t want to kill you.” Bruce jerks out of Joker’s grip and heads for the living room. He can hear the clown following behind him.

The room’s clear, more than enough floor space for Bruce to stretch out on. He debates taking the sofa, but it’s a two seater and he’d have to draw his knees up to be able to fit. Instead he pulls the cushions to the floor in place of a pillow and wishes he could stomach the journey upstairs to retrieve a proper duvet.

It’s what he wants to do, but he doesn’t think he could stand to see another person turned to ash. Not tonight.

Joker watches him settle from the doorway, a familiar blend of rage and hysteria mingling in his eyes. The face of a madman on the brink of triumph, daring Bruce to tear him down or miss the chance for good. The city beneath them, the rain, the night crackling with an electricity of their own making. Maybe there had been times when the knife was in Bruce’s hands, or Joker was standing so close to the edge that an easy route out of their little drama had been obvious. But if there had, it was only ever momentary.

Broken nose healing nicely, costume recognisable if incomplete without the lipstick. Joker looks like some small fragment of what Bruce is trying to get back to.

Bruce swallows, doesn’t think about what it would be like to kiss him and prays to whichever version of God Camila kneels to that this is not all he has been left with.

“You’ve always wanted to kill me,” Joker hisses, “You want me to die or you want me to change. Either way it’s my head on the chopping block and you would never in a million years let anyone else swing the sword.”

Matching up to Joker’s anger in the moment is impossible. “We’ll talk about it in the morning.”

Joker barks out a laugh. “You sure you don’t want to play house?”

The sound of dawn washes over the world, a mostly silent affair save the shrieking of a distant crow.
Bruce settles himself in his makeshift bed and lets his eyes drift closed. He can hear Joker moving, footsteps disappearing down the hall. He holds his breath and waits for the protests of tortured mattress springs to start up but they never come. Instead the clown comes back, the slap of his feet softening as he steps onto the carpet, coming to a halt by Bruce’s head.

Bruce doesn’t need to open his eyes to know the exact expression Joker is wearing for the occasion. Awe tempered by derision, unable to believe how brilliant or how awful the Batman is. The face of a man who’s going to escape from Arkham Asylum, but is astonished that someone managed to get him into the building in the first place.

When Bruce does sneak a glance at his travelling companion, it’s after the shuffling of a body settling itself on the floor has subsided. He opens his eyes a crack and sees Joker curled up like a cat a few feet away, head resting on his arm. The light hits him just right, so that his eyes seem to glow, boring back into Bruce’s, mouth hitched up into a wild grin that makes it plain he knows he’s being watched.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Warnings for dead animals and blood drinking in this chapter folks

Bruce’s body clock tells him that it’s been a few hours at most since he fell asleep and for now that’s going to have to be enough. He raises a hand to shield his eyes from the light pouring through the living room window, blinking rapidly as he adjusts to the colour pallet of the surrounding furniture. It’s a lot more green and brown than he was expecting.

It’s also a lot more Joker-free.

Shaking his head to dislodge the last remnants of sleep, Bruce sits up. He had been dreaming: a well-worn nightmare about falling down a well and coming face to face with hundreds of bats. Their eyes glowing the same shade of green as the last few frames to ever grace a television.

Bruce grimaces, tosses the tarpaulin aside and heads for the kitchen. He’s relieved to find the pack where he left it, switchblade, bouncy ball and can lids all still tucked away inside. It does little to convince him that Joker’s absence is innocuous, his gut clenching like it knows something unpleasant awaits him in the not too distant future.

Aside from the pack, the kitchen is a disaster zone. The puddle on the floor has cracked and scattered across the floor. Nausea rises fast, Bruce imagining Joker sitting down to pick his way through desiccated human remains like a bag of crisps, but when he looks again he sees the way the pieces could fit together into one whole. It looks less like a Joker snack and more like the clown had to push waste aside to get on with everything else he was doing.

The cupboards have been unceremoniously raided, three empty tins of spaghetti hoops lying in amongst a host of other food stuffs in varying states of decay. Bruce would be hard pressed to say where he’s been keeping it, but it would appear that Joker’s still got the can of spray-paint he’d used back in Constance. Jagged red letters on the front of the fridge proclaim I’m gross. Don’t open me.

None of this is worrying on its own. The cupboard under the sink is open though, a couple of upturned fairy liquid bottles indicating that it’s been stripped of useful items. If you know what to do with them, there’s a whole lot of damage that can be done with household cleaning chemicals. Bruce has no illusions about what Joker is capable of in that department. The man could set a lake on fire, building something dangerous out of oven cleaner and wood polish is child’s play to him.

Everything is child’s play to The Joker. Laughter rings in Bruce’s ears, unreal and empty. Just a half-hearted reimagining of bad things long past, carefully curated by his brain to spook him. The real thing cuts deeper, grating against his ribcage, cold and uncomfortable in ways the mind cannot recreate.

What’s real is the calling of crows coming from the garden. A lot of birds making a lot of noise. Bruce tries to enjoy it, the sound of life continuing despite everything but no sooner has he gotten past that little miracle than he’s thinking of all the reasons a large group of crows might congregate.

He’s thinking about dead things feasted on by carrion. The kitchen feels suffocating and small.
The kitchen window looks straight out onto the house next door, but there’s a door behind the table. White paint and frosted glass obscure the view but not so much as to cover up the green of a lawn and the grey-brown of a flagstone patio.

Bruce dashes back to the living room to retrieve the grappling gun. Cool metal in his palm reminds him of city streets doused in rain, skyscrapers only he could scale. The thrill of the world opening up before him in ways that were uniquely his. It makes him feel mighty. He returns to the kitchen not thinking about what else might lie beyond the back door, taking particular care not to listen to the voice clattering around his skull insisting that Joker has found someone to kill and the crows have come to feast on their body.

The door is unlocked, swinging open easily. Bruce raises the grappling gun like a pistol. He’s never had cause to use it as such but then again, he’s never needed to. The idea of taking a hook to the chest was always enough to deter any criminal.

But these aren’t criminals, they’re birds. The garden is rich with spring colour, cherry blossom overhanging from the neighbour’s property and a flood of pansies framing a lawn that may once have been the owner’s pride and joy. It’s an echo of millions of other suburban gardens scattered across the United States, growing less well defined by the day.

The crows have gathered in a shrieking mass atop a mattress sitting in the middle of the lawn. They squabble with each other, evidently attracted by something good enough to poke eyes out for. Life probably hasn’t changed all that much for crows. They’re supposed to be intelligent birds so if any animals were going to cotton on to the cataclysmic decline in the human population of America Bruce supposes it would be them. But they’re still hunting for food, searching for mates, living day to day. The only difference is that they don’t have to worry quite so much about being shot as a pest species.

They’re surviving well, better than most other animal species. Only plant life appears to have survived untouched. If he ever has access to a working nuclear laboratory, Bruce is going to conduct some heavy research into the radioactive properties of crows, children and plants.

The crows weren’t startled by the back door swinging open, but Bruce stepping into the garden proves too much for them. No sooner has his toe crossed the threshold than mass of bodies transform into black wings. Headed skyward but still circling the area.

“Perfect,” Joker growls, “You had to go and ruin it, didn’t you? I almost had them.”

Bruce follows the sound of Joker’s voice and finds him sitting at an algae covered glass patio set, feet propped up on the table and an open tin of pineapple chunks resting in his lap. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?” Joker gesticulated wildly towards the mattress. It sounds like it should be a rhetorical question but he leaves himself hanging, looking to Bruce with raised eyebrows and evidently expecting some kind of response.

He looks…not less washed out exactly but the white of his skin is less translucent than it had been the night before. He’s swapped his ruined green shirt for something decidedly less flamboyant – a pastel pink button down with thin white stripes running through it – and his hair is damp from where it’s been washed free of ash. His feet are naked, toes wriggling like worms below grey slacks cut for someone significantly shorter than him.

“Why were there so many crows out here?” Bruce tries. He’s still holding the grappling gun out, aimed at where the birds had been. He drops his arm and lets the device hang loose at his side.
A self-satisfied smile washes over Joker’s face. “Oh Batsy, were you worried they had gotten to me?”

“I wasn’t worried. What were you doing?”

“What am I doing, darling. Tenses, tenses.” Joker jams a chunk of pineapple between his teeth. “I’m just trying to switch up the menu. Call it catch of the day.”

“You’re trying to catch a crow.” Bruce remembers Camila, talking about crow meat like it was fine dining. He’s eaten rat in the past and owl, and can’t say he rates either. He’s never had cause to eat a crow though. They’re wiry things, typically devoid of fat and boasting only as much muscle as they need to fly, he doubts they’d be much better.

What does look good is the tin of pineapple Joker’s got cradled between his legs. Bruce wonders if it tastes as good as the tinned pears had, if it’s as sweet and refreshing as it looks like it should be. His stomach grumbles, one tin of soup in two days is nothing.

“See something you like?” Joker asks. He’s positioned the pineapple directly over his crotch so that to stare at one is to stare at the other.

Bruce drags his eyes away from the tin to glare at Joker, who reaches for another chair, giggling. His body twists at odd angles, everything overextended, but nothing snaps.

Joker nods to the empty chair. “If you wanna see the show, you gotta take a seat. I promise to share my cinema snacks.”

“What show?” Bruce asks as he drops into the offered seat.

“Oh you’ll see. I’ve got something special cooking. Sing a song a sixpence, if you will.”

“Crow pie?”

Joker shrugs and pops another piece of pineapple into his mouth. “I was thinking more along the lines of the maid who gets her nose pecked off. I gave that a go once, lopped the nose right off this silly little thing while she was hanging out her laundry then threw it aside for the carrion. I laughed myself sick but she didn’t seem to get the joke. Gothamites were a miserable bunch, really resistant to good comedy.” He grabs the bridge of his nose, pinching hard that the words come out distorted and nasal. “I told her, there’s no use worrying about bloodstains on the sheets when someone’s slipped a red sock into the whitewash.”

Bruce can’t recall any incidents of a woman being found with her nose removed. He’s convinced Joker invents half his victims out of thin air based on whichever whims he wishes he could satisfy in that moment.

The pineapple is vanishing into Joker’s mouth at an alarming rate. Bruce can’t bring himself to ask nicely, instead reaching out as casually as he can manage and sticking his hand right in the tin.

Joker’s shriek of laughter is loud enough to scare off the handful of crows that had already resettled themselves on the mattress. He shifts his hips, pushing up hard under Bruce’s hand. His body heat spreads quickly through the thin metal, far too close for comfort.

“You gotta work for it!” He gasps. Bruce’s fingers close over a single piece of fruit and he makes to pull his hand away but the rim of the can catches against his wrist. Under Joker’s careful watch it moves, cutting deep enough to draw blood.
Bruce lurches back, hissing at the unexpected prickle of a surface level injury. Joker’s left arm shoots out, grabbing him by the wrist and pulling him back in. White lips close around the cut, sucking hard, the sharp end of a tongue prodding at the torn skin.

With a long groan, Joker’s eyes roll back in his head.

It’s all kinds of weird, making Bruce’s stomach twist in on itself in ways that have nothing to do with his hunger. The sensation of Joker sucking hard at an open wound is vile enough on its own, but the obvious tent he’s pitching in his pants takes the situation from uncomfortable to gross.

Still, once the heat of the clown’s mouth makes contact with his skin, Bruce is like a rabbit caught in green headlights, frozen to the spot and unable to think of any course of action that would stop his demise rushing up to meet him.

Joker takes a few long slurps and when he’s done the blood collecting in the corners of his mouth makes him look that much more like his old self. He doesn’t let go of Bruce’s arm so much as toss it away, a toy that was fun for all of five minutes.

“Now that’s what I call a daily special.” Joker hums. He finds the edge of the pineapple tin that Bruce had cut himself on and tips the whole lot back, drinking the juice down in two gulps.

That leaves Bruce with one piece of pineapple to himself. He takes a moment to check over the cut, and once he’s cleared away the excess saliva he can see that it’s little more than a glorified scratch. Then he lays the pineapple on his tongue with almost reverential respect and resolves to savour it as far as is possible.

He has all of two seconds to enjoy the pungency of its sharp sweetness before the flavour turns cacky and alkali. At first he assumes that it’s been stored improperly, the tin badly sealed but then he remembers it was Joker who let him have it and has to assume poisoning.

Bruce spits out the pineapple and it forms a frothy puddle on the patio. The taste won’t leave his mouth, no matter how he tries to drag his teeth over his tongue to shift it. Despite his best efforts he can feel it crawling closer to his oesophagus and it seems inevitable that at least some of it will make it to his stomach. Panic rises as Bruce runs through a list of toxic items that might be kept under a suburban sink, checking things off when they don’t match up to what’s happening in his mouth. The substance doesn’t burn like bleach or oven cleaner, it just tastes foul.

By the time Bruce works out what it is, Joker is on the ground, laughing to the high heavens and pounding his fists on the patio. There are tears forming in the corners of his eyes and his mouth is stretched so wide that the rest of his face is forced to concertina itself, aging him like no one’s business.

Wiping drool from his chin, Bruce snarls at him. “Not funny.”

Joker’s mouth flaps like he’s trying to respond but he’s laughing too hard to get the words out.

The thing Bruce can taste is not an unknown toxic concoction designed to main or kill. It’s soap. Regular washing up liquid, exactly the sort of thing that one might find under the sink. Sure enough, when he checks under the table he finds a bottle of bright pink fairy liquid, purporting to be scented with pomegranates. He spots Joker’s hand reaching out to retrieve it a moment too late, the clown taking hold of the bottle and clutching it to his chest.

“Why?” Bruce groans.

Joker takes a steadying breath, trying to squash his guffaws. It works right up until he belches and a
stream of iridescent bubbles pour from his mouth. It’s more than ridiculous enough to set him off again, a squawking, shrieking mess on the patio. Bruce flinches whenever he hits a high note. He supposes there’s little point pleading with him to quiet down for the sake of secrecy, anyone in the area is already going to know where they are.

Retrieving the bottle of soap would be a petty act of revenge, and totally worth it as far as Bruce is concerned. He gets to his feet, hoping that Joker’s laughter will prove enough of a distraction to make this an easy task.

He hasn’t gone two steps when the air is rent by a thunderous boom, heat billowing about him and nearly knocking him off balance. The sound of springs twanging free of their confines echoes around the garden and after a moment debris starts falling to the patio in a symphony of soft clatters.

Whirling around, Bruce sees the remnants of the mattress distributed across a half-hearted blast zone around the lawn. Stuffing sticks to everything, transforming this slice of urban bliss into an impromptu cotton field.

Bruce waits for the world to settle, noting that the blast wasn’t loud enough to set his ears ringing and Joker has stopped laughing. He doesn’t expect the latter to last for long.

Only this time Joker doesn’t laugh. “Wonderful, just spectacular!” He growls, getting to his feet and trying to shake detritus from his body. “Didn’t catch a single crow.”

Bruce peers up at him, incredulous. “You were trying to catch a crow…with a mattress?”

“No, I was trying to catch several crows with an exploding mattress. Do keep up Batsy. It would have worked as well, if you hadn’t come along and spooked them.”

“Me? You were the one making all that racket.”

“That doesn’t count!” Joker stamps his foot, “I wouldn’t have been laughing if you hadn’t been so deliciously amusing. You really thought I’d poisoned you, darling, what was I to do?”

Shaking his head, Bruce walks away. In the interests of understanding exactly what he missed he starts rooting through the remains of the makeshift bomb that had been sequestered within the mattress. From what he can make out Joker had used the density of the stuffing to his advantage, leaving one canister of chemicals open just a crack and the other open completely. The one had dripped slowly into the stuffing, meaning that it had taken time to make contact with the other. It’s a pretty clever trick, and Bruce has to admit a grudging respect.

Just as he’s always privately marvelled at Joker’s escape plans and villainous schemes. Bruce considers himself a resourceful and intelligent individual, but looking at what Joker can accomplish with a rubber band and the right attitude he’s had occasion to feel like something of an idiot.

In amongst the burned out plastic and charred springs, something catches Bruce’s eye. Something in a familiar shade of dark red, bordering on brown. Shards of it lie hidden all across the blast zone and once he’s noticed one he can’t keep his eyes off the rest. The taste of revulsion mixes with the soap still coating his tongue, making him gag. He looks back towards Joker who is doing something complicated with an uncoiled spring and the bottle of washing up liquid. Oblivious to everything except the task at hand.

It feels like the perfect moment to say something cutting, taking an argument over the physical to the realm of the intellectual. But words never were Bruce’s weapon of choice and try as he might he can’t work out how to articulate the hopeless mess of rage, exasperation and disbelief he’s falling in
Dogs need to be punished, immediately. Bruce has the perfect opportunity to rub Joker’s nose in his own filth, growling out warnings as to what will happen if he tries this sort of thing again. It should be easy, with the clown distracted by whatever pointless task he holds in his hands, but when Bruce reaches out to where cool skin and soft hair should be he finds nothing.

Joker skips out of Bruce’s way another three times without so much as looking up from the spring and the soap. On the fourth try he glances up, but only to push one of the patio chairs out of the way before he dashes into the space it was occupying. His recalcitrance does nothing to temper the maelstrom of untapped violence bubbling away beneath Bruce’s skin, just makes it harder to concentrate, harder to pin him down.

When Bruce has three more failed attempts at subduing Joker under his belt, he switches tactic. He lets the clown settle himself, then points to a pile of the little dark shards at his feet. “What are those?”

“Oh please, that meme was overdone before it started. Vine giveth and Vine taketh away. Then Vine is taken away.”

Bruce doesn’t have a clue what he’s talking about. “Why,” he grits out, “are you using human remains as bait?”

Joker jerks his head up with an exaggerated air of confusion. “I’m sorry, would you rather I had used something from the tins in the kitchen?”

“Yes!”

“Well how was I to know that? You weren’t going to eat any people pizza and apparently I’m not allowed to so what was the use of letting it go to waste?”

On a completely unfeeling, relentlessly logical level, that kind of thinking makes sense. Bruce swallows thickly, “you can’t just use people like that.”

“They’re dead, love.” Joker says, not unkindly. “They don’t care anymore, it’s fine.”

It’s impossible to say if Joker really doesn’t care about anything outside his twisted id or if he just does what he can to wind up the Batman. Either way, Bruce is forever trapped by his desire to beat the clown to a pulp, and the knowledge that it won’t do any good.

Joker never has to suffer, that’s all on the people standing in his way. The best Bruce could ever do was provide a momentary reprieve from the madness, but the clown has never hurt in any way that counts. He lives on, eternal and unruffled, whispering sweet nothings into Bruce’s ear about how no one else would ever be so bold as to kill him.

In the end all that leaves is rage. Bruce’s feet move without thinking, lunging forward and once again feeling Joker slip through his hands. This time the clown rounds into him, the spring falls to the floor and his smile takes on a manic edge, sidestepping every blow thrown at him. He ducks, dives, bends himself in two, seems to teleport halfway across the garden in an instant. The parts of Bruce’s brain that know the fight is futile beg him to stop, but they’re feeble and insubstantial compared to the urge to press on. A splash of green used to look so incongruous against rain soaked city streets, and out here where plant life has begun it’s certain takeover of what’s left of human infrastructure, the effects are no different. Joker doesn’t fit into any of the spaces he occupies, so he becomes slippery and hard to follow. Too out of place to ever be pinned down.
“One two three, one two three…” Joker mutters under his breath, a stage whisper that can be heard from fifty paces. A waltz beat, tracking their movements perfectly. Bruce tries to break the rhythm, waiting till he’s sure he’s a second too late to strike or cutting off the edge of one strike in order to swing into the next faster than expected. It doesn’t work, Joker manages to be just out of reach in just the right ways to keep the dance steady.

The world shrinks around them, till all that matters is the metronomic beat and The Joker in front of him, never where Bruce wants him to be.

In the end it’s Joker that throws a spanner in the works, as ever. The count lulls Bruce into a false sense of security, sure that the next near miss is just a few beats away.

“One, two…” Joker slows and it’s possible to get a hand into the front of his shirt, Glorious victory washes over Bruce and he wants to shout his success to the skies.

A hand comes up to wrap around his, then strong limbs wrap around him and though their owner has no weight to throw behind them Bruce is pulled to the floor.

Despite weighing almost nothing, Joker can hold a body down like no one’s business. He pins Bruce’s arms to his sides, arching over him and grinning wild danger. The open nib of the washing up liquid bottle hovers over Bruce’s head, then is shoved between his teeth, pinning his tongue. Joker grips the bottle round the middle, ready to squeeze.

“Three.” Joker hisses. “Look where your impatience has gotten you.”

Bruce bucks forward in an attempt to dislodge him and Joker’s hands tighten around the bottle. Foul tasting liquid dribbles over the back of his tongue and where it’s been trapped by the tip it’s impossible to spit any of it out. He has to swallow.

“Good boy, drink it all up,” Joker soothes. He squeezes again, sending another cascade of soap into Bruce’s mouth. It’s awful enough that he reacts without thinking, twisting his body every which way possible till he finds a configuration that unseats Joker.

Bruce rolls out and away from him then pulls himself to his hands and knees and starts spitting like his life depends on it. His saliva is pink and iridescent, it tastes nothing like pomegranates.

While Bruce is distracted by the awful flavour flooding his mouth, Joker retrieves his uncoiled spring. Bruce misses the moment a crow comes in to land, but he doesn’t miss the croak it makes as the tip of the wire plunges through its throat, ending its life. His head snaps up in time to watch Joker pull the still spasming body free, taking care not to get any blood on his clothes. He takes the head in hand, stretching out the neck till the spine snaps and the bird goes still.

“For your dining pleasure, may I present crow a la mode,” Joker throws the crow to the ground and pins it under one foot so he can start plucking it with his good hand.

Bruce doesn’t have a single rational thought left in his brain. The only thing he’s capable of focusing on is how badly he needs water to shift the taste of soap from his mouth. Maybe Joker’s blood would be a fitting substitute.

Somewhere, someone is laughing. Far removed from the garden, possibly on a whole other plane of reality. Bruce pushes aside the itch clawing at his bones and telling him to run as far as he can from the sound. Instead he focuses on the shard of something read clenched tight in the crow’s beak, rigor mortis holding it in place long after Joker has decapitated it.
Joker wastes over an hour building a fire on which to roast the crow and by the time he’s done the spindly little thing is still mostly raw. Bruce declines to join him for breakfast, using half a canteen’s worth of water to wash his mouth out before scoping out the house for anything that might be of use on the road. The cans in the kitchen are a no brainer, he spends a happy few minutes tearing through a four pack of tinned tomatoes, but most excitingly the downstairs bathroom comes with a lock and a razor that has yet to rust over completely.

Bruce locks himself in and pulls the cowl off for the first time since the church. Dead skin leaves a snowstorm in its wake, sloughing off his face and into the sink. The taps don’t work, but he does what he can with an out of date tin of shaving foam and the razor. He finds a tube of hand moisturiser in the bathroom cabinet when he’s done and when he smears it on his face he swears he can feel his pores actively sucking it in.

It’s only a temporary respite. Bruce pulls the cowl back on and heads back to the living room to grab the tarpaulin which he packs away along with the spare tins left in the kitchen. He disposes of the empty tins in the back of a cupboard, it seems foolish to keep carrying them around when Joker hasn’t made use of the lids from the spaghetti hoops he ate that morning.

What loveliness the garden might have had when Bruce first stepped outside that morning is lost. The flowerbeds are more or less untouched and the lawn will recover but the picture looks a mess. Mattress debris and crow feathers stick to every available surface and the smell of charred flesh hangs heavy in the air.

The fire has burned down to a few smouldering remains that shouldn’t be in any danger of flaring up when Bruce’s back is turned. The twisted plastic of the washing up bottle sits melting in the heat and he can’t pretend that he’s not at least a little relieved.

Half raw crows are no longer the order of the day though. Joker emerges from the shed at the back of the garden carrying a chainsaw. Bruce’s hackles rise, till he remembers that the engine will have been burned out the same as everything else.

“Well, well, well. Look at you!” Joker beams. “You sure do scrub up well, Bats.”

Bruce would hardly describe a shave as ‘scrubbing up’. He’s wearing the same clothes he’s been living in for months, now a long way on the wrong side of threadbare and underneath the cowl his eyes are sunken by perpetual exhaustion. He raises a questioning eyebrow in Joker’s direction. “Come on, we’ve got to get moving.”

“'Kay,” Joker trots up to him, chainsaw still in hand.

“You can’t take that with you.” Bruce tells him.
“But it’s my pet,” Joker frowns, “surely you’re not going to separate me and my little Bobby?”

“Give it here,” Bruce reaches for the blade, praying that Joker hasn’t managed by some miracle to get the motor working again.

They engage in a brief tug of war during which Joker tries several times to get the chainsaw to operate as advertised but in the end Bruce is able to relinquish it and throw it over the fence into the neighbouring garden.

Joker sniffs. “That wasn’t very kawaii of you.”

They leave the house behind via a side alley leading from the garden to the street. Bruce leads the way, passing an open bucket that has been filled with rainwater and subsequently clouded with soap. He remembers Joker’s wet hair when he had first left the house that morning. That was what the washing up liquid had been for.

Bruce snorts. “There was shampoo in the bathroom.”

“Never use it. All those nasty chemicals. Why, you never know where they’ve been. No, it’s dish soap or nothing for me. Anything else and my hair loses its silky softness.” Joker leans in close so he can whisper into the shell of Bruce’s ear. “And we both know how much you like me all fluffy when it’s time for pets.”

The memory of Joker’s check, pressed into his hand in what had seemed like a subconscious search for body heat while sleeping flashes across Bruce’s mind. It ties his tongue, leaving him with no reasonable recourse but to push Joker away. It does very little for his dignity. It doesn’t stop the blush crawling across his cheeks and it certainly doesn’t stop the clown from howling with laughter.

“Just think of me as your kitty cat. You always likes cats, right? Can’t stand ‘em personally, but when I saw how you looked at her I figured ‘hey, worth a shot!’ I was already dropping dead mice on your doorstep, it wasn’t such a great leap to start presenting my belly for rubs. I was hurt that you didn’t catch my hints, darling. After all I was ready to do such a great public service. Whatever she was doing for you clearly wasn’t enough, you were always so tense.”

“Don’t you dare talk about Sel- Catwoman.” Bruce catches himself at the last moment. With a sinking stomach he remembers giving Jason’s name away under the shadows of the early morning, and resolves to keep the rest of the family safe.

Joker rolls his eyes. “Oh please. The lady has no more honour left to defend mister big bad Dark Knight. Or was her cunt so sweet that the memory sustains you? Do you still thin about her when you touch yourself? Do you remember what it felt like to be inside her? Pounding, howling animals that you both were. A bat and a cat. Interspecies mixing at its finest.”

“I said shut up!” Bruce moves before he thinks, reaching for Joker’s injured hand and squeezing hard. It doesn’t sent ripples of pain across that horrid white face the way it should do, but it serves as a worthy distraction. Bruce slams him into the tarmac and bears down on him, grabbing his wrists and tugging his arms sharply behind his back to hold him still.

Joker lets out a low groan. “Fuck yeah, Batsy. Just like that.”

“You know it’s a pity you threw the last of the soap on the fire because I’m in the mood to scrub your mouth out.” Bruce growls. “If you can’t keep your sordid musings to yourself I may find it in both of our best interests to cut out your tongue.”

“Oh God.” Joker hisses. “I love it when you talk dirty baby. Go on, what else are you gonna do?”
“I will sew your mouth shut if I have to.” Bruce jerks Joker’s arms back even further, past the point where the average person would be suffering from torn ligaments and dislocates limbs.

Joker shudders, a whole body motion accompanied by a desperate high pitched giggle. “I’d like to see you try.”

“You won’t see a thing. I will blindfold you and plug your ears. The world will be lost to you, Joker.”

The strangled sound Joker lets out lights a trail of gasoline through Bruce’s veins. He’s distantly aware that this isn’t about Selina anymore. She was just a pawn in Joker’s mind games.

“You could kill me.” The clown whispers.

Bruce grunts in ascent. “I could, but I won’t.”

He can’t ignore the way Joker bucks up against him, grinding his buttocks on as much of Bruce as he can reach. The temptation to respond in kind is jarring, if not enough to snap Bruce out of it as he slides further up Joker’s body to avoid the distraction.

“Spoilsport!” Joker gasps. He’s clearly enjoying himself and the dissonance between the intent behind his actions and the results spreads warm heat through Bruce’s belly. He wants to prolong the game, for no reason than the joy of holding down this wriggling, cackling mass.

The eternally sharp part of his mind, the Batman part that should probably be protesting this situation, offers up a solution. Joker has spent time out of Bruce’s sight that morning and there’s no telling what he might have stashed away in that time. He needs to be patted down, searched for weaponry. It’s not an easy task to accomplish while pinning down his arms but it’s possible.

Bruce starts at the hips, slipping a thumb beneath the hem of Joker’s shirt. He finds nothing, save for a particularly ticklish spot that makes Joker yelp when the slightest pressure is applied. He slides his hand along the defined ridge of his nemesis’s spine, tracks the contours of his shoulder blades, lets his fingers sink into the white flesh poking above the shirt collar.

His fingers slide into that bright green hair, still slightly damp and oh so soft. Bruce combs through it, hears Joker let out a drawn out purr at the contact.

Bruce snaps back into himself with whiplash speed. He leaps off Joker, trying to think himself into a standstill. There’s heat building in his groin, alarming and uncalled for and entirely inappropriate and he has to turn away to avoid looking at Joker while he tries to get a handle on himself.

Blood pounding in his ears, the world refusing to slow. Bruce breathes deep, fights the nausea churning up his stomach. The cowl sticks to his skin, the rubber turning acrid and unpleasant where he’s sweating. He wants to take it off. Partly to relieve the discomfort and partly too look upon Joker with his flesh-face and watch the clown squirm.

Someone is laughing, a distant howl that strikes shards of glass into Bruce’s heart. For once in his life he welcomes it, if only to cool the heat ricocheting off his ribcage and trying to overwhelm him.

“I know it’s been a long time, darling, but really? You’re done already?”

Bruce glances over his shoulder to where Joker is sitting up straight in the middle of the road, smiling a smile that doesn’t manage to light up his eyes. He’s a hideous thing, his tissue paper skin stretched and shifted until all that’s left is the suggestion of humanity. His chin juts out too far and without lipstick he looks like a ghost of himself. A pale shadow that won’t stop winding its way into Bruce’s
There are a hundred of ways one can tell a person to shut up and Bruce would know. He’s employed them all, when he’s long past the verbal sparring and can think of nothing better to say to silence Joker. It never works, except as an admission of defeat.

“So…you gonna take care of this or do I have to deal with it myself?” Joker points to the hard line of his erection, clearly visible through the front of his trousers. Nausea tries to rise once again through Bruce’s stomach but not as fast as heat, sympathetic arousal clawing its way up his body.

Joker’s right. It has been a long time. Not that sex has ever been particularly high on Bruce’s list of priorities but before the bomb he used to have quite a lot of it. Now even masturbation is a rare luxury.

No matter what solutions his animal brain might try to offer up for animal problems, Bruce has always prided himself on his self-restraint.

It self-restraint it can be called. It certainly doesn’t feel like any great effort to ignore Joker, blocking out his babbling as Bruce continues down the road. The hard part is shutting down the pieces of his mind that want to do something, anything, regardless of who joins him.

There are fewer S symbols here than there had been on Constance, but the houses are hardly unadorned. Bruce doesn’t see any purple in amongst the storm of graffiti, but he does spy a few splashes of yellow in hidden behind the red and the black. It doesn’t mean anything, it’s just a matter of what was left behind.

The sound of a zip sliding open, a high pitched keen. Bruce doesn’t want to know what Joker’s doing behind them, why his laughter has smoothed out into something soft and contented.

“B-bats!” Joker stutters out.

Bruce ducks his head and puts on a burst of speed. He’s grateful for the sound of his blood pounding in his ears, growing louder by the moment. It’s almost loud enough to drown Joker out completely.

He’s gone a few hundred metres before he remembers that loosing Joker is not at all wise and the only thing worse than standing his ground and letting this happen would be having to find the clown after he’s done. Bruce stops, he can hear Jokers happy little whimpers even at this distance, doesn’t think he’ll be able to forget the sound as long as he lives. He slips into the space between two houses to wait it out, reasoning that at least like this there’s no chance of him seeing anything he doesn’t want to see.

S symbols stare back at him across the gap between one building and the next, they run up the wall behind him, trying to bring the world in close. Bruce tries to distract himself by picking them apart, unhooking one curve from another until he can see each one individually. None of them are as accurate as the one Joker had painted in the font but a couple of the artists remembered that Clark’s symbol was encased in a diamond rather than a triangle. They’ve been painted over several times, but the paint is faded enough to be a colour all of its own, so Bruce traces their outline with his eyes and tries to remember the sentiment behind them.

Hope. Clark was hope. Diana is truth. The rest of the JLA never had to carry such weighty crosses but they would sometimes joke that Bruce was justice. He would remind them that he was just a man.

Back on Krypton, Kal-El could have been just a man, and on Themyscira Diana was one
extraordinary woman among many. A shift in perspective and the whole world looks new.

Bruce’s eyes follow the wave of S symbols down, and it’s only because he’s so focused on the patterns the lines draw together that he notices there’s something different hidden beneath all that crushed hope. Painted in yellow at the bottom of the wall, smooth curved edges give way to sharp points. It’s not a perfect likeness but then again the symbol did change over the years. It is, unmistakeably, a bat. More specifically, the bat that the Batman used to wear on his chest when he flew across Gotham City.

Someone remembered him. The hard line of Bruce’s shoulders softens just a fraction. He imagines a teenager grabbing hold of a can of yellow paint and meticulously tracing out the symbol from memory. In his mind’s eye, the child has dark hair and blue eyes, they know how to hit and they know how to get out of the way of danger and they do not kill.

He reaches the bottom of the wall and finds background noise rising up to meet him in its place. Bruce’s hands ball into fists against the brick wall behind him, gritting his teeth and trying to pretend that he can’t hear anything but knowing that he has to pay attention. If he loses track of the gasps and grunts, the silly little moans that feel more performative than justified, he loses track of Joker and he can’t have that.

Eventually the slew of animalistic grunts give way to a manic burst of laughter. Bruce keeps himself under control, more or less, screwing up his eyes and letting the hammering of his heart override the impulse to break something. He waits, listening for approaching footsteps. Joker can move almost as quietly as the Batman when he chooses but subtlety is rarely his strongest trait.

Joker sticks his head round the corner, “Hiding, are we?”

Bruce pulls his mouth into a flat line, “I thought you could use some privacy.”

“Well aren’t you the perfect gentleman?” Joker smirks. “You should have said so, I wouldn’t have minded if you’d stayed to watch the show. There was a moment where I could have really used some help from the audience.”

The damn breaks, everything that he has tried so hard to keep from manifesting itself as tangible thought leaping to the front of Bruce’s mind. The groaning and the moaning slots itself neatly over the image of Joker twisted into obscene positions, moving with a damning fluidity. The idea of his penis suggests itself to Bruce, long and pale, standing proud in a copse of dirty green hair. He squashes it down, trying instead to focus on the way those green eyes flash triumph.

Cat’s eyes, Bruce would say. Every speck of available light has always converged on Joker, as if he were the moon.

“We should get moving.” Bruce says. He clears his throat, takes one final look at the bat symbol and lets his feet do the rest.

Joker makes a disappointed noise of acquiescence. Bruce doesn’t know what to tell him; it’s a world without Superman not a world without sense. The rules don’t change just because it’s harder to enforce them and minds don’t change just because they can.

As he barges past him, Bruce notices the stain of something pale and damp on Joker’s trousers and can’t quite bring himself to put two and two together. He lets his gaze linger on it a second too long, trying to work out if he wants to claim ignorance and ask.

Joker spots him looking. He lets out a low chuckle and leans in close. “What do you think it is?”
Bruce is determinedly not thinking that it’s anything. He jerks to life and marches on ahead, back onto the road heading north. He can hear the slap of Joker’s feet hitting the tarmac behind him.

The sun is almost directly overhead, meaning that it can’t be much later than noon. They still have most of the day to walk and part of Bruce thinks that sounds hellish but he knows it will be easier going than he’s used to now they can stick to the roads.

That is, until he spots figures moving between the houses. Slim and human in shape, definitely children. They haven’t congregated in as greater numbers as they had done in Constance and they don’t make any effort to mug them but as the day wears on they become a constant presence. Joker takes great pleasure in shrinking into himself until he’s as small and quiet as possible, then laughing himself in their general direction and watching them scatter.

Silence, then laughter, then inane chatter that Bruce intermittently ties to keep up with. The soundtrack of the day is repetitive, but it’s something. No matter what else Joker might be, Bruce is glad to have something to concentrate on other than the road beneath his feet.

They pass through several townships over the course of the day, separated by mild mannered stretches of road that fail to create the impression that any one of them is a distinct entity. By the time they come to a stop it’s been dark for hours and the presence of the children, though apparently innocuous, makes Bruce all the more wary of seeking shelter in one of the houses they’ve passed. They crawl underneath the row of bushes that line the local park, sheltered from the worst of the weather and hopefully tricky enough to access that they’ll hear anyone trying to jump them in their sleep before serious damage can be done.

Bruce makes a half-hearted suggestion that they take it in turns keeping watch and is promptly laughed down.

“Honey, even if you trusted me to watch your back you wouldn’t let me sit up all night on my lonesome. Neither of us would get any sleep, and not in a fun way.”

Joker’s right. They share a cold tin of soup, each with their own spoon, then the tarpaulin is laid out and for the first time Bruce thinks he detects a note of displeasure in Joker’s face when he looks upon it.

“I make an excellent body pillow.”

“I’m not sharing a bed with you.” Bruce turns him down flat.

Joker grunts in annoyance. “Of course not, that would be far too exciting. Anything could happen.”

“You could strangle me in my sleep.”

“Only if that’s what you’re in to.” Joker winks.

“Goodnight, Joker.” Bruce pulls the plastic up and over his head, closing his eyes and willing sleep to come fast and deep.

Joker keeps babbling for a few minutes, going off on a long tangent about how they’re both up past their bedtimes. He cuts himself off with a mighty yawn, then Bruce hears the crunching of leaves and twigs as he settles himself.

The sleep Bruce falls in to is plagued by the past. Dreams that feel too perfect to be real and too vivid to be fake. He sees Selina before him, feels her wrapping himself around him and coaxing him out of his shell. The way she always would. His fingers try to find purchase on her hips but much as he can
feel her weight on top of him, her body pressing around his, she is insubstantial smoke that he can never quite touch.

“A girl’s gotta have a few secrets,” she winks. Her gasps sound like stuttered laughter and Bruce can’t think of a single word to describe her eyes that isn’t romantic.
The next few days are uneventful as the cycle of walking, sleeping and eating takes over. They have a few run-ins with packs of emaciated children but they can always be dissuaded with a few menacing glares and the implicit threat of two adults taking on units with an average age of twelve. The human infrastructure becomes denser as they go, till fields and forests are nothing more than a suggestion lying low on the horizon should they ever manage to take high ground. Road signs tick down the miles to Gotham from below the heavy weight of hope, promising the death of Superman whether they take the turn to Blüdhaven or keep straight.

Though he’s willing to play along at first, by the end of the fourth day Joker’s boredom is untenable. He’s reluctant to stray far from Bruce’s side, which is something of a comfort. Staying close reduces his opportunities to cause chaos, but without a nefarious plot to set up he’s becoming restless.

Bruce dodges a somewhat predictable jab to his jaw, catching hold of Joker’s fist and twisting his arm back till he drops the plastic straw he’s holding. “What did you hope to accomplish with a flimsy piece of plastic?”

Joker laughs long and loud. “Who knows? I wasn’t going to find out unless I did anything about it.”

From time to time, Joker will slip away for just long enough to have Bruce worrying that he’s decided the rules of the game need to be changed. Just as panic sets in, a mop of green hair will appear from round a corner, grinning wide and almost painfully casual. He keeps expecting the clown to emerge with a homemade bomb in tow, has no doubt that with enough pressure applied to his boredom Joker will do just that.

It gets Bruce thinking though. “How did you rig the explosives back in Constance?”

He can feel Joker fighting the urge to launch another easy attack, just for the sake of having a fight to throw himself into. For the past two days his favourite pastime has been engaging Bruce in pointless scuffles that rarely last more than five minutes and have no more lasting impact than a couple of new bruises apiece.

Joker blinks, too distracted by the fist he’s been debating throwing for the past ten minutes to have a clue what Bruce is talking about. “What d’ya say?”

“Back in Constance, when you set up those four blasts and sunk most of the town centre. How did you rig the explosives?”

“Oh.” Joker frowns. “The same way you set up any explosives, I suppose.”

“They were very well timed.” Bruce tells him, because it’s the truth.

Joker takes this as a mighty compliment and squirrels his way into Bruce’s personal space, sporting a smile that might be intended to look winning.

“I can’t see how you could have managed such a complex set up without electrical fuses.”

It’s a leading question, intended to find out just how much Joker is able to do with the collective wreckage of modern society. If you have the patience and the resources you can forge a new set of components to make a working fuse. Bruce has only met a handful of people with the capability to do as much in his travels and one working fuse won’t make up for the corruption to the national grid or the burned out wires in every electrical device left under the sun. Anyone who has power is
running it off a generator that’s had most of its inner workings replaced and been adapted to fun off biofuels. Whoever fixed the generator up prior to Camila’s arrival at the church would have sunk a whole lot of effort into it.

As usual, Joker either doesn’t want to share his secrets or he can’t remember them. “A little bit of luck and a whole lot of string,” he winks. He holds his hand up to his face, giggling to himself, then counts down his fingers to form a fist. The afternoon proceeds from there.

They’ve developed something of a sleep schedule, a rare luxury for Bruce and something he’s willing to bet Joker has never had in his life. They bed down around midnight and rise with the sun. Joker is almost always the first to wake, usually raiding the pack for breakfast before anyone can stop him.

He has yet to lay claim to the switchblade of the bouncy ball. It should be a relief, but Bruce is convinced it’s only because there’s something Joker’s not telling him. The switchblade would obviously be a nightmare in his hands but the clown’s reluctance to reclaim the ball does little to convince him that it’s innocuous.

Joker catches him staring at the little green orb the next morning, unsmiling and wary. Bruce tries to ask him what the shiny liquid is inside it but he’s suddenly very interested in the art of tying blades of grass into knots with his tongue.

“You ever see Twin Peaks?”

“You!” Bruce waves the bouncy ball in front of his face but fails to catch his attention.

“It’s hilarious. No one can handle the truth that Laura’s daddy liked to diddle his kiddies, so they make up a story about this demon possessing half the town to make themselves feel better. They hallucinate all these parallel worlds and supernatural shit. One guy keeps seeing this made up giant dude and he’s an FBI agent, government officials falling straight down that rabbit hole because it’s easier to blame ghosts than to admit monsters walk amongst them. Then at the end he becomes a monster, goes quite mad! But he won’t let go of the demon.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works.” Bruce drops the bouncy ball, resolving to try again later. He’s never in his life sat down to watch a boxset of anything but Jason liked to show the younger family members Twin Peaks, then to laugh at them when they complained of nightmares in the following weeks. Even from third hand viewings, Bruce is pretty sure the demon’s supposed to be real.

“Gotta expand your mind, Batsy,” Joker hums. He sticks out his tongue to demonstrate another blade of grass that has been folded into a complex double knot.

He tries not to be too obvious about it, but Bruce’s tongue twitches, trying to work out how one would go about repeating the feat.

The shifting of his jaw gives him away. Joker smirks at him, then takes the saliva covered grass not and drops it down the back of Bruce’s shirt. It’s slimy and gross and takes far too long to get out. Joker sits back and watches Bruce twist and flex trying to reach it, laughing an open, honest laugh. He looks like a big kid.

They press on, breaking into houses when their food supplies get low to raid the kitchens. Joker suggests crow for dinner every night but Bruce’s stomach rolls at the memory of feathers and human remains scattered around the garden. Besides, fresh meat demands to be cooked and he’s reluctant to advertise their position more than necessary by lighting a fire.
Not that the locals are proving all that dangerous. Some mornings Bruce wakes to find a small collective of children watching him, inching closer to the pack but never bold enough to hit the mark. They vanish in a flurry of quick footed terror, small bodies that he would be happy to help if they would only stay.

The residential areas become town centres, the shell of high street shops laid bare lining the roads. Bruce keeps his eyes peeled for anywhere that might stock something in his size, but he’s not hopeful.

“You need to adjust your sights.” Joker says as Bruce comes storming out of an old thrift store that’s now little more than a collection of empty rails. “You’re not as big as you used to be.”

He’s right. Joker drags a mirror out of nowhere and points to all the places Bruce has lost muscle mass, clicking his tongue in something that might be disapproval. Bone structure is on Bruce’s side, he’ll never have narrow shoulders or be mistaken for someone slim, but he’d lost the power of the heavyweight fighter he had been a year ago.

Joker peers over Bruce’s shoulder, looking like the reflection of a much shorter man distorted by a funhouse mirror. “Don’t worry darling, I don’t care if you’re a little out of shape. I’ll love you all the same.”

That much Bruce doesn’t doubt.

They come across a shopping mall, large enough to hold a proper weekend flood coming into the city for some retail therapy. Joker skulks through the carpark, pointing out all the spots where there might have once been an ominous red puddle. “Someone’s been here before us.” He makes a dash for the doorway, slipping inside before Bruce can stop him.

Always a step ahead. If Bruce could only manage not to rise to the challenge he could stand his ground and wait for Joker to come crawling back to him. That’s how things have worked for the past few days, but years of watching the clown dash away over rooftops and knowing that the only way he’ll ever find him again is if he gives chase make Bruce wary of setting too much score by recent behaviour.

He steps into the mall and Joker’s laughter echoes through the cavernous space, graffitied white walls reflecting sound and light onto all who enter. For a moment the place is filled with children, huddling together and peering down from the balcony that skirts the first floor, but at the first traces of that laugh they scatter into the shadows.

Catching Joker up is easy. He’s not hiding, if anything he looks like he’s waiting for Bruce, leaning up against the wall with his hip cocked and an eyebrow raised. “Well Bats, why don’t we dig into those big old moneybags you keep so very well hidden and see what kinda damage we can do in here.” He pushes himself up and off the wall, leaning into Bruce’s personal space but not so close as to touch him.

There’s a fire in his eyes, copper sulphate going up in a haze of green light. Bruce can’t bear to look.

They hunt through the shops, starting with the clothing stores but moving on when it becomes apparent that there’s nothing left in any of them. The most interesting thing either of them find is a pack of old balloons hidden under the counter in a party shop still struggling to be the most colourful spot in the mall. Joker snatches them out of Bruce’s hands, ripping open the packet and inflating three at once. He pops them all on the nearest sharp surface, then does the same with another three. It’s all fun and games until he works out that the ears of the cowl are sharp enough to tear through rubber and after that Bruce is his main target.
Having balloons burst without warning over his head is not Bruce’s idea of a good time. After the third bang catches him unawares he starts actively avoiding Joker, willing himself into a state of hyper-alertness to increase his chances of spotting the clown trying to sneak up on him. Once he’s in that head-space, Batman takes over, utilising the surrounding shadows and reminding him of how to blend into the dark at a moment’s notice.

Joker chases, Bruce runs. The mall is a microcosm of their shared identity, swinging from the balcony, hiding on the lower floor, searching for upper hands and low blows. Joker disappears into a toy shop and comes out with a bag of marbles that he tries to trip Bruce with, Bruce finds a thick wad of rope balled up next to some badly stored dry ice at the back of a music supplies shop and attempts to tie Joker to one of the posts holding up the balcony. Joker’s nice enough to ignore the cream cleaner in the janitor’s closet but not so nice as to try to spray soap in Bruce’s eyes, Bruce goes to paint over Joker’s face in the same whitewash that covers the walls but finds it’s dried out sometime in the past year. The grappling hook is useful here, leaping into action and out of the fray, reveling in the feeling of taking off and having nothing beneath his boots.

The sound of laughter fills Bruce’s ears and he can’t say if it’s coming from the other end of the building or right behind him. The chase is consuming, all encompassing, familiar. When the rest of the balloons have been blown and popped Joker meets him on the first floor balcony, drawn up to his full height and dripping vindictive glee.

“Oh I’ve missed this.” Joker purrs. “I thought I was going to have to write those dancing lessons off as a waste of time but you’ve held your form pretty well. Tell me, can you still fly?”

“You tell me.” Bruce replies. The air crackles around Joker in the way it always does when he’s building up to his finishing move, ever impossible to predict. The excitement of not knowing what happens next makes flying sound like a quaint secondary possibility. Bruce is surprised he doesn’t float away.

The air isn’t heavy with smog drenched rain but this could be a rooftop. It’s grey, the light coming through the few skylights in the ceiling enough to see by but not enough to be called daylight. Spectators shuffle through the area around them, their safety ostensibly the gamble each of them are taking and yet so completely irrelevant to the dance as to be forgotten. All that rage and glory distilled to fit into the negligible space between them.

Dark reflections, bright headlights. Superman was the day and Batman was the night. But Superman is gone and all that’s left is the pied piper standing before him. It may be time to reevaluate their roles.

“I think,” Joker hisses, twirling into Bruce’s personal space with a disarmingly graceful pirouette, “that I’m going to fucking murder whichever little imp decided that pulling your wings off would make for good sport.” He sets a hand on Bruce’s chest, leans in for the briefest of moments, then pushes.

Bruce’s back makes contact with the barrier, promising nothing but a hard surface to land on should he take another step. Joker holds him firm with his good hand, strong but not strong enough to push him over the edge. Bruce moves to snatch the hand away but Joker is fast, going low to deliver a sharp jab to the stomach before shooting up and butting him on the chin.

Bruce is so surprised he doesn’t realise he’s being forced over the edge until he’s in freefall. Gravity tugs him into odd angles and he has less than seconds to right himself before he hits the ground. He lands on his feet and fists, spreading the shock of impact. A neat little trick Selina taught him.

He scowls up at Joker. “What was that for?”
“For?” Joker leans over the balcony, shaking his head. “Oh no. No way. You can’t run around ascribing meaning to things willy nilly. Sometimes stuff’s just fun.”

“You said someone pulled my wings off. What did you mean?”

Joker smiles wide, the sharp edges of his teeth catching the last dredges of light. “You tell me.” He hauls himself up to stand on the barrier and looks out across the mall. There’s no wind to catch in his hair no neon lights to highlight the fact that his colour pallet doesn’t match the world at large. It looks like a hollow victory. He starts walking the barrier like it’s a tightrope, whistling a tune that used to grace the ring at Haley’s Circus. He starts out simple, walking, skipping, threatening to run. By the time he’s doing cartwheels along a strip of polymer no wider than his thumb it no longer looks like he’s taking risks, even if he does sporadically try to convince Bruce that he’s about to fall.

“I’m really gonna do it this time!” he squawks, flailing his arms wildly. By all rights Joker should already be falling, the angle he’s holding himself at completely untenable and yet it seems impossible that he won’t right himself.

“No you’re not.” Bruce is bored of waiting for Joker to get bored and there’s an itch at the back of his brain telling him to get moving. Morestown is still a day or two away and Gotham further still.

Joker twists his face into a scowl and straightens up. He peers down his nose at Bruce, then slowly and deliberately steps into thin air.

Landing on all fours is not the only thing that has remained second nature to Bruce. He doesn’t even think when Joker starts to fall, just steps forward and holds out his arms to catch him.

“My hero,” Joker coos, slinging his legs over one of Bruce’s arms and leaning back into the other. He wraps his arms around Bruce’s neck and like an insistent sloth, refuses to let go. “Is this the part where you take me back to your lair and I demonstrate how grateful I am that you saved my life?”

“Absolutely not.” Bruce pulls Joker off him and does his best to set him upright.

Joker blows a very loud raspberry. “You’re no fun.”

“We have to get moving.”

“But Batsy!”

“No buts.”

“I dunno about that. You may not look like you’re suffering from Roid Rage anymore but from behind everything’s exactly where it’s supposed to be.”

Bruce growls under his breath. “We’re going, Joker.”

“Oh yeah? You gonna make me?” Joker’s eyes flash in challenge.

Bruce is sure he can hear the scuffling of small bodies retreating further into their hiding holes. “I’ll start walking and you’ll follow.”

“Really, you sure about that?” Joker leans back, nonchalant and deadly, “because I don’t remember us having that kind of relationship. You’re the cat and I’m the mouse. Not that I don’t appreciate a little role reversal every now and then to spice up the marriage but you can’t fight animal instinct.”

“Joker…”
“What? You gonna tie me up again, sling me over your shoulder? Been there, done that, they weren’t selling tshirts.”

Bruce takes a step towards him and grabs him by the injured hand. Joker flinches but doesn’t recoil, smile hardening as his brow furrows. In the half-light he is ghoulishly bright. “So the bat wants to play a game. You wanna cut a hole in my side and poke at my innards? That oughta keep me in line but trust me honey, that’s a party for two.”

A second too late, Bruce sees Joker’s free hand reaching forward, fumbling at the zip of the front pocket of the pack, the one where the switchblade is kept. He pulls back with a great roar but he’s not nearly fast enough. Weight distribution changes as the zip falls open as Joker’s fingers dart inside to retrieve their prize.

This is not a child, armed with a deadly weapon but still working out how to use it. This is a man who knows not just how to cause damage but to take pleasure in it. There’s no way that the look Joker is wearing is anything but hostile.

Bruce drops to the floor, determined to be far out of Joker’s way when he starts swinging. Joker has no finesse with knives but he’ll push a blade into anything to watch a vein pop. Bruce has seen him accidentally stab himself in the side in the middle of a fight only to laugh his way through it. He waits for the clown to lunge forward into the space left for him, from there it’s a simple matter of getting him on the ground and wrestling the knife out of his grip. They’ll scuffle and one or both of them will leave with some minor lacerations but it’s nothing they haven’t done before.

But Joker doesn’t behave as expected, which really shouldn’t come as a surprise. He doesn’t step to Bruce, he doesn’t drop down to his level, he doesn’t even back off to skirt the perimeter. Instead he goes into retreat, feet hitting hard on the linoleum, skipping away from Bruce and muttering furiously under his breath.

Stopping at the other side of the mall, Joker holds his weapon over his head. Bruce notes, with a mixture of irritation and bemusement, that he would not be tall enough to snatch it out of his hand. Like Jason putting cereal on top of cabinets that none of the other kids could reach, or the Justice League letting him walk because it made them laugh to see Batman arrive last to everything.

The tactical advantages of holding a switchblade to ransom are lost on Bruce. Which is hardly surprising seeing as Joker isn’t holding the switchblade.

He’s holding the bouncy ball.

“We are not leaving here until I say so,” Joker sing-songs, a bitter edge to his voice, “and if you try to do anything about that I will break this ball right here and you can kiss whatever you think is waiting for you in Gotham goodbye.”

“What?” The rational part of Bruce’s brain is trying to dissect how this manipulation is supposed to work.

But natural born instinct kicks in, struggling to keep them both alive. Bruce takes a steadying breath, gets to his feet and stars wracking his brain to work out what he’s been missing.
Chapter Notes

I'm reeeeaally sorry this chapter took so long to get up. You know how life can be.

Warnings for this chapter: gruesome murder of a child, plenty of blood and death in general, some on the nose references to Joker's abuse of Harley

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Six months earlier

The lack of warm bodies he can live with, it’s the lack of anything else that’s getting him down. Gotham was always delightfully inconsistent in its architecture, sometimes little more than a mess of grubby alleyways and sometimes the greatest unclaimed empire on Earth. Metropolis, on the other hand, is dull. Joker passes through an endless series of identical housing blocks, each capped with one of five interchangeable convenience stores, and wonders who thought any of this was a good idea. It’s all so bland, he wants to smash it into pieces just to see if its capable of holding a different shape.

Pressure bears down on him from all sides, curling his spine and trying to rip the hairs from his head. Joker hacks out a laugh before the breath is squeezed entirely out of him, at himself for being so pathetically weak at such a crucial moment and at this stinking good for nothing city for being so boring.

He really should turn back the way he came, go find himself a nice little spot to set up shop. Somewhere where the children still run squealing through the streets, begging for the bogeyman to rise up from under their beds and pluck their eyeballs from their skulls. Joker would be happy to oblige, but every time he tries to stand still a personal little demon comes creeping out of the back of his mind to remind him that for as long as Batsy is out of his sight there will be no one to stop him doing whatever he pleases. He can’t think of anything more awful, for all the hell it’s trying to rain down on his barely human form, this is better.

Joker’s body thrums with the memory of Gotham, aching in sympathy with this half familiar wasteland. The world going pitch black and the hours or weeks or days it had taken to find the light. Green, everything green. Standing at a midtown intersection and wailing out some horrible noise that had definitely not been a laugh. Climbing to the top of Wayne tower and scanning the skyline for something black and brilliant fighting back against the unbearable stagnancy of the world.

He growls, fights the compressed air surrounding him to raise a fist and punch himself in the gut. It doesn’t knock any sense into him but it knocks the wind from his lungs. So that’s something. This is going to be the first and only time he lets something he can’t see get him down like this. Joker opens his mouth to laugh but no sound comes out.

It’s hard enough keeping track of what he’s doing here. He has a vague notion that he might find
Batsy hiding in amongst these perfectly identical buildings, searching for the weirdo alien thing he used to hang out with that is now conspicuously absent from the world. Normally Joker wouldn’t notice a little thing like that, but he’s never had much cause to worry about what goes on outside of Gotham. When you’re out in the big wide world without hope for a saviour, you miss the big blue and red thing you would typically expect to sweep down and sort everything out.

Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No. It’s a big empty sky that will never be full again. There had been aeroplane parts washed up at the Gotham docks where the flying death traps had dropped straight out of the air. One slip and whoops! Gone. Vanished. Fallen. Joker likes to think that the passengers died screaming. So many people went out without the time to realise they weren’t breathing before their atoms were ripped wholesale from one another, it’s nice to think that a few folk got to see the ground rushing up to meet them one last time.

There had been a kid. Not so young that they didn’t know what Joker was but young enough that him being a grownup was more important than him being a monster. It had been so easy to scoop them up like a sack of potatoes and walk them to the edge of the known world, a test to see what would happen when someone dared to pass through the veil between Metropolis and the rest of the world. They had cried and wriggled but they hadn’t known how to fight so when Joker lifted them over his head and punted them over the unwritten line in the sand that no sane person would ever cross it had been an easy thing. Whatever it is that’s weighing him down had pulverised them. On moment they were whole, the next they were gloop.

It had been hysterical. Even now Joker’s struggling for air as he tries his very best to laugh along. The oddity of a change of state, solid to liquid in the blink of an eye. And all the whispers that had said it would happen to him had been wrong.

The memory that feels like Gotham is easy enough to place. Here, as there, the streets are green, the concrete jungle layered over with debris following the blast. Joker’s pretty sure it was an explosion of sorts that did it, the air had smelled like instantaneous combustion when he rose out of Arkham, and he would know. He’s not entirely convinced this isn’t a last ditch effort from some hanger on or other to prove that they can upstage him, as if anyone would ever want to go one worse.

There are no maps and no goons left to drive him from point A to point B. Metropolis is a sprawling grid that positively wreaks of possibility. Call it nesting instinct – Joker yearns to fill every available hole in this new environment with pieces of himself. Handshocks that put out enough charge to fry synapses, silly putty that can burn through steel beams. Little pockets of carnage waiting to be unleashed on his command, if only any of it still worked properly. Joker toxin would be the obvious fall-back but he’s not sure how to find the ingredients anymore and without any civilians floating around to use it on he doesn’t see what the appeal would be.

Nothing moves when he comes through, the rats and pigeons that plague any self-respecting city were snuffed out the same as all the people, if you care enough to tell the difference. The heat cranked all the way up and those that didn’t collapse into a puddle went up in a puff of smoke. Like a cloud of icing sugar, making the air sweet where you pass. Maybe that’s what left the city so green, so shiny. So cold and lifeless and dull.

It takes a pointlessly long increment of time to find his way to the city centre. A few times he pauses by signs written in helpfully large letters, intended to guide tourists but the idea of following instructions and tracking a well worn path sucks all the remaining fun out of the journey. So Joker lets his eyes glaze over and the letters blend into one another, dancing below a layer of green that’s too bright to be moss or lichen or algae. It could be mould, he supposes, but that’s a little on the nose for his tastes. The world rotting once the fight had been kicked out of it.
There had been a time when the Batman tried to step out of the limelight. The real Batman that is, not one of those cretins he would sometimes pull out of the woodwork as a stand in. The brute whose finesse had been so lacking it was a miracle no one else could see the farce, the goody two shoes robot who couldn’t move one cyborg arm without the mayor’s say so, the flirtatious and lithe thing that had sounded just enough like the first little bird for Joker to wonder.

Point being: Batsy tried to rot and in the end it never stuck. Life, for all its tedious idiosyncrasy, finds a way, and if it cannot win by sheer force of will it will show you why substitutes are always second rate. Waiting for the elements to break you down is pointless, the world will change or it will end.

Some streets are heavier than others, their constrictive air almost enough to bring Joker to his knees. It’s a curious sensation, one he imagines is similar to that of being pushed between the jaws of a trash compactor. From beneath the insufferable weight of something he cannot see, the world looks larger and less easily defined than ever before.

It takes him a while, but eventually it occurs to Joker that the path of most resistance is probably the one he wants to follow. If he was going to drop a bomb on America, killing its most recognisable celebrity and a healthy dose of the population in one fell swoop (and quite frankly, he’s shocked at himself for letting a group of God botherers beat him to the punch) he would want to do it where as many people could see the deed go down as possible. Say, in the heart of America’s premier modernised city.

So where the air tries to suffocate him, Joker follows. It wrings him out, squeezing his internal organs into silly string. Soon enough he’s going to have to push the button at the top of the canister and let everything out. Let himself breathe, let him soar. The screaming of his blood vessels as they try not to pop is just about bearable but he does wish it didn’t result in quite so frightful a headache. His skull is so close to bursting it’s a wonder he doesn’t forget who he is altogether.

“Batsy!” Joker tries to should the name into the ether but his throat has been forced closed. He stutters out a desperate wheeze that was born a laugh to think about his windpipe shutting down, leaving his body lying here, entombed by an invisible force that keeps almost everything out. The Bat would never know.

Sun glances off the glowing green skyscrapers as Joker turns onto a street wide enough to house parades and riots. Big enough to lead somewhere important. It’s jammed with cars, frozen in the formation they had held when their saviour failed to save himself and not one moment later. The engines cut out as one, so the picture is not one of the split second before a mighty crash but of a normal Tuesday morning. What a wasted opportunity. Joker can’t get the sound out but the sentiment of a groan is very much present. The temptation to abandon his sacred mission and rearrange these automobiles into something more entertaining is almost unbearable.

Almost, but not quite. Joker can resist anything except temptation (and he can resist even that when he really tries). It wouldn’t do to live entirely off the back of his latest whim and sometimes you have to dedicate yourself to a project to get the results you deserve.

Right now the project is simple and essential: find Batsy. The universe is being horribly uncooperative on this front, actively refusing to split open and reveal the caped crusader tucked away beneath the mantle, waiting to sprout into this brave new world. If it can really be called a new world. It feels more like a snapshot of the old one in which Joker has had the misfortune to become trapped. Someone held up a camera and told them all to say cheese and his smile was so spectacular that they thought he was posing for the same photo.

Finding one’s soulmate is a very broad goal that can be accomplished any way one sees fit. Getting to a specific point via a specific route is a frightfully tedious task and not one that Joker signed up for.
He would tell the city as much, if he could get enough air into his lungs to speak. He moves in the same direction as the traffic once did, having already made up his mind that he will find some small piece of what he’s looking for at the end of this road. The air pressure builds with every step he takes, till he’s crawling on all fours along the fronts of the designer shops that line the street.

There’s a joke in here somewhere, something about his diminished slapstick capabilities coupled with an invisible force trying to bleed him dry. The visual and the anything-but. It’s on the tip of his tongue, rising from his battered body but without wings to carry it any further. The headache is getting steadily worse, not so much as to slow him down but that doesn’t stop it being a real killjoy. Joker lets out the ghost of a growl and whacks his head against the pavement, trying to shake it free. It does absolutely nothing to soothe the pounding at his temples but he does manage to cut his head open, which is nice. Blood slides down his face and drips off his chin, painting constellations on the tarmac and when he twitches his head at all the right moments the shapes become those of his design. He watched the red converging on the grey till a jester stares up at him, grinning wide.

Then Joker laughs and the shaking of his body sends blood scattering across the picture and the shape breaks. Oh well.

He must look a treat, gasping for air and covered in his own blood. When Batsy finally catches up to him it’s going to be touch and go as to whether they’ll be anything left for him to do. The bright pink of Joker's jeans and the acid yellow of his hoodie might save the look if he’d had a chance to wash them since Gotham. He’s a mess. Not that his bat doesn’t prefer him trussed up and ready for carving but it rather ruins the fun if the duck arrives at the feat fully dressed.

He’ll tidy himself up eventually, if he remembers. He doesn’t think he’s going to forget something as important as his stage presence, he’s a master showman after all, but even the most important things have a habit of slipping his mind when he least expects it. It’s fine, whatever happens he’ll find a way to work it into his masterplan. Maybe if he keeps himself in a state of perfect dishevelment the Batman will look at him and see a precious thing in need of defending, maybe Batsy will scoop Joker up and carry him to safety like one of those screeching damsels he used to trail after.

Night after night, in a city that belonged entirely and only to the two of them. The thought of the great beast showing his soft underbelly, wooed at the last by the broken outline of a man with nothing left to lose, sends shivers up Joker’s spine. He wants to let himself be wrapped in that thick black cape, to know how tenderness feels before he shows his claws and dives in to tear at the guts of his captor and prey.

In her most annoying moments, which granted had been most of the time she dared open her mouth, Harley had doubted that Joker had it in him to kill the Bat. In amongst all her other pointless observations and inane plotting, often in the middle of one of her tantrums. Throwing herself at him in various states of undress and pleading to know why they couldn’t leave Gotham, why he wouldn’t kill the Batman, why he wouldn’t drop his trousers and let her ride him like a pogo stick.

Joker never could understand how someone with so many pieces of paper insisting she was smart could be so stupid. The irony of idiots passing as intelligent is hardly something Joker’s unfamiliar with but he’s never seen much in its comic value. Harley had been a real headcase though, capable of spending hour after tedious hour rambling on about the pathology of her warped mind only to wind up back at his feet like the yappy little lapdog he had turned her into, begging for a bone.

That’s not the point though. The point is that she had doubted him. How he was supposed to account for ideas popping into his head at the last minute, Joker has no idea. It was hardly his fault that Batsy had a knack for pulling the rug out from under them.

Besides, if Batman were capable of dying at Joker’s hands he would have probably done it by now.
Everything else, all the dancing and the waiting and the possibility of eternity hiding behind their combined rage is just testing the hypothesis. Joker is nothing is not thorough in his research. So he had hit Harley hard enough for all of Gotham to see the little birds twirling round her head and he had laughed. And she would apologise and shrink a little further into his shadow.

Every cursed minute spent trekking down the high street stretches out into its own impossible forever, time marking itself by the change in the vehicles flanking Joker’s side as he hobbles onward. After a while their call becomes too strong and though he can restrain himself from the temptation to spend hours and days reassembling their metal carcasses into a picture worth looking at, he can’t resist wiping away the layer of green dust settled over them and admiring his reflection, warped by the shells of their chassis. They compress and expand him, beyond what any unseen force can do to his physical form. Laughter can’t travel on waves of light, but when Joker pushes his face into grotesque expressions it creates ripples in his reflection, echoing out across the city till he’s the largest thing therein.

The sun might dip a little closer to the horizon but Joker doesn’t notice. He pursues wider goals and immediate satisfaction in equal measure, and really, isn’t that the best way to live? The joy of the here and now drowns out all else so that when he finally reaches the end of the road his success comes as a surprise.

Surprises are supposed to be fun. Joker has always strived to surprise people, no matter the occasion. Surprise birthday parties, surprise wedding crashes, surprise packages in the mail. People pull the funniest expressions when they’re surprised, a particular brand of fear mixed with just a dash of excitement. It keeps them guessing which in turn makes them less predictable, less boring.

What’s boring is coming to the end of a long line of traffic only to find that what he came looking for is nowhere in sight. He’d heard tell of how much more overt Metropolis is than Gotham in its worship of its saviour but this is a bit much. The roundabout sitting at the intersection is massive, the end of the street flanked by signposts directing human traffic to whichever tourist attractions were deemed most worthy of an exorbitant entry fee, and sitting atop this roundabout is a statue of Superman.

It’s a very big statue, a garish blasphemous thing that makes bile rise in Joker’s mouth. It stares towards the sky with a soft smile, promising peace and prepared for war. Hands held out to catch the alien ships that will rain from the sky when he takes flight and reminds the rest of the universe that they are as nothing to the God of Earth.

How dare they?

How dare they?

What sort of idiotic, small minded giant thought they could get away with crafting monuments to the false promise that hope is enough all on its own? The boy scout with his bare face and open heart who looked upon the world and decided he would be good enough for them all. And no one was smart enough to see how perfect the fallacy was, how deliriously awful. This two bit prophet with his wide eyes and innocent smile never understood, and people deigned to build statues in his honour.

Images flash behind Joker’s eyes and he thinks they might be memories but he can’t hold on to any of them for long enough to tell. The letter S, plastered across walls and billboards because it’s the only thing anyone has to say. Calling, craving for a thing that will never come back to them. But they are bigger than one man, one alien, bigger even than hope. Humanity, for all its predictable and trite idiocy has so many shades of grey as to be uncountable. The pallid purity of a bright white slate was dreamed up by something that thought itself super.
The worst thing about this mess is knowing that Metropolis singled out their saviour and made him mighty while Gotham did the decent thing and let theirs remain the stuff of folklore. A story that few out of towners ever believed because Batman is so much darker, so much more satisfyingly complex than the stone oaf now standing before Joker. But no one ever thought to get Batsy a statue.

Joker chokes on his attempts to laugh. As if the Batman would accept a statue of himself, rigged up in downtown Gotham for all to see. He’s far too conscious of his failings to let anything like that stand. Justice works best as a symbol when it never quite moves into the light; surprising people, keeping them guessing, keeping them from growing stagnant and dull. When the two of them reunite and resume the fight between the way Joker sees the world and the way Batsy thinks it has to be, it might be fun to try erecting a monument to the Dark Knight’s efforts.

Just to watch him tear it down. Neither of them would ever have to know if he hated it on principal or if it was just Joker’s handiwork that he couldn’t stand to see.

Despite the unshakable urge to laugh himself silly, Joker can’t say he’s particularly tickled. It comes from a place of rage, rising hard and fast. The urge to smash something is unignorable, to light fuses and watch the sunset explode before his eyes. There is no greater goal and there is no world outside this moment. The statue has to go.

The air pulls him all the tighter here, so much so that when Joker tries to laugh blood comes up, his insides trying to eat themselves. He’s heard tell that it’s possible to laugh oneself to death but has always assumed that fate would be far too cruel to grant him a similar end. Like this though, he can see it happening, and he doesn’t know if it’s the irony or the sheer joy of the thing that pleases him more.

He needs something heavy enough to smash stone. None of that bird’s beak on a mountaintop bullshit. Joker casts around for something to get the job done but it’s hard to focus on anything when colour has become uniform and his eyes are trying to claw their way out of their sockets. He wishes he had a crowbar, he can work wonders with them when given the chance. There’s every chance that one might be hiding in one of the cars but when Joker tries to imagine himself retracing his steps and going through the hassle of jimmying locks, punching through windows and getting distracted by the patterns his blood paints when his skin inevitably breaks on the broken glass he can’t quite make the picture work. Probably because he’s already done cars, they’re so passé. He needs something new, something fresh. Something very heavy. A drain cover would be perfect, but if hunting through cars sounds boring it’s nothing on sweeping the streets in the hope of uncovering a sewer entrance.

This is proving to be a whole lot more trouble than Joker had anticipated. Not that he’d come prepared for much beyond the chance to throw a human body into an invisible blitzer but really, what sort of city goes to ruin and leaves everything so perfectly tidy? It’s hard for a puddle of human go to do more than mollock about like a kidney but surely it wouldn’t have been so hard for someone to to fight through the inconvenience and rough the place up a bit.

There’s a low-lying fence skirting the edge of the roundabout, completely ineffectual against intruders but strong enough to win a fight with a car trying to spin off the road. Joker heads over the examine it, testing the strength of the chains strung between individual support posts. It doesn’t fall apart in his hands like he so sorely wants it to and so it thoroughly deserves the swift kick he delivers to the metal fixings holding the whole arrangement to the ground.

Joker’s foot throbs with non-committal exasperation. If his body wants to try to convince him that broken toes are something he should concern himself with it’s going to have to try a whole lot harder than that.
The posts have been fixed in concrete and buried in the ground, so they’re going to be a bitch to break free but they’re also going to be delightfully heavy. Bracing himself for the inevitable shortness of breath brought on by a real workout, Joker drops to his knees and starts digging.

He’s gasping for air in no more than ten minutes. Pathetic, Batsy used to chase him across Gotham rooftops for hours at a time and Joker never once faltered because of a wheezing chest or the need to catch his breath. It makes the laughter trying to bubble out of him more painful, he never thought enjoying himself could be such a chore.

It takes a long time. The skin of Joker’s hands is worn through in patches when he’s done and a handful of dislodged fingernails are scattered in the resulting hole. The cement block comes free of the earth with a satisfying pop but Joker has to laugh when he remembers that it’s still attached to its neighbours by the chains. He could probably chew through them if he had to, he’d break a few teeth but that’s not such a horrible price to pay for roughing up Superman’s stupid smug face.

He’s so geared up for doing just that, Joker’s a little disappointed when he notices that the chains are looped over a pair of hooks at each side of the post and it’s the work of a moment to remove them.

The post is very heavy indeed, which is good, but the invisible evil in the air makes it hard to spare the energy to lift it. The sun has long since vanished by the time he manages to drag the thing up to the statue’s shoulders, perching himself on Superman’s bowed back and taking a moment to hunt for signs of something darker and wilder than anything this city has to offer hiding in amongst the rooftops.

Beneath the moon, Metropolis glows with a faint green light. Even under so much dust it’s clear to see that the buildings here are all smooth lines and neat architecture, everything designed to match. It looks unnatural and eerie to Joker’s Gothamite sense of design. There’s no personality here, it was all washed away by the notion that humanity is not a wretched, despicable thing on its own terms. His heart clenches and his breath catches and Joker wonders how he could have been so stupid as to think coming here was a good idea. There’s nowhere for the Batman to hide in this city, it was never going to host their grand rendezvous.

Metropolis wants you to seize the day, Joker just wants to find his knight. It doesn’t feel like any effort at all to raise the post over his head and bring it down on the stone below his feet.

The statue cracks, the sound loud in this silent city. It takes three tries for the first block of stone to fall away but once it’s gone the structural integrity of the whole thing is damaged and Joker has to fight to keep his footing as the rubble falls out from under him.

He throws the post towards Superman’s head with as much force as he can manage and it does nothing to temper his rage, constricting him into a wild little thing that doesn’t care if the effort of this exercise kills him. Joker can breathe free, can hear himself laughing and shrieking as the stone shatters before his anger.

As Superman himself falls, because all supermen must fall eventually.

Therein lies the joke. Anyone who calls themselves super will live to see that theory disproven. Dying a hero proves their fallibility and if they cannot die sooner or later they’ll try their hand and villainy and from then on the trust if lost. Good intentions will eventually become the foundation for someone else’s triumph.

Joker persists against the straining of his muscles, nothing more than petulant whining from his body, insisting he’s not getting enough oxygen to the right places. He’s not going to listen to such low brow drivel. He keeps going until the statue no longer looks like any hero he can give a name to.
He steps back to admire his handiwork, leaning heavily on the post still clutched in his battered hands. Is it a bird? Is it a plane? Who the fuck cares?

As the final displaced fragments come to rest, the world returns to its intolerable calm. Joker hadn’t had time to appreciate how full of motion he had made this tiny patch of land before the entropy dissipated. Kinetic force always runs out, and people have the gall to tell him that the universe is inching towards chaos of its own accord.

Some of the sprogs he’s encountered in the ghastly wonderland beyond this city have tried to imply that he’s somehow responsible for all this. The God killing accusations are a flattery, but the suggestion that this is what he wants out of life is worse than an insult and he’s not very good at holding his temper when someone’s careless enough to let the thought cross their mind.

It’s amazing what punishments Joker can think up when he drifts past anger into the white hot ocean of blind rage. No one ever wants to take him there twice. A little playing with his dinner, some tactical dismemberment, all a bit of fun as he tries to centre himself. But people do love to run. There had been one woman with grey eyes and nails sharp enough to leave tracks in his arm, she had reminded him of the stray cats that used to plague the Gotham ports. Her head had popped off so neatly. Joker had had some old springs lying around, she’d made a lovely jack-in-the-box.

He skirts the no-longer-a-statue, keeping his eyes peeled for any part of it still holding a recognisable form. That’s a lovely turn of phrase – keeping one’s eyes peeled.

It transpires that he’s done a pretty good job of smashing the thing to pieces and there’s nothing more for him to do here. How irritating. Joker scowls at the pile of rock sitting atop the roundabout, willing it for reform into something hateful enough that he can have another go at taking it apart. He supposes he could try his hand at breaking down some of this nauseatingly perfect architecture, letting stones fly through windows, the city falling apart in his hands. But that’s not a game that’s any fun to play without anyone to watch him pull their home to pieces and the immediate joy of disorder would wear thin long before he was done with a sandbox this big.

No Batsy and nothing else to do. Metropolis is a bust. Joker casts the post aside and tries to growl under his breath but no noise comes out. He tries again and again, letting himself get so worked up that he almost forgets to revisit the fact that the sound the post made hitting the road was not that of metal hitting tarmac.

Now that’s interesting. Joker glances down and sees the post resting at an ungainly angle against a bump in the road. It looks like a misshapen speed bump only that doesn’t make what most people like to call ‘sense’. A speed bump like that would be considered a traffic violation even in Gotham, nearly a foot high and right on a busy roundabout.

Joker reaches out with a foot to prod the lump. There’s nothing but give at first, foot sinking inches deep into the mound until it connects with something firmer. Too soft to be concrete, too hard to be living flesh. He guesses what he’s found a moment before he drops to his knees to wipe the dust from its face.

No sound comes out and it feels like his ribs might crack under the pressure, but it’s impossible not to laugh. A proper laugh, clutching at his sides and feeling his whole body shake beyond his control. Joker tips back his head and aims his silent mirth at the moon, staring down at Metropolis with calm indifference, as if this were any other night.

The man in the moon is crying, though no one knows for whom. Joker laughs for the end of days. Before him, wrapped in his cape and quite dead to the world, is Superman.
He knows he never bothered to look too hard at the papers when this awful intergalactic idiot graced their covers week after week, but Joker’s pretty sure that the living specimen has been a whole lot prettier than the corpse. It’s to be expected that his hair’s lost some of its lustre since he conked out, but in death Superman’s skin is an ugly shade of puke green run through with dark veins. His eyes, frozen wide open, are pupils narrowed to lizard like slits in milky blue irises. It’s dark and street lights don’t exist anymore and all Joker can think is ‘ew’.

Muscles all but turned to stone, hands fist ed in his cape like he’d been trying to pull it over his head when the blast hit. Maybe it’s made out of special fabric that could have shielded him from the worst of it. Joker wrinkles his nose and the breath of laughter that escapes him is not entirely sincere. Something about the wide-eyed shock, the hunched over position of Superman’s body, is off. Like he died scared.

That should be funny. That should be fucking hilarious. Joker has a nagging feeling that anything that scared something as powerful as Superman should probably scare him too, in a ‘questions first, laugh later’ sort of way. He tugs half-heartedly at the cape, it would be nice to take the edge off the radiation, but it’s trapped in that death grip. It will lie here as long as the corpse does.

Perfectly intact, not burned to nothing or reduced to a puddle of organic matter stewing on the tarmac. Someone went to the trouble of building a bomb just to take down Superman and it wound up doing more damage to the rest of them. Typical. You’d think people would have had more than enough time to learn that weapons of mass destruction never quite turn out like you plan.

The joke stays funny for another minute at most but it’s got a limited lifespan and Joker’s got places to be. Or rather, he’s got a very large flying rodent to find and it’s not here so he’s got to relocate himself. He blinks down at the body of Superman, debating whether its worth taking with him. He can’t begin to imagine the sort of horror it would put upon the faces of all those pathetic believers in the false God. Towns painted over with the Superman symbol having to look at the rancid carcass of their hero.

Of course, it’s not quite rancid yet. Microbial life would appear to have tanked it along with everything else and survival in the blast zone is a very rare privilege. That green skin though, those animal eyes. It would be delicious to watch them look to this thing they claim to worship and see it for what it really is.

Were the world what it had once been, Joker probably wouldn’t have noticed the way the wind changes and a whiff of something that has yet to stagnate catches in the air. Under the current circumstances, details like that count as something happening and the hairs on the back of his neck prick as whoever it is that has decided to disrupt his evening comes up behind him.

Joker gathers the facts. He’s dealing with someone living who’s strong enough withstand the initial impact of the radiation bubble and keep standing once inside. Given the wide range of meta and mutated abilities that failed to save the rest of the Rogues Gallery back in Arkham, Joker’s sure to expect a whole different calibre of powerful. He has a pretty good idea of what’s coming.

“What are you doing here?” The accent fluctuates between English, American and something entirely untraceable.

Joker’s lived a pretty rich life, crossed paths with a whole load of heavy hitters, but unless he’s forgetting something he’s never been formally introduced to her. He tries to speak but the words get lost on the way to his mouth. He scowls momentarily then hitch ed up his smile into the widest thing he can manage, determined to make a good first impression. Dragging himself to his feet and running a hand through his hair to tidy it, he turns to face her with a flourish.
Wonder Woman is taller than Joker expected, an inch or two shy of the Bat and almost as heavily built. Her outfit is the same impractical nonsense she’s always sported but Joker can appreciate dedication to a brand in the face of adversity. Her back is admirably straight, though there’s a weakness in her eyes he hadn’t anticipated; compassion or a need to understand or some other such nonsense that she should really learn to live without.

“Hey look at that! We’ve got two of the trinity,” Joker’s not sure he’s speaking loud enough for her to hear. “Does this mean Batsy’s late to the party?”

“You shouldn’t speak,” Wonder Woman chides. Her voice wavers but it’s more than a whisper. She tries to take a step towards him and is set upon by something that literally knocks her sideways, almost pushing her off her feet entirely.

It’s not compassion, she’s in pain. The same pain Joker’s in, fighting the urge to let their bodies succumb to the pressure and cave in entirely. No one’s safe.

She steadies herself, looking right past Joker to the partially exposed corpse of Superman behind him. She nods towards it. “Is it really him?”

“Who’s he, the cat’s father?”

Wonder woman growls and reaches for something at her hip. She’s got a temper then, and it’s terrifyingly short. Joker’s rather disappointed that they have to do this when neither of them is at their best, she’d probably be a rather fun dance partner.

Something flashes through the night, whirling through Wonder Woman’s hands to wrap around Joker’s wrist. It looks and feels like an ordinary stretch of rope, except for the way it’s glowing a soft yellow that serves as quite a nice counterpoint to the deep green of the night.

Green. Like that Lantern Man guy. Maybe he’s going to be the next one to show up.

The rope is a pretty pathetic weapon though, Joker’s kind of disappointed. He’d been expecting some legendary sword or at least some old school projectiles. Knots can be slipped though, and for all its glowing glamour the rope doesn’t burn or scald or do anything except lie against the fabric of his hoodie.

“Is it really him?” Wonder Woman asks from between gritted teeth. She’s not really angry, just desperate.

Joker wants to play on that desperation, counter with a joke and watch her irritation build until she snaps and forgets what she was doing here in the first place. He’s not the perfect line ready to go, about how reality is an indecipherable and fleeting thing that splits itself along multiple axes on a daily basis so who’s to say what anything really is? The words don’t come though, sabotaged at the last moment by an unspeakable urge to tell the truth.

“Yes,” Joker hisses.

A small smile tugs at the corners of Wonder Woman’s mouth. “Did you come here looking for Superman?”

“No.”

“Then why are you here?”

“I’m looking for Batman.”
“And you thought you’d find him in Metropolis?” Wonder Woman’s eyebrows raise like she’s trying to mock but the effect is spoiled when the last syllable jumps an octave and she’s forced to bend double, clutching at her sides as a stab of pain sweeps through her.

Joker shrugs, a mighty effort through the screaming of his muscles. “He might have been.”

“He might be anywhere. Coming to Metropolis is really scraping the bottom of the barrel.”

The barrel line is such an obvious lead into so many jokes. Bad apples, Donkey Kong, shooting fish. Joker can pull the words together but his tongue refuses to carry them, curling into the shape of a nasty little whine about how he’s looked everywhere and he doesn’t know what else to do. How he might just die of boredom if he doesn’t find Batsy soon. He stops himself a split second before the words are given life. It’s bad enough to have been attacked by a case of the truthseys let alone that he might try to hand out information of his own volition.

Wonder woman stumbles towards Superman’s body, knees hitting the road with finality as she drops down to cradle his head, peer into those eyes and search for traces of humanity. She won’t find anything here, just death. That’s all this city’s good for. Joker eyes the sagging of her shoulders, the weight of her breathing – hadn’t he just been thinking that she walked so tall? Stood so strong? It’s getting to her, the radiation. Not all at once, not like the child who had become a pancake for Joker’s amusement, but more rapidly than he would have guessed. She won’t be able to withstand the pressure for much longer at this rate and Joker has to wonder if two dead Gods in one day is twice as funny or a farce.

He fiddles with the rope at his wrist. It’s not particularly tight and it hasn’t forged itself into any knots. Joker eats high end biometric security systems for breakfast, this should be a breeze. It holds tight though, no matter what he does to try to free himself and he can only blame whatever magic Wonder Woman has resting in her bones for that.

Imagine if the Amazons had done security at Arkham. That would have really made escapes fun.

Wonder Woman takes a long breath that might be shaking because she’d trying not to cry or because her lungs are trying to collapse in on themselves, it’s difficult to tell. “Batman used to say you were obsessed with him, is that still true?”

This time Joker is able to bark out a laugh at her naïveté before the truth is forced between his teeth. “But of course. This old dog certainly can learn new tricks but why on Earth would I want to?”

“What?”

This at least is an answer Joker has never had cause to lie about. “Because we are each other’s reflection and I will dance with him in Hell before I let anyone else kill him.”

“Do you love him?” Wonder Woman peers up at Joker out of the corner of her eye. Hard, sad, cautious. Her mouth is spun into a thread as she bites the inside of her cheeks to distract herself from how much everything else hurts.

“As much as I’m capable of loving anyone.”

“Then you’ll find him.” She turns to face him properly, face hardening into a parody of the strength she must be so used to feeling and Joker can see her crumbling. He’s going to watch Wonder Woman die. He’s going to stand her with her stupid truth rope holding him fast and he’s going to look her in the eye as she falls apart. This is a weird first meeting.
He nods, unable to form the words. Wonder Woman starts reaching for pouches and compartments that no costume that skimpy should be able to accommodate and Joker wants to say something about Timelords and how she’ll be back on her feet fighting fit in ten minutes anyway.

He wants to know. He think he deserves at least a little something. “What’s a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?”

“I came north looking for Br- for Batman,” she starts. “I can’t ask anyone else to do this. But I thought… I dunno what I thought. I wanted to find Clark.”

“Clark?” Joker rasps. Because surely not. Surely Superman’s name wasn’t fucking Clark of of all fucking things.

Wonder Woman waves vaguely towards the corpse and Joker falls to his knees, unable to breathe or think or do anything beyond belt out silent guffaws that feel powerful enough to shake the Earth beneath his feet. Dear Lord Clark. That’s some A Grade comedy right there.

“I shouldn’t have come,” Wonder Woman whispers. “As soon as I entered the airspace it had me.”

The TARDIS-like pouches on her suit take more rooting through than Joker would have thought possible and when she’s done all Wonder Woman has to show for herself is a green bouncy ball that looks like its filled with some kind of liquid. As far as bouncy balls go it’s a rather nice one but Joker’s pretty sure that having something sloshing around inside is going to throw it off balance when it’s in motion. She holds it out for him to take, barely leaning forward to bridge the distance between them.

“This is an asclepion. Cleansing magic, passed from Themiscyrans to humans. This one is very powerful, if it’s broken it can eradicate all environmental threats to human life in a ten-mile radius.”

Joker could ask hundreds of questions about exactly how the shiny green thing is supposed to tell what aspects of an environment are damaging to the dominant parasite but prior experience with immortals has taught him that he’d only get some mumbo jumbo about magic in response. The pieces fall into place nice and easy though, if the thing’s broken open right here then all the material in Metropolis still emitting radiation will be sanctified and whilst that’s not exactly going to save the world in a hurry, it’s going to make it so much easier for everything else to start down the road to recovery.

“What are you waiting for?” He hisses.

Wonder woman presses the ball into Joker’s palm and wraps her fingers round his wrist, right next to the rope but so much tighter. Her hand is shaking, as is the rest of her. “A human has to do it.”

If Joker’s didn’t know any better, he’d think he’d just been asked to save the world. He tips back his head and manages a small squeak of laughter in amongst the shaking of his shoulders. Him. Joker. Save the world. Can you imagine?

“That thing’s magic,” Wonder Woman continues, the last drops of venom she has left to give slipping into her voice, “I know what you are, what you’ve done. It doesn’t matter what Batman says or what DNA you have, in your heart you’re a monster. You won’t do.”

So he is being asked to save the world, just not directly. “You want me to find Batsy, bring him back here and get him to do it.” Joker says. That’s the truth, but not the whole truth. It doesn’t account for the fact that theoretically any old human could be the one to pull the plug but that the Bat is inevitably going to be the only one who works out how to get into the city unharmed. It doesn’t
account for what happens if Joker fails.

Her grip slips and Wonder Woman falls to the tarmac with a thump, displacing green dust. The light in the rope flickers, then it falls away from Joker’s wrist with the grace of silk. He’s left holding the asclepius, and with it the immediate fate of the human race in his hands.

“You’ll find him.” Wonder Woman whispers. “He’ll understand.”

No magic is necessary for the next step, no mysterious truth telling lasso is needed to get an honest answer out of Joker. He can’t promise that it will happen the way Wonder Woman thinks it will, but Joker doesn’t want the world to stay like this. So as long as he’s looking for Batsy anyway it’s an easy secondary goal.

“I will.”

A slight nod of the head, eyes falling closed. Wonder Woman’s draining fast, she must be in agony, the way she twitches and whimpers on the ground for a full half hour before she stills completely. Her skin isn’t green, but soon enough she’ll be indistinguishable from the body of Superman just a few feet away.

Joker stays with her until he’s sure she’s gone, giggling as best he can when she makes a particularly entertaining shape in her death throes. He’s made it all the way out here, it seems remiss not to stay for the grand finale. It doesn’t make his visit to Metropolis worth it, but it’s a decent consolation prize.

Just think, if he hadn’t taken it upon himself to go looking for Batman out among the dead, she might have had to do this all alone and then where would they be? He’d fault himself for plot convenience if he weren’t so delighted that fate decided to line itself up properly for a change.

He leaves Wonder Woman to gather green dust along with the rest of this too-perfect tomb for too-perfect people. Trekking back in the vague direction of the edge of the city, stopping to play in traffic and raid the shops for clothes. The asclepius is deposited in the top pocket of a shiny new green dress shirt and by the time the sun comes up Joker’s all but forgotten it.

Chapter End Notes

I only realised as I was editing this chapter that the Superman statue is straight out of the DCEU. This is what happens when you only have a cursory interest in important characters in a shared universe lmao. I did say that this was a mash up of various different ‘verses though so *vague hand waving* I’m allowing myself this one.

Similarly, I'm sure Joker and Wondy have met at some point in canon but I'm pretending they haven't
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Wonder Woman gave you a bouncy ball and told you that I could use it to save the world?” Bruce stares Joker down, daring him to think hard enough about the bile he spills to realise it’s too ridiculous for anyone to take seriously.

Joker frowns. “My version of the story was a little more detail oriented. There was a whole midsection where I had a go at killing God on my own terms.”

“Yes, the narrative satisfaction is astounding,” Bruce says, flatly. “Can we get going?”

“To Metropolis? Sure. But we should probably take that little detour to Morestown first. I know what you’re gonna say – a hazmat suit isn’t gonna keep you from going all strawberry jam on me for long in that radiation minefield but I figure it’s a place to start. I’m thinking we can do a whole second act closer where you work out how to adapt the thing for super hardcore conditions, maybe a montage with an eighties song, something to get the blood pumping.”

There’s a manic light in Joker’s eyes, permeating his whole figure. The bouncy ball stays raised above his head, ready to strike. Bruce has seen him like this before, on the brink of something spectacular, something awful. His best lies always were the most obvious.

If Joker were telling the truth, Bruce doesn’t know what he’d do. He’d head to Gotham first because he has to see it, he has to know. Maybe he’d move to Metropolis once he was done peeling apart the city in search of survivors but that could take years.

Even if it doesn’t take years, he could persuade himself that it should. And if there really were a way to make his city safe again, just sitting in his pocket, who’s to say what he might do with that time? There’s no telling where Bruce’s good intentions might take him.

Bruce stares Joker down. “I don’t have time for this. We’re going back to Gotham.”

Joker’s laugh starts as a rumble deep within his chest. Like the first claps of thunder, trailing behind the front running lightning but ahead of the storm. He falls to pieces, his muscles slackening just so they can tense and reshape around his mirth. Side-clutching isn’t enough, this requires oscillation through half a hundred different species of laughter, high pitched giggles and throaty guffaws. The walls must be clutched, then his knees, sides split and clothing rumpled. Snatches of something off kilter and nervous slip through the myriad cracks in Joker’s composure, something Bruce wasn’t meant to see.

“Oh God,” Joker finally manages to wheeze out, “this is just golden. A proper boy who cried wolf thing. Ya know, comedy may be my first love but there’s nothing quite so juicy as a ripping good yarn to go with it.”

Bruce’s skin crawls. Unbalanced and cocksure, Joker is most dangerous when he knows something you don’t.

The story is made up on the spot, it has to be. All of Joker’s tall tales are. And yet for every silver spun deception, the clown always leaves a grain of truth sitting in the mire. A joke to be uncovered by his hapless victims so that he can stand tall when all is said and done, puffing out his chest and making sure everyone knows that he handed over all his cards from the get go. How can he be
Some wounds stay open long after you forget they're even there. The face of Harvey Dent swims before his eyes, a man unable to place himself and acting out people’s worst expectations of him just to see if the impression stuck. Just because he put his life in his own hands and was still unable to see
the path ahead.

Bruce takes a steadying breath. Joker is a monster, and he’s not Harvey, but some reassurances are one size fits all. “Still human.”

“Do I have to spell it out for you?” Joker spits, straightening his back and hardening his eyes. “Here, let me go grab a set of those alphabet blocks they give to toddlers and mental patients to keep them occupied while mummy and daddy are too busy to give a fuck. You can’t be both. You have to choose.”

“So choose.” Bruce dare him.

A light chuckle, hands miming the drag of a knife against a throat, guts being hauled from the stomach of a corpse. “Oh honey, I already did. Now it’s your turn.”

The sharp edges of Joker’s figure exist within a heightened reality contained entirely by his aura. His smile hitches further up his face till he’s little more than twin beams of green embellishing a hole in his sallow skin. Something nags at the back of Bruce’s mind. He missed something, but it wasn’t the bouncy ball.

“I’m going.” Bruce snaps, turning on his heel and making for the door. Behind him, Joker laughs up a storm. The sound jumping out at him at odd angles where it reflects off the cavernous ceiling of the mall.

The rustling of bodies pulsating through the dark parts of shopfronts sets Bruce’s teeth on edge, taking him back to the road out of Constance. Running, knowing that he would find The Joker but not knowing where. Not knowing that the presence lurking behind him in the bushes was perfectly safe.

They’re just kids. If only they would come out of their hiding places, Bruce is sure he could establish a rapport. Then Joker could take advantage of their trust and skin them for his boots, string them up from the balcony like puppets. He makes everything so hard.

The mall runs straight for a few hundred metres, then makes an abrupt turn that looks like it was designated by the planning authority rather than the architect’s design. Bruce makes it round the corner, then tucks himself against the wall to wait for Joker to catch him up.

Joker will come, recent precedent makes him sure of it. Bruce gives him five minutes before poking his head out of his hiding place to find out what’s taking him.

He fully expects to come face to face with Joker crouching just the other side of the wall. He holds his breath, anticipating the jump scare, but when he looks back the way he came he sees nothing.

Bruce doesn’t waste time convincing himself that it’s a trick of the light, because nowhere is so dark that Joker cannot make it bright. At the other end of the mall, the floor is empty. No flashes of green, no ripples of laughter.

Years spent squashing down the urge to panic have dulled Bruce’s emotional reflexes to the point that he’s leaps into action without pause to let his nerves overwhelm him. He strides back up the main aisle, eyes flicking from left to right, hunting for anything that moves and catching nothing. He clocks shop names as he passes, keeping track of which ones he and Joker had been able to get into playing that ridiculous game with the balloons. They’ll serve as a starting point, but give him an inch and the clown will be through every lock in the building in a matter of minutes.

Bruce is almost back to where he started before it hits him. He’s lost The Joker. He had him tied up
and banged to rights and he let exhaustion and residual guilt over a broken hand talk him into letting the most dangerous mass murderer he’s ever encountered trot at his side like his faithful travelling hound.

The trick in hunting Joker down, is getting hold of him before he gets bored of hiding in the shadows. By the time the clown starts dropping hints of his own it’s invariably too late. Perhaps not too late for everyone, but the slate will forever stay muddied. The click of the safety coming off the starting gun is all you get, then the show starts with a bang and the tension keeps escalating, until most people have fallen clean off the edges of their seats.

Bruce closes his eyes and starts running through possible movement channels in his head. He automatically tries to map this scenario on a city wide scale, unused to dealing with problems of this magnitude in confined spaces.

The explosions back in Constance are damning evidence that Joker has lost none of his flair and is still more than capable of major damage with minimal resources. He’s always thought a few more steps ahead than anyone anticipates, but he’s also a master at flipping on a dime when the situation calls for it. The trouble is not that Bruce can’t predict what he might do next, but that there’s so many possibilities it’s impossible to account for them all.

A foul smell catches in Bruce’s nose and his eyes fly open. He looks around wildly, heart hammering in his chest as he tries to detect the source. Out of the shadows below the balcony up ahead, the first tendrils of a grey gas emerge, crawling across the floor at a leisurely pace. They billow outwards, moving towards Bruce with a purpose and not rising more than a couple of metres off the floor. It’s a heavy gas, perhaps using the dry ice they had found at the back of the music supply shop as a base. Bruce thinks about furniture polish and dried out tins of paint, half a hundred other things that he wasn’t paying attention to as he ran from Joker.

It would be a blessed relief if they could get back to that right about now, Joker signalling his position with a curtain of cold laughter as they descend into the chase. It’s like waiting for a cloud to burst, for the guillotine to fall.

Bruce needs to shut off the gas and find Joker before things get out of hand.

Bruce has never found Joker before anything gets out of hand. On the few occasions he thought he had he had been proven wrong sooner or later. He takes a step towards the gas, breath shallow to guard against the worst of any lethal applications it may have.

It doesn’t scald his throat or close his airways, but the smell is beyond anything Bruce has encountered in a year filled with dead bodies and deplorable human hygiene. The years spent ducking into the Gotham sewers for cover have given him a stronger stomach than most but this is something else. He recoils, gagging so hard he’s in danger of losing his breakfast.

Bruce used to keep a mask in his utility belt to filter out gasses – it gave out back in Panama and he hasn’t found a working replacement since. Without it, the resulting nausea is going to make running headlong into the gas unpleasant. Not impossible though, not by a long shot.

Instinctively, Bruce reaches behind him to grab hold of the edge of a cape he hasn’t had in over six months. His hand falls through empty air three times before he remembers the fight he had gotten into along the northern reaches of the Rio Negro, when it had been pulled from his back and vanished into the undergrowth. In place of the familiar tug of the borderline impermeable fabric against his nose, Bruce takes a deep breath and buries his face in the crook of his arm. The gas is so thick that he can taste it on his tongue and the effort of not succumbing to the urge to vomit makes his eyes water. He charges forward, half expecting the gas to turn viscous and refuse to let him pass.
Bruce passes under the awnings of the balcony and into a dark less accessible than the muted half-light of the rest of the mall. He moves to activate the cowl’s night vision in time to catch a flurry of movement out of the corner of his eye.

His first thought is that it’s Joker, so he lurches after it but he’s gone no more than a few steps before he sees other shapes flitting through the deep shadows. The children. In his haste to recapture the clown he had almost forgotten about them though he has no illusions that Joker was so careless. He’s probably been waiting for just such an occasion to go rogue, waiting for lives to hang in the balance while Bruce struggles to follow the trail back to him.

Bruce is hit in the face by an overexcited gust of gas rising high enough to completely engulf him. He splutters, stepping forward to pass through to the other side where the air is fractionally clearer. It doesn’t seem fair, let alone possible, that Joker should have been able to put together something like this on the fly.

Fairness and possibility are irrelevant. What matters is how you deal with them. The gas smells awful but it doesn’t leave Bruce faint or send his heart into palpitations, indicating that it’s non-toxic in its current state. Bruce pushes onward, tracking it back to a box tucked inside a broken shop window.

Peering into the box, Bruce sees a chunk if dry ice, just as expected. There’s a thin film of something covering it that feels tacky between his fingers and sticks to his skin. He jerks his hand back, trying to get rid of the stuff and feels something heavy weighing down the other end.

Two dead rats pop out of the back of the box and up onto the dry ice. There shouldn’t be anything unusual about dead rats, but this pair still have some lustre in their fur, looking to be freshly killed. Leaning in close, it’s possible to see that their mouths have been stretched into a mockery of a smile, exposing the rodents’ molars and splitting their cheeks.

Every muscle in Bruce’s body goes taught and he allows himself a fleeting moment of abject terror before he acts. Pulling the film away, rats and all, he uses a shard of broken glass to scrape it off his finger. The smell changes instantaneously, not the clear smog of pure dry ice but nowhere near powerful enough to turn a stomach. If Joker has managed to recreate his toxin and the initial burst of gas wasn’t enough to turn Bruce, it’s likely he has a second round of chemicals wired up somewhere to activate it.

Bruce is pretty sure he has a better chance of herding the children out of the mall in the next five minutes than finding the other half of the Joker Toxin before the clown activates it. “You need to get out!” he roars.

He’s met by a faint rustle of bodies in the dark, but no flurry of footsteps making their way to the door. They’re scared of him, and why wouldn’t they be? No matter, Bruce will drag them out of here one by one if he has to.

The first thing he should do is dispose of the dry ice concoction in front of him. Bruce reaches for the box but stops short of picking it up. It would be just like the clown to set it atop a switch to be triggered by shifting weight, or to explode on contact with body heat.

Then again it could just be a smelly box. His indecision makes him impotent. Bruce growls under his breath as he decides against risking it and turns back the way he came. When he steps out of the shadows and sees how far the gas has managed to spread, he realises it wouldn’t make much difference whether he managed to dispose of the box or not.

It’s not so bright in the mall that the night vision renders Bruce blind once he’s out in the open but the light does him no favours, forcing the cowl to recalibrate so he can’t see into the shadows. He
ducks back below the awnings to hunt for the children. He skirts the edges of the room, keeping cover below the balcony and trying to ignore the persistent stink flooding the area. The further away he moves from the dry ice, the stronger the scent becomes. He would have thought that alone should drive the children out of hiding, but evidently they value their dominion more highly than their well-being.

Bruce often finds himself confused by the motivations of the younger generations. Joker is nowhere as far as he can see, the few scraps of movement he catches sight of too small and skittish to be the clown.

Back in Gotham Joker used to vanish into thin air for months at a time. He never told the Batman where he’d been hiding and he certainly didn’t tell the GCPD. His borderline superhuman speed doesn’t account for the way he can disappear without a trace and the longer Bruce goes without finding him the more sure he is that finding the clown isn’t going to be difficult so much as impossible.

“Please,” Bruce pleads with the retreating backs of a gaggle of children. “Get to the exits. You’re not safe here.”

Whispers pulsate through the dark. Bruce picks out a handful of words: lying; gas; death.

He figures he’s not going to get a better chance, the children aren’t all that far ahead of him. Bruce leaps forward, skidding along the floor and reaching out with one arm till his fingers wrap around a thin ankle. He flinches, waiting for the inevitable scream but the only sound he hears is the urgent shuffling of the rest of the children moving away from him as fast as they can.

Bruce pulls the child into his field of vision. They’re shaking visibly, hiding behind matted hair. They’re ten years old at a push, a stringy little thing that doesn’t try to fight his grip.

“Please don’t kill me.” Voice barely above a whisper, they avert their eyes, looking straight past the ears of the cowl. Their pupils are blown from sitting in the dark, hungry for light.

“I’m not going to kill you.” Bruce unintentionally mimics the breathy fear in the child’s voice. “I’m trying to save you.”

A full body shudder ripples through the child. “We don’t need saving.”

“If you don’t get out of this mall, you will.”

“This place is our home, it would never hurt us.”

“I know,” Bruce sighs, “I know. But there’s a man here who will kill you. He doesn’t care if this is your home or not.”

The child’s eyes narrow. “You mean The Joker?”

“Yes.” Bruce nods. He’s got to guess that this kid is a Gothamite, or at least from the suburbs. He’s not sure small children would remember nightmare clowns if they didn’t have some stake in the outcome of their activities.

“He came here before,” the child continues. “Ages and ages ago. He didn’t hurt us then. Why would he hurt us now if he didn’t hurt us then?”

“Because that’s what he does. Sometimes he hurts people and sometimes he doesn’t feel like it.”
“It’s your fault!” The child’s voice rises above a whisper with the accusation. “You were playing with him, he wants to keep up the game.”

If that cuts Bruce anywhere sensitive he can deal with it later. “It really doesn’t matter why he’s here anymore. You need to get out, you and all your friends.”

“We won’t.” The child jerks forward, head butting Bruce right between the eyes. They’re far too small to cause him any harm, but Bruce’s surprise is enough to allow them an opening. They slip their foot through his momentarily lax grip and vanish back into the dark.

Bruce has to change tactic; the children are far too fast for him to catch. He picks himself up off the floor and heads back into the main body of the hall, shutting off the cowl’s night vision. He makes a big show of setting off back down the main aisle, slapping his feet hard against the floor to mark his massage. He swings the pack off his shoulders as he goes, reaching in and pulling out the grappling gun.

He rounds the corner and heads for the back exit, double doors designed to comply with fire safety regulations. They’re not locked, and when he pushes against one it swings open with relative ease. Through the crack he can see the mottled tarmac of the carpark, the bare bones of the last few vehicles left standing, a few patches where grass is already breaking through. This place had been alive a year ago, the remnants of dead bodies should be everywhere but they’ve all been cleared away. Because for all his callous disinterest in humans, The Joker knows a thing or two about the human condition and he’s right about corpses left in houses.

The door settles back on its hinges with a click and Bruce uses the sound as cover for the clatter of the grappling gun locking onto the railing of the balcony overhead. He retracts the chord, trying not to gasp at the feeling of air beneath his feet, the swooping of his stomach. It’s hard to believe this used to be so common to him he could have called it his primary mode of transport. It’s been so long since he last used the gun that he’s almost surprised he remembers how to angle his body to stop himself from crashing before he can get hold of the railing and haul himself up.

From here on he has to stay low. Bruce gets to the floor and crawls along on his belly, risking the odd peak over the edge of the balcony to check on the situation below. The first couple of looks reveal nothing but on the third try he sees what he was hoping to see.

A couple at first, then a handful, building up to a steady stream. The children emerge from their hiding places and walk out into the sluggish mist now curling across the entirety of the mall floor. They are universally skinny in a way that speaks of bone deep starvation, skeletal and shaking. They blink up at the darkening skylights like they can’t quite believe they’re still there and even at a distance it’s possible to see how freakishly small their pupils become when confronted by the barest suggestion of proper light.

They look like something out of a deep sea nature documentary, the stringy jellyfish that had always amused Barbara. Now that he can see them, Bruce has a better idea of what needs to be done to get them out of here. If he wants to go for the ‘grab them by the scruff of the neck and drag them to the door’ technique then realistically he’s only got one shot at getting a very small few of them to safety. They think he’s gone, or they wouldn’t have risked coming out into the open and once they know he’s willing to play dirty to get them where he wants them they’re not going to give him a second shot at it.

A noise, he thinks. Something loud enough that they don’t think it’s human, or at least that they know it wasn’t produced by anything native to their home. Something to make the infiltration feel real and immediate to them, might just be enough to send them running for the doors.
It’s a longshot, these children know what Joker is and that doesn’t send them running. Bruce casts a desperate glance down to the floor below and when he can’t come up with a better plan in three seconds decides it’s better to act now than to worry the act won’t work.

He moves up to the top of the main aisle before he tries anything. A couple of times Bruce peers over the edge of the balcony and thinks he sees blank eyes following the ears of the cowl. He’s fresh out of sirens and flash bombs, the cowl no longer emits any kind of noise and he lost the last of his batarangs back at Horne’s. That leaves the gauntlets and the grappling gun.

Bruce supposes the claw of the grappling gun could make a decent clang hitting a grate in the ventilation system, but nothing overly impressive. The trouble with modern architecture is that all the thin metal and ugly underbelly of a building’s nervous system are covered over, it’s unlikely anything in here will make a decent noise when struck. The gauntlets on the other hand still have the auxiliary blades running down the side, and dragging them along the railings of the balcony should produce the kind of high pitched metallic shriek that will create a cacophony with these acoustics.

A faded t-shirt and ripped jeans won’t provide Bruce with the kind of cover he got used to under the cape, which is not to say his training with the League of Shadows was all for nothing. Bruce closes his eyes and slips into the space between what people expect to be there and what they can see, the space he saves for Batman. He takes cover beneath the air itself and pushes down all the human parts of him that might try to leap to the foreground, stepping forward so silently he may as well not weigh a thing.

The children move, cautious as deer, in small herds that form and disperse without rhyme or reason. Apparently unfussed by the smell of the gas, it trails behind them, parting only temporarily as they pass and closing up again as soon as they move forward.

They don’t see Bruce, eyes passing through him like so much smoke. Good, he thinks. That will make this next bit easier.

Bruce slip on the gauntlets and hooks one of the blades over the railings. He spares a final glance into the fray, trying to calculate the most likely route of egress. If all goes to plan the children will flood down the main aisle of the mall, round the corner and out into the carpark. Either that or they’ll run off into the shadows and that will be the end of that. He can think of a Plan B when he has to, for now the toxin remains inactive and he still has time.

Amongst the skittish flocks of children, something moves with unbridled purpose. The gas twitches around it, rising up into columns that effectively mask its approach. Bruce follows its movements with a sinking stomach.

The gas falls away and Bruce is unsurprised to see Joker staring up at him, framed by the dredges of the dying light. He’s so bright, so much more present than the children running around his ankles. They don’t seem to have noticed him. Maybe all it takes is one visit in which no one gets hurt, maybe that’s what trust looks like to them.

The only thing you can ever trust Joker to do is stick a knife between your ribs. The clown raises some metal piping and a chunk of stone over his head, even at a distance Bruce can see that he’s biting down hard on the insides of his cheeks to stifle his laughter. His shoulders are still shaking, the corners of his mouth straining to reach his ears. Danger and rage dance in his eyes, the music pulsing towards a final movement that they will both live to see the other side of.

Bruce has just enough time to form the bare bones of a warning on the back of his tongue when Joker strikes the pipe against the stone and sparks fly. The gas flinches and writhes where they hit, first a local reaction but spreading out across the floor at an alarming pace.
“Run!” Bruce screams, pulling the gauntlet hard against the railing and praying that the sparks it leaves in its wake will die before they hit the gas. It’s far too little coming entirely too late.

He grabs the collective attention of the children, heads snapping towards him in unison, frightened meetcats spotting a hawk overhead. They gasp as one and it’s possible to see the moment the dull sheen of their eyes switches to a manic plea for death. Their faces twist onto emotions too violent to look real on bodies that haven’t felt anything more than primal fear in months.

Joker tips back his head and laughs. A shrieking cry that sounds sharp enough to shatter the skylights overhead. For a moment he laughs alone, then like a pack of wolves he is joined by a chorus of his own making.

Chapter End Notes

@ any ASOIAF Book Snobs wondering if that line was a reference to what they think it was a reference to - it was
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: lots of death, lots of body horror, an extreme depersonalisation episode

This chapter is dedicated to the anon on tumblr who's birthday is the day it was posted

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This batch of Smilex is less refined than anything Joker had managed to produce back in Gotham, not so much a neurotoxin as a muscle contractor. The rictus that settles over the children as they laugh themselves to death doesn’t limit itself to their faces but it still spreads their smiles thin enough to tear their skin clean off their skulls. Arms twist in on themselves and snap, the room reverberating with the crunching of rib cages collapsing over hearts and lungs. The cracking of bones being forced into shapes they were never meant to hold by overzealous muscles ricochets off the high ceilings and the clean laminate of the floor. Blood pours from newly torn holes, streaming from fractured eyeballs that just a second ago had been dead to the world.

And soon they’ll be dead. Everything comes full circle.

Bruce recoils from the balcony, willing himself to find some sort of focus despite the acid clawing its way up his throat. The chorus of laughter and breaking bones rises to a frenzy, always so much worse when it happens to children. It doesn’t seem possible that anyone that young could sound that malicious when they laugh but Joker will not rest until he’s burned the world down in his own image.

Despite the clamour of bodies breaking apart from the inside out, the clown remains the loudest thing in the room, a lighthouse standing in the eye of the storm. No one ever sounded quite so cold or quite so exalted.

Lighthouses are worthless if you don’t know what they mean. To the untrained eye they’re a beacon, just begging you to dash yourself on the rocks below. There’s nothing Bruce can do to save these children but understanding and acceptance are two different things.

He starts with the basics. He got lucky when Joker pushed him off the balcony earlier and managed not to injure himself but without the cape or shock absorbers built into his boots the chances of a repeat attempt going sour are high. He doesn’t have a gas mask so even if he could get to the floor, making the leap would be suicidal, the gas will crawl into his airways and he will drown in his own blood as broken ribs poke holes in his lungs. Bruce stares at the scene before him, dumbstruck as the laughter fades from a chorus to a solo piece. There’s nothing he can do. He can’t even get close enough to break Joker’s bones and pretend that temporary pain is adequate retribution for mass murder.

Bodies broken down, bent back on themselves until they’re compact enough to be carried in place of a morning briefcase. That had been a Joker special, a minor wealth management firm based in Old Gotham specialising in ethical investments. The clown had still been laughing when they dragged him off to Arkham, explaining to anyone who would listen that any accruement of capital was inherently unethical and anyone playing the stock market was little more than a glorified gambler.
The human briefcases had been sent to the police morgue for inspection and sent back three days later, unexamined. No one could stomach to look.

As the last of the children snaps their diaphragm, Joker spreads his arms and bows deep. “Oh Batsy!” He howls. “You should see your face.”

Snarling, Bruce raises the grappling gun and points it squarely at Joker’s chest. He hesitates, he has no muscle memory for this, no contingency plan that can be deployed at will to handle a situation spiraling out of hand. Bruce has held a gun in anger exactly twice in his life and he’s never pulled the trigger. In his mind’s eye he sees Joker with his chest torn open, heart writhing on the floor in a grim parody of life. In death, he smiles all the wider, showing every last tooth.

It wouldn’t happen like that, of course. If Bruce could find it in himself to let the grapple fly Joker would either die the same as everything else or get up and walk it off as if it were nothing.

“Don’t tease me, darling. I’m very delicate, you know. The soft-hearted sort. I don’t think I could bear it if you pointed that thing at me with no intention of using it.”

It’s enough of a challenge to hold Bruce’s arm steady for another minute, eyes boring into Joker’s, unable to tell if his mood is broadly murderous or something more targeted. The clown’s made honest attempts to kill him in the past, of that much he’s certain. In amongst the taunts and the near misses and the fights so carefully choreographed they felt like dancing, there had been nights when inspiration struck and electrified Joker into action. The times when nothing could slow him down, gutting the city in pursuit of his quarry.

Bruce drops his arm. Joker breaks into a bout of gasps that might be intended to mimic a panic attack but morph into cackles in a matter of seconds.

“So this isn’t over the line for you? They were children, Bats, and you still can’t bring yourself to do anything about lil old me? I was hoping to get more of a rise out of you.”

“Come up here and we’ll find out how many lines you’ve crossed.” Bruce spits.

“Oh no, I don’t think so. You’ll hit me with that ‘I have the high ground’ crap and go for my remaining limbs. Or you’ll tie me up again and I’m sorry to say, darling, that you don’t provide a good enough return on my investment into our little bondage sessions. To say nothing of how naughty you’ve been not listening to me when I try to explain how to fix this mess of a world we find ourselves in. No, we’re going to have to do this the hard way.”

Joker’s body goes rigid and he falls back with slapstick ease, vanishing below the gas. Bruce screams out wordless frustration as he lurches towards the railing, scanning the floor for any sign of the clown’s whereabouts and getting an eyeful of blood and bodies. He tries to track his movements by his giggles, no easy task when the acoustics throw sound at the most unexpected moments.

Bruce’s eyes are hovering over the disconcertingly bright front of a toy shop on the other side of the mall when the front doors swing open and by the time they’ve swung closed the laughter has died. The gas is still pulsating across the lower level of the room, pushing itself into pillowy clouds that look worryingly innocuous.

Once the quiet has had a moment to settle, the mall feels less like a disused relic of yesteryear and more like a tomb. Not just for the twisted bodies of the children that now populate it but for all the people who were reduced to sludge or vapourised the day the bomb went off. The air wreaks of death and it’s more than a physical thing, a deep disturbance of the spirit. Something vile and cold that he has run into far too many times to mistake it for anything else. To call it supernatural might be
a step too far, but this is one thing Bruce is prepared to concede cannot be explained by science alone.

The air closes in around him until there’s nowhere he can turn without meeting the eyes of every person who ever dropped down dead in this mall. Bruce has to get out of here, he has to breathe clean air.

He has to grab Joker by the scruff of the neck and rebreak his bones and pull out his hair and rip off his finger nails and pull apart his jaws until that smile literally splits his face in two and his tongue hangs useless and forlorn from the gaping hole that used to be his grin and his laughter is tainted by misery and and and…

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Bruce pushes aside the mental image of a bloodied and beaten thing lying on the tarmac beyond the front doors. Memories surface, vague and discomforting. A voice telling a young boy that he should never go after someone on the back of his emotions because clouded judgements cost lives. It sounds like him, though he can’t imagine ever being so understanding.

Not understanding, just rational. Bruce is tired of being rational and all the more exhausted of apologising for the moments he is not. Pulling the trigger of the grappling gun may have been a step too far for him, but there’s plenty that isn’t.

Bruce skirts the edge of the balcony, taking great pains to keep his focus on the indistinct shapes of the bodies lying below. Sometimes the gas shifts to temporarily uncover them, sometimes the unfamiliar angles of bones bent at unnatural angles emerge from the mist with all the subtlety of a cheap horror film. It fuels him, building his anger to fever pitch and setting his pulse racing fast enough to carry him through whatever Joker might have planned for the two of them.

When he’s directly opposite the front doors, Bruce jumps up onto the railing. He aims the grappling gun at the railing directly across from him, fires, and recalls.

This time Bruce doesn’t angle his body to make the ride smooth. He lets gravity act on him like a pendulum, swinging him down and across the floor. His feet trail through the gas and he could swear he feels pins and needles start to spread up his legs at the first contact. It all fades as he flies forward and jerks his arms slightly to dislodge the grapple.

Bruce hits the door feet first and braces himself for the glass to break beneath his body weight. He needn’t have worried; the doors fly open to let him through. His landing may be less elegant than it would once have been but it serves its purpose well enough and when he straightens himself out he’s not sporting any broken bones. The small gash in his belly is seeping into his shirt but the flow is weak and it’ll have scabbed over in half an hour. He’s ready to catch the scent of blood between his teeth and follow it to whatever horrid hole it has ducked into.

The carpark is empty save for the ghosts of long dead cars. Bruce doesn’t know what he expected but he knows it’s annoying. Joker isn’t done being a nuisance and there are parts of this plan that still need to be brought to the fore. If this were the grand finale they would be meeting on the tarmac, Joker spoiling for a fatal fight in which he’d never quite manage to hit hard enough to strike a finishing blow.

Bruce gets to his feet, keeps as low as his figure will allow and goes in search of Joker.

After an hour of hunting, first through the carpark then the surrounding warehouses and superstores, Bruce feels like the hairs on the back of his neck will never lie flat again. He holds his breath longer than he ought to, feels a headache start to brew where he’s been grinding his teeth in frustration,
nervous ticks that he’s never gotten the hang of. Bruce catches his reflection in the broken fragments of a floor length mirror in a homewares store and doesn’t like how clearly his discomfort is painted on his face. In amongst the growing copse of facial hair is an expression of worry bordering on fear.

He can’t believe he used to live like this, knowing that Joker was out there but unable to do more than guess at where he might resurface. Had there really been nights when Bruce had let the clown stay at large while Batman hunted down smaller prey?

The light is rapidly fading and the mere idea of laying down with his back exposed to the elements makes Bruce shudder. It’s not that he thinks Joker would want to take him out like that, but once the idea’s in play it becomes a possibility. And once something’s a possibility there’s no telling what Joker might do with it.

There’s no telling what’s possible. Joker alone seems to understand the full magnitude of what the human body and mind can wreak upon the world. Bruce has wasted hours and days and weeks trying to work out how to keep up. An idiot, a madman and a genius walk into a bar and they are all the same person.

Bruce slaps his cheeks hard enough for the fleeting impression of his fingertips to leave a tingling afterglow. There is no one else to do this job, he has to be in the moment. Deep breaths, slow enough for him to really feel the air filling up his lungs. He’s going to find Joker, if it takes all night or the rest of his life, because that’s what he does. What he’s done since he first heard laughter crackling through the dingy streets of the city he loves. It keeps him alert, keeps him ready for anything. Eradication of crime is a mission statement, keeping up with The Joker is a way of life.

There’s always a trail to follow, something innocuous but just a little out of place. If Joker really doesn’t want to be found he can keep himself hidden to the bitter end but even then he tends to prepare for the eventuality that he changes his mind. Joker’s always been handsy, with Bruce in particular but anything within reach is liable to be fiddled with. Bruce never did like throwing him into the second seat of the batmobile unless he was unconscious, the clown treated the dashboard buttons like a game of wack-a-mole.

Unfortunately for Bruce, unconscious people wake up and some nights on the drive back to Arkham, Joker would regale him with tales of how he did it. Usually he told his stories with furtive glances out of the corner of his eye, left hand twitching just so, laughter rising and falling in the familiar patterns that indicated he was lying. But every now and then he’d let his voice even out and his fingers wind backwards. The truth, or whatever Joker believed to be true, was invariably fascinating. The leaps of logic he was capable making defied every lateral thinking problem Bruce had ever encountered. It was informative, if impossible to understand.

Joker always brushed his more heinous crimes aside as pleas for attention or an excuse to fight. Beacon fires burning on the edge of the city, designed to lure bats towards the flames. On the days Bruce had been weak enough to believe it was as simple as that complicity weighed heavy on his chest. It’s hard to breathe when you think someone might be trying to set the world on fire just to smoke you out of hiding.

There will be no smoke tonight. Bruce will call upon every lesson he learned under the thumb of the League of Shadows and he will slip into the darkness like the best he has spent years fashioning himself into. If he finds red puddles occupying abandoned buildings he will swallow whatever fear and unease the human body might feel and let his weak and feeble flesh blend into the night until he and it are one and the same.

The homewares store is large and relatively well stocked considering it’a already been ransacked. Shattered porcelain clicks under Bruce’s feet as he passes through aisles decked out with the wasted
remnants of baths and toilets, waiting impatiently for time to turn them to white dust so they may coat their surroundings in ice like temperance. A promised perma-frost waiting in the future of this cold, dead world.

Lightbulbs and hinges still line the shelves but crowbars and power tools are nowhere to be found. The kind of people willing to risk diving in for first dibs on that kind of kit are an easily distinguishable sort, sitting on the rotting carcasses of their cities and proclaiming themselves monarch simply because no one was left to stop them. People like Horne. Bruce is careful about how he approaches their strongholds, has only intentionally entered the lion’s den once. They are invariably quick to anger, wielding husks of metal that look like they’ve seen more action in the past year than they were supposed to see in a hundred. They think they look scary. They have no idea.

Without the cape he can’t risk any leaps from great heights but Bruce is plenty good at making do with what’s in front of him. He ploughs through the store, pulling rope and plastic ties from beneath upended shelving. Back outside the sun is burning low on the horizon, catching the tips of the clouds and staining them pink and lilac. On another day it might be quite a nice sunset, but the old rhyme said something about red skies warning shepherd to stay off the hills. He may have got morning and evening the wrong way round, but Bruce thinks it might be time for anything standing in his way to step aside.

He closes his eyes and pushed Bruce Wayne into the abyss.

Batman opens his eyes, searching for all the things the mortal he left behind was too weak to see. There is a trail to be found, a path that will exist as much by what is not there as what is. He will find it, he will pick up on the smells the human mind can’t comprehend. Vehicles lie undisturbed across the carpark, their windows smashed and their useless electronics looted by the optimistic fools who once thought there was a chance that all this could return to fraction of what it had once been. Once upon a time there might have been a light scattering of litter trailing after the intransigent wind but all the empty crisp packets and drinks cans have been blown away or anchored by the encroaching undergrowth. Everything’s so still, masking his movements will be a challenge.

This place is far from field and forest and a year isn’t enough time to have drenched this shopping compound in green. Around the edges of the carpark the brush is made up of grasses, nettles and dandelions all growing taller than they would ever have been allowed to before. Batman eyes these edges, taking note of the turned down scrub where deer and who knows what else have passed through. There’s a patch up near the driver’s entrance to the compound where the tips of a few grass stems have been bend backwards in a way that suggests someone with long legs may have knocked them aside as they tried to creep from the carpark undetected. Batman sweeps in on it, so fast that it feels as though the idea to move has just occurred to him by the time he’s on top of the clue. The breaks in the foliage look sloppy enough to be unplanned and so fresh that there’s water beading at the top of one stalk where the soft green insides have been exposed.

When he examines the surrounding area, Batman finds an emerging pattern. A handful of recently broken stems through the embankment between the carpark and the road, prints in the thin layer of dust covering the tarmac. He follows, trying to stay standing but finding the terror of the open air to powerful to overcome. There are no skyscrapers to shelter him here, so he creeps along, staying low, hoping that grass and shadows will be enough to keep his cover.

When the time comes to reflect on this evening, Bruce Wayne might look at the merry route the Batman was led and conclude that he was quite intentionally given the run around. That kind of perspective is granted only to those able to utilise the power of hindsight though, so Batman finds the scent and follows it, through low lying warehouses and the sparse accommodation that peppers the stretches of land between one place of work and the next. He tracks by misplaced hairs and details
turns inside out. Like turning on a UV light and being able to plot the patterns of a sex worker’s clientele through the years, once the Batman is unleashed everything looks like a map to something sordid.

It shouldn’t be this easy, Joker is far too subtle to let himself be tracked like this unless he wants to be. In his excitement at having something to push back against, Batman forgets himself and presses his nose back to the trail.

Joker knows him far too well, doubles back and wipes out his tracks as if on cue, just to create the impression that Batman is working harder than he really is. Hundreds of books have been written delving into the madman’s psyche but if the Batman were to write one on the act of hunting him down it would start with a checklist of signs he has you where he wants you without you realising. The pointlessly long excursion, the vague sense you are moving in circles without ever crossing the same point twice, the high probability of running into booby traps. He mostly avoids these ridiculous pranks, save for when he’s crossing a ransacked building site stopped in a mid-construction freeze-frame. He steps onto an old piece of plywood at just the wrong angle and is canted forward as it destabilises. He bites his tongue to keep from cursing and when he turns around to survey the area he’s greened by the gurning face of a haphazard jack-in-the-box on the other end of the plank.

It’s half as tall as he is, constructed out of what looks to be several mattress springs stuck together and a paper plate with a face scrawled on it in marker. He doesn’t jump out of his skin, it’s not even a near thing.

Batman must have gone ten miles or more before he catches the first whiff of laughter trickling through the night. The moon is out, gibbous and bright enough that its penumbra casts a halo across the stars. The night sky is at the wrong orientation, he’s not moving in the direction he thought he was. It’s light and airy, the kind of laugh you used to hear dawdling from one designer shop to the next in Gotham’s shopping district this time last year. It’s so very much not what Batman had been expecting that he almost forgets to quake in his boots. It’s a momentary thing, of course, but the predictable honesty with which he lets fear overwhelm him approaches comforting. Some things never change.

Another hour of following signs that could have been tailor made to suit his modus operandi. No one knows what time it is anymore, not really, and all Batman can say for sure is that it’s late. Eventually he rounds a corner and sees a stack of old shipping crates stacked up in the driveway of a largescale farm supplies emporium, on top of which a solitary figure is laughing to itself as it stares up at the star-studded skies.

“You took your time.” Joker doesn’t look at Batman when he approaches. “thought you’d stood me up. Ridiculous, I know darling. Just look at you! You’ve really gone and worked yourself up into a state and we both know you can’t resist me when you’re angry.”

Batman’s voice comes out as a guttural growl. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way.”

Joker’s head turns through a full one hundred and eighty degrees. His eyes glow in an unseen light and his smile draws so wide it seems impossible it could ever return to its normal size again. “Oo! Has the Big Guy finally come out to play? There’s no contest there, you know how much I love you hard up against me.” He winks, then tips back his head and cackles. If hyenas howled at the moon it would sound something like this. Batman’s muscles try to atrophy when he steps forward, protesting every step. He is a dark thing that takes off into the glorious black and owns it entirely, but there are darker things out there than him.

The crates are so easy to climb that Batman’s surprised to find Joker still waiting for him when he makes it to the top. The clown faces away from him, enraptured by celestial bodies, presenting his
back as an easy target. It was never like this before, more fool him for thinking the game could change now.

Batman reaches into his pocket to retrieve a handful of plastic ties and takes the rope from where it’s wrapped around his shoulder. He makes the mistake of moving cautiously, worried that he might startle his quarry – a rookie error. The element of surprise is a fraught, tenuous thing. He lunges forward and is met by the hard line of Joker’s forearm rising up to block his strike. He staggers back and by the time he’s found his centre of gravity his opponent is on his feet.

“You just don’t listen,” Joker singsongs, ducking a fish to the face and sliding between Batman’s legs with the elegance of a ballerino. “This could have been so easy but you just had to go and make a show of walking out on me.”

“I didn’t walk out on you.” Batman pulls the rope tight between his fists and tries to hook it under Joker’s chin. He misses, and this time his fumble brings him perilously close to the edge of the crate.

Joker doesn’t push him, though he must see the opening. The clown stands back and laughs, waits for Batman to turn around and meet him on equal footing. His audacity is as astonishing as ever.

“Never said you actually walked out on me, just that you made a show of it. The art of drama is, after all, all in the performance. And what a performance it was, the temper tantrum of a silly little boy who’s gotten so used to the idea that he’s lost everything he can’t even be bothered to give a damn when he’s told it doesn’t have to be like that,” Joker steps out of reach of another flying fist. “I have to say, I really don’t appreciate this level of distrust. I was trying so hard to tell the truth.”

“You can’t kill people just because you’re a compulsive liar and no one in their right mind would believe a word you say.”

The corners of Joker’s mouth twitch into something sinister, eyes flashing with that particular brand of electrified rage he wears so well. “And yet, I did.”

Batman tears into him, fists and feet flying, never hitting the mark. Joker doesn’t go low when he goes high, he rises up till he’s unreachable, barreling over and under him at the last minute and refocusing the fight so fast it’s impossible to keep up. The clown doesn’t try to hit back, letting Batman tire himself out under his own exertions. The crackle of neon, the smell of ozone, the emergency services howling in the distance. Every time they turn to face each other the truth of what once was digs its way a little further under their skin.

They are not on a rooftop and the skies are far too clear to belong to Gotham, but they try so hard to believe that this can stand in for the real thing. The way everything else fades into insignificance, though that may have happened several days and who knows how many miles ago.

The moonlight catches Joker just right, illuminating half his face and casting the rest into shadow. He’s all hard lines and persistent survival, the green of his hair still the brightest thing Batman has seen in days. It softens all his planes and sharpens all his edges, emphasising the spaces where something is missing. No bright orange waistcoat or purple jacket, no lipstick. Does that make a difference? If Batman were to stop right now, pull the two of them together and kiss The Joker, would the picture be complete?

Joker reaches into a space unwittingly created just for him, grabs the front of Batman’s t-shirt and forces him back till his feet hit the edge of the crate and the clown is the only thing between him and a three metre drop.

“Gotcha,” Joker grins, leaning in to press dry lips against Batman’s, “now you better play nice till we
get to Metropolis.”

A witty response is in order, followed by a daring escape and an epic battle in which The Joker comes close to victory but the Batman emerges victorious.

Things don’t happen as they’re supposed to. Batman barely has time to formulate a surprised yelp before Joker lets him go and he’s falling through the night, through the city and someone is laughing so hard that they cannot breathe. He tries to spread his wings but they’ve been ripped from his back and when he hits the ground the light of the moon short circuits and everything cuts out to a perfect matt black that envelops him and drowns him in blessed silence.

Chapter End Notes

Joker loves the SW prequels and hates sand #facts
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bruce comes round with the sun in his eyes and his right arm aching like it's been put through a mangler. Someone is doing home repairs on the inside of his skill and when he blinks, colours flow in and out of each other. He feels nauseous, sick and disoriented. The ground would appear to be moving beneath him but he’s not doing anything to encourage it. He tries to shift himself to a more comfortable position and a spark of pain daggers up his arm. Despite this, his limbs are held tight and refuse to move when he commands it.

He’s almost certain that no part of this situation is good, from the cotton wool clouding his head to his inability to control his body, though there’s something to be said for the way the encroaching darkness at the corners of his vision takes his weight away from him and leaves him floating somewhere between sleep and wakefulness. His discomfort is no less potent for his refusal to fully engage with it but his brain pleads sleep starvation and does what it can to push the pain in his arm to a background concern. Imagine if he’d opened his eyes and immediately had to pick himself up and start walking all over again.

Back to Gotham, always back to Gotham. Back to the shriveled carcass of his hometown, because what else is there?

“Are you awake, darling?” The voice comes from somewhere above Bruce, sounding strained, pushed through the wire netting of forced joviality. Green spots burst before his eyes, the suggestion of movement in his neck muscles shifting the indistinct shapes swirling in front of him.

He makes a sound, of that much he is sure but it’s probably nothing intelligible. The voice understands him though, breaking into a low chuckle, unfamiliar and warm. “Tell me about it.”

This is all wrong, but Bruce doesn’t have the energy to fight it. All his moral outrage, all his insistence upon his own code of conduct has flown out of reach. He has vague memories of a fire in his veins and the sweep of fists through the night air as he stood atop skyscrapers and defended the world from a black hole rimmed by the glistening lights of its event horizon. They don’t go anywhere, circling round in circles till he wants to scream. There has to be an end to the chase, if there isn’t he’ll go mad.

Sleep cries out to him, opening up its arms and promising it will pull him in and never let go.

“You do that.” The voice urges.

Bruce lets himself slip under, a tiny, shrill reinterpretation of the person he had been the last time he had both feet on the ground tells him that he’s making a big mistake. He brushes it aside and pushes onwards, just as he always does, till the swirling colours fade to black and he dreams of an unnervingly soft voice drifting over fields of green.

Chapter End Notes

Labeling this as an ‘interlude’ would have hecked up the chapter numbering system, but
please think of this as an interlude with a full chapter coming in the next couple of days
When Bruce opens his eyes it’s night time and the indistinct edges of a fire are pulsating in front of him. He wants to put it out but he can’t remember why. It makes very little difference, when he tries to move pain rockets up his arm all over again, exploding behind his eyes and blossoming into a migraine.

He can’t move his arms or legs and after a few minutes’ careful focus on the steady wind of something trailing over his body he concludes this is because he’s been tied up. It’s a less restrictive bondage than the one he had subjected Joker to – Bruce’s spine is straight and nothing appears to be tied to anything else – but he’s been tied so that it’s impossible for him to move either arm without hurting the right.

Bruce tries to convince himself that the pain is that of a sprain or restricted blood flow. The more times he accidentally jostles it and has to bite his tongue to keep from whimpering as the jagged edges of the bone grind together below the skin, the harder it is to pretend it’s not broken.

The crates, the fight. Joker kissing Bruce just because he could and it might be fun before standing back and letting him fall. If the pounding in his head is anything to go by, he’s suffering a nasty concussion. Nausea probably isn’t too far off.

“Well wouldya look what the bat dragged in?” Joker’s voice is nails on a blackboard, grating against Bruce’s every last nerve. “I was starting to think I’d shuffled you off this mortal coil a shade too soon.”

Shifting his head strikes sparks across Bruce’s vision and sets the world pivoting on a hundred axis simultaneously. He looks up and sees the clown looming over him, clothes slightly worse for wear and hair fanned out into a mockery of a halo but otherwise looking horribly pleased with himself.

“Untie me. Now.” Bruce tries for his Batman voice but his throat is rough with dehydration and it comes out thin and pleading.

Joker laughs deep in his chest. “Oh Batsy, what on Earth would possess you to think this could be that easy?”

“My arm is broken.”

“I had a broken bone once. Real pain in the ass. Guy I was with kept using it as the stick part of the carrot and stick method. Funny story: I don’t think he realised there was even a carrot in play. Sound familiar at all?” Joker aims a kick squarely at the point two inches above Bruce’s elbow that forms the epicentre of the pain.

Bruce has a split second to process what’s about to happen and no time to brace himself. Joker’s foot...
collides with his broken arm and he cries out as the two halves of the bone are separated and nerve endings that should never have been exposed are plunged into the bruised tissue surrounding the injury.

Joker sniffs. “Listen to you. No self control. And here I was thinking you were a tough guy.”

At first, when Bruce tries to speak no sound leaves his mouth. When he finds it’s voice it’s strangled and feeble. “It’s a serious break, you have my arms bound. Restricting blood flow to sites of injury increases the chance of necrosis. I need to put a splint on the arm till we can find some proper plaster cast.”

“What would be the point? You stick a splint on that and I’ll break straight through it to get at your arm the next time you’re a naughty boy. And you will be a naughty boy again, won’t you, honey? I do hope so, it would be a shame if I’d knocked the fight out of you.”

Bruce scowls up at him. “If you’re looking for an apology—“

“Apologies are for cowards and fools. You should mean what you say or you shouldn’t open your mouth.” Joker drops down between Bruce and the fire. “Refusing to apologise for the sake of your pride is just as bad.”

The fire.

The fire is bright and billowing smoke and the carbonated fragments of fuel crawling their way up Bruce’s nose do nothing to settle his stomach or clear his head. Anyone could find them. He wants it out.

“I have no intention of apologising for anything.” Bruce tells Joker. “Let me go so I can put out the fire before someone spots it.”

“This lil thing?” Joker jerks his head towards the fire and for a moment the flames are reflected perfectly in the grain of his hair. “No dealio. I need something to toast my marshmallows on. Besides, you really think I can’t take a troop of ghost kiddies all on my lonesome? If you were half as good at the old Houdini act as you like to pretend you are you’d be out of those ropes in a jiffy and we could take them down together. Batman and The Joker, side by side at the end of the world, fighting off the hell spawn of yesteryear. That’s a harlequin romance plot if ever I heard one.”

“It’s not your safety I’m worried for.”

“Oh I know. You want to get yourself out of there so you can stamp out this fire, rain on my parade and bundle me back up, correct?”

Bruce doesn’t say a thing, he can’t work out what his next line is. Thinking is so hard when his brain is trying to pour itself out of his ears. He has another go at surreptitiously loosening his bonds to no avail. He feels more than concussed and more than tied down. Bruce feels weak, like he hasn’t eaten in days.

“How long was I out?”

Joker ignores Bruce and ploughs ahead. “What are you planning on doing with me if you can get me home?”

“Joker!”

“What are you going to do, Batsy?”
Far away, in another lifetime, rain is hitting a rooftop hard enough to make waves across a flooded city. Joker bleeds colour into the stolid grey, tries to force it onto the uniform of the Batman till they are one and the same whilst at the same time rejecting everything that binds them. Joker’s head snaps up at the mention of Arkham Asylum and Bruce is sure he can see a hairline fracture in the chitinous shell that covers a garish smile and eyes like shamrocks, like the neon signs that advertise gambling dens at all hours of the day.

Arkham is the only place that ever stood a chance at keeping Joker in. The asylum may have lost its round the clock surveillance team but its inbuilt security systems were something of a modern marvel. Particularly below ground, in the sub basements where the line between hospital and prison untraveled completely and no one dared grant the patients any treatment.

Bruce hates the way his stomach curls in on itself as all traces of insecurity vanish from Joker’s person and the clown looks straight through him with such ease as to make the cowl seem pointless. He speaks slowly, as one would when dealing with a toddler. “The old homestead, eh? Tell me Bats, what do you remember about the security systems there?”

Arkham Asylum was almost entirely funded by Wayne Enterprises in the end and Bruce was sure to stay abreast of all developments to the facilities. “Multiple locks, thumb print and retina recognition, coded keypads, deadbolts. Acetate cell walls, air pumped in to eliminate the need for breathing holes. Bulkheads sealing the second and third basements from the rest of the building. Three backup generators to ensure the premises were secure during power outages.

Joker nods enthusiastically. “Right, right. Someone really didn’t want us degenerates getting out. It sure would be a shame if some over excited Christian nutjobs had gotten hold of that magic anti-Supes rock and decided to make an atom bomb out of it. Why, I reckon something like that would wipe out the Gotham power grid and take those pesky generators with it. Might even de-power the whole country! The whole world!”

Obvious. Stupid. Bruce frowns and tries to drag the backwaters of his brain into the present. It’s not like he hasn’t had to consider this problem independently. With time, patience and access to the right materials he might be able to get one of the backup generators running but he won’t know until he can get a proper look at them and there’s no telling how long the repairs might take. He managed it with the night vision in the cowl, he knows the basics, but he’d had help with that.

“Even without the extra security measures in place, Arkham is still the strongest holding in the city.”

Joker’s cackling borders on sarcastic, “You sound like a supervillain from those cheesey old films. Here Joker, lemme just tell you my big fancy plan to put you in a box real quick to make it easy on you – no need to thank me! You really think I ever hung around at Arkham because I had to? You’ve got it all wrong, sugar plum. The nice men in white coats kept me fed and kept you off my back and in return I had the most wonderful time watching the cuckoos try to fly the nest while I was working out what my next big show was gonna be and when the time came I waltzed on out, easy as a cream pie to the face. After what happened the last time I was there I can assure you I have no intention of ever spending another night wasting away in that shithole.”

Real rage is brewing behind that smile, the faintest flicker of something Bruce isn’t stupid enough to call fear reflecting in Joker’s eyes. It’s probably just a trick of the firelight but it’s hard to forget the stories. Strait jackets, electro shock therapy, a handful of claims of outright torture. The abuse of patients at Arkham Asylum had been Gotham’s worst kept secret as long as Bruce has been alive. As Batman he spent many a night skulking around the facility, following up on leads he had to hope went nowhere. There was a whole wing in Blackgate just for the people he caught tormenting patients and inmates alike and by all accounts they had lived like kings.
He sort of wants to say something about how it wouldn’t be like that anymore, not if he was the only person left to oversee the estate. Bruce stops himself before he lets misplaced sympathy get the better of him. “What happened at Arkham?”

“What didn’t happen at Arkham?” Joker snickers, baring his teeth. Muttley saving face no matter how out of hand the race gets. “Let’s see. Hunger strikes and forced starvation – never knew where one ended and the next began. Solitary confinement for days and weeks yadda yadda I’m sure you heard all about that. Caused quite the scandal back in the day but really it was your own fault if you wound up stuck in the SHU. They tried cramming me in there a few times but it was so boring being down there by myself, would have rather stuck pins in my eyes but in the end the guard’s eyes had to do. I was quite popular with the guards, you know. Always put it down to my boyish physique. Sunday afternoons they’d sneak me out back for a bit of—”

Joker makes a circle with the thumb and index finger of one hand and a fist with the other before driving the two together. Bruce thinks he knows what the clown’s implying but he’s not about to ask for clarification. He’s caught guards doing that sort of thing to patients and inmates in the past, though not for years before the bomb and never with Joker. “They didn’t…not to you.”

Joker’s eyebrows rise into clean crescent moons as shocked glee is writ large on his face. “My goodness mister Batman, I didn’t think you had it in you” Rape culture thrives off the denial of survivors’ experiences, don’cha know?”

As if you care, Bruce doesn’t say. He sidesteps the baited argument and tries to steer the conversation back to where he wants it. “What happened the last time you were at Arkham?”

Throwing his hands up in obvious irritation, Joker lets out a frustrated growl. “The lights went out and everybody died. I was alone in the third basement for three weeks before I worked out how to shift the bulkhead and when I got above ground the left-over radiation was trying to squash me into a flatbread. It was awful. If you think the guards were bad you’re gonna have a field day with this stuff.”

“Oh.” Is all Bruce can manage. He tries to picture the lower levels of Arkham in half light, then in barely illuminated fragments spilling from an entirely imagined surviving bulb. Buried in the earth with a door weighing several tonnes between a slow death and the vague possibility of freedom, without anything left to guide you. It sounds like a fate worse than death.

Maybe that’s where Joker got the bags still sitting under his eyes, maybe that’s why he’s carrying tension in his shoulders like Bruce has never seen.

“Those first three weeks though, in the dark?” Joker looks Bruce square in the face and drops his voice into a modulation that comes dangerously close to even. “It was kind of funny to begin with. Everyone turned to soup but back than soup meant soup. None of these dried-up solids you and I keep finding. A big old pond of dead villains – ha! Dear Basil was the first to go but I mean, he was more or less liquid already. Bane and Jonny boy couldn’t get a word in edgeways, Fries was much the same temperature as everyone else in the end. I found Eddie’s hat floating on the muck. Gotta assume Cobblepot and your boy Dent went down easy. Harley had been out of custody for months so I dunno what happened to her but you would have thought she’d have found me by now if she’d made it. Weird, really. That I survived and she didn’t. Or at least, she hasn’t come crawling back for her puddin’ in quite some time.”

Joker spits the word ‘puddin’ like a curse, wrinkling his nose as his eyes glaze over. Not quite present in the real world.
“Maybe she finally realised that she could do better than you.” Bruce mumbles.

The laugh Joker lets out is rich and low. “Harleen Quinzel? Oh Bats, she was a monster.”

“Only because you made her one.”

“Me? Oh no no no. No! Don’t do that to her Batsy, not you. She’d have found her feet as a supervillain soon enough, I just sped the process along. It was all she ever wanted, really. I was her enabler.”

“I saw you throw her from a ten-story building because she dared to speak out of turn.”

Joker shrugs. “Some people wanna live boring little lives where they get married and settle down and everything’s just peachy until they start losing their memories and their brats shove them in a care home to rot. Some people wanna be thrown from ten story buildings. Some people just want to watch the world burn.” He turns his smile on Bruce, amping it up until it swallows the rest of his features. “What do you want, Bats?”

“I want you to untie me.”

“Well you can’t always get what you want.”

Turning his head to the side, Joker is distracted by the leaping flames. Bruce doesn’t have to wonder what he wants when he vanishes beyond the edge of the light and returns a few minutes later with assorted debris to throw on the fire, whooping every time he finds something that combusts fast enough to send sparks rippling through the cloud of smoke hanging over their heads.

Staring at the fire for too long makes Bruce’s head throb and his stomach try to tie itself in knots. He refocuses his attention on everything outside it’s orbit, the mostly hidden things sitting in the dark. He thinks he can make out the regular shape of windows slotted into the walls of a high rise some way behind Joker.

Cool grey concrete. Bruce is lying on grass but it’s an island in an ocean of bricks and mortar. He casts his eyes up as far as he can stand before his headache kicks into overdrive and can’t pick out the top of the block. It looks like a proper piece of architecture, something with height and substance. The kind of building you can sit atop and see a kingdom roll out before you.

It could be Gotham, the comparatively diminutive skyscrapers that surround the docks, too old to be practically useful but situated too close to the freeway heading north to be worth refurbishing, doomed to be dust for the sake of the shipping industry. Bruce’s breath catches in his throat, the sharp sting of longing, so deep seated and yet so unexpected, catching him off guard.

He turns to look at Joker, “Where are we?”

Joker pauses in between throwing pages from an old magazine into the fire. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“I was unconscious. Haven’t exactly been able to track the lay of the land.”

This news seems to genuinely surprise Joker, who executes a perfect double take. “I just assumed you’re installed a GPS in your brain or something. You always seemed to know exactly where you were no matter how far you chased me.”

“I had help.”

“Of course, of course. Little miss purple face and pals. If you must know we’re coming into
Morestown, should be able to hit up the power plant tomorrow, s’just the other side of town and
down river a ways.”

“Morestown?” Bruce mentally calculates distance and time.”

Joker rolls his eyes. “Yes, darling. That was the plan, remember? We’re gonna go hit up their nuclear
joint, grab a couple of hazmat suits then double back on ourselves and head east to Metropolis. All
told we’re maybe a week off saving the world. Neato, amiright?”

No one is ever right about anything being ‘neato’. “Joker, just how long was I unconscious?”

“How should I know?” Joker plucks a long twig out of his pile of rubbish, singes the end and starts
trying to write his name in the air with the burning tip.

“If you know you were stuck under Arkham for three weeks without a lightsource or a timepiece to
keep track of the days, you can tell me how long I was unconscious.”

Joker raises a fist in triumph when he manages to trace a particularly successful ‘J’ onto the night.
“Well, you got me there. First time you woke up was about two hours after you fell. You’ve been
drifting for three days.”

“Three days?” Bruce chokes, “You have to untie me.”

“I don’t have to do anything, love.”

“I could have sustained serious brain damage.”

“Now there’s an exciting prospect. You saying you could lose your mind on me, Bats? I’ve always
thought you’d make a wonderful crazy person, you already have the creepy fetish gear and the
delusions of grandeur down pat.”

“Joker!”

“You’ll be laughing all the way to the funny house. Or you would be, if there were any funny
houses left. I suppose we could build one, just you and me playing house together till we get fed up
and go back to punching each other in the face.”

Bruce squeezes his eyes shut, he shouldn’t have expected Joker to understand or care about the
ramifications of an extended period of unconsciousness. “I have a serious concussion. You shouldn’t
have let me sleep at all. If I’ve suffered brain damage and it goes untreated I could lose my memories.

“I lost my memories once. It’s really no big deal, honey. You’ll make new ones.”

“I could lose Batman.”

Joker narrows his eyes. “Not possible.”

It’s Bruce’s turn to laugh. How willfully naïve Joker can be. “Batman isn’t the only person I’ve
been. If amnesia does kick in, there’s no telling which parts of me it will leave behind.”

Joker pauses, the corners of his mouth drooping down. The glow from the fire washes out his skin
until he’s porcelain all over, distaste clouding his features and setting him in stone. He takes his time
to think over his options but eventually he hurls the rest of the rubbish into the fire and stalks over to
Bruce.

“So what? I need to check for holes in your skull or you’ll turn into a bad nineties soap opera on
me?” Joker drops to the ground and pulls Bruce’s head into his lap. The movement sends stars spiralling behind Bruce’s eyes and tugs his arm at just the wrong angle to have him biting his tongue to keep from crying out.

No point in admonishing him for that. “This would be much easier if you untied me and let me do this myself,” Bruce says from between gritted teeth.

Joker’s legs shake with the force of his laughter. “I don’t think so. You might have a sweet spot for injured animals but I have no intention of giving you full use of your arms anytime soon.”

“Wouldn’t be full use. You broke one of them.”

“Technically speaking, the ground broke one of them and only because you fell. I told you, whoever broke your wings is an awful little shit who deserves everything you’ve got coming for them.”

Spiderlike fingers press against Bruce’s skull, probing the rubber of the cowl for signs of breakage. Joker’s anything but gentle, pressing down hard on any bruises he finds and making Bruce wince. His legs are too stringy to make for a comfortable pillow, the hard line of his shin digging into the point where Bruce’s skull meets his vertebrae.

At no point do Joker’s fingers sink through the bone and into his brain. Bruce is pretty sure that if there were any hairline fractures along his cranium he could know about them by now and without a CAT scan or an MRI it’s impossible to be sure about the damage inside his skull. Three days without food or water mean that his building nausea is ultimately fruitless and his disorientation could just as easily be due to dehydration as the knock he took to the head.

If he wanted to be thorough about this, Bruce would ask Joker to remove the cowl to be sure it’s not masking other injuries. It would allow his skin to breathe and that alone is enough to have him willing to risk it. He opens his mouth to speak but the words get stuck in his throat.

Above him, Joker smiles the absent minded smile he’d put on for show with new therapists. He’s focused on something just past Bruce, still prodding overenthusiastically at his skull, waiting for a weakness to reveal itself.

“I mean it, Batsy,” he hums. “What are you going to do with me?”

There’s no room for anything but honesty. “I don’t know.”

“And with Gotham?”

“What do you mean?”

Joker’s fingers return to a particularly sore bruise and push down hard. He giggles when Bruce flinches and the corners of his smile drift back into proper focus. “You’re the one who wants to get back there so bad, you tell me. It’s a shell of a thing, Bats. If the radiation doesn’t kill you, the boredom will. There’s no one left, not even a people pancake unless you really know where to look, they all went pop when the big bang came. I appreciate your dedication to the cause but there’s absurdism and there’s being ridiculous.”

“Apparently I can’t listen to reason.”

Chuckling lightly, one of Joker’s hands slips down to cradle Bruce’s chin, thumb curling through his now semi-substantial beard. He’s steady, not trying to menace or main. If anything, he’s being gentle, for the only reason Joker ever does anything – because he can.
Bruce’s breath catches. It would be the work of a moment for the clown to snap his spine. He could kill Bruce, but he won’t.

“Your trouble, my dear, is that you were never interested in really changing anything. That was fine when we were kids back in Gotham. I could be chaos and you could be stability and it kept things fresh, but when you were done things went back to how they’d always been. Well, you don’t want to maintain the status quo as it exists now and it’s not possible to go back to the way things were.”

“I was trying to keep the city safe.” Bruce retorts.

“You were trying to remove problems as they arose, reactionary fool that you are.” Joker shakes his head. “Well, Gotham’s all out of problems, they died along with all the maggot people. But we go sort out Metropolis and maybe, someday, someone’s gonna have some problems for you to get your teeth stuck into all over again. In the meantime, you’re stuck chasing me down with nowhere to put me. I’m never gonna pay for my crimes, Bats. You shoulda worked that out a long time ago, sentimental idiot.”

“I’ll work something out.” Bruce replies, weakly. The hand poking at his skull has slowed to stroking the top of his head and while he knows he shouldn’t be listening to it, his concussed brain leans into the motion, lulling him into a state of drowsiness and screaming for sleep.

Joker’s still talking, blabbering on about the power of money and the irresponsibility of spending it on vigilantism rather than strengthening Gotham from the ground up. He thinks it’s hilarious, he’s so proud of Bruce for doing things the hard way. Bruce tries to formulate a response, to point out that he had been the CEO of a company that financed numerous community development schemes in addition to throwing his body into the fight. All that comes out is a yawn.

“You’re right,” Joker pulls his hands away from Bruce’s head and stands up fast. If Bruce thought he’d seen stars before it’s nothing compared to this. “It’s bed time.”

The fire stays burning as Joker rummages through Bruce’s pack for the tarpaulin. Bruce is vaguely aware that he should be worried about the gaping hole in his stomach, the pain in his arm, his desperate need for water, but all that feels like a background concern when he could be crawling under the plastic sheet and going back to sleep.

“We’ll talk about it in the morning.” Joker beams. Bruce could swear he didn’t say a thing out loud.

Draping the tarpaulin over Bruce. Joker crawls underneath to lie next to him. He doesn’t try to wrap the two of them around each other, doesn’t even try to sleep face to face. He presents his back to Bruce so it’s impossible to say if his eyes are flashing danger like they had back at the house.

Maybe they’re memories, or the tell-tale signs of dreams to come, but Bruce’s head fills with images of fights the two of them have had. Pressed up against each other, focus so absolute it was as if the rest of the world didn’t exist. The last thought he processes before the fog overtakes him and he slips one again into the black is that the two feet between him and Joker are the closest they’ve ever been to each other.
Chapter 24

The sun crests over a row of housing tenements, light pushing past Bruce’s eyelids and waking him with a jolt. The combined evils of dehydration and concussion leave him feeling woozey and if he thought he had a headache the night before he was a fool. Pounding, desperate pain strikes a crescendo across his temples, swelling to encompass his whole body.

Bruce buries his face in the ground to block out the light and the motion tugs at his broken arm in all the wrong ways. He lies there, groaning into the tarpaulin and praying that his blood will stop pounding in his ears long enough to catch his breath.

He couldn’t say how long he lies there, trying to focus on anything other than the twin harpies of a migraine and broken bones. The surface seems a long way out of reach, a distant point that he fails to reach no matter how hard he struggles to burst above the waves. Up where the cool ocean breeze will clear his mind and strengthen his resolve. It won’t make the pain go away, but it might make it easier to deal with. He feels weak, much weaker than he should do after a good night’s sleep. Movement is so tiresome, his bones feel like lead, trying to trap him down in the depths.

And Joker is nowhere. Either that or he’s hidden himself so well that he can’t even catch the tell-tale sound of far off laughter. His absence probably shouldn’t be quite so alarming, but Bruce’s breath catches in his throat. The vestigial desire of a child to not be left alone while ill rearing its head and trying to sabotage his grip on the situation.

Bruce has no grip on the situation. He swallows and his throat is like sandpaper. Three days, Joker had said, and if the clown got him to drink anything in that time it can’t have been much.

No wonder he feels so awful. He needs food and water, the sooner the better and if Joker’s gone off by himself for the morning, now would be the time for Bruce to sort himself out.

It takes monumental effort and the pain in his arm is enough to make him gag, but after psyching himself up to shuck off the plastic, Bruce manages to roll himself out of the tarpaulin. He tests the boundaries of his bindings and comes to the conclusion that if he had full use of both hands he’d be able to slip these knots in a matter of minutes.

Getting free is going to be tricky, painful and deeply necessary. Bruce cranes his head to get a better idea of his surroundings and what equipment he has to work with.

In the morning light, a slew of S symbols can be seen crawling their way up the side of the housing block Joker has parked them beneath. It’s a far more colourful display than what had been on offer in Constance, creating a jumbled rainbow rising over the scene. Bruce lets himself be excited by the flashes of purple amongst the storm before he remembers how far they are from Stephanie’s home. These symbols come in every colour, myriad shades of red, blue, green, yellow…everything. They look less like a slap in the face of the old world as a celebration of the new.

There can’t be many people left in these parts. The population had been dropping fast for the last few days Bruce has a clear recollection of. The S symbols here are a statement of intent, meant to claim space. The question is, are the children that painted them fully awake and potentially violent like back in Constance, or the dead eyed type like those at the mall?

The children in the mall, all dead. Their bodies twisting in on themselves and every muscle drawn tight as they laughed themselves into the black. The chase, the rage. Joker kissed him and pushed him off the edge of the building and the Batman fell because he’s lost his wings and forgotten how to
Bruce is far too tired to address any emotional response to the memories, except to acknowledge that he doesn’t like how easily the clown talked him into what might pass for normal conversation the night before. Hands strong enough to snap his neck moulding him to compliance. It shouldn’t have been so easy.

He can blame it on the dehydration or the concussion. Or both. The fire is long out, not an ember left to burn through the ropes binding Bruce. At the far end of the stretch of lawn he’s lying on, a driveway curls around the building, stretching round to a communal car park. The pack is a few feet away, it’s contents spilled across the ground.

Bruce’s stomach sinks. He hopes Joker hasn’t gotten hold of the grappling gun. It doesn’t feel like he’s wearing the gauntlets anymore either, so they’ve either been discarded or scooped up by the clown.

Empty tins surround the pack. It looks like Joker’s had himself a regular banquet. What’s been left behind is just enough to attract some of the precious few flies left living out here following the bomb. The edges of the tins should still be plenty sharp enough for his purposes. Bruce takes a deep breath and starts wriggling towards them.

Twisting his left arm far enough to grab hold of a tin makes his right arm shriek in its bindings and the rope is thick enough that it takes half an hour to cut through it at the disadvantageous angle. Bruce grits his teeth till the final threads come loose, pulling away sharply with his left arms and feeling the rope fall free.

It hadn’t felt like any part of his body was suffering from restricted blood flow but now Bruce has to assume that he had acclimatised to not being about to feel his extremities properly. An unexpected rush of sensation runs down his arms and he cries out when he brings his right arm round to cradle against his chest and the pain magnifies tenfold.

The skin of his arm is warm beneath his fingertips, the swelling over the break shiny and red. Bruce stares it down miserably, hoping it’s just some light inflammation and not the beginnings of a serious infection. He doesn’t want to deal with the logistics of tracking down antibiotics any more than he wants to weather that kind of storm.

In the meantime, there are things he can do to reduce the likelihood of him pulling through this with little more than an imperfectly set humerus. A splint would be the place to start. Bruce scans the area for anything easily accessible and sturdy but gets distracted when he sees a canteen strapped to the pack.

Without a care for how the broken ends of the bone scrape against each other, without so much as pausing to free himself from the rope binding his legs, Bruce lunges forward and snatches up the canteen. It’s no more than half full, but once’s he’s gotten the lid off and brought it to his mouth it doesn’t matter how little of it there is, only that it’s there, gushing across his tongue and breathing new life into him.

Bruce sits, sucking on the neck of the canteen for a full minute after the water is gone. He’s not fully aware of the moment the liquid runs out and he’s left pulling in nothing but air. When he can bring himself to set the bottle back on the ground though, the edges of his vision look a little clearer. His stomach clenches around the sudden intrusion and he thinks he might be about to vomit it all straight back up again but in the end his body manages to recognise that any presence in his digestive tract is better than nothing and his stomach settles enough that the last two tins of soup at the bottom of the pack are starting to look appetising.
He starts out intending to eat one now and doubting that he’ll manage to keep even that much down. Bruce doesn’t bother looking for the spoons, just opens the tin and pours its contents down his throat.

Despite his best intentions, he does the same with the other tin almost immediately, catching his stomach in atrophy between nausea, hunger and overstuffing. It should be all kinds of awful, but it’s a relief to feel something working as it should do internally. He breathes deep, determined to keep the food down and revelling in the renewed burst of personhood the rush of nutrients brings on.

When he’s given his stomach time to settle, Bruce pulls the lid off a tin and uses it to slash open the ropes binding his feet. Standing is more of an effort than it should be, muscle strain and generic weakness leaving him swaying slightly over the long dead fire. He tries to take a step forward and the world nearly capsizes but his arm screams in protest at the motion and he can’t ignore it any longer.

Picking up the pack with a shaking hand, Bruce checks to be sure the grappling gun is inside, notes the position of the sun and starts hobbling north. If Joker’s wild hand gestures the previous evening had been anything to go by, that’s where the power plant is. Wherever the clown has got to, he can catch Bruce up.

It’s very slow going, even after the initial stiffness has worn off. He moves from object to object, leaning on anything that will take his weight. If he weren’t sporting a nasty break, Bruce might have let himself fall a few times, just to save himself the hassle of staying upright.

Once he’s made it to the end of the driveway that services the housing blocks, Bruce finds himself on a major road in a residential area. To the north, the houses fade out into a distance dominated by a handful of high-rises and the remnants of yesteryear’s neon. He suspects that’s the town centre. He can’t remember if this place is supposed to be a city, his sense of what constitutes a large settlement permanently warped by living in one of the world’s great financial hubs.

He had struggled with the same question back in Sao Paulo, when he had first landed and life was full of things like private jets and overexcited businessmen. Not that anyone was about to mistake Sao Paulo for small, but so much of the surrounding municipality was as indistinguishable from itself as it was from the main city. A complex array of places that used to be able to stand on their own two feet, subsumed by the monolith.

The other side of the road is lined with houses, every one with its door kicked in and its windows shattered. They look like a recent development, certainly newer than the housing blocks on Bruce’s side of the road. The ghost of uniformity can still be seen flitting through the front gardens, even after a year of neglect. Bruce watches for signs of movement, ears pricked for any rustlings in the undergrowth. He does what he can to blend into the dull grey of his surroundings, calling on techniques taught to him by the League of Shadows for quite literally hiding in plain sight.

The same techniques he had used the other night. Three nights ago, or however far back it was. The Batman in his entirety is not a person Bruce has ever spent much time as, the all-consuming final form of the mantel only ever a last resort, the place he went to when Bruce Wayne’s body could no longer sustain him. A monstrous thing that cared little for hope or mercy, only concerned with the end result. Birds in the hand.

He couldn’t say how long he waits for something to jump out of the bushes, only that by the time he moves the pain in his arm has reaches a fever pitch and that standing around with nothing else to focus on isn’t helping. Bruce cradles it to his chest as he strikes out across the road on fawn’s legs. He selects a house at random to start with, marching down the garden path and pushing aside the shattered remnants of the front door.
It’s dark inside, the deep seated low lighting of a place that has abstained from visitors for far too long and settled into bad habits. The floor crackles with broken crockery and torn book pages, the inconvenient and unhelpful leftovers of whatever life was once lived here. Bruce shuffles through the entrance hall to a kitchen stripped of utensils and appliances, every last scrap of anything that might potentially one day find itself useful is gone. The same is true of the living room, with its missing furniture and shattered fish tank. He doesn’t bother going upstairs, it doesn’t seem worth the effort.

Bruce goes through another twenty houses before he finds anything remotely useful. They’ve all been so thoroughly ransacked that he has to assume a proper raiding party came by this way in search of treasure for their lord. He has to believe this was conducted by a troop of well organised children given the population demographics over the past few hundred miles, but this kind of effort is, in Bruce’s experience, normally carried out by adults.

The twenty first house has had the wall between the kitchen and the living room smashed in, plywood poking out of the gaps in the wallpaper like children hiding behind the sofa. Bruce falls upon it, pulling out as much as will come and breaking the pieces down to size with his feet. He sits himself on the collapsed top of the kitchen table and pulls the strips of rag Stephanie had given him out of the bottom of the pack along with a few plastic ties left in his back pocket. He lies the wood against his arm, running from just beneath his armpit to just past his elbow, then ties the splints in place as best he can one handed. It’s got none of the finesse of a proper cast and he can already see that he’s going to have to work hard to keep the wood in place but when he’s done he can let his arm hang loose at his wide without wanting to shriek in pain.

It’s not going to heal cleanly. Bruce does his best to fit the bone back in place before strapping himself up but the bone’s snapped clean in two and without pins to hold it in place the ends are bound to slip away from each other somewhat. No matter, he’s always hit harder with his left hook.

With his primary objective complete, Bruce braves the stairs in the hope of finding a bathroom. There’s little chance of the building still having running water but he’s not trying to make a home here, just to urinate into a proper toilet and feel somewhat civilised for a minute or two.

The first floor hasn’t received anything like the kind of sweeping the ground floor had, which only goes to strengthen Bruce’s conviction that this operation was conducted by out of town raiders. Go in, get out fast, don’t risk getting tangled up with any home-grown gangs.

There is a bathroom and the toilet is still intact. When Bruce has relieved himself he moves to wash his hands on instinct only to be brought up short when the taps don’t work.

What this place does have is a relatively rust free razor and a half can full of shaving foam tucked away in the cupboard under the sink. Bruce lays hands on them and moves without thinking, pulling up the bottom of the cowl and letting a storm of dead skin fall into the dusty porcelain basin. He sees his reflection staring back at him from the bathroom mirror, more heavily bearded than he’s ever been in his life with the snakeskin residue left behind by the cowl creating new ridges of wrinkles across his cheeks.

He does what he can to dissociate himself from the man in the glass. Not because he can’t bear to see himself like this but because he doesn’t have the energy to fret over how he looks like a whole new kind of stranger every time he gets a look at himself.

Without the use of his left hand shaving takes a long time. Great sheets of dead skin peel away from Bruce’s face along with his facial hair, creating a film over the dark pile of fluff gradually building in the sink. When he’s done he wipes the excess foam off with a towel hanging on the back of the bathroom door that wreaks of damp. He surveys his work in the mirror and satisfied that he’s done what he can with the resources available, pulls the cowl back down to begin the cycle all over again.
It would be nice to take the razor with him, but it’s only a matter of time because Joker gets bored doing whatever it is he’s doing and catches up with Bruce. Light fingers can easily pick up anything sharp at a moment’s notice and Bruce is in no position to be wrestling contraband off the clown.

He intends to look through the upstairs bedrooms for anything of use left behind. Bruce gets as far as pushing open the door to a child’s bedroom and seeing a dark spot on the floor where a body might have liquified and can’t bring himself to take a step further. He supposes he should consider himself lucky that he didn’t find any human remains in the bathroom, this place isn’t lived in, after all.

Bruce makes his way back to the front door, keeping his eyes peeled for pieces of glass that might be large enough to pierce the soles of his boots and leave him with another injury he could do without. He pulls himself through the frame without snagging his splint and starts back up the garden path towards the road.

A new perspective, the angle shifted. The buddleia dominating the far end of the garden is more than enough to cover it from the road but from here Bruce can see the unmistakable outline of a body half hidden beneath the branches.

Bruce stiffens, his first assumption that this is someone who has been following him. Then he looks harder and though it’s difficult for him to get a lock on the outline of anything he’s sure that whoever it is lies with the perfect stillness of the dead.

Bruce’s next assumption is that this is Joker’s handiwork, the body a calling card or a punishment or something left behind because it was no longer interesting to him. The rage rises fast through Bruce’s chest, straightening out his posture and giving him a boost of energy. He marches to the bush and reaches underneath to get a better look at the body.

They’re not a recent kill, dead for a lot longer than twenty-four hours. His hand makes contact with the stick thin bone of a shoulder blade and Bruce knows that rigor mortis is complete. The body is cold and when he gets a good look at then their eyes and lids are starting to stain blue from decomposition. A handful of flies keep watch but no maggots are visible. Judging by how much give there is to the flesh and how little to the muscle the body is breaking down far slower than it should be.

Bruce’s heart lightens to know that Joker isn’t responsible for this death, but the lack of scavengers swinging by to make the best of the carcass is unsettling. If the radiation out here is powerful enough that even microbial life is struggling to make its presence felt then no wonder there’s no sign of life in Morestown.

That would explain why the raiders came in so fast. If the breakdown of organic flesh has been slowed it must take stronger than average resistance to survive here. For all Bruce knows it’s already started acting on him, masked by the dehydration, malnourishment and concussion. The sooner they get to the power plant, the better.

Bruce takes a minute trying to determine cause of death. The victim isn’t sporting any visible wounds and they don’t have the right bruising around their neck for strangulation but they are preposterously thin. They’re light as paper under Bruce’s hands, almost as light as Joker. The skeleton lying underneath the skin is vulgar in its prominence, drawing the skin tight over the skull. It looks like they crawled into the undergrowth and starved to death.

Food can be hard to come by, it’s perfectly possible. A shiver runs down Bruce’s spine though, this feels wrong. He has to push aside the voice insisting that this is a problem he needs to solve, alongside the migraine it’s just too much.
The only thing he needs to worry about is not letting the same thing happen to him. Bruce pushes the body back to its final resting place beneath the buddleia and hauls himself back to the road.

“I’m heading to the town centre!” He shouts, voice producing a flat echo where it strikes the surrounding buildings. The bushes don’t rustle but Bruce swears he can hear laughter in the distance, just on the edge of the breeze. It follows his hobbling steps, promising to catch him up just as soon as it feels like it.
Morestown feels real to Bruce in ways Constance never could. It has major roads and traffic signs, a shopping mall big enough to warrant decent architecture and a high street packed with ransacked shops. For the most part, buildings are bland and boxlike and it could be anywhere in America, but at least it has height and depth. Nothing like the extremities of the human soul that Gotham can lay bare for you, but profound enough to strike the barest glimmer of wonder into his heart. The people here had history and heritage, has things been different it might have swelled to be something mighty.

It still might, it’s funny how places rise and fall. Any stretch of land that’s managed to hold on to its identity for a great length of time can boast multiple capitals, revolutions, wars that shaped and reshaped the nation so that the place you are standing no longer looks like the one they tell you about in the stories.

Bruce shuffles through streets that feel nothing like home. Every step stings but the longer he keeps it up the more accustomed he becomes to it and so movement gets easier. Morestown takes up more space than he was expecting it to and every time he thinks he might be approaching the edge, another row of streets presents itself. He doesn’t really know what he’s looking for, Joker has said something about a river but there’s every chance that he doesn’t know the first thing about the layout of the city. Maybe he had meant a physical body of water, but it’s just as likely that he was referring an arterial road or that he made the whole thing up.

Bruce walks for hours before he finds what he’s looking for, past the point where Morestown town centre has started to bleed back into the countryside. The river is real. It’s shielded from the walkway running alongside it by a cursory attempt at a flood barrier dug into the earth, ending in a stubby little wall that looks as porous as a sponge.

Morestown isn’t all that far inland, proximity to the ocean should have made anti flooding measures were a major consideration when it came to town planning. Bruce casts a judgemental eye over the shoddy design. He drops down over the floor barrier, wincing at the spark of pain that shoots up his legs as he hits the ground on the other side. He reaches out to steady himself but uses the wrong hand, letting out a groan as the broken bone ends manage to shift against each other despite the splint.

He’s standing on a breach of loose grey stones, running down to sand closer to the water. A tide mark of debris sits a few feet down from where Bruce is standing and beyond that the ground has a damp sheen. Low tide, but who knows when it will rise. Bruce kicks at the mess of broken twigs and plastic and feels vaguely disappointed when nothing useful immediately presents itself to him.

The far bank looks green, though that could just be a trick of his perspective. Grassy tufts peer back at Bruce across a river that seems wider than it should be and for all he knows beyond that is just more tarmac. A handful of buildings are visible across the way, looking worse for wear and when he squints he thinks he can see the outline of something larger lurking off to the east. The nuclear power plant, he hopes. He could head there right now, scope things out and see if he couldn’t retrieve a pair
of hazmat suits before Joker caught him up. Injuries aside, it would probably be the fastest way to tackle the problem.

Then again, the kind of casualties Joker leaves behind are hardly worth the convenience. Not that Morestown has had the decency to reveal its inhabitants but the S symbols dotted through the streets mean it’s unlikely that it’s completely empty. Clutches of children are no doubt scattered across the city. If Bruce really cared he would have been thorough, scoping out the shopping centres and long dead chain stores to smoke them out of hiding.

There’s no bridge as far as Bruce can see, which is strange. The basic logic of infrastructure would dictate that transport between a major facility and its parent town be made as easy as possible. There could be a crossing further down river, but it seems unlikely that a person would be able to see the power plant but not the bridge.

It’s possible that someone’s blown the bridge in the past year. It does seem awfully convenient that Joker would remember the existence of the plant and that he would retain enough knowledge of its whereabouts to give what is, by his standards, a detailed set of directions on how to get there.

If Bruce finds rubble, scorched metal, a burned out plastic bottle that might as well be a bomb casing as another piece of trash, he knows exactly who he’s going to blame it on. He looks round, half expecting to see Joker standing up the bank, smile hitched up and ready for bout of verbal sparring that he eventually insists turn physical. But Bruce is alone with the water and the refuse and the faintest impression of laughter hanging on a non-existent breeze.

There are S symbols painted on the flood barrier in orange and yellow. The yellow paint reminds Bruce of the Batman symbol he has seen back in their early days in the suburbs, when the smell of charred crow and raspberry washing up liquid had felt fresh. The unsubtle and unsolicited grunts as Joker touched himself, echoing through the clean morning air. Back when Bruce had called up Selina’s memory and tried to make something out of it that could sate him, watching her bend into forms she never meant to take as the night swept by.

He catches his breath before the memory can overwhelm him but not before his heart has risen into his throat. Bruce’s blood pumps thick and loud in his ears, leaving his skin clammy, a grotesque mixture of revulsion and arousal simmering just below the surface. He feels unclean, the mere suggestion that the thing in his head might be Joker, that the part of Bruce that had mashed the clown’s face into the pavement might have been onto something makes him want to retch.

He can blame his nausea on the concussion for now. Steady as Bruce’s stomach has been holding all morning, it hits him in a rush, the sudden clenching of his abdominal muscles sending him pitching forward and reaching for something to steady himself against. Once again, he knocks his injured arm at the wrong angle and he would yelp in pain but the contents of his stomach cut him off.

The splatter of vomit against the stones on the beach sounds far off and muted. Bruce stays hunched over for a good few minutes after he’s stopped retching before he straightens out, his stomach still churning but almost certainly empty. He stares down at the stinking mess, all that energy, wasted. His limbs are shaking and weak and if he can’t keep anything down he’s going to struggle to maintain any kind of strength.

The dehydration, at least, he can fix. Bruce turns towards the river and staggers to the waterline. He falls to his knees and drops his head to drink. The water is slightly salty and there’s an aftertaste of something oily and industrial that he’s happy to say he can’t identify. It can’t be good for him, but if he’s able to withstand the radiation levels out here he figures he can survive this.

Once he starts the repetitive suck and swallow that drags the water into his body, Bruce goes onto
autopilot, water dripping down his chin and wetting the front of his shirt. Where the damp cloth touches his skin he feels cleansed and he wants more, to let the river carry the bits of him that shiver and shake out to the ocean like so much garbage.

Bruce stands, kicking off his boots and shucking off his trousers and underwear in one motion. The t-shirt takes a while one handed and it picks up a few tears along the way. When he’s done he stands at the edge of the water, naked but for the cowl and acutely aware of all the little pockets of filth that have accumulated on his body over the past however many days. He tries to count time since his sponge bath at the church but that feels like another lifetime, like Bruce has not been clean in years.

Illness, real filth, his penis still making a half-hearted effort to chub up at the thought of something that is neither Selina nor Joker. It all needs to go. Bruce’s first step into the water is tentative, letting the shock of the chill ripple through his body as he persuades himself that he can see it all floating away. A great black cloud hanging low in the water.

One toe is not enough, he pushes in deeper. The river is cold enough to raise Bruce’s skin to gooseflesh but he fights the discomfort, wading out till it runs around his waist. He stares downriver at the gathering mass and his blood starts to thin.

In the middle of the river the water is no higher than his navel. Bruce takes a deep breath, pinches his nostrils shut and lets his legs fall out from under him. One moment he can see the skies stretching up into a mess of pale blue dappled with clouds, the next everything is dark and green and murky. The reinforced plastic covering the eyes of the cowl lets him see the water closing in around him in perfect clarity and his skin goes smooth as the chill envelops him in its entirety.

Bruce used to be able to hold his breath for a full three minutes when necessary. He’s not sure how long he’s under but he knows he’s a long way off his record. The seals on the cowl have worn thin and by the time he’s lost control of his lungs there’s water seeping in to cloud his vision, stinging his eyes with salt and nameless chemicals. He rises to the surface, spluttering for air and limbs flailing. He’s still alone, the river bank looks a lot further away than the walk out here had felt. From this angle, when he looks downriver a slight curve in the landscape obscures the powerplant and he could just as well be anywhere.

The first soak done, scrubbing himself clean takes time. Even over the damp kick of the water, Bruce can smell himself. All the nooks and crannies where sweat and worse have gathered. He starts at the bottom, where the dead skin of his feet still has bits of the bog Stephanie had walked them through trapped in it. The scabs on his legs have peeled away, leaving behind shiny red scars to remember them by that catch the light brilliantly when he’s shifting the grime that covers them with his overgrown nails. Pulling the filth and stink from his groin is a sexless task in water too cold to allow for anything else, as is skirting the edges of his anus and being pleasantly surprised by how much better he feels once that’s done. Then his armpits, the deceptively clean plain of his belly, his back as best he can reach it.

The dark cloud pushes away from him in a steady trickle, it’s nowhere near enough. There’s still water caught in front of Bruce’s eyes, diffracting light through stray droplets that stick to the plastic. Green light pouring off the banks splits itself into yellows and blues, a stray rainbow hovering at the edge of of his vision.

It’s beautiful and impractical and the water raises flakes of dead skin from their resting place against his cheeks. The cowl is claustrophobic and cloying, out of sorts with the nakedness of the rest of his body.

Bruce pulls the cowl up and over his head and lets it drop into the water, exposing first his shoulders, then his cheeks, all the way up to a hairline he hasn’t had much cause to worry about in a year. He
might have started balding sometime in the past few years, not that it matters anymore. It’s not like there are any more paparazzi to pick apart his appearance from beyond the guise of a mask so much less adaptable than Vulcanised rubber.

There have been whole days on his journey when Bruce has gone without the cowl for one reason or another, but in the past few months these have been whittled down to hours, then minutes, then what little time he can spare to remove the discomfort of facial hair caught underneath it. The sun hits his skin and as ever his first instinct is to shrink into himself, back into the shadows of skyscrapers and subterranean refuge. Till he’s become something suitable to walk in the light.

Only there’s nowhere left to hide and whatever difference could be split between Bruce Wayne and Batman is washing away downriver. The man he is today is closer to the one who first came up with the idea of the masks than either of the pair that would don them.

He drops below the surface of the water again, keeping his eyes closed to keep the sting of the water at bay. Reaching up with his one good hand, Bruce scrubs at his face, feeling the soft edges of dead skin peeling away and helps it along. His hair, grown almost to his shoulders in the time it has spent uncut below the cowl, slips forward with the current and tries to obstruct him, catching between his fingers like an insistent crop of weeds.

When Bruce rises above the surface once again, the clouds trailing away from him are not black but pale and flaky. He watches it pour away from him along with all the filth. A lump rises in his throat, the suggestion of sentiment washing over him and retreating just as quickly as the water over his head.

The world is silent, verging on peaceful. The river washes around Bruce’s midsection when he starts and he feels his presence as a solid marker in the flow of time. His legs, weak from lack of use and energy need not work all that hard to keep him upright and despite what manner of microbes might be hiding in the water he had drunk his head feels somewhat clear and his stomach isn’t trying to expel its contents.

It can’t last, for all the reasons that happiness was never more than a brief excursion for him. He attracts too much trouble and once he has it in his hands he won’t let it go. His suspicions that someone, somewhere is laughing at him rise to a fever pitch and drop away in an instant. Bruce flinches and looks round, expecting to see Joker standing a short way upstream.

“I always had you pegged for a dreamboat.”

Joker’s voice comes from the bank, eyes the green of new growth and his mouth slackened into what might be a genuine expression of disbelief.

They stare at each other without speaking, no hint of a challenge resting on the air. Joker in civilian clothes with the smile wiped off his face and the lipstick long gone, Bruce as naked as the day he was born. Perhaps it’s supposed to be momentous, the first time two titans look upon each other and are able to see each other for what they really are without the trappings of identity, but the awkwardness is palpable. Like meeting the male lead by the stage door and discovering him to be an insecure little man rather than a gallant hero.

Bruce wants to break the tension, or to respond to the need to hide away beneath a moniker of his choosing. His blood stays thin though, spilling through his veins with a gentle ebb and flow. He stares into eyes that he is loath to add descriptors to and lets the silence trail off into the early afternoon.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They try to break the silence simultaneously.

“Well…”

“I…”

Bruce waits for Joker to find his composure, be in in mirth or rage. He’s always assumed that the clown would be horrified by the flesh below the cowl, or that he would at least find sick satisfaction in seeing such an exalted symbol discarded like so much rubbish, but there’s nothing. The longer the silence runs between them the more disturbed Bruce is. He’s tempted to head for the river bank and hit the clown over the head, just to snap him out of it.

Before Bruce can make the first move, Joker slumps forward into a deep stoop. “We need to talk.” He starts shedding his clothes with methodical calm, his mouth still slack as he tries to pretend that there’s something on the beach so frightfully interesting it requires his undivided attention.

Perhaps this is the real thing, the fleshy centre of The Joker that Bruce never gets to see.

When the clown straightens up he’s totally naked. There were days back at Arkham when he would strip himself down and run shrieking through the halls till someone caught him, laughing hard enough to make himself sick as he collapsed on the white tiled floors. Batman would review the security tapes every now and then - it’s nothing Bruce hasn’t seen before but it’s a different thing to see it in the flesh.

The bleached white of Joker’s skin fades to a grubby pastel blue around his knees and upper thighs. The hair sprouting from his armpits and groin is slightly darker than the stuff on his head, as is the surprisingly dense thatch trailing down his legs. He used to shave, Bruce realises, and he wants to laugh out loud.

In the early years, Bruce had shaved his legs in the belief that it made slipping in and out of the batsuit that much easier. He was right, up to a point. That point being the beach holiday he had used as a front for investigating ties between Falcone’s people and a handful of Mexican drug cartels in the gulf. By the second morning of what had been publicised as a ‘private getaway for the Wayne family’ the internet had been buzzing with talk of the hairless wonder of Gotham coupled with a bizarre amount of speculation as to what this meant for his sex life. The next year beating back curious paparazzi and nosy talk show hosts did a number on his nerves that no amount of swift costume changes could undo.

He had said it was for cycling, with the good-natured laugh of a man who has no idea what he’s talking about.

Joker pulls the asclepion from the pockets of his trousers with a flourish. He’s still not smiling, but his posture is triumphant. He strides out into the water, moving towards Bruce with grim determination.

He stops a few feet downstream. Frowning, he reaches into the water and pulls out a great black mass that wriggles between his fingers. He holds it away from his body, nose wrinkled like it smells bad. “So much less impressive up close.”
Bruce squints, trying to work out what he’s looking at. It’s only when Joker turns his hand over and the blob changes conjecture, exposing two sharp points amongst its unreadable folds, that he realises it’s the cowl.

He had let it go, fingers slipping off the rubber and sending it downstream along with the thick black cloud. Bruce chokes out a protest, moves towards Joker and demands that it be given back.

Joker looks from the cowl to its owner, shrugs, and throws it at Bruce’s face. It slaps hard against his skin, wet rubber stinging on impact. He nearly doesn’t catch it when it drops away from him, trying and failing to form a seal against his new growth skin.

Joker laughs. It sounds forced, but it’s something. Bruce is so grateful that one of them is trying to defuse the awkwardness that he smiles despite himself.

Joker sees it. Joker sees everything. “So…skin face you has a better sense of humour than the big guy.”

“It’s all me,” Bruce swallows his smile. “Some bits of it are less me, but it’s all me.”

Joker replies with an unconvinced hum. “You’re that high society type, right? Trust fund brat, used to make the front page of the tabloids for getting hammered and fucking bimbos? Didn’t I try to kidnap you a couple of times?”

“You did.”

“ Weird.”

Bruce wants to shake him. Joker is still Joker and Bruce is still as much of the Batman as the clown ever got to see. The only difference is that lipstick is much harder to come by these days and no matter how dedicated you are to the cause, you can’t wear rubber over your head forever.

When Bruce concentrates he can feel the bright sparks of skin abrasions on his face, pressure sores brought on by the wear of the cowl. Even with his beard shaved to stubble and the dead skin cast aside he must look a mess. Forget clean shaven legs, he’d like to see what the paparazzi would make of this.

And yet Joker is staring at him with the kind of wide eyed awe usually reserved for small children the first time they sit on Father Christmas’ knee. The remnant heart of dreams in which remembered sex broke bread with unspeakable fantasy has washed away downstream but that doesn’t stop the dull burn across the back of Bruce’s ribcage. Appearance is a weapon, after all.

He tries to snap out of it, outside of public events he’s had very little cause to worry about anyone finding him attractive over the course of his life. All the same he feels a discomfort not dissimilar to the time he took Selina out, to some back-alley restaurant where he had hoped no one would find them. He had made sure to drab down, ugly him up the best disguise when he was so admired for his good looks. He hadn’t shaved in a couple of days, let his hair fall unstyled across his face, picked out a suit decidedly unfitted and rumpled. She had shown up in a floor length black gown cut close enough that no one in the room was under the illusion that she was wearing underwear and a string of pearls that she ardently insisted were acquired legally. She had looked like a goddess, Venus’s less benevolent sister rising from the waves with a wicked grin and eyes as dark as midnight; she always did have a knack for knocking the wind out of him. Bruce had spent the entire evening fretting that without the services of a good tailor and some high end personal grooming he couldn’t possibly match up to the standard she was setting.
When the night was done, Selina had kissed him and for the first time in his life Bruce had leant into someone else’s touch on instinct. The whole-body cravings for human contact that he had always assumed were myth washed up and over him and just like that he was lost.

No one has ever made him feel quite like that, before or since. Joker closes the distance between the two of them, mouth still slack, face unreadable. He reaches out to touch whatever fallen god he sees before him and as cold hands thumb along Bruce’s jawline time turns back to a sensible pace.

Joker doesn’t catch up till two seconds later, by which point Bruce has already snatched up his wrists and twisted his arms behind his back, forcing his face down towards the water.

“Don’t touch me.” Bruce growls. The force of his anger surprises him, but he doesn’t let his voice shake. The thing he is holding, long and lean, pale skin covering ripcord muscles, danger beyond danger, is nothing to him. The cowl is unimportant, retribution is what matters.

At first Joker doesn’t say anything and when he starts to come back to himself his laughter is choked. “Oh you sweet thing. You brilliant brute oh my God. What’s the point of the mask, eh?”

“You try anything and I promise we will find out how long you can hold your breath.”

“Promises, promises,” Joker rasps, a parody of the voice he had used when he was facing tarmac back in the suburbs, trying to grind up into Bruce. “I’d like to see you try.”

The precipice is right before them and the thrill of freefall hot on Bruce’s heels. Just one move is all it would take, one toe out of like from Joker and they can fall together, all over again. Fists can hit home, bones can break. The water will rise around them but it won’t be the thing to drown them, they do that to each other.

Bruce lets go of Joker’s hands and watches him stumble forward. Deep breath, feet spread apart, ready for the fight. Preemptively gritting his teeth against the rush of pain he knows will come when the clown goes for his broken arm first.

Only Joker doesn’t. His smile is back in place, twisting his features into thick wrinkles and an expression of sarcastic glee. He surveys Bruce from a safe distance, laughing quietly under his breath.

Bruce steps towards him and Joker steps back. “Ah, ah, ah. Like I said, you and I gotta have ourselves a pow wow and you’ve got a glint in your eye like you wanna make me scream. Not that the fighting isn’t fun but it turns out some things really are more important. Who’d have thought?”

Fingers curling over empty air, Bruce scans the banks, still empty. “I’m listening.”

Joker’s smile stretches out another few inches. “Look at you, Captain Trustfall. Here I was thinking that we were gonna spend most of the day arguing about whether or not I deserved to get a word in edgeways.”

“You don’t,” Bruce grunts, “but I figure you’ll keep talking regardless.”

“You know me so well! That’s what makes our relationship work, ya know? Taking the time to really understand each other-“

“Joker, if you don’t get to the point sometime in the next thirty seconds I’m going to re-break your hand.”

“Someone’s touchy this morning,” Joker giggles. He catches the darkening corners of Bruce’s eyes
and pulls himself together. “Ok, ok, ok. So. I gotta talk to you about this whole saving the world thing Scarlet Bondage put me up to.”

“Her name is Diana.”

“Oh word? I don’t give a fuck. Anyways, I’ve got this ass-clap-eleon thingy and I was supposed to give it to you to take back to Metropolis but last I heard you weren’t all too keen on that idea, so I’m wondering which buttons I need to press to get you to change your mind.”

Bruce shakes his head. “Joker…you’ve always been good at believing your own stories but this is ridiculous. I’m going back to Gotham and you’re coming with me.”

“Hmm, I don’t think so,” Joker throws asclepion from hand to hand. “See, I dunno if you’ve been paying attention over the past twelve months but the entertainment industry’s really shot to shit and I’m about to watch my brains pour out my ears if I have to sit in this sewer any longer. I gotta admit, I used to think that the end of days would be one helluva party but it’s all so dull, except for you. And you’ve always been the brightest thing in the room but it was so much more impressive you had some real competition for the top spot. What else can I say?” he sighs, “I miss the chaos.”

Bruce lets out a bark of humourless laughter. “You just want to watch me turn to sludge when we cross the border into Metropolis.”

“Would I be taking us to get fancy schmancy radiation-be-gone suits if that were true?”

“Hazmat suits aren’t going to save us from something that powerful. They might not even work on kryptonite radiation at all.”

“Well of course they’re not going to be enough on their own, but you’re the Batman.” Joker punctuates himself with a round of jazz hands, “if anyone can find a way to get into Metropolis without dying it’s you. Or me, but that’s just my luck of the genetic draw. Think of it as a challenge! You always liked those, right? Getting to prove that you were the smartest boy in school.”

“I’m not going to risk my life on your delusions.”

Joker crosses his arms over his bare chest and raises an eyebrow in Bruce’s direction. “Ya know, my therapists used to say that it was deeply damaging to call another person’s beliefs delusions. At least to their face. I more or less trust their judgement. They’d swan in and say ‘hey there jokey boy, no one wants to die’ and whaddaya know? Every last one of them went down begging for their life. You can’t argue with that kind of consistency.”

He tries to take a step towards Bruce who makes a low warning noise, urging him to back off. “Any good faith you had with me was gone the moment you let that gas loose. We’re going to Gotham and that’s final.”

“Jeez, if that’s the tone you took with them no wonder you ran through kids so quickly,” Joker snorts.

Bruce rounds on him, rising up as high as his back will let him and ignoring the way his headache spikes. It’s an old reflex, meant to intimidate. Not that intimidation tactics have any chance of working here.

Joker rolls his eyes and peers down his nose at Bruce. “Look, the way I see it, Metropolis is a win win situation. You must know that Gotham’s gone the way of the dodo and it’s not like you’re gonna be able to do anything about it once you’re there. Might as well risk it in the big city and see if you can’t bring the world to rights. That always was your schtick.”
“I’m not trying to save the world, I’m trying to get home.” Bruce spits, turning back to the shore. It doesn’t matter, this ridiculous argument that will never go anywhere. It doesn’t matter because Joker is wrong.

Joker’s laugh cuts like a stone through water. “Well if this isn’t a classic case of role reversal. They oughta have us committed. I was rather hoping that we’d get to the part where you angst over what your old buddy Clark would have done in your shoes.”

The water is running high around his waist and the pigeon is still singing somewhere offscreen. A crow has come down to peck at the vomit on the bank and Morestown stands before him in dour silence.

And all Bruce can think about is that Joker knows Clark’s name, clicking into place along his tongue with embarrassing ease. It had been a Daily Planet in-joke that Clark Kent was Superman, compounded by every intern that flitted through their offices and remarked on the resemblance. It never got further than a page fifteen mock think piece in the Metropolis Post, far off being a full-blown conspiracy. Superman had a Wikipedia page, a home far outside the United States and a name that was alien on the ears.

Clark Kent was just lucky enough to look like him, that’s all.

Joker’s always been better at putting two and two together than most, but he never had much interest in the world outside the Gotham city boundaries. He came face to face with Superman a couple of times, but never without Bruce in the room, and his eyes had been the colour of jealous rage.

It’s pointless to ask how Joker knows. All Bruce will get is a half baked answer about things Diana told him in Metropolis. It’s not like a name alone lends credence to an otherwise farfetched story but it sows the first seeds of doubt.

The crow looks up, head cocked to catch the sound of something too quiet for human ears to hear. It holds its pose for a beat before lifting off, passing right over their heads as it makes for the other side of the river.

“I’ll bet that’s not good,” Joker titters.

It’s most likely a fox or a bear that startled the bird, but Bruce doesn’t have much faith that anything so innocuous put it up. Call it a sixth sense, call it an instinct. it’s saved more lives than any of the technology he’s forked out for over the years.

“We should get our things,” Bruce starts towards the bank, gesturing for Joker to follow. He hasn’t gone two steps before his unease crystalises into something more substantial. A susurrus of voices growing rapidly in volume, bodies hidden by the incline and the flood wall.

The purple S symbols on the wall stare Bruce down. It’s a warning, telling them both to run.

“They have the same dead eyes conviction as the kids at the mall with none of the apathy. Faces twisted into a gargoyle’s approximation of rage, they move with a uniform slowness that seems
perfectly calculated to unnerve. They growl and snarl at each other, practicing for when they come across prey worth taking down.

At first Bruce thinks there’s maybe twenty of them, not so many that he can’t keep the clown at bay while holding them back. For all he knows they may back away when they seem them, the same as most of the warm bodies they’ve encountered running through the undergrowth when they hear him and Joker coming.

Then another row of heads appears behind the first, and another. In a matter of seconds they swell from an easily manageable unit to a force to be reckoned with and Bruce’s mouth goes dry as he reaches for the bank.

One of the children in the front row sees them and the news of Bruce and Joker’s existence spreads through their ranks in a great wave, following the path of their snarls.

“What are you doing here?” Three of them ask in near perfect unison.

“Just passing through,” Bruce tries to move closer to the bank but the crowd flinches forward, an animal’s response. Territorial and hostile.

A rumble of considered mutters spill from the bank as the children debate Bruce and Joker’s fate. It doesn’t take them long. Words like ‘outsider’ and ‘murderer’ are thrown about and battle stances are adopted.

“You know,” Joker hisses into Bruce’s ear, “this is all gonna go much smoother if we get out of here now.”

“I thought you hated smooth.”

“Darling, can we please save the big moral arguments for another time? Your anguish is beautiful to behold but the fallout is starting to bore me.”

“I don’t th-“ Bruce is cut off by a great shout going up from the assembled messes. Though the fire doesn’t reach their eyes, the children’s faces display identical anger. They push forwards as one, over the lip of the floodwall, down onto the beach and into the water.

They’re fast, closing the distance with alarming speed and they don’t stop advancing. When the frontrunners are almost upon Bruce and Joker the beach is still swamped with the rear guard.

Too many of them to fight, not when he’s one arm down with an insistent fog clouding his head. Bruce feels Joker’s fingers close over his and doesn’t object when he’s dragged away towards the opposite bank.

Chapter End Notes

Join us next chapter for a naked chase scene
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Warnings: bloody animal death stuff

The children have almost closed the distance between them by the time they hit dry land. Out of water, Bruce’s legs return to a semi liquid state and running is difficult. He’s going to struggle to maintain enough speed to stay ahead of the pack.

“This is no time for a fit of the wobblies!” Joker spits, tugging Bruce along faster than his feet want to carry him. They scramble up the bank, the beach here is steep and the rocks shift beneath their feet with every step.

Bruce feels small hands swiping at his calves. What the children plan to do to him, he couldn’t say. Maybe they want to rip them both apart, limb from limb. Maybe they’ll tie them down and wait till he and Joker are as dead eyed and distant as they are.

Bruce doesn’t doubt that Joker would take a few of them down with him, blood pouring from their little bodies. For now, he’s grateful that the clown isn’t trying to cause havoc. Cold fingers squeeze tight around his, still dripping water as they reach the top of the bank and tumble forward into the grass.

The grass here is almost as tall as Bruce, quite possibly a Poison Ivy special. There’s no need to keep an ear out for how it rustles behind them, their pursuers make their presence known through gnashing teeth and snarled out threats. Rarely do their voices consolidate into something strong enough to be classified as a word but that’s not necessary to understand the general sentiment of their thunder.

The skin of Bruce’s arms starts to redden quickly where the grass strikes him. The repeated pressure is unpleasant and the abrasions uncomfortable to say the least. He looks ahead of him and Joker’s buttocks are zigzagged with tiny welts.

They push on, the bubbling cacophony behind them never fading enough to let them slow down. Bruce wants to looks round and remind himself that they’re just children but every time he tries to move his head he’s blindsided by a new wave of pain settling across his temples. His nausea is building again and as the water drains from his stomach he is left feeling empty and weak.

Eventually Joker decides that the grass flicking against his skin is too much of a nuisance to be tolerated. “Bugger this for a game of soldiers.” He keeps his hand locked over Bruce’s as he lurches out of the undergrowth and onto a stretch of road running alongside it. The tarmac is a whole lot easier to run on than the loamy soil at the top of the riverbank but that’s an advantage that can be shared by both parties. The one edge they have, however temporary it may be, is that the children don’t expect them to change course and it takes them a second or two to realise where they’ve gone.

Joker speeds up, pulling Bruce forward with such force that he can’t hold his injured arm steady and lets out a whine of pain when it jostles at his side.

Mind over matter can steady Bruce’s nerves but it cannot account for energy he simply doesn’t have.
His feet hit hard against the sun warmed tarmac, bare skin slipping into the rough creases of the road and every step sends shockwaves running up his body. The edges of his vision are starting to fade; he thinks he hears one of the children shout something about wanting to tear out his liver.

*Maybe you should talk to them, he thinks, it couldn’t be so bad.*

Joker tugs hard on his hand, snapping him out of it and reminding him to keep up. Bruce gasps for breath, finding just enough air to choke out the tail end of a sentence. “I can’t…”

“Like fuck you can’t!” Joker growls. “We’re almost there, you big baby.”

Closing in on a destination sounds nice. Bruce lets his eyes zero in on Joker, till the vibrant flash of his hair becomes a beacon he can stay on the trail of. Something snatches at the back of his neck and he lurches forward to get out of its way. He’s dimly aware that the clamour behind them is growing louder by the second and the slightest misstep is going to send him soaring into the arms of the hoard behind him. Someone is screeching at him to keep himself moving and he thinks it would be nice to stop and let the heat soak through the soles of his feet from the tarmac.

The black edges of his vision grow wider, shrinking the world down to a single pinprick of light. The noise fades away in increments, reverberating strangely and transmuting any rational sound into empty howls.

“Come on! You’ve got like ten steps to go, don’t be such a wet blanket.” Joker shrieks.

Bruce doesn’t know what he’s talking about, there might as well be a sign hanging over their heads designating this the end of the line. His feet are too slow beneath him, barely even trying to keep up but Joker won’t let him stop. If they could just break for a minute so that he could catch his breath, colours might have the decency to retreat into their designated quarters and his blood might not feel so sluggish in his veins.

With a final heave, Joker pulls Bruce out of the dark. He pushes him up against something firm enough to take his weight and steps out of Bruce’s space, opening up the afternoon into something wide and bright.

Bruce takes deep, shuddering breaths, letting himself fall down what feels like a brick wall at his back. Everything looks fuzzy and green. The children who were chasing them were definitely not green, they were shades of earth and sky.

“Those little shits tried to rip my legs off the last time I came through here. I told them ‘hey kiddies, I’m not a jigsaw boy! Can’t put me back together when you’re done.’ They kept at it for hours though, hadn’t been so many of them back then. Thought I polished them off…oh well. Can’t do everything right all the time.”

Bruce can’t make head nor tail of the words coming out of Joker’s mouth, but it all sounds important, like the clown is giving him everything he needs without being direct about it. Easier for both of them that way. Joker finds it hard to be honest, Bruce hates being left in the dark.

His vision fills with bright white skin as Joker looms over him. “You look like shit.”

Bruce’s reply is devoid of shape or substance. It just about matches the far-off roaring of the children, still audible despite their apparent absence. Maybe Joker trapped them, put them in a box. Or maybe Bruce is the one who’s trapped, crowded against the wall and too weak to fight back. His injured arm throbs angrily and when he concentrates he can feel the heat collecting in the area. He needs medical assistance, he heeds pins to steady the bone, he needs to eat.
All this should be obvious. Joker doesn’t get it though, so he cranes over Bruce with an air of tense joviality, like he wants to laugh but can’t quite bring himself to do so. The joke, apparently, isn’t nearly so funny when your opponent is unable to fight back.

“W-water.” Bruce stutters.

Joker doesn’t move. “I’m not your maid. There’s a whole river right over there.”

If he could pull the energy out from where it’s nestled against his internal organs, Bruce might be able to explain. He wonders what would happen if he went to sleep and Joker didn’t care to wake him up, watching him fade to nothing before his eyes. After all these years, it could well be a bizarre combination of relatively ordinary injuries that took the Batman down. There’s got to be a joke in there somewhere. In the meantime, he’ll have to keep himself awake.

Bruce reaches out with his left hand, grabs hold of Joker’s shin and feels coarse hair pushing up against his palm. He doesn’t say a word, doesn’t have anything to say. He couldn’t even say what he hopes to accomplish, save a reaction of any kind.

Nothing happens for a long time. Bruce swears he can feel Joker’s eyes on the back of his head, breathing shallow and stunned. He’s never touched the clown like this before, without anger or retribution or thinly disguised regret. The closest they’ve ever come to being gentle with each other was when Bruce used to handcuff him for the ride back to Arkham.

Or when Joker slipped a hand over Batman’s skull, looking for holes. A hand slipping into hair too soft to be real. It’s more than possible that he missed something.

Eventually Joker shifts out of Bruce’s grip. “Fine.” He moves away, hopefully towards the river though it’s equally likely he’s decided to go it on his own or has decided to use Bruce’s imminent demise as an excuse for one final prank.

Everything still looks unfocused and green, Bruce has to assume that his brain is latching onto every piece of vegetation in the area and trying to reshape it all into a comprehensive scene. The sound of the children’s shouting is fading as they retreat and he supposes that’s a good sign, even if he has no idea why they stopped the chase.

If Joker had done something awful to them they should be screaming for their lives about now. They still have the power to form fully functional words, why would they not beg for mercy?

Bruce rests his head against the wall, lighting up sensitive bruises across the back of his skull. His eyes drift closed, promising to envelop him in the darkness.

He can’t sleep, not till he’s gotten some sustenance in him. Bruce wants to laugh, but all that comes out is a half-hearted choking noise. The sleep wouldn’t kill him, it’s Joker’s complete disregard for his wellbeing that would do it. The clown would leave him lying on the ground till it was too late, then complain that Bruce was boring for up and dying on him.

Either that, or crumble into dust. Joker’s done weirder and less explicable things than that in his life.

There are crows screeching somewhere offstage. They’re soothing, in a way. The guttural yelp of the birds has followed Bruce all the way up from Brazil, a reminder that things survive. The pigeon by the river had been an anomaly, too soft and unobtrusive to make it to the coast.

Crows, pigeons and seagulls had been the signature birds of Gotham city. In spring, floods of starlings would overtake the parks, picking the bushes clean before moving on. It used to drive Ivy up the walls, she designed a whole new subspecies of carnivorous oak just to slow them down. She
wanted the seeds where her babies could grow, not scattered around the city in guano waiting to be swept off the streets.

Out of sight, a crow is cut off before it can reach its next note. It could have been taken by a predator or it might have just thought better of opening its mouth.

Time is hard to keep track of but Bruce is pretty sure Joker’s been gone for longer than he needs to be when he comes walking up from the bank. Anticipation and nausea curdle in on each other. He wants to drink and he wants to eat but he can’t be sure that his stomach can handle it.

“Here ya go.” Joker drops a half full plastic bottle into Bruce’s lap, no cap. It’s only by virtue of the angle it lands at that it doesn’t spill everywhere.

The water in the bottle has a greeny brown glow to it, though it’s more or less free of unidentified particles. Not that Bruce would care either way. He wants to drink something, anything and if it’s liable to make him any more ill than he already is he’d rather not know until it’s too late. He raises the bottle to his lips with a shaking hand and tips the contents down his throat. It may look less than clean but it tastes heavenly, the metallic bite from upstream no longer noticeable. It clatters into his stomach with an audible splash and when it wets his tongue he feels like he might be able to speak.

“Geez Louise, greedy guts.” Joker snorts, dropping down to Bruce’s right and pushing up against him. “Not gonna save any of that for later?”

Bruce whimpers when The Joker presses hard against his injured arm, disturbing the bones. He finishes the water in a few mouthfuls and casts the empty bottle aside. It makes a hollow rumble as it rolls away from them.

Something warm and twitching lands in Bruce’s lap. If he were more lucid he might have jumped at the apparition but now his shock is entirely internal. He looks down and finds a recently dead crow resting in the dip between his legs, wings still fluttering through the aftershocks of life.

“What…?” Bruce starts.

“Lunch,” Joker smiles, he sounds very pleased with himself. “You looked like you could use a bit of a pick me up, especially after you went and puked up your breakfast.”

“But…fire…”

“Don’t think we’re going to be able to cook it, I’m afraid. Gotta get some food in your belly quicksharp, we don’t have time to be messing around with luxuries like that.”

Bruce watches, miserable as Joker picks up the dead bird and rips off its head. Blood splatters over the both of them, warm and sticky. It collects between Bruce’s legs and around his crotch. It’s going to clot around his pubic hair and be murder to get out, no doubt.

Joker brings the torn stump of the neck to his mouth and sucks hard, drawing out the blood. When he pulls it away his mouth is ringed with red and he looks a little more like himself. He starts stripping feathers from the corpse, half of them sticking to the blood coating his hands. He pulls off the wings and offers them up for Bruce to drink from, pushing them between his lips and not taking his vague murmured protests as an answer.

The crow’s blood tastes foul, the overbearing twang of iron outdone only by a sickeningly profound salinity. It rests, bitter, on the back of Bruce’s tongue before slipping down his throat to mingle with the dirty water of the river. His stomach flexes uncomfortably around it, reminding him that he is still concussed and it will gladly dispense of anything it deems unsuitable for the sake of his battered
His nausea must be evident on his face. Joker clamps a hand over Bruce’s mouth. “Probably wanna keep that down, Bat Attack.”

_Thanks so much for the advice_, Bruce’s brain spits out. He nods weakly, and when Joker’s done plucking the bird, exposing the meat underneath, he opens his mouth to accept the offered food.

Crow’s blood may taste awful but the flesh is miraculous. Alfred and Camila have joined forces inside his head to scream at him about the folly of eating uncooked poultry but in the moment, it’s hard to care. Raw as it may be, the flesh is soft and succulent, not as salty as the blood and easier to swallow. He knows it’s just the hunger talking, but Bruce would go so far as to put it in the top five meals he’s ever eaten.

Joker pushes the meat between Bruce’s teeth, pausing every now and then to take a bite for himself. With the feathers stripped away there isn’t much on the bird and it doesn’t last them very long. That’s probably for the best. Smaller portions will be easier to keep down. Bruce is still desperately hungry though, even once his gut has got to work processing the meat and water.

Later, Joker can catch them another crow and they can do the whole thing over. The clown pops the last of the meat into Bruce’s mouth and leaves his fingers in there, still coated in blood at varying stages of coagulation. The taste makes Bruce want to gag but the animal instinct to keep eating is strong.

Bruce sucks hard on Joker’s fingers, keeps going long after the blood has been washed away down his throat. The digits lie placid on his tongue, letting him draw them in, running his teeth along the pads in the hope of dislodging what little more sustenance might have been left behind.

Pressed into Bruce’s side, it’s easy to hear when Joker’s breath starts hitching around his underhand giggles. It’s not enough to stop Bruce, not quite. Not until he’s sure he’s gotten all that he can from the clown’s hand.

Joker lets out a low whine when Bruce spits out his fingers. “Don’t stop.”

“Stop.” Bruce mumbles against the hand still pressed to his lips.

Joker growls in frustration and gets to his feet. Though blocks of colour are now better consolidated, Bruce still can’t see clearly more than a couple of feet away and everything is very blurry. He’s almost grateful for it. Or more specifically, for the fact that Joker’s crotch is a mess of blood and green hair and it’s impossible to make out his inevitable erection.

“Fucking cock tease,” Joker snarls. He stoops to grab the water bottle and stalks off back towards the river.

The strangest urge to apologise overtakes Bruce, but he can’t find the effort to say anything. He watches the green, white and red blob go and tries to pretend that he doesn’t know what happens next.

“Don’t go pulling a sicky on me!” Joker shouts over his shoulder, “and you probably shouldn’t go to sleep. Unless you want to make sleep a permanent pastime, that is.”

“Ok.” Bruce whispers, but Joker is already out of sight. His stomach pulses experimentally, testing boundaries, trying to work out if it can do anything with what it’s been given.

It better had. Bruce takes a deep breath and wills his food to stay down. That’s all he has to
concentrate on: digesting; surviving; staying awake. Being strong enough come tomorrow that he can do all of this without help.

Up ahead is a greyish blob, looking rather small but Bruce suspects it is the power plant. Pinpricks of colour in amongst the long grass at the bank indicate wildflowers and the air smells green. Not the same living green that used to flood through the gardens of Wayne Manor in summertime, but breathing all the same.

There are still crows shouting out of sight, and this time none of them are silenced. The howling turmoil of the children has faded away almost entirely, to a dreary rumble as they try to negotiate whatever line Joker has managed to draw in the sand between here and them.

That’s what life sounds like here. Temperamental children and doomed crows. Holding into whatever they can carry. Bruce focuses hard on them, ignores the laughter coming from down by the river, the soft grunting, the desperate little sighs. It doesn’t bear thinking about, not when there’s so much good in the world.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Warnings: More human bodies being gross, more dead animals, allusions to some past body-horror heavy murders, the plot not really advancing at all

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bruce doesn’t mean to sleep, but he must doze off because the next thing he’s aware of is the setting of the sun and Joker drooling onto the shoulder of his good arm. The horizon is a clearly distinguishable point in the distance, the gentle rise of the hills to the east popping against a deep orange sky. Wispy clouds track purple across a tangerine field and a gaggle of crows are sending the day off with a chorus of raucous shrieking.

A murder. A group of crows is called a murder. Blood pushes up hard behind Bruce’s eyes and he groans as his stomach starts to cramp. Nothing like raw meat to send the digestive tract into overdrive. He tries to shift his head to relieve some of the pressure on the back of his skull and his headache hits him like a missile, sharp enough to send him reeling sideways. His injured arm hits the ground, lighting a fire along his nervous system that rages over the site of the break. His stomach screams in an agony born of being too empty to vomit and too nauseous to eat, retching helplessly though nothing comes out.

On top of everything else, he’s covered in dried crow’s blood. It’s a few hours off starting to putrefy but it’s tacky and unpleasant on his skin, glowing black in the light of the setting sun. He pulls himself away from the wall, unable to decide if he should be cradling his head, his stomach or his arm.

There’s a soft thump followed by a yelp as Joker falls over. Curses are mutters around belts of laughter, every sound he makes far too loud.

Bruce screws his eyes shut and tries to will it all away, from the light on the horizon to the crows to The Joker to the smell of the green. Sleep calls to him, a far off and unreachable land where he can drive the waking world back into its horrid hole and be done with it for good.

“What’s eating you?” Joker’s voice comes from somewhere over Bruce’s head.

Explaining broken bones, encroaching infection, concussion, dehydration, malnutrition, chronic exhaustion and a likely case of food poisoning to The Joker would be pointless. Bruce tries to hash out a snappy response but his voice sticks in his throat.

“Hmm,” Joker sounds unimpressed. “So what, you’re gonna roll over and die on me? After I got you water? And dinner? You know if you don’t wanna go on a second date it’s customary to just not call, this is all rather over dramatic.”

Bruce shakes his head and immediately wishes he hadn’t. It’s like there’s a carefully balanced cannonball sitting inside his cranium and every time he moves it ricochets around his head, taking forever to come to a standstill.

Feet hitting the tarmac, grass sighing as it lets Joker past. “There’s a whole world out here, Bats,
while you’re dying in the dirt to please your own ego. Did you even stop to consider how I might feel about all this? Watching you try to waste away like some common or garden human worm is frightfully boring and I think we both know you’re better than this.”

His exhaustion may have faded somewhat since the morning, but Bruce doesn’t think he’s ever felt worse in his life. He would use that against Joker, remind the clown that Batman is just a mask over a man not much better than anyone else in the grand scheme of things but his tongue refuses to move. His forehead is clammy against his palm and his stomach won’t still. The one positive he can see is that he hasn’t thrown up the crow meat. Yet.

Batman used to go out in less than stellar health all that time, that was part of the job. Gotham suffered near constant rainfall and more often than not he would return to the cave drenched to bone and primed to catch whatever virus was flitting through the underworld that week. Alfred would feed him endless chicken soup and fiery hot curries and Bruce would joke that sore throats made doing the Batman voice easier.

“Helloooo! Anybody home?” It sounds like Joker is skipping circles around Bruce. “Look at me! I’m Batman and I’m too much of a wuss to keep my shit together though a stomach bug. Terror of the night, my ass.”

A wave of discomfort rockets through Bruce, stemming from his lower gut and he has to concede that Joker’s faecal metaphor may be on the money. The clown’s voice carries an edge of anger that he’s only heard a handful of times in the past. The rage of a foiled scheme is little more than pantomime, displeasure with his captors a show that rarely lasts, this is more visceral. Undermined expectations are one thing, but when the fabric of the world as he believes it should be starts to crumble, Joker becomes very dangerous very quickly.

Once upon a time, Bruce had walked away. A moment of weakness in which he had convinced himself that the endless game of cat and mouse wasn’t worth the hassle. Joker had screamed at his retreating back, loud enough for all of Gotham to hear. When Bruce’s nerve broke and he went back for him, the clown was gone, in his place a stack of bones individually labelled for the victim that had been slaughtered to put them there. Records showed that each and every one of them had been alive the day before, and when you looked closely it was possible to see bite marks running along them. Some of these were left by dogs, some by tropical fish and larger predators.

Some of them had looked human.

“I’m not helping you anymore. You’re a big boy, you can handle yourself.”

The soft flop of a body lowering itself to the ground, maybe ten seconds of silence before fingers start tapping on exposed skin, tongue clicking. Joker can be very patient when the mood takes him but usually it doesn’t. He’s turned fidgeting into a high art.

He’s waiting for something. If Joker had really decided that he no longer cared, he’d pick himself up and leave. But no matter how many times he has proclaimed that boredom is the single worst thing that can happen to a person, he always makes himself wait. He waited back in Arkham, sometimes for years at a time. He sets complex traps and lies still till he has his prey where he wants it. He waits for the punchline, because timing is everything in this business.

The Joker’s great sacrifice, the price of everything he holds dear. He has always been willing to bore himself for Batman’s sake. For both their sake’s. To be sure that when they finally meet it’s the unstoppable force and immovable object that he’s always dreamed of. He will sit and wait for Bruce to pick himself up off the floor or die trying.
Bruce’s headache is strong as an ox and not going to get any better on its own. Keeping his eyes tight shut, he raises his head and tries to focus on his arm instead, diverting the pain centres of his brain towards a less distracting problem. He gets to his feet slowly, taking care not to put an ounce of weight on his injured arm. He holds his hand over is eyes and lets them fall open just a crack.

“You call that progress?” Joker jeers.

Sunspots burst across Bruce’s vision, cascading over the darkening road. There isn’t an inch of his body that doesn’t ache. He is little more than a mass of putrid flesh and if he doesn’t do something to fix himself that is all he’ll ever be. The first step he takes towards the river is hellish, the second is worse. But by the time he’s built up to a slow waddle, the knives running up his spine are just another thing to deal with.

“He lives!” Joker squawks and breaks into a great gust of laughter. Bruce is careful not to look at him, doesn’t think he could stand to see bright colours drifting through the gloaming.

Where before the grass had whipped along Bruce’s skin, now it stabs and claws. Every blade seems to have grown razor wire down its sides, snatching at the bare skin of his legs. He grits his teeth and his headache rises tenfold. In the end he can do little more than keep a steady pace and let gravity do most of the work for him as the grass covered bank slopes towards the river.

The tide is high and the beach almost swallowed by the water. The pack will be making its way downstream along with all their clothes. All they have left is Joker’s ridiculous bouncy ball.

Bruce doesn’t wade out deep this time, sitting himself on the edge of the beach and sliding into the water with care. It takes some of his weight, slowing his descent. He lets it carry him forward till the water line is around his torso when he sits.

The change is instantaneous, cool water soothing frazzled nerves and somewhat desensitising them. The break in his arm throbs wildly, the pain drawn into focus as his hand tries to go numb. The weight transferred from his skeleton to the river alleviates some small part of his exhaustion and thins his blood, taking the edge off his headache.

There’s a minimal chance of him descending into hypothermia if he stays in the water for too long, for now this is good. Bruce tries to tip his head forward to drink but the effort puts too much pressure on the back of his neck, his spinal cord feeling like it’s about to fracture under its own weight, so he takes his good hand and starts shovelling water into his mouth as fast as he is able. It’s slow going, his thirst seemingly endless, but it’s something.

The water tastes of nothing, so essential as to be weightless on his tongue. As vital as air, as negligible.

The clear skies that have dogged their journey are starting to fade, clouds encroaching from the east, creeping along the darkening heavens to block out the moon and stars. The sky is still clearer than it ever was in Gotham, in a world without light pollution every speck shines bright across the heavens, sand dug away to expose new gods. Bruce doesn’t bother trying to name the constellations, he’d only forget where to find them come tomorrow.

The man in the moon spares him a mournful glance before vanishing behind a bank of cloud. He’s almost finished waxing, full moon three nights off at most. The ripples on the surface of the river catch his light even once he’s covered over before they are subsumed by the totality of the water.

Bruce keeps drinking, watching the changing landscape of the night as clouds drift in and out of the moon’s path. He concentrates on how the water moves around his limbs, gently tugging them
through the current without any insistence that they follow. His broken arm twinges but doesn’t
scream. It still feels hot, even below the water.

His headache doesn’t vanish but when he’s given his bellyful of water time to settle the cannonball
comes to a still. Bruce tips his head forward and lets the water wash over his face, scrubbing at the
dead skin still peeling off his cheeks. Now that the first layer has been shed he can focus on the
pressure sores marring his upper lip and cheekbones, great scabby things that barely need to be
touched for the skin to break.

Blood mingles with the water and runs tracks down Bruce’s face, He can see it on his hand, dark
lines rolling over his wrist and losing themselves where his arm meets the river.

It reminds him of crow’s blood pooled in his lap. Reaching down, Bruce can feel it on his thighs,
malleable where the water has soaked it through. It tugs against the hair on his legs as it pulls away,
folded tightly into his pubic hair and sticking to the end in lumps. Despite everything, when he goes
to scrub his penis clean his blood makes a vague effort to travel south. It doesn’t get very far, but it’s
been so long since he touched himself that the aftereffects of the low-level arousal he had felt that
morning are still moving through him.

He waits patiently, knuckles pressed to the underside of his glans. The heat struggles to consolidate
beneath his fingers. Which is fine. It’s not like an erection is going to clear his head and masturbation
is a terrible idea when Joker could wander over at any minute.

He soaks for a long time, letting the river soothe him and drinking as much as he can. The water
turns from pleasantly cool to dangerously cold in an instant, sharp enough that Bruce doesn’t hesitate
to make his way back to the bank. The cannonball may be gone, but the water in his stomach sloshes
with every step he takes, highlighting his nausea. The clenching of his stomach makes him think that
he’s about to vomit it all up, till it shifts to settle lower. Bruce makes sure to move a few metres down
the bank before he empties his bowels and what comes out is mostly liquid. He takes a tentative step
back into the river to clean himself up before returning to where he left Joker.

Putting one foot in front of the other is easy, the grass just feels like grass.

The smell of smoke hits him hard, only as soon as he recognises it he realises it’s been hanging in the
air for some time. Bruce emerges out of the grass and onto a pothole riddled stretch of road below a
rail bridge, where Joker has a dead owl on the end of some old piping and is trying to toast it like a
marshmallow.

Singed feathers quickly turn to ash, lighter than carbonised wood so that they rise into the air on the
back of the thermals created by the fire. As Bruce approaches, one of the bird’s eyes pops in the heat,
making the flames crackle and spit where the fat dribbles out of the socket.

“Heya! Have a nice bath?” Joker’s crouched low over the fire, assuming the position of an over
exited two-year-old getting their first taste of danger. There’s a scratch running along his cheek and a
pair of puncture wounds on one shoulder oozing blood. It looks like the bird put up a fight.

Bruce collapses on the ground without grace or elegance, legs akimbo and his good arm thrown back
to take his weight. The heat pouring off the fire is unpleasant on his feverish skin. He sees the
bouncy ball reflecting the flames where Joker has dropped it next to the fire.

When he doesn’t get an answer, Joker shoves the owl deeper into the fire where the hollow stems of
its feathers sound like firecrackers when the rupture. “Your posture’s terrible.” His eyes travel over
Bruce’s exposed crotch. In the light of the fire, they look red.
Bruce purses his lips and doesn’t reply. Instead, he concentrates on the workings of his gut, the strange noises it makes as the water drains from his stomach. He can already feel his bowels sizzling with discomfort and one way or another it’s not going to be long before he has to go and relieve himself again.

For want of conversation, Joker starts singing, slapping his hand against his thigh and roaring for an imagined crowd to join him at least once per song. Old nursery rhymes have their lyrics swapped out for a barrage of toilet humour. The wheels on the bus always sounded so innocuous but Bruce now knows that “people passing gas go fart, fart, fart” and judging by the way the clown laughs, he considers this one of his better jokes.

The owl is pulled from the flames, feathers burned away to nothing and the beak shrivelled in on itself. It’s charred black on the outside but there are tears in the skin that leak red.

“That looks done, right?” Joker looks so pleased with himself. Logic dictates that if the clown can keep one raw animal down, a second shouldn’t be a problem, but he’s been known to change his eating preferences on a dime. Just to keep everyone on their toes, or so he told the Arkham doctors.

Without saying a word, Bruce bites the insides of his cheeks to keep from grinning. He watches Joker bring the bird to his mouth, take a large bite out of it and then gag as his mouth is filled with more raw meat.

“Ish disgushting.” Joker wines around a mouthful of bloody meat. “Izh it shupposed to bweed? I don’ sink ish shupposed to bweed.”

“It’s not.” Bruce allows the corners of his mouth to turn up fractionally.

Joker swallows with a growl. “And you just say there and let me make fool of myself? Shame on you, Batsy.” He forces down another couple of mouthfuls before giving up and casting the spindly bird aside.

The size would suggest that it’s a barn owl of all things, less meat on it than a crow and noticeably less tasty. Bruce would know. When he felt particularly uncharitable to the owls that used to hunt in the cave he would spend an afternoon culling them off and then pass them on to Alfred to turn into stew. Alfred made it quite clear that he was unimpressed by this behaviour and the rest of the family would miraculously find other places to eat for a few days. Bruce could hardly say he blamed them.

“If you really wanna do that to yourself, be my guest. Personally I’d rather eat another crow.” Joker watches with fascinated revulsion as Bruce reaches for the owl carcass. The bird is still whole, no attempt to clean it having been made. They lost the switchblade that Stephanie had given him along with the rest of the pack and without it, rendering the owl edible is going to be tricky.

The skin is cooling rapidly and a few millimetres down it’s the temperature of living flesh. The blood doesn’t make much of a mess beyond Bruce’s hands as it’s evidently had time to coagulate. Even if it did get everywhere again, he wouldn’t mind. He’ll head back to the river just as soon as the heat of the fire proves too much for him. The smell of gore doesn’t set his head spinning like he expects it to, but getting into the abdomen is not an easy task when he’s only got use of one hand. The bird has to be pinned between his knees, blackened claws pointing up at him.

It takes a few minutes’ careful manipulation of the meat before the abdominal cavity falls open and Bruce can reach in to scoop out the innards. He puts the heart, liver and kidneys aside – all pathetically tiny, and throws them towards Joker.

Joker takes an experimental bite out of the liver, screwing his eyes shut and making a show of
keeping his tongue out of the way of the organ. When he’s satisfied that it’s not the worst thing he’s ever put in his mouth he relaxes and wolfs down the rest of the offal.

The edges of the fire are more ember than flame, so it’s here that Bruce digs out a well and settles the owl down to cook. It won’t take long, not for something that small.

With a great smacking of his lips, Joker finishes his mouthful. “Not what?”

“You don’t need me to keep you entertained.” Bruce doesn’t take his eyes off the owl.

“I’ve dedicated the best years of my life to keeping up with you and the past year has been all about tracking you down. I think we’ve established that I do.”

“So what? You can do anything except relieve your own boredom?”

“Pretty much.” Joker stretches out, hand propping up his head and leg cocked in a mockery of seduction. “I know I’m good, darling, but I’m not that good.”

“And here I was, thinking that you were supposed to be a comedian.”

Joker grins at that, the smile that straddles his face and makes it look like his cheeks are about to split, the closest he ever comes to sincere amusement. “You never watched much late night telly, did ya, rich boy? Too busy out and about getting your kicks by more creative means.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Bruce prods at the owl with a discarded stick and is disappointed to find it far from cooked.

“Everything! It has everything to do with anything, my dear. All those old stand up shows. They found the weirdest folk. None of them funny, mind you, except they were so bad you had to laugh. They kept you coming back though, because you were sure that if you could wait it out there was bound to be someone worth watching, a diamond in the rough so to speak.”

“I fail to see your point.”

“You usually do. Too literal minded, that’s what you are. It’s why I love ya though, Bats. You challenge me to think outside the jack-in-the-box.”

The image of a paper plate on a spring, rises unbidden to the forefront of Bruce’s mind, making his head pound. “You’re saying that if the late night cable comedians had someone to challenge them they might not have been so bad?”

“How should I know?” Joker shrugs. “There you go again, taking everything at face value. No appreciation for the art of the metaphor. What I’m saying, my dear Bat, is that comedy is tragedy plus time and the longer you can stand to wait before the other shoe drops, the better the pay off. As long as I have you cleaning up after me, the tragedy goes on. The punchline comes when you give up on me, or I die, or you die, or a prison is built that can actually hold me, or who knows what?”

Bruce turns the owl over and stares at the blackened skin of its back. This conversation seems to be taking place on a plane he can’t quite reach, sparse details trickling down to where he’s struggling to keep his feet on the ground. He blames it on the fever, the way it mingles with the fire and tries to suffocate him. Joker stares him down, smug smile hitched up far enough to make it clear that he knows Bruce doesn’t have the faintest clue what he’s talking about.

“You can solve Eddie’s riddles, bypass Ivy’s, unravel Jonny’s chemicals, beat down Solomon Grundy. Everyone knew you as the spanner in the work, a rat chewing through the cables but not
me. See I get it, I know that you’re the best reason any of us ever had to do what we do. What would I be trying to do if I wasn’t trying to be the centre of your universe? That’s your tragedy, Bats.”

Joker isn’t making sense and Bruce doesn’t ask him to clarify himself. He’ll tuck this memory away, and sometime in the future, when he’s got a cave to hide in and Joker’s in the wind, he’ll bring it out to be analysed and decrypted.

When the owl’s cooked through, Bruce scrapes the ash off its skin as best he can and bites straight into the bitter flesh. It’s stringy meat, the hard-worn muscles of a predator. He tears off a wing and offers it to Joker, but the clown has developed a fascination with the different species of grass running up the river bank and is in the process of testing the combustive properties of each one. He doesn’t look up until Bruce has finished eating and poured handfuls of grit over the fire to put it out.

“What was that?” Joker snarls, holding up a fistful of grass.

“A tragedy.” Bruce stands and turns back to the river. He needs to defecate again, he can only hope that the owl meat hasn’t passed straight through him. When he’s done, he’s going to crawl into the water and let the residual heat of the fire wash away downstream.

The night cracks into broken mirror brilliance, Joker tipping back his head and laughing deep within his chest. He follows Bruce at a distance, snickering when the time comes for him to relieve himself. He trails after him, into the river, clutching at his sides, so incapacitated by mirth that for a minute all he can do is stand in the current and let it wash through him.

When Joker pulls himself together and starts cleaning the leavings of the dead birds from his body, his eyes are sparkling with glee, more living green than the grass swaying in the evening breeze. He goes stiff, eyes trained on the water then pounces like a heron, pulling something out of the water and throwing it over to Bruce.

Bruce catches it, just. He doesn’t need to follow the shape of the thing to know it’s the cowl.

“You gotta take better care of that.” Joker chides.

Bruce blinks down at it. It should be half way to the ocean by now. "How did you-?"

"It got caught under a rock." Joker shrugs. "Or I had it with me the whole time. Whichever one sounds more poetic."

There seems little point in Bruce pulling the black rubber back over his face, not when Joker knows what lies beneath it and his skin finally has a chance to heal. Bruce sets it down on the beach, and when he leaves the river he snatches it up to take with him.

They start off down the road towards the power plant, Bruce moving at a steady hobble and Joker whinging that he’s slowing them both down. For the first time, it occurs to Bruce that they might be wandering straight into a dead end. Someone could have been through the plant and taken any suits left behind. They might be about to spend hours, days, searching for something that isn’t there.

Bruce doesn’t know if that would be the tragedy or the punchline. He opens his mouth to ask but thinks better of it. Joker nudges up against him with a knowing smirk, and where the clouds shadow the heavens he looks incorporeal in the stunted moonlight.

Chapter End Notes
You may have noticed that there is now a chapter count on this story. This is because I have finished writing it, I just have a whole lot more to publish. Massive thanks to everyone who's commented here or talked to me about this story on twitter or tumblr, you've all been fantastic motivators in getting this beast done <3
It’s three miles at most from the rail bridge to the power plant, but the journey takes them almost four hours. By the time they reach the perimeter, Bruce is exhausted, fighting nausea with every ounce of his self-control and leaning heavily on anything that will bear his weight.

“Gonna upchuck again? Lemme know if you are. Gotta play it tactical, that’s good bird bait.” Joker nudges him in the side.

Bruce shakes his head and doesn’t let go of the fence that surrounds the plant. He desperately wants to crawl back into the river, let the water temporarily calm his fever, but the compound is a short way inland and he doesn’t think they can spare the detour, not when they’re this close. He may be immune to the long-range effects of kryptonite radiation but no matter how many lead linings are in place, standing this close to a uranium power source carries a certain level of risk. It’s best that they get this over with as fast as possible.

“We need to do some recon.” Bruce rasps.

Joker flashes him a double thumbs up. “Right you are, big guy. Like I always say, no point opening your presents unless you’ve had a chance to cop a feel the night before.”

Bruce slaps away a hand treading perilously close to his naked buttocks. Joker sighs. “Guess tomorrow ain’t my lucky day.”

When Bruce has caught his breath, they start clawing their way along the perimeter. Impotent yellow signs promise electrocution to anyone who lays a hand on the wire mesh of the fence, setting Joker off laughing every time he catches sight of one.

It’s a blink and you miss it thing, which is why when Bruce blinks as Joker ducks through a gap in the fence, he misses it.

“Your…your fucking face!” Joker stutters out.

Bruce frowns at the apparently intact fence. “How did you-?”

“Come now, darling, a magician never reveals his secrets.” Joker winks and starts backing away from the fence, putting the onus on Bruce to get to the other side before he vanishes from sight.

If Joker wanted to vacate Bruce’s company, he could set off at a brusque walk and lose him within an hour. His slow, taunting gait speaks of a desire to test but no desire to be proven wrong.

The slash in the fence is small and discrete, cut off the ground so Bruce has to clamber through it gracelessly and the severed ends of the mesh dig into him at uncomfortable angles.

“Bravo!” Joker claps, voice barely above a whisper. “Now, let’s get this show on the road.

Bruce takes a moment to examine the gap, how hard it is to see where it lies when there’s no one climbing through to highlight the hole. It doesn’t seem possible that Joker would have been able to spot it without already knowing it was there.

“Joker!” Bruce growls, turning to find the clown a fair distance ahead of him, crouched low next to an access shed and beckoning for him to follow.
The power plant rises high over the low-lying landscape, three cooling towers strike hourglass silhouettes across the night, accompanied by a lone chimney spouting from the back of the central admin hub – a squat little box shaped thing.

Ahead of Bruce, Joker scurries to the foot of the nearest cooling tower and hunkers down, the light from his eyes the only indication that he’s even there. Bruce hobbles after him, holding his injured arm tight to his side to stop it jerking unpleasantly as he moves. When he catches him up, Joker has plastered himself to the wall, head tipped back, eyes glassy and tongue lolling out in a parody of death.

“We should keep moving.” Bruce jabs two fingers into the clown’s exposed armpit and watches him spring to life, sucking in air and fixing him with a look of indulgent rage.

“Gotta keep a low profile out here, Batsy. Can’t go exploiting each other’s weaknesses like that.”

“Yes. Remind me why we need to keep a low profile exactly.”

Joker blinks in mock innocence, affecting the drawl of a stereotypical southern dame. “Why, I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“You’ve been here before.” Certainty solidifies when Bruce says it. He can feel it, in his bones. Call it Batman’s intuition, call it a sixth sense but he can say for sure that Joker came by this way when he was leaving Gotham. He wracks his brains, trying to remember what the clown had said about coming through Morestown before.

He knew that the children wouldn’t come any further up the road than the rail bridge. Bruce is willing to bet that whatever the reason for that may be, the answer lies inside the power plant. He’s not running for the front door. Something’s wrong.

Joker shrugs. “Maybe. Who knows?”

“You do!” Bruce spits. He grabs Joker’s shoulder and slams him against the wall with as much force as he can manage. “What’s got you spooked?”

“I’m not spooked, just exercising reasonable caution. Looking both ways before I cross the street. You know the drill.”

“Start talking, or I’ll start breaking bones.”

“Oh honey,” Joker slides out of Bruce’s grip with ease. “It’s real cute that you wanna do all that for little old me. But let’s face it buster, you’re busted.”

Bruce aims a weak blow at Joker’s head but the clown is long gone by the time it makes contact with the concrete. The effort knocks Bruce off his centre of gravity and he instinctively reaches out with his right arm to steady himself. The pain that runs through his side is like lightning, sending him to the ground with a guttural groan.

The sharp change in orientation makes his stomach jerk and Bruce has to swallow hard to chase the rising vomit back down his throat. Joker lays a foot on his chest, pressing him into the ground.

Bruce is very glad that it’s too dark to make out what lies between Joker’s legs.

“Ya know, Christmas would be a shit show if your parents never managed to slip in any surprises. Not that I would know but I’ve seen enough after school specials to get the gist. I could take a trip down memory lane and sure, we might get to find out what’s so spooky about this big old
abandoned power plant that looks like a survival horror film waiting to happen. But you know what? When we come to open our presents tomorrow morning, mummy’s going to be able to tell if we’re faking surprise.

“You’re mixing metaphors.” Bruce huffs.

Joker adopts a serious droop to his brow. “You’re right. Shouldn’t mix bereavement with whining. Or was that beer and wine?”

“Get off me.” Bruce pushes Joker’s foot away and pulls himself back to his feet. He tries to angle his body so Joker can’t see how much of his weight he’s putting on the wall. “This isn’t a game, Joker. If you know something, you need to tell me.”

“I don’t know nothin’.” Joker holds up his open palms. “And if I did, I wouldn’t tell a thug like you.” He takes a step back, grinning at Bruce with enough vindictive glee to make it clear that he has no intention of letting this turn into a brawl.

With a deep breath and a whole lot of effort, Bruce forces his legs to take his whole bodyweight and continues to shuffle round the edge of the cooling tower. “If I find out that you’ve withheld valuable information I’ll-“

“You’ll what? Puke on me? Give me a really long, stern talk on the evils of my ways?”

Bruce snarls under his breath and doesn’t answer. Over Joker’s guarded sniggering, he thinks he can hear something moving in the cooling tower, a low rumble he can feel through the concrete, echoing yet insulated by the curvature of the walls. He grits his teeth and hopes it’s just birds.

When they reach the reception building, there’s no sign of life coming from within. The steps leading up to the doors, however, are riddled with streaks of mud that look fresh, or at least like the kind of thing that a good cleaning staff would have cleaned up very quickly a year ago. Bruce pauses to examine them, Joker looming over him and blocking out what little light manages to break through the clouds.

“I do so love watching the big Sherlock Holmes performance in action, though I reckon you could do a few better than fifty brands of tobacco ash, right? What was Conan Doyle thinking? Nobody smokes these days. Useless superpower.”

“Move.” Bruce snaps

With a maniacal titter, Joker steps out of the way of the moon and comes to crouch at Bruce’s side. His legs are so long they have to practically fold in on themselves for him to stoop that far, knees sharp enough to maim landing around his ears. He settles himself close enough that it’s possible to feel his scant body heat, but not so close that they’re touching.

Bruce runs a finger along a stripe of mud and some of it comes away, it turns to powder on impact but most of it caked on thick. The shapes of unshod feet are imprinted into it, accompanied by something larger that he can’t identify. “There are people here.”

Joker wriggles excitedly. “I do so love an audience. So, how should we make our grand entrance?”

“This is a stealth operation. We sneak in, get what we need, and go.”

“But Batsy!” Joker wails. “Think of the kiddies! They were promised a show.”

Bruce clamps his hand over Joker’s mouth. “We don’t know anything about the people inside. What
weapons they have at their disposal, what their age range is. So, we’re going to go in quietly and scope out the area. When we know what we’re dealing with we can make a concrete plan.”

Something hot and slimy trails over Bruce’s palm, he pulls away sharply, biting his tongue to suppress a yelp. Joker’s eyes glint, his tongue hanging out of his mouth as he breathes heavy around quiet laughter.

Bruce wipes the saliva from his hand as best he can on the concrete steps. Joker pulls his tongue back between his teeth with a pop, the muscle slipping out to wet the white expanse where his lipstick once lay.

They don’t go in the front entrance, not even Joker’s perverse compulsion for showmanship necessitates that. Skipping the steps entirely, they slip round the side of the plant and start looking for another way in. They find a heavy steel door built into the basement of the main building with an access panel that has been rendered useless by the absence of electricity. It’s missing a handle, must have been on a spring lock, and when Bruce tries pushing it open in the hope the lock hadn’t been closed when the power went, he’s disappointed to find it shut tight.

“Hang on.” Joker pushes past Bruce and sets his hands on the flat concrete of the plant’s walls, one hugging it, the other bulging over the bouncy ball.

“What are you doing?” Bruce hisses.

“Reckon I can get us in backstage.”

Joker takes off, scaling the wall with the purchase of a gecko. Bruce’s jaw falls open as he watches the clown defy gravity, moving fast, as if to stop would be to break the tension he’s maintaining in his limbs. Next to the cooling towers, the admin building is unimpressive, but the ground dips to accommodate it and it must be thirty metres or so to the roof.

Bruce doesn’t breathe until The Joker is a dark outline against the sky, perched high on the building. He graces Bruce with a small wave and his laughter carries through the night with perfect clarity. Then he turns his back and is gone.

At first his heartbeat is sluggish, but the longer Bruce stares at the sky, wondering what on Earth could be taking Joker so long, the harder it pounds against his ribs. The clown might be planning to regain the element of surprise and attack him from the dark, or he might be about to set the inhabitants of the plant on him.

Hanging the cowl off the end of one of his splints, Bruce lays his hand against the sheer concrete. It’s unforgiving beneath his palm. He pushes down hard, searching for suction, some indication of how Joker managed to reach the top. He jumps as high as his legs will let him and tries to grip the wall over his head to no avail, landing on his backside. He has to bite down hard on his good arm to keep from crying out, the muscle strain from clenching his jaw sending shockwaves through his skull.

Enough time has passed that Bruce is debating heading back to the main entrance and trying to make his own way in when the still night air is disturbed by the scraping of metal on metal as the door swings open. He jumps onto the defensive, taking a step back and angling his body so that his injured arm is as far away from it as possible.

“What’s behind the mystery door?” Joker asks in a stage whisper. He’s standing in the entryway, pale as a ghost against the pitch black beyond. He’s drawn himself up to his full height, eye’s flashing with glee. Even without the trappings of his costume, he looks like he used to when he would tear across Gotham with a plan and without a care. The act is a serious, detail oriented thing
but the performance is what shapes his figure in the eyes of his prey.

“Did you run into anyone?” Next to Joker, Bruce sounds like he’s shouting. “What does security look like?”

“Impatient, aren’t we?” Joker cocks a hip. “Can’t say I blame you. I’m very excited about the main event, supposed to be a real crowd puller.”

“And the main event would be what, exactly?”

“I couldn’t say! It’s all very hush, hush. But the reviews have been excellent so I wanna get a good seat for it.”

Joker holds the door open and ushers Bruce inside. The plant is so dark that it’s impossible to see more than two feet ahead, but judging by the way their breathing echoes off the walls, they’re in a corridor. When the door falls closed it plunges them into total darkness. Fear, not so much of the dark as what could be living within it, chimes through Bruce’s intestines, trying to persuade him to run. He takes a steadying breath, looks his phobias right in the eye, and reaches for the cowl.

His skin screams at the rubber sliding down his face, partly because the pressure sores are barely beginning to scab over and mostly because of how the cowl traps heat. Bruce longs for the soothing absolution of water, carrying the burn downstream. He blinks to activate the night vision and waits for the corridor to light up green.

Nothing happens. Bruce tries again, and again. The black doesn’t render into recognisable shapes. In a last-ditch effort, he reaches for the manual switch but it’s no more effective.

“Come along now, time waits for no man.” Joker singsongs. It sounds like he’s standing a fair way ahead of Bruce. “Or anyone, I suppose. Time is gender neutral in its disregard for your passage through it. It hates us all the same.”

“I can’t see.” Bruce snaps.

Joker snorts. “What, you mean the electronics in that rubber face of yours didn’t survive a blow to the head and a soak in the river? I’m shocked.”

In many ways, it’s a miracle the cowl maintained it’s night vision functions for so long. It had been a tricky task getting it back up and running and even then the electronics have to be delicate to fit neatly alongside his head. Of all the times for it to give up the ghost though, he had hoped it might pick a more opportune moment.

Bruce leans against the concreate wall and ignores the way the earth beneath his feet tries to jerk out from under him. The fever evidently doesn’t like movement without visual points of reference to confirm that the landscape is still where it should be. He takes a cautious step forward, then another. It’s slow going but he supposes it’s better than nothing.

He doesn’t realise he’s standing right in front of Joker before the clown laughs, breath blasting over Bruce’s face and the sound loud enough to have him jumping out of his skin. “Come here.” He grabs Bruce’s good hand and interlocks their fingers. “That should do it.”

Joker tugs Bruce along with a series of sharp jerks that don’t allow for breathing room. Bruce bites his tongue to keep from complaining and does his best to keep up. The corridor is longer than he was anticipating, sloping down towards a basement level unseen from the outside.

“Are you sure this is the way you came in?” Bruce asks, when he’s sure they’ve been walking for
longer than Joker took coming in through the roof.

“Nope.” Joker giggles. “But what do I know? I’m blind as a bat down here. Or at least, I’m as blind as you.”

Eventually, the walls of the corridor drop away and the air cools as they step into a wider space. Joker stops and starts, taking them on sudden detours that stop them running head first into whatever this room is used to store. He leads them through the basement and up to another set of metal doors. When Bruce tentatively throws his shoulder into them, they don’t budge.

“What are they for?” He asks.

“A lift.”

“The lifts don’t work.”

“Duh.”

Joker drops Bruce’s hand and starts fiddling with the doors, the soft twangs of his hands finding pressure points that even the engineers probably didn’t know existed try to echo through the basement but are muffled by the cargo. The doors don’t cave in on themselves, but after a couple of minutes they shift and strain like Joker’s trying to open them.

Bruce frowns. “What are you-?”

“Please don’t spoil the surprise, Batsy.” Joker groans. “Let your hair down for once in your life. God knows you have enough of it these days.” He does something unseen to the doors and they spring open almost silently.

Following the sound of Joker’s bare feet slapping hard against the metal floor of the lift, Bruce inches himself inside the carriage. It feels big, industrial grade, the kind of thing that doesn’t wind up in the parts of a plant like this that ever gets shown to the public. He rests his hand on the wall just inside the door and strains forward, trying to hit the opposite side with his foot.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to save the Pilates for when we meet up with the other soccer mums.” Joker says. His voice ricochets off the metal of the lift, amplifying him till he becomes a cacophony. Bruce sucks in a deep breath and hopes that he doesn’t start laughing anytime soon.

A repetitive rhythm of rattling and banging starts up as Joker proceeds with the next part of his plan. Bruce presses himself against one wall and tries to will the chill of the metal into his bones. Physics isn’t on his side, and instead his body leaves his surroundings warm and himself no cooler than when he started.

“Here, hold this.” Joker pressed what feels like a sheet of metal into Bruce’s hand.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m getting us up the lift shaft.” Joker says. “I would have thought that was obvious.”

The cold dread spiking in Bruce’s gut at the thought of having to climb anywhere does nothing for his fever. His fingers clench over the metal in his hand and he instinctively looks up, trying to get a better look at the state of the lift’s ceiling.

Lunging forward, Bruce sweeps wide with the sheet metal, trying to knock Joker off whatever game he’s playing and give himself some room for negotiations. “We can’t go through the roof.”
“I figured.” Joker’s eyeroll is practically audible. He’s nowhere near Bruce. “I’m not trying to get us through the roof though.

A moment of silence followed by a low grunt of effort from Joker. At first nothing happens, then the carriage lurches off the ground.

Only to tumble down again instantaneously. It lands with a wobble, like a rolled penny coming to rest on a flat surface. With his balance so compromised, Bruce has to drop to his knees to keep from falling, willing his stomach to stop churning.

“Sorry, my technique’s a little rusty. We’ll call that a trial run.”

“Joker!” Bruce gasps. “Do not try that again.”

“Are you saying that you don’t trust me to pull us up this lift shaft?”

“Not inside the carriage.”

“But you said we couldn’t go through the roof.”

The lift has got to weigh close to a ton. Even with a decent pulley system in place, that would be a mammoth effort for a trained strongman. The idea of travelling up who knows how many floors with nothing but Joker’s spindly arms to prevent them falling back to the basement is reprehensible. Bruce doubt’s he’d have much luck himself on a good day.

“Let’s just find the stairs.”

“The stairs!” Joker cries, like he’s only just remembered them. “I mean, we could, but who knows how long that would take.”

“It will be faster than you pulling us up this shaft.”

“Oh, ye of little faith.”

“I’m not staying in this metal coffin while you try to get us both killed.” Bruce pushes himself back to his feet and launches himself towards the open doors. He thinks he can remember some approximation of the route Joker took to get them to the lift, all he needs to do is follow it back part way then try another path.

“Don’t leave me, baby! We can still make this work!” Joker cries, loud enough to set Bruce’s teeth on edge. There’s a mighty clanging that sounds like the clown’s fist striking metal, then a sharp percussive rattle as something falls from above their heads.

Bruce doesn’t like the sound of that. “Joker…”

“If we must go our separate ways, then this is the path I choose.” Joker makes a great show of sniffing. He’s probably wiping at a non-existent tear.

The carriage relaxes as Joker leaps up off the floor and his fingers barely make a sound as they wrap around the lip of the hole in the ceiling. A few moments of concentrated muttering, latches being unfastened and parts being disassembled before the final panel falls comes free, scraping along the outside of the hull where Joker pushes it up and away.

“I told you, I’m not going through the ceiling.” Bruce hisses after him.

There’s a certain amount of concentrated grunting as Joker pulls himself through the hole he’s
created to sit on the outside of the lift. "Yes you made that quite clear. Didn’t say anything about me though."

"We can’t split up."

"You’re not the boss of me."

Against his better judgement, Bruce moves to stand in what he thinks is the centre of the lift and cranes his neck to see if he can make out anything happening above his head. He swears he catches a brief flicker of green cutting through the dark, but it’s gone just as soon as he spots it.

"I can’t let you go alone."

"Are you asking for a leg up? It’s a nice spot up here, the view’s incredible."

"Just come down here and we’ll take the stairs."

"Shan’t."

Bruce reaches up to judge the distance to the ceiling. Even on the balls of his feet his fingers barely touch the inner lip of the gap and he has no way of telling how much further he’d have to stretch to reach the hull. He pushes a fraction too far forward and his muscles turn to acid beneath his skin, every point of tension in his body burning bright. His fingers slip off the edge of the metal panelling and he goes crashing to the floor of the carriage. The resultant bang does nothing to ease his headache and it’s sheer luck that he doesn’t land on his injured arm.

At first, Bruce doesn’t bother trying to move. In the black he can’t be sure if his eyes are even open, but he’s very sure that when he lies on his back his blood doesn’t have to work so hard to get round his body and that’s soothing. His right arm throbs lazily, a gentle reminder that it’s still attached to him.

A sense of peace washes over him, which lasts no time at all before Joker’s laughter sounds from inside the lift where he’s stuck his head back down into the carriage. "You need to work on your form. You call that a plié?"

Bruce pushes himself into a sitting position and immediately regret it when the strain of having to pump blood upwards to reach his head sends his heartbeat into overdrive. He blinks slowly, trying to bring the dark into focus.

There’s no focus to be had. "I can’t."

"Don’t give me that!" Joker admonishes. "C’mon, Bats. It’s not like you to be such a spoilsport."

"I’m ill and I’m injured. I only have the use of one arm. I’m not as tall as you. This isn’t a debatable matter, Joker. I can’t get into the lift shaft and even if I could, I couldn’t climb the cables."

Joker blows a raspberry that echoes wildly off the metal walls. "Excuses, excuses. Next you’re gonna be telling me you can’t hand in your homework because the dog ate it, and I’ll say that you have to make it up to me in some other way, then you’ll feed me a line about working on some extra credit projects at home and I’ll tell you that I was thinking of something a bit more immediate…boy do I have a knack for storytelling. How do you feel about the naughty schoolgirl routine, anyway?"

"We’ve got to find another way up." Bruce ignores him, pulling himself to his feet and leaning heavily against the open doors. He almost jumps out of his skin when cool fingers graze the top of his head. Joker must be leaning full bodied into the lift to reach him.
“That’s not how the story’s supposed to go,” Joker whines, setting a finger firmly in the middle of Bruce’s forehead. “Our dashing heroes are supposed to make their daring escape through the roof of a lift and find their way to freedom despite their sickness. ‘They hunted around in the dark for a bit then walked up some stairs’ is a terrible scene pitch.

“I really don’t care.” Bruce slaps the finger away.

Joker snickers. “Here, love.”

“What?”

“Look, in front of you!”

“I can’t see.”

“Well neither can I.”

“Joker…”

“Take two steps forward.”

Bruce is just disoriented enough to obey without asking why. This time Joker’s hand comes to rest on his chest, tightening like it expects there to be fabric for it to gain purchase on.

“What are you doing?” Bruce asks.

“Just stretch your arm up again. Reach for the sky! This lift ain’t big enough for either of us.”

It’s obvious where this is going. “You can’t intend to pull me through that hole.”

“Why ever not? It’s not so different from our little escapade with the cave and the campfire. We can even have a proper fight when you get up here, if you like.”

“You won’t be able to lift me.” Bruce says, more confidently than he feels. When they’d escaped from the Hole at Horne’s they’d had the twine, he knows from bitter experience that things always feel heavier when they’re not dangling from something else.

Tentatively, Bruce reaches up with his good hand. Just one try, just to prove him wrong. Joker leans down, wrapping both hands around his elbow and pulls.

It’s surprisingly easy. Bruce’s splinted arm hits the edge of the gap a few times as he’s pulled through but otherwise it’s painless. When he’s risen high enough he uses his feet to push himself the rest of the way through, flopping out onto the top of the lift with all the grace of a fish out of water.

“There!” Joker crows. “Was that so bad?”

His voice thrums against the wall of the lift shaft. “Try to keep quiet,” Bruce cautions in a whisper. “We don’t want anyone to know we’re coming.”

“Right, right.” Joker replies. “If there’s anyone here, that is.”

“You’d know better than me.”

“Only if I want to. I prefer the dramatic tension of the unknown.”

There’s a sliver of light cutting through the wall above their heads. It’s difficult to say exactly how
high it is but Bruce would guess twenty feet. It’s barely anything but after the black of the basement it looks like a beacon, so bright it’s difficult to look directly at it. It casts meagre shadows along the walls, just enough to make out the cables stretching up and beyond the impenetrable dark up above. Back in the day, lift cables could generally be trusted to be structurally sound but there’s no telling what a year without use or proper maintenance might have done to them. The climb he’d have to make to reach the point that the light is coming from seems as unlikely as it had done down in the carriage, Bruce supposes he has only himself to blame for trying to call Joker’s bluff. Unless the clown goes ahead and tries to pull him up after, they’re not going to get very far.

“Here.” Joker tugs Bruce past the cables to peer into the deep shadows surrounding the wall of the shaft. A row of metal panels with evenly spaced slits cut into them runs upwards, impossible to see how far up it goes in the dark but ostensibly it could run the whole height of the building. They probably used to cover cooling vents, not meant to be weight bearing but if they were designed with a shred of ergonomic sensibility they might just hold a quick climber for a short stretch.

That doesn’t solve Bruce’s problem. “I can’t use my right hand.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Can’t. It’s broken, remember?”

“Pssh! What’s a broken bone? I used to work with broken bones all the time.”

Bruce fixes him with a flat stare that’s probably not visible in this light. He can just about pick out the top of Joker’s head, hair shaking when he starts to laugh. It could be any colour down here.

“Ok. Ok, I got an idea, princess.” Joker starts. “I’ll go ahead and you can keep hold of my ankle, if you trust your legs to do the rest of the work.”

It’s not a great plan, but it’s also not totally awful. If it were anyone but Joker it might even be fairly sound and it sounds much more promising than leaving Bruce to make his own way up. Bruce reluctantly agree, watching Joker start up the panelling. The pale lines of his body catch shreds of light, making him look like a particularly angular ghost.

When Joker’s gone about six feet he pauses and waggles his foot in front of Bruce’s face. “All aboard the choo choo train!”

“You don’t have an Achilles joke lined up? I’m disappointed.” Bruce rests a foot in one of the lower slats and wraps his hand around Joker’s ankle. He gives an experimental tug and is relieved to find that the clown holds steady.

Joker lets out a disgusted grunt. “I thought about it, but that introduces all sorts of weird resentments and mother slash son dynamics into our relationship. I’m kinky, but I’m not that kinky.”

All told the climb isn’t so bad. Joker manages to indulge in no more than two false alarm falls intended to scare Bruce where he feigns loss of balance. The rubber of the bouncy ball, still held in Joker’s hand, squeaks against the metal. They reach the line of light and it’s the work of a moment for the clown to open the next set of doors.

The lift opens out into a windowless corridor, light trickling down from a flight of stairs to their right. It seems impossible that something so weak could have been visible down below. The walls are a sterile shade of grey, old safety posters reminding employees to always wear their lead lined suits when approaching the reactor and that anyone demonstrating signs of radiation sickness should be moved offsite immediately.
Directly in front of them, a catalogue of rooms is presented along with floor numbers and arrows instructing the reader on how to reach them. The sign informs them that they are currently standing in the first basement and that the second basement they have just come from is intended only for use by reactor technicians.

If they follow the light, they’ll supposedly hit the employee lounge, the lab, waste disposal, staff offices, deliveries and access to the cooling towers. To the left: showers and the reactor.

Chances are, hazmat suits will be kept somewhere between here and the reactor. Bruce starts off to the left, moving slowly. “Come on.” He keeps his eyes peeled for anything that looks like a storage closet or cloakroom. Every door has a sign attached but his vision is too blurry and the light too low for him to read any of them. When he tries to focus on the lines of the letters his head spins and he has to screw his eyes shut and press his forehead into the cool concrete walls until it stops.

A couple of hundred metres, a bend in the road and Bruce passes a window set into the wall. He peers inside and sees a hulking mass of metal, barely illuminated by the moonlight coming in through a lone skylight set into the ceiling. It sits in a cavernous hall that looks like it reaches deeper into the earth than the sub basement. The floor seems to vibrate beneath his feet.

It’s the reactor, they should find something soon. Bruce holds his breath and waits for Joker to make an inane comment that he doesn’t have the patience to respond to. When nothing comes, he looks round and finds himself alone. “Joker?”

Bruce’s stomach sinks. He had told the clown to follow him, he hadn’t checked to be sure he was actually playing along. They must have been separated for ten minutes or more, plenty of time for Joker to get bored and start making his own entertainment. He rushes back the way he came just as fast as he is able, doing his best to ignore the way the bland colour pallet of the plant swirls into one mighty blob of grey in which it’s almost impossible to pick out anything more interesting than the difference between the light up ahead and the dark behind. He forgets about the bend in the corridor and winds up crashing straight into the wall rather than following it round.

When he’s caught his breath and shaken some of the cotton wool out of his brain, Bruce looks up past the lift doors towards the stairs, waiting for a splash of green and white to materialise against the grey. Nothing happens, even when he marches over to take a look back down into the shaft.

The good news is that there’s only one way Joker would have gone. The bad news is that Bruce has no idea what lies at the top of the stairs. He takes them as fast as he can despite the sluggishness of his legs, counting them as he goes in a vain attempt to distract himself from the burn in the backs of his calves.

Bruce reaches the top of the stairs, grasping at the hand rail to steady himself. He wants to fall forward, bend double and rest his hands on his knees till he catches his breath. Instead he walks towards the door in the opposite side of the boxy little room he’s come out in and throws it open.

The first thing that strikes Bruce is that the far wall has been replaced with a pane of glass, the second is that Joker probably shouldn’t be pressing his naked body against it if they want to keep a low profile. He hobbles over, ready to chastise about how bare skin leaves prints on glass that you don’t need dust to see and sooner or later, someone is going to notice that they’re here.

Before he reaches Joker, Bruce gets a look at what lies beyond the window and his priorities shift to maintaining absolute silence. He grabs Joker without a word, wrapping his good arm around the clown’s chest, reaching up to cover his mouth and jerking him back from the glass.

The window looks down on what was once an industrial laboratory but has now been so stripped of
parts as to be a scientific graveyard. Dotted amongst the disassembled equipment are the sleeping figures of an unprecedented number of children, possibly even more than had come after them in Morestown.

The children aren’t what alarms him though, or at least they’re not alarming enough to warrant keeping Joker pressed against him despite the clown’s gleeful squirming. What worries him is the gigantic figure in the middle of the room, the children almost comically tiny in comparison. Twice the size of an average man with a grisly green hide that Bruce knows can’t be pierced by knives or ordinary bullets, scratching rivets into the floor in his sleep.

It’s Waylon Jones, unmistakably. Of all the things Bruce had planned on fighting through to get to a pair of hazmat suits, the Killer Croc was nowhere on the list.
Chapter Notes

Warnings: Joker spouting off more rape culture nonsense and being very glib about domestic terrorism. Just Joker being awful. Really, the warning should just read 'Joker'.

Also this chapter features some stuff about nuclear physics. I endeavour not to use bad science but nuclear physics is a long way from my area of expertise. I'm trying, but if the science is bad I can do little more than apologise.

Joker wriggles backwards, skin deliciously cool. Steering them back against the wall, Bruce pins him as tight as he is able. The clown doesn’t struggle, perfectly content to be manhandled into position. The extra few inches he has on Bruce combined with his obscenely long legs mean that his buttocks press against the taught skin of Bruce’s belly.

He’s so smooth, despite the light dusting of hair running up his thighs. Joker glides against Bruce, taking pains to maximise the amount of direct skin contact between the two of them.

It doesn’t matter that Bruce is ill, or that Joker is The Joker, or that they are in a very dangerous position. As soon as his nerves start firing and he acknowledges that the thing in his arms is a person, Bruce’s blood starts sluggishly pushing south. It’s ridiculous, shameful even. But the unclammy cold of Joker’s skin rubbing up against his fever is just enough to push him into a half hearted arousal.

Bruce bites the insides of his cheeks to keep from groaning in disappointment as the head of his half hard penis brushes against Joker’s thigh. He tries to will it down with promises that he will take care of it just as soon as he can manage five minutes of real privacy but to no avail. The damage is already done. Joker stills beneath his arm, the seal of the hand against his mouth going tight as he sucks in a surprised breath. He goes slack, a disbelieving stutter pushing out under his breath as he slips under Bruce’s hold and turns to face him.

The light is coming from a torch-like basket hanging over the lab, burned down to embers but bright enough, having crawled through+ the dark to reach this balcony. Joker catches stray photons, highlighting the deep seams and old scars that criss cross his skin. “Well, what do we have here?” he purrs, pinning Bruce’s hand to the wall before he’s had a chance to get a hole of him again. “My, my, Batsy. Is that a sticky wicket in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?”

“Get off me.” Bruce grunts as Joker steps impossibly closer, toes trailing over the backs of his feet and lowering his head so their noses are mere inches apart. He risks a glance down and sees that the clown is fully erect, his penis a ghostly grey next to Bruce’s muted pink.

Bruce’s mind starts cataloguing detail before he can stop himself. It’s difficult to tell when he’s still at half-mast but it looks like Joker is bigger than him, uncut, foreskin bunching at an odd angle around the glans and shaft curving slightly to the left.

“Eyes up here,” Joker lurches forward, cocking his head like he might be about to kiss Bruce.

Kiss Bruce again. It’s not clear if it’s a memory or the faded fragments of a dream, but Bruce swears he knows what those pale lips feel like against his own. Dry and purposeful, pressing against him
momentarily before letting go and sending him into freefall.

He doesn’t want to do that again. Joker rearranges himself so his arms cage Bruce in as he mutters under his breath about stars falling into line. Fate and destiny and other words that don’t mean anything you don’t want them to. His free hand goes to Bruce’s hip, thumb rubbing circles into the skin there, soothing a spot that now feels like it’s on fire.

Bruce flicks his eyes up and holds Joker’s gaze, steadying his jaw and glowering as hard as he can. “I said get off.”

“Yes, yes. I heard you, I’m just not convinced you meant it.”

“You ever heard the saying ‘no means no’?”

“Eh, sometimes it does. Sometimes ‘no’ is just a performance though, you’ve gotta watch out for that. You’ll miss out on so much of what life has to offer if you listen to what people say without paying attention to what they mean. It’s ok, love. There’s no one watching, no one left to perform for. But I suppose you did always save your best scenes for me. That’s what makes our relationship work, we’re so dedicated to one another.”

Joker pushes his hips forward and his eyes flutter close when they brush against each other. It’s just more skin, but Bruce has to bite hard on his tongue to stop himself keening at the contact and there’s nothing he can do to stop his penis twitching. Bright sparks beneath his skin scatter into his brain, trying to persuade him to press on, tug the loose thread and let the clown unravel in his hand.

“That’s it!” Joker breathes, “Just like that.”

It might just be a façade, a game Joker is playing as he attempts to unnerve the opposition. Bruce feels the fingers holding his hand to the wall slacken ever so slightly. Impossible as it may seem, Joker is distracted, momentarily thrown off his game. Bruce uses the lapse in concentration to twist his arm free, reaching between the two of them and socking the clown in the gut as hard as he can.

Joker stumbles back, winded. “What was that for?”

“Keep your voice down.” Bruce snaps, pulling himself away from the wall and striding past Joker to get a better look down at the lab, trying very hard not to think about how hard he might still be. As best as he can tell, there’s no nightwatch set up, meaning that the children here are either very stupid or they feel totally at ease.

Bruce supposes it makes sense that he would find Waylon Jones in this type of company, the man always did have an affinity for children that stretched beyond the ‘no killing minors’ rule that most Gotham villains abided by. Were she born in another era, Selina would probably have been one of his strays scooped up off the street and Jason had a friend who came up under him. Orphans and down and outs, everything left over when the inadequacies of local social services had been exposed. Those were the children that the Killer Croc took in. It wasn’t ideal, but in Gotham it seemed someone would always step in to handle what the system could not.

The assembled masses look to be unanimously sleeping, piled as they are into upset chemical vats and beneath work benches. Bruce can see one particularly small child bundled into the divot of a centrifuge.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to take care of that?” Joker hisses into Bruce’s ear. Following his line of sight, Bruce is unsurprised to find that the clown is ogling his crotch, still yet to
reach a state of repose. He screws his face into the picture of disgust, grabbing Joker’s chin and redirecting his attentions to the lab floor below.

Reflected in the glass, green eyes flash. “What’s wrong, Bats? Not used to getting a feeling in your funny bone for a boy? I don’t have to be a boy, you know. You can think of me however you need to overcome that pesky internalised homophobia.”

“You know, for someone so keen to get into my pants you’ve done remarkably little research into my sexual preferences.”

“Oh!” Joker squeals, ducking out of the way of Bruce’s hand trying to silence him. “Am I to believe that the Dark Knight himself has made a French Mistake?”

“Believe whatever you want.”

“I believe you are terrified yet intrigued by the prospect of sex with a man. You think the second penis is going to cramp your style.”

“Some women have penises.”

Joker lets out a low whistle. “Wowzers. Ten out of ten, very politically correct of you.”

“Will you please focus on the task at hand?”

“Which is? Watching kiddies while they sleep? I’m afraid that loses you points on the cinnamon roll scale.”

“We need to find where they’re keeping the hazmat suits. If we keep quiet and move fast, we could be out of here by morning.”

“Oh, I see how it is. Don’t think you’re tough enough to take on the Croc?”

“Why would I provoke a dangerous individual without cause?”

“I dunno, why would you provoke a dangerous individual without cause?” Joker turns to Bruce, expectant. “Punchline? Hello?”

“It’s not a joke.”

“Well your sense of humour is so terrible, you can hardly blame me for getting confused.” Joker rises onto the balls of his feet, craning his neck as he peers down at the lab.”

Bruce backs away from the window and jerks his head towards the far end of the balcony. “We should get moving.”

“But we just got here!” Joker whines. “

“And what we’re looking for isn’t here.”

“Yes it is.”

“What?”

Joker points towards the back of the lab, near the far wall where the divisions that would once have marked a row of emergency showers have been pushed into a haphazard pile. Bruce squints, trying to make sense of what he’s looking at.
“Ten o’clock from the big scaly dude.” Joker mutters. Bruce follows his directions and spots an indistinct blob sitting in the middle of the floor.

It could be anything. “How do you know?” Bruce asks.

“I’m clairvoyant.” Joker says, matter of factly. “Or I’ve been here before. Can’t remember. Point being, if we wanna take candy from this baby, we’re gonna have to get down there to do it.”

“How sure are you?”

“Pretty sure.”

Bruce covers the eyes of the cowl with his hand. He really shouldn’t trust Joker’s judgement, but his head throbs every time he tries to think for himself and his legs are shaking with the energy lost in fending off the clown’s advances.

“Ok.” Bruce breathes. “Ok. First thing’s first, we’ve got to find a way down there, preferably one that doesn’t involve any more disused lift shafts.”

“That shouldn’t be so hard. This place is like a hamster cage, ha! All the little tubes connect up to each other sooner or later. Good job we did take that lift shaft, though. Otherwise we would have come out next to Croc and that would not have been pretty.” Joker snorts.

“We’ll need to make our way down to the basement level to get in.”

“Why?” Joker taps the glass. “You’re a strapping young slash middle aged lad, Batsy. You could smash the glass and go for a little fly. I’ll follow right behind you.”

Bruce doesn’t dignify him with an answer. He glances both ways down the balcony, which is really just a brief break in a corridor stretching on into the dark. If he’s got himself oriented correctly, heading right should send them towards the main building. It wouldn’t make sense to build a viewing platform somewhere where superiors and guests couldn’t make use of it, so the central offices should be close by. It would make sense for there to be some kind of lab access through there. Bruce sets off to the right, doing his level best not to wobble as he walks.

Joker trots after him. “You’re looking a little the worse for wear there, old chum.”

“Whose fault is that?”

The plant is something of a maze, the kind of building that never needed to ascribe to any architectural conventions and become impassable to outsiders in the name of practicality. Luckily, the doors have yet to be stripped of their labels and vague signs line the walls, indicating which way they need to go to reach reception.

Bruce doesn’t bother trying to keep up with The Joker, who ducks in and out of stray side passages ahead of him with wild abandon. His persistent giggles mark his path, even as the mismatched floor planning sends him far out of Bruce’s line of sight. He pops out of random doorways and emerges from around corners and Bruce suspects that the Scooby Doo familiarity is entirely intentional.

Soon enough, Joker’s giggles stop flitting from room to room and settle down somewhere to Bruce’s right. Following the sound, Bruce finds him leaning up against a set of double doors that lead through to a staircase heading down.

“Fast track to the basement, no tollbooths or elevators? Your wish is my command.”
The stairs are slow going, Bruce holding tight to the bannister and trying to let the momentum of one foot in front of the other carry him. The whole is constructed of short flights, folded in on each other to fit into the slim space allotted them. It’s not till he’s made it to the bottom, where the light from the lab has almost entirely vanished, that he realises that Joker hasn’t followed him. He peers upwards, stomach sinking as he considers the possibility of dragging himself back the way he came just to get hold of the clown.

“Joker?” Bruce’s voice echoes uncomfortably loud off the walls. He’s answered by a drawn out squeak, smooth surfaces struggling to create friction against one another. It’s punctuated by the slap of feet hitting metal and a snort of laughter from Joker.

The sounds repeat like a coda, four times until Joker comes into view.

He’s streaking down the bannisters, obviously. Bruce watches Joker’s indistinct outline hoist itself up onto the railing two flights up before letting gravity do the rest. The naked skin of his buttocks pulls another squeal from the structure and his laughter when he makes landfall is entirely self-satisfied. He’s going to have terrible friction burns in a few hours’ time.

“Wee!” Joker shrieks as he comes to a halt at Bruce’s feet. “Ah, that was fun. Chop, chop now. We need to get moving, haven’t got all day.”

The dark is more or less impassable, setting Bruce’s head spinning and forcing him to divert all excess brain capacity to keeping track of the whereabouts of his limbs. Joker is so much more in his element with the lights out, he takes over as trailblazer without question. “This way, Bats.” He hums, hooking a little finger through the one on Bruce’s good hand.

Mercifully, the dark doesn’t last for long. After a handful of turns Joker brings them out into a hallway illuminated by a dusky light spilling through a window set into a door on the opposite wall. Bruce drops his hand and hobbles forward to get a look at what lies beyond.

The door leads to what remains of a decontamination cubicle, now a mess of shattered acetate strewn across the lab floor. Given the nature of the facility, Bruce would expect that it had existed more to give peace of mind to those leaving for the day than to ensure anything was kept out. His brain whirs, cogs twisting into place, putting the picture together with bracing clarity.

Bruce sucks in a breath and pulls away from the door. He has to bite his tongue to keep from chastising himself verbally. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

“What?” Joker squints through the window.

Bruce tries to recall the details of the reactor as he had managed to look at it from the upper level. It had been dark, he’s pretty sure that in the absence of electricity to light up the control panels, that’s how it’s supposed to look. There’s no telling what state it’s in like that, whether it’s leaked or if the power cells are still properly functional. For all he knows, it might be close to collapse.

“There’s…is the reactor still live?”

Joker blinks. “Gotta assume so. Unless this fearsome band of children and crocodiles are playing hide and seek with a world class nuclear technician, I don’t think they could have shut it down themselves. That’s supposed to be like, really hard to do, right?”

Bruce shakes his head. “The reactor core is fuelled by a chain reaction. It’s not possible to stop it, you can only flood the cells to slow it down.”

“Huh. So you’re saying someone took a murder stone, made it so it couldn’t be stopped, then used it
to power their telly? That’s just poor planning.”

It’s more complicated than that, much as the details escape him in the haze of his fever. Bruce has long since learned that trying to explain nuclear physics to people who aren’t Barbara or Tim rarely goes well for him but that’s fine. He doesn’t need Joker to understand the specifics, just the stakes.

The way Joker phrases himself though, it stirs old memories Bruce hadn’t realised he’d been storing. Slogans painted on street corners, left over literature scattered across pavements when the God botherers were forced out. A certain kind of radio chatter that was too farfetched to take seriously.

He used to take everything so seriously, hours spent filtering through the most mundane of threats. But the talk coming out of the hyper religious right wing Christian radio channels was so devoid of any basis in fact that Batman never bothered himself with it. It was always doom this and death that. They had some particularly choice opinions on the length of Diana’s clothing and they point blank hated Clark – he got in the way of their worldview, too much like a God to allow for the nebulous existence of their own.

They used to talk about murder stones though, particularly in those last few months. Bruce had been standing in the reception of an English speaking investment firm in Sao Paolo, preparing to discuss the redistribution of Wayne Enterprises research funds in combatting the rise of Zika, eyes flicking to the flat screen television sitting over the lobby. It played the news twenty four seven, more to advertise that they could afford the Skybox than anything. The anchor had cut out, the cameras switched to a view of downtown Metropolis recorded on a last generation smartphone, Clark rising through the air and saying something impossible to make out.

“You can’t stop our murder stone.” Someone had said, them the screen erupted into green light. Five minutes later, there was no more television, no electricity of any kind. The roads were clogged with useless vehicles and the question already on everyone’s lips had been ‘how long will this last?’

Forever. This change is forever. You can die or you can embrace it. Bruce reaches out to catch Joker’s wrist. “How did you know they were Christian fundamentalists?”

“What?”

“You said…before.”

“Oh, I met them a few times. They thought I was the worst, I was always slipping arsenic into the communion wine. They kept on about how they had something big planned for the false God.” Joker raises his fingers in air quotes around the word ‘God’. “Plus, this is America, baby! It’s always the angry white Christians who start shit. Sooo predictable. Next!”

“Wait, it was the Gotham branch?”

“How am I supposed to know? I caught the big TV finale same as you no doubt but I have no idea if they managed to franchise themselves. God, I can’t even remember what they called themselves, it’s been so long. On the one hand I’m tempted to say that it was the Gotham squad, because the end of days brought to you by Gotham City is the greatest show imaginable. But on the other hand, I kinda feel like the whole point of our dear motherland has always been getting it a bit wrong. It makes more sense thematically for Mister Perfect to have been taken down by his own people.”

“But you can’t be sure?” Bruce’s fingers curl up into the dips in Joker’s skin. He’s so ridiculously thin, like someone gave his bones a coat of paint and sent him on his way.

Joker pulls his hand away and uses it to throw the door to the lab wide open. “Please don’t start up
the Big Guilty Bat routine, it’s old hat. I’m sure if you did miss something it was nothing that anyone else would have caught. You may be my God but I never claimed you were omniscient, though you did usually manage to think of everything. The God of forward planning.” He makes to step through to the ruined contamination cubicle and Bruce barely manages to pull him back in time.

“We have to think this through. They might have sentries that we can’t see and we need a plan in place in case he wakes up.”

“Who’s he, the cat’s father?”

“Waylon Jones.”

“Oh, Bats,” Joker twinkles with sadistic glee, “Surley you can say the name.”

“His name is Waylon Jones.” Bruce insists. He pushes the door closed with his foot. “But he has a very well-deserved reputation as a killer and a cannibal, so we need to prepare for all eventualities.”

“Eh, I dunno about it being well-deserved. Just because you’ve killed some folk doesn’t mean you know how to do it with style. He’s always been a bit of a brute, if you ask me. So unrefined! And that’s after he finishes talking. Blah, blah, blah, boy’s always got something to say or he wants to negotiate or some other nonsense. Needs to eat human flesh, my ass. All that ‘I don’t want to eat people but they taste so good’ bullshit. C’mon, man! You’re a humanoid crocodile! The comic potential is limitless but nooo, he’s gotta get all philosophical about it.”

Reasonable, on his best days, is how Bruce would describe Waylon Jones. Willing to listen to sense till his patience is tested and the lizard brain takes over. He can’t imagine that waking up to find intruders in his home is going to put them on the man’s good side.

Joker is too noisy, Bruce is too slow. It's counter intuitive but as soon as the solution presents itself it's clear that it's the right one. “We have to wait.”

“What?” Joker peels himself out of Bruce’s grip. “Now you’re just being silly. The longer we wait, the greater the chance of them finding us.”

“If we wait till morning, talk to him, I can probably persuade him to give us the suits of his own accord. It’s the safest option.” Bruce insists. “And if it doesn’t work, we have till tomorrow night to work out how to steal them.”

“Classic Batsy, chalk up his life of crime to a contingency plan.” Joker giggles. “You do know there’s no way he’s going to give us those suits, right? He lives in a nuclear power plant, I’m going to go out on a limb and suggest that he needs them.”

Joker’s probably right, but there’s something warm and certain blooming in Bruce’s chest, entirely at odds with the unbearable heat of his fever. The idea of going toe to toe with an adult and solving a problem without fists or extortion sounds wonderful.

He shakes his head. “It’ll work.”

“First you wanna go back to Gotham, then you wanna talk sense into the big green goblin man. There’s just no winning with you.” Joker rolls his eyes. “Fine! I'll hang back if it means I get to hear your punchline. But you should know that I’m not going to help you negotiate with him, this is your bed so you gotta lie in it. In the meantime, we've got hours and hours till morning, so what are we gonna do to pass the time?”

They could go and take another look at the reactor, maybe see if there’s a way to get closer to it.
Bruce would like to get a better idea of what state it’s in, but more than anything he wants to stop his head from pounding and his arm from aching. “We sleep.”

Joker gasps with mock excitement. “Why, if we bed down now we might manage a full five hours before you toddle off to a fate worse than death. What luxury!”
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Warnings for this chapter: Lots of suicide/death ideation, lots of talk of attempted indirect suicide (including mentioned starvation), strong cultish vibes, more of me attempting to do nuclear physics

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Bruce hauls himself back up the stairs with no help from Joker, just so that they can sleep in the corridor overlooking the lab rather than directly in front of the door. He drops off almost immediately and wakes to the grey light of dawn streaming through the skylights, bright on the whitewashed walls. His head throbs and when he tries to find a more comfortable position on the concrete his arm protests painfully.

There’s a hand on his hip. Joker evidently decided not to listen to his insistence that the fever was going to keep him more than warm enough to sleep alone. Bruce throws him off and sits up just far enough to peer down into the basement where they’re tucked beneath the lip of the window.

Most of the children are still asleep, the handful that aren’t wiping sleep from their eyes and moving in sluggish, uncoordinated patterns that appear to have little purpose. Bruce watches small bodies pull themselves to their feet, plodding into loose huddles. They’re as dead eyed as the children from the mall, as wraithlike as the children back in Morestown. Toy soldiers, broken all the same.

Joker stirs, groaning softly as he wakes and reaching out to drag Bruce back to the floor. “It’s early, honey. Come back to bed.”

A hand snakes along Bruce’s thigh, coming dangerously close to his crotch. Bruce slaps it away and shuffles back towards the opposite wall. He doesn’t want to risk being seen just yet. He gestures for Joker to follow him and receives a complacent scowl in response. After a few minutes of pounding the floor in a mercifully silent tantrum the clown gives up and worms his way over on his belly.

“So, what’s the plan, big guy?”

“Go back the way we came yesterday. Knock. Wait for an audience."

“That’s it? No distraction techniques? No sleight of hand?”

Bruce shakes his head and blinks against the white spots that burst in front of his eyes with the motion. “Suppose it would be too much to ask that I do all the talking.”

“You know me so well!”

Arriving at the door to the inner sanctum and asking to be let in isn’t ideal but Bruce knows that being caught snooping around Waylon Jones’ back with kill negotiations before they can start. He reaches out to still Joker’s hands where he’s throwing the bouncy ball from one to the other, dangerously high given their proximity to the window. “Stop that.”
They move slowly, giving Bruce plenty of time to think back on all the instances that words didn’t work on Jones. His stomach sinks in ways that have nothing to do with nausea. Talking things out is still the best course of action, he’s sure of it, but it’s definitely the best of a list of very bad options.

For his part, Joker is strangely docile, content to follow after Bruce and keep quiet. He’s either come round to the idea of doing things Bruce’s way or he’s a lot more scared of the Killer Croc than he’s letting on.

Waylon Jones, Bruce blames the slip on the fog crowding his head. The doctors at Arkham always encouraged their staff to use the real names of their patients as far as possible. They said it helped people stay anchored to their sense of self.

Keeping track of all the little details is hard when every slight movement sets his muscles on fire. The splint has become cumbersome, waterlogged and heavier than it should be. Every time it’s jostled it sends shockwaves up towards the break that make him want to retch. It must have been at least ten hours since he last drank anything and when he’s running a fever like this that’s beyond dangerous.

They crawl to the other end of the corridor and Bruce needs a moment before he can stand. He sits, shivering despite himself, pushing as much of his skin as possible against the cool concrete. Joker reaches down to press a hand to his forehead and he leans into the touch. The clown is so cool, even through the cowl.

“Dangit, Bats, you’re starting to look as pale as me. And you’ve got a lil bit of a temperature there, buddy. You better hope the hospitals have still got the goods in when we get back to Gotham because you are gonna need ‘em.”

Joker pulls his hand away and slides it under Bruce’s armpit, trying to urge him to his feet. Nerves that are sensitive at the best of times light up in LED clarity when under pressure from the fever. Bruce twitches, trying to get away and lets out an involuntary bark of laughter when Joker delivers a particularly sharp prod to his under arm.

“No…” Joker whispers, face the picture of reverential joy. “Oh no, surely not. Not after all this time.” He tries again, running his fingers down Bruce’s side in a scrunching motion that catches every sensitive patch of skin going. Bruce positively flails trying to throw him off, he barely possesses the state of mind to bite down on his tongue to keep himself from yelping.

Joker descends into silent laughter, falling to his knees and clutching at his stomach. “Oh my God. You’re ticklish? Like really super fucking ticklish? Fucking hell, look at me. Vigilantes hate him! Click here to find out how this man’s paltry altruism discovered this one weird trick for taking down the Batman.”

“’M not ticklish.” Bruce lies. He’s gotten so good at managing his reactions he’d almost forgotten that he was.

Fingers scrape against Bruce’s skin, he and Joker laughing together as he jerks away, trying to get away. They’re far too loud but he can’t find the strength of mind to hold back. He can’t breathe properly on his own, this is all that will come out.

Holding up his palm in a stop signal he half expects to be ignored, Bruce gasps out. “Uncle!”

“You’re no fun.” Joker snorts. He’s still smiling when he takes hold of Bruce’s good arm and uses it to drag him to his feet.

The walk to the stairs is short and excruciating, Bruce leaning heavily on The Joker and trying to
convince himself that he could stop any time. He can feel how much weight he’s lost over the past year, how easily the clown keeps them both moving, walking him forward like he’s nothing.

When they reach the stairs, Joker guides Bruce’s and to the bannister, tells him to old on for dear life and leaves him to stand on his own. Bruce stares down the stairwell, darkening to a deep grey where it vanishes out of sight. He desperately doesn’t want to have to make the trip again. They should have just slept at the bottom.

“You can always shuffle down on your bum!” Joker demonstrates by sitting himself on the top stair and pushing himself down the first flight with enough force to rattle the whole structure.

It would be fast, that much is true, but just watching Joker jerk and tumble as he bounces down the stairs is enough to kick Bruce’s headache into overdrive all on its own. He starts towards the basement, gripping tight to the bannister and stopping to catch his breath as often as he can justify.

“How up, hurry up, hurry up!” Joker hisses. He’d been up and down the stairs several times in the time it’s taken Bruce to get three quarters of the way down. Everything from an encore of his bannister streaking antics from the night before to splaying himself out like a starfish and letting gravity do the work. Bruce is trying, he really is, the cloying panic of an incomplete task tugging at the back of his mind. The gulf between what he is capable of and what he wants to accomplish feels impassable.

When they finally make it to the door to the demolished decontamination cubicle, it’s fully light outside and it doesn’t look like any of the children are asleep anymore. The lab is a rush of activity as they move towards one another, congregating then dispersing seemingly at random. A few of them appear to be pulling apart what little equipment is left intact and a fairly large group has gathered around a hefty book spread open on the floor.

Just visible, Waylon Jones sits to the right, awake but almost entirely motionless save the blinking of his eyes. Children climb up and over him but he doesn’t seem entirely conscious of their presence.

Joker twitches impatiently. “Are we waiting? Are we busting the door down? If you don’t make a decision soon I’ll be forced to take matters into my own hands.”

“We knock.”

“Knock, knock, who’s there? Iiiiiiiit’s Jokesy!” He raps his knuckles against the glass set into the door three times in quick succession, then leans back.

Bruce works out what he’s planning not a moment too soon. Really, the film reference is a dead giveaway. He reaches out to grab Joker by the hair, stopping him from ramming his head through the glass.

“This really ain’t the time, Batsy.” Joker giggles. “If you wanted to play rough you shoulda gotten it out of your system upstairs.”

The knock was enough to get the attention of the inhabitants of the lab, heads turning their way in canon. Bruce feels sick watching the borderline non-reaction from the children, all sporting identical empty smiles. They should be cautious or curious, not rendered passive in the face of a potential threat. Admittedly, having an ally like Waylon Jones removes the urgency of self-defense in a great number of cases but even he spares them little more than a cursory glance before raising a hand and gesturing for them to enter.

The door falls open under Bruce’s hand. He sees the jagged shards of plastic from the cubicle spread
out before him and tries to spot a path around it that won’t be torture on his bare feet. Joker strides ahead, straightening out his spine and spreading his arms wide. “Croc, old pal! Long time, no see. How are the kids? The wife?”

If Waylon Jones is at all surprised to see him, he doesn’t show it. Yellow eyes narrow but he doesn’t flinch. “You’ve not a lot of nerve coming back here.”

“Hey, look at that, he remembers me! We got ourselves a fan. I gotta tell you, buddy, it’s a pleasure to be here in Stinksville on my End of the World Tour. I’ll be from now until whenever.”

Two children fiddling with waste metal look up as Joker approaches them, apparently only aware of his presence when he’s ten feet away. They don’t recognise the danger, blank eyes betraying no indication that they have any idea what he is.

Bruce lurches forward just as fast as his legs will carry him, trying to pull him away. “Joker!”

“Oh yeah,” Joker gestures towards Bruce. “I brought my glamorous assistant along for the ride, hope you don’t mind.”

“Get away from them,” Bruce growls, getting a hand on Joker’s shoulder and tugging him back.

Jones huffs in surprise. Bruce turns to look at him for the first time in the three years since he apparently vanished from the Gotham sewer system. Something of the facial structure of the man he had once been remains, the wide bridge of his nose and deep set eyes. It’s a passing resemblance though, nothing anyone would recognise if they hadn’t seen photos of him from before. He’s grown since Bruce last saw him, shoulders almost comically wide beneath a human sized head. The deep green scales that cover his head and arms fade to a muddle yellow over his belly, the softest part of a man with no weak spots.

Except he looks weak as anything now. Eyelids heavy and spine curling in on itself, a weariness in his bones you can practically smell. He was always so difficult to take into custody and it stings more than Bruce would like to admit to see him looking so worn out.

“He looks like the clown man.” One of the kids says, pointing to Joker.

“The other one looks sick.”

“Are they going to stay?”

“Why is his willy white?”

“That’s body shaming!” Joker snaps his fingers in the direction of the last child to speak, fixing them with a menacing grin. “My, my. Such bad manners.”

“Leave them alone.” Bruce pleads.

“Relax, Batsy. Just so long as you keep your eyes on me, nothing’s going to happen to them.”

“What are you doing here?” Jones rumbles.

Joker opens his mouth before Bruce can get a word in edgeways. “We need a favour, Croc me lad. Thought you might oblige.”

“Ha!” Jones barks. “You’ve never done anything to warrant a favour from me, clown. Move along.”

“Aww, but we came all this way.
“I said no.”

“Well that’s just perfect.” Joker throws up his hands in surrender. “This was a bust. C’mon, Bats.”

Bruce ignores Joker striding back towards the door, wiggling his fingers in the sort of come hither gesture one would use on an excitable puppy. “Hear us out, Waylon.”

Jones makes a noise low in his throat that could be laughter or rage. “Hear you out, Bat? Like you heard me out all those years you had me on the run, hiding in sewers because it was the only place you had trouble tracking me? Trying to get me back into that shit hole you used to call an asylum? You want to run, little rodent. Fly if you can. This place isn’t safe for you.”

“Hear you out, Waylon,” Joker interjects. “I’m not gonna fight either of you.” Jones snaps his fingers and the children scatter to the edges of the room like startled mice.

Bruce’s heart rate calms fractionally. “Then I fail to see how my safety’s in danger.”

“You don’t know the half of it, Batman.”

“Then explain. I’ve got time.” Bruce tries to raise his voice, hoping to sound more forceful, but he just sounds strained. He tries to recall the details of his plan and to his dismay finds there never were any. He was supposed to walk in here, ask for the hazmat suits and take them.

Jones looks at Bruce, expression unreadable. He glances towards Joker, clicking his tongue in exasperation. “What are the two of you doing?”

“It’s like I said, we wants to stop in to see our old pal Croccy. Thought maybe he’d like to give a couple of upstanding gents, such as ourselves, a hand.” Joker singsongs.

Jones shakes his head. “Nah, not like that. I mean the two of you. Batman and The Joker. Not exactly the team of the year. The Bat at least I would have thought would be at the other end of the country by now, all the smart folk headed south.”

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“What does that make you then?” Joker asks.

“I never really prided myself on my brains. Start talking.”

“Well,” Joker starts. “It all began at ACE Chemicals, where I was a lowly-“

“I was in Sao Paulo when the bomb went off.” Bruce cuts across him. His throat aches every time he talks. “I’ve spent the best part of the past year on the move. I found Joker just over two weeks ago. We’re headed back to Gotham and we’d really appreciate it if you could lend us a pair of hazmat suits to finish the trip.”

There’s a moment of silence, then the air is rent by deep honking sounds as Jones tips back his head and laughs. “Man, I haven’t wanted anything to do with that dumpster fire of a city for years. Who the hell would want to go back there now the place is a death trap?”
“See!” Joker turns to Bruce with a look of smug vindication. “Gotham’s trash. No one wants to be there.”

“And you expect me to loan you out two of my hazmat suits for some fool’s errand?” Jones talks over him looking straight at Bruce. “I don’t think so. There’s gotta a better reason for you two putting up with each other than that. I don’t trust random partnerships, they’re always a cover for something.”

“Would you believe me if I told you that the persistent sexual tension that has been building between the two of us for years – manifested as extraordinarily intense physical fights and a vicious mutual hatred – is now so close to breaking that we’re loathe to part from each other until we’ve seen the grand finale?” Joker asks.

“No.” Jones replies.

“He’s a danger to himself and others. I wasn’t going to leave him running around out there by himself.” Bruce explains. “Plus, he’s obsessed with me and isn’t about to leave me alone in a hurry.”

Jones rolls his eyes. “How convenient.”

“I don’t find it at all convenient.”

Joker gasps. “Honey! How could you?”

Bruce ignores him. “What about you? Why are you here?”

Jones mouth drifts into a lazy approximation of a smirk. “No need to take that tone, I got nothing to hide. Ain’t exactly the most interesting story. I was in the area when the bomb went off, unlike most folk I didn’t die. I wasn’t about to turn a bunch of kids away when they’d been turned out of their homes. Guess I’ve always had a soft spot for kids with no one else to look out for them. They’re safer in here.”

“Batsy is relating so hard right now.” Joker whispers.

“But, it’s not safe.” Bruce blinks up at Jones, trying to keep him in focus. “The radiation…”

“You let me worry about that.” Jones huffs. “It ain’t gonna kill us, just slows us down a bit, reduces emotional range.”

Bruce screws up his face, confused. “You mean…from the plant?”

“Oh. No. Shit. Who the fuck cares what that does to us?”

“I saw a documentary on what this kind of radiation can do to a person!” Joker pipes up happily. “Skin shredding off, puking till there’s nothing left. Blood everywhere. Sounds frightfully fun.”

“Yeah well, we’re not so fussed about all that.” Jones shrugs. “Folk round here are scared though. The kids in Morestown won’t come beyond the railbridge. You should have followed their example.”

Bruce thinks back, struggling to reach into the deep dark recesses of the previous afternoon. There had been a tunnel, something dark, then he had been leaning against the wall. He had recognised it as a rail bridge, but thinking back on it he doesn’t think it spanned the two banks.

“The bridge isn’t a bridge.” Bruce frowns. Saying it out loud, it seems obvious.
“When is a bridge, not a bridge?” Joker laughs, waving towards the nearest work bench where a
group of children have gathered, staring at him in awe.

It seems to take an age, happening in slow motion, but Jones raises a hand and points towards Joker.
“They won’t come past the bridge because of me. The bridge isn’t there because of him.”

Obvious, really. “What did you do,” Bruce hisses, grabbing Joker’s elbow to get his attention.

“Oh, I dunno. Ran through here, decided to get out when I saw Croc was here and you weren’t. Grabbed some stuff from the basement, thought it might be fun to make something go
boom. What’cha know, I was right! Standard fairytale romance, see?”

“He’s a nuisance.” Jones growls, but there’s no malice in his voice.

“Anyway!” Joker turns back to face Jones with wide eyes and a wider smile. “Let’s go back to that
thing you said about this place not being safe for us, that sounded fun!”

“Last I checked I was a cannibal.”

Joker rolls his eyes. “Yes, you’re an outstanding predator, when you can find it in yourself to get to
your feet. See, I’ve been teaching Batsy all about this cool new thing where you listen to what
people mean rather than what they say and I’m pretty sure you didn’t mean you when you were
making your charming little threats.”

With a great groaning, Jones pulls himself to his feet, stepping over to loom down at them. There’s
always been a certain lizard like tightness to his eyes when he’s angry that’s missing now, but Bruce
has to fight the urge not to step away. He doesn’t like being so close to something that could knock
his legs out from under him without having some kind of protocol in place for what to do should it
try.

“You’re standing in a nuclear power plant. The reactor core was never properly dealt with. You
work it out.” Jones rumbles, then steps past them and continues on to the nearest gaggle of children,
where a very small child is trying to dismantle the lens column of a high end microscope. He leans
down to examine their handiwork, muttering in approval.

Bruce’s stomach sinks. “You mean…”

“The reactor’s gonna blow!” Joker laughs. “Oh man, that’s gonna be entertaining. When?”

Jones shakes his head noncommittally. “Maybe today, maybe tomorrow. Maybe next week.”

“Maybe next month?” Bruce tries.

“No. It’s going to be soon.” Jones says, like he’s not remotely bothered by the prospect of dying
from radiation sickness. If he’s right about the reactor then the chances are radiation levels within the
plant must already be approaching dangerously unsafe.

Bruce hobbles after Jones as he moves between the groups of children crawling over the wreckage
of the lab in search of new things to break. “You have to get out of here.”

Jones doesn’t look up from assisting with the snapping of a choice sheet of cork. “What would be the
point?”

“If you stay here, you’ll die.” Bruce searches Jones’ face for some hint of understanding. There used
to be something sharp behind his eyes, powerful enough to remind even the most reactionary of
opponents that underneath the animal’s skin resided a man. Now it’s gone soft, the same dullness that sits in the eyes of all these children.

Jones’ eyes flick up to meet his. “Better to go out quick than to starve to death. Or getting shanked for a tin of beans. We’ve been waiting on this for months, we’re not going to leave.” He leaves Bruce standing between what was one two rows of workbenches.

“This is weird.” Joker leans over Bruce’s shoulder.

Bruce nods. “We have to get out of here.”

“Hey! Look at you talking sense. I’m with you on this one, Bats. I don’t wanna go out in some rando nuclear explosion. There’s just no good way to spin it, ya know? Ever since Hiroshima everyone’s like ‘too soon’.”

“This is going to be more Chernobyl than Hiroshima.” Bruce is slowly but surely starting to join the dots together, looking at what Jones needs and what he has. Now that Jones has left his perch, the hazmats are clearly visible, a pile of orange and white behind the clearing in which he slept, standing in stark contrast to the uniform grey of the lab walls.

If the reactor is going to blow in the next twenty four hours, they’re dead anyway. Not that Bruce has any reason to think Jones is telling the truth but he doesn’t have time to look into the stability of the reactor himself. Any longer than that and as long as they move fast, there’s a reasonable chance of them making it to a safe zone, somewhere upwind. He looks at the shifting mass of bodies moving through the lab, too young or too dead eyes to understand what’s going on here. They deserve better than this.

Joker groans. “I don’t like what your face is doing. Really, Bats?”

“We can’t leave them.” Bruce says with as much finality as he can muster.

“We didn’t come here to save a bunch of stupid orphans. What would we do with them all? I really feel like we should let our relationship progress past the honeymoon stage before we think about adopting kids. Besides, I’m hopeless at remembering to feed them, I’ll probably just kill them all by accident.”

Bruce ignores him and heads after Jones. The lab feels huge to his strained and worn out muscles, the effort necessary to get from one side to the other barely tenable.

Jones is focused on helping a girl pull apart an old leg from a swivel chair. “They won’t go with you.” He says. “I don’t much like either of you but you’re welcome to join us if you want. I promise you, though, they’re gonna stay.”

“Are you going to stay?” The girl asks. The depths of her eyes consolidate into something nearly human.

Bruce shakes his head. “We have to go. You should come with us.”

“Why would I want that?” The girl smiles as Jones passes her the broken pieces of the chair.

“Bad things are going to happen here.”

“We’re going to die.” She informs Bruce happily. “And when we’re dead we can stop hunting for food and scaring everyone else in Morestown and waiting. Waiting’s really boring.”
She can’t be older than seven.

Bruce turns his attention back to Jones. “If the reactor blows, it’s going to wipe out the children in Morestown as well.”

Jones walks on. “Good.”

“I have to stop you.”

“What’s to stop?” Jones asks. “I’m not forcing the reactor to blow, it’s gonna do that all by itself.”

“It’s true!” The children chorus. “We read it in the books.”

Like a proud parent surveying his progeny, Jones graces them with an indulgent smile. “Right. You see, Batman, the world has changed. The life’s been sucked out of it and some of us are tired of breathing when there’s no more point to anything. First we figured we’d just starve to death. How’d that work out kids?”

“Awful!” the chorus replies.

“Exactly. Getting so hungry your stomach tries to eat itself is not a nice way to go. We all agreed we wanted a cleaner death, so we tried dehydration. But you’d be surprised how hard you can fight to survive, even if you don’t wanna live. With the river just a short walk from the front door we all caved on that one pretty quickly. We figured the water was probably full of toxic waste so we hoped that would kill us, but aside from a few random infections we’re all still here. The reactor though, there’s no way to stop that taking us out.”

Boiling rage is lighting somewhere beneath Bruce’s skin but he’s not yet ready to face it head on. He stares at Jones, dumfounded. “You’ve brainwashed these children into thinking that life isn’t worth living anymore and you’re going to let them die for your own nihilism.”

“Nah. See, we’ve never tried to hide our eventual goal. Plenty of kids decided to go back to Morestown rather than stick it out. Those that are left want this. The certain death life didn’t choose them, they chose it.”

When his anger bubbles to the surface, Bruce reckons he might find the energy for a couple of decent blows. He weighs up his chances of hitting Jones hard enough to knock him back but that doesn’t account for the children.

Bruce will knock out every last child in the room and drag them out of here if he has to. He doesn’t care what they think they want. “They’re children, they don’t know what they’re doing.”

Joker shoots Bruce his best disappointed stare.

“If the reactor goes, it’s going to make this area uninhabitable.” Bruce snaps at him.

Joker is unmoved by this information. “It’s barely inhabitable now.”

“You and I won’t survive.”

“Of course we will, darling. We always do. Call it natural talent, call it plot armour. The fact is, you’re smart enough and I’m devious enough and we’re both far too handsome to die. We’ll be fine.”

“We have to do something!” Bruce roars, and his voice is swallowed by the concrete walls. He
whirls around fast enough to make himself dizzy, trying to catch the eye of as many children as are looking his way.

“Like I said.” Jones starts. “You can’t.”

“Not possible.” Pipes up one child.

“The books say no.” Says another.

“Which books?” Bruce growls.

It transpires that the thick volume Bruce had spotted through the window to the lab is one of many on nuclear physics and the upkeep of nuclear facilities that the children have dug up from around the plant. They’re worn from overuse, every page dog eared from being marked and remarked so many times that it’s impossible to pick out any page as being more important than its neighbours.

Bruce tries to leaf through a couple of them but the fever blurs his vision, making it impossible to pick out anything more detailed than the chapter titles. He catches something about the optimal structure for a uranium core to maximum temperature without generating dangerous heat. It’s definitely beyond primary school reading levels.

“Do you understand this?” Bruce asks Jones, trying not to sound too incredulous.

Jones flashes a small smile. “No. But they do.”

“See,” a boy who barely makes it to Bruce’s hip tugs his arm to get his attention. “The reactor will be lead lined, but when it gets too hot the concrete around it’s going to crack. Then the lead lining will be damaged and all kinds of radiation can get through. We know it’s going to be strong enough to kill us because uranium has a half-life of four point five billion years so it’ll be poisonous for ages yet.” He grins like this is wonderful news. It sickens Bruce how much he reminds him of Dick.

Bruce isn’t great at talking too kids. He’s been told it’s because he talks down to everyone and rarely simplifies anything. “When the rector explodes, it’s going to kill a lot of people outside the plant.”

The boy brings a hand to his chin, imitating a philosopher in deep thought. “But…being alive isn’t good anymore. So won’t they want to be dead too?”

“You don’t get to decide if they die for them.”

“Why not? If it’s better like this, why would they be sad?”

“Solid reasoning!” Joker cries, midway through a rather complex trick shot with his rubber ball that sends it careening off several pieces of scrap metal before coming back to him. “Cam we keep him, Batsy? Please, please, please!”

“People are still living in Morestown.” Bruce continues. “Some of them are quite happy with their current circumstances.”

“What are they happy about?” Asks a girl, looking up from a second volume on the thermodynamic properties of reactor cells.

“Do they have more stuff to break?” Asks another.

“I like breaking stuff.”

“But soon it will all be broken.”
“It’s ok, we’ll be dead after that!”

A chorus of excited babble starts up around the room, the children apparently in agreement that dying in amongst their broken home is the best course of action.

“Like I said, they can go anytime they want.” Jones booms. He’s finished his rounds and lumbers back towards the spot where he had slept. His shoulders shake with the effort of moving, like he’s struggling to breathe.

Joker trails after him, picking up detritus as he goes and trying to force it to recombine into something more useful. “Ya know, Croc, it seems to me that you have no plans for those hazmat suits so really, what’s the point of being a dog in a manger about them? You might as well hand them over.”

“Probably.” Jones smiles at him, flashing teeth too long and sharp to belong to a normal man. “But I mean, you stole my shit a while back. So why should I?” He goes for the hazmat suits before settling back down on the floor, gathering them close to his belly and curling over them. His spine forms a perfect semi-circle, flexible in ways a human should never be.

Joker turns on his tail and prowls back towards Bruce, wearing an expression of scorned rage. He’s muttering furiously under his breath, eyes darting around the room in search of parts he can use.

Bruce grabs him by the shoulder. “Don’t do anything rash.”

“Don’t tell me what to do!” Joker snarls, shoving him off and leaping towards a pile of discarded metal strips.

A wave of dizziness compounded by nausea washes over Bruce. Stumbling towards the last intact counter in the hope it will take his weight, he feels small bodies moving past him, letting him pass but too enraptured by his presence to leave him alone entirely. He reaches his destination and accidentally hits the splint against the edge of the table, yelping in pain as the broken ends of his femur grind against each other. When he looks up, Joker is dashing towards the other end of the lab, eyes hardened the way they only ever do when he’s locked onto a target.

Joker’s got eyes like springtime in Robinson Park, like the green lawns of the mansion Bruce grew up in, like neon lights hanging over the red light district. He’s so very dangerous, there’s no way he picks up that kind of purpose without intent to cause harm.

Bruce hoists himself back to his feet and starts towards Joker. The clown is pulling something off the walls, but his vision is too fuzzy to make out what. The children aren’t scared of him, if anything, they’re curious. Crowding around him to watch him work.

As Bruce steps forward, a crack echoes through the room and a hush echoes through the crowd. peels off as a low rumble, reverberating through his feet. He lurches back towards the counter before his compromised balance knocks him down.

Joker jerks away from the wall, back straight, meercat attentiveness making the piles of assorted junk cradled in his arms look comic. “What was that?”

“Your cue to leave.” Jones informs him.

The children look up at Bruce with identical expressions of unthinking bliss. “Now, we die.”

Chapter End Notes
Plotting wise this is the weakest chapter in the fic, hopefully you can forgive me given what it sets up
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: a momentary suicidal urge described up close and personal

Radiation sickness is a bad way to go. Standing at the centre of a nuclear blast, you go up in smoke before you’ve had time to realise your own mortality, but proximity to dangerous radioactive material will kill you slowly, Skin peeling off, days of vomiting up black matter as your body breaks out in an archipelago of cancers while your organs rot inside you. Looking round the room, Bruce can tell that neither Jones nor the children are quite aware of this. For all that time spent trawling through books on how to maintain a reactor, they’ve never read anything on the biological effects of uranium. Daydream smiles break into worried frowns all too quickly, looking to each other for some sign that they are not the only ones still living.

The boy who had explained to Bruce how nice it was going to be when they were dead turns to Jones. “Waylon, why aren’t we dead yet?”

“You’d know better than me.” Jones scratches hard at the back of his neck. “Maybe it takes time for the radiation to get out of the reactor?”

No doubt that’s part of it. Bruce is rooted to the spot, unable to decide whether it’s more important to distract Joker from whatever he’s doing over by the wall or to scoop up as many children as he can and run. Not that he’s in any fit state to run right now, or to carry and weight beyond his body. He should have kept Joker bound and gagged, he’d almost be back in Gotham by now if he had.

Luckily, Joker needs no convincing that whatever he was trying to do with the pieces of metal picked off the wall is not top priority right now. He drops what he’s carrying in a rush and vaults over several piles of debris in his rush to get back to Bruce.

“Time to enact a daring escape, methinks.” He’s smiling, but it’s strained. He scans the room, no doubt hunting for weak spots and materials that only he would be able to make useful. Bruce is as at a loss for what to do next, he looks at the items lying near his feet and tries to envision them fitting together into something of value but comes up empty handed.

A secondary explosion sounds behind them, strong enough to shake the plant’s foundations. Joker spares a glance over his shoulder in the general direction of the reactor before grabbing Bruce’s hand and dragging him into action. “Well, would you look at the time? I do believe we’ve overstayed our welcome.”

Bruce stumbles forward but tugs his hand free of Joker’s grasp. He nearly loses his balance turning round to get a better idea of which children are closest to him. There are three sat almost at his feet, though only one of them seems to be aware he’s there.

“Have to go!” Bruce tells them, grabbing a child around the middle and hoisting them over his shoulder. His back clicks unpleasantly with the movement and though the child can’t weigh all that much his good shoulder protests the extra weight.

“What are you doing?” Joker screeches at the exact same moment that Jones lets out a roar that
sounds like it was plucked straight from the cretaceous period.

Bruce looks up and sees a great mass of reptilian skin mobbing towards him, too fast to stop and almost no time to get out of the way. He has just enough presence of mind to dive before Jones hits him, but he judges the angle wrong and lands with most of his bodyweight resting in his right arm. He screeches in pain, struggling to keep hold of the child squirming in his good arm.

“You’re hurting me!” The child tries desperately to wriggle away from him.

Bruce rolls onto his back, breathing heavy with the aftershocks of his landing. He stares up at the ceiling, trying to remember if it had always been so blank and grey or if the fever is starting to paint over reality. The floor is cool beneath him, it would be so easy to lie here and forget about everything else.

The child slips away. Heavy footsteps sound across the floor. If Bruce could just stay like this…

The perfect grey of the ceiling is interrupted by a large, green thing with fangs, snarling down at Bruce like the beast it thinks it is. “What are you playing at, Batman?”

There are children in this building. They don’t deserve to die. “Can’t leave them.”

“You don’t have a choice!” The green thing spits, voice like gravel in a cement mixer. “If you want to live, that’s your business, but we’ve made our plans for the end of the world.”

Bruce wants to laugh. Who makes plans for the end of the world?

Batman made plans for all sorts of things. Bruce wouldn’t call any of them the end of the world, and certainly nothing he envisioned was as dire as this, but there were plans.

The pain still shooting up his arm fades incrementally and Bruce’s consciousness slips back into some kind of focus. He moves to sit up but he can’t because there’s nothing to push off of. Gravity has reversed itself. He looks towards his feel and sees thick, green digits wrapped around his ankles.

“Put me down.” Bruce groans.

“I oughta bash your brains out!” Jones snarls.

“Not that that doesn’t sound like a splendid evening’s entertainment, but I’m afraid we’re going to have to cancel. Technical difficulties, yadda yadda. You know the drill.” Joker drops out of nowhere in a shower of sparks, latching onto Jones’ back. His arms wrap around the man’s neck and start to squeeze and Bruce is so very grateful that the clown is much stronger than he looks.

None of the children step in to help Jones. They look up at him, puzzled, asking if there’s anything they can find in the books that might help.

“Get off me!” Jones rasps.

Joker’s shrill laugh only emboldens Bruce’s headache where it strikes his eardrums. “Sorry, honey. I’m afraid I missed that lecture on consent back at the beginning of the year. Too busy meeting up with my roofie guy, you know how it is.”

Jones reaches up to pry Joker away and in the process drops Bruce. It’s not a long fall to the floor but he lands right on his head, the ears of the cowl digging into his skull. He pulls himself into a ball, clapping his hand over an ear and willing the ringing in his bones to stop.
Jones' roars and Joker’s cackles sound empty in a space this large. Bruce dares to open his eyes a
little, and though the room appears to be vibrating at a high frequency, he can just about make out
that Joker had effectively ridden Jones to the other end of the room.

Lurching towards the wall, Jones tries to knock Joker off but the clown has always been quicker than
quick and with such a large assailant to play with it’s easy enough for him to move around Jones’
body without letting go, wrapping limbs around his head to block his vision. The loud thwacking of
scale on concrete sounds out again and again but Joker remains tight on his perch.

Beyond being an irritation and occasionally pulling hard enough on Jones’ windpipe to tease
strangulation, Joker does almost nothing to incapacitate him. Every time the man-beast moves
towards the wall, Bruce expects the clown to take advantage of the moment and slam his head into
the concrete. It doesn’t happen though, and he can’t for the life of him understand what the tactical
advantage of delay is.

Whatever Joker’s doing, he’s wasting time. The smell of smoke is starting to drift through the lab,
promising terrible things at work in the reactor. Bruce frantically tries to recall what he should be be
expecting next. If there’s a fire, then the reactor must have overheated, but even if a crack in the
surrounding concrete weakened the lead lining there’s no guarantee that a radiation leak has taken
place yet.

Best case scenario, they are in imminent danger of being in the war path of a huge quantity of
gamma radiation. Bruce pulls himself to his feet and though the room is still swimming in and out of
focus and someone may or may not have taken a jackhammer to his temples, he stays standing. The
sparks that had surrounded Joker when he dropped onto Jones’ back are now lying on the ground,
glinting like diamond dust. Bruce shifts his feet and something sharp digs into the soles. He pulls
back quickly and sees red lying amongst the shimmering silver.

Broken glass. Bruce looks skywards and thinks he can see a tear in the middle window overlooking
the lab. If he still had the grappling gun it would be the work of a moment to swing himself up there
and escape.

The children seem more or less unaware of the fight taking place in their midst. A fair few of them
are staring listlessly towards the back wall, in the direction of the reactor, but a few are still focused
on pulling apart the remaining lab equipment and some of them have crowded round to read from
one of the big books. They don’t even bother to step out of Jones’ way as he tries to shake the
monkey from his back.

Joker positively screams with laughter every time one of the children comes within crushing distance
of Jones’ feet. “Careful now, wouldn’t wanna hurt the little darlings.” He screeches. “You gotta pay
attention.”

These last words should be directed at Jones, but Joker’s eyes flash towards Bruce, two familiar
pinpricks of green in a world that otherwise seems alien to him. They jerk upwards, encouraging him
to follow them.

Then Joker and Jones are gone, running past him towards the back of the room. Bruce turns to look
for what Joker had been signalling towards and it doesn’t take him long to spot something bright
orange lying in the middle of the floor.

The hazmat suits. Joker’s creating a distraction. Bruce turns to look at him and their eyes lock. They
each nod once in understanding, then Joker is dragged away as Jones continues to try to shift him.

Bruce moves towards the wall, hugging it as best he can. Not that it will hide him, not without the
cover of black rubber and Kevlar to protect him from prying eyes. The walls are cool though, and that alone is enough to keep Bruce on course. Jones is fairly well distracted but it wouldn’t do to break his concentration.

When he reaches the back corner of the lab, there’s no more cover to be had. Bruce breaks away from the wall, staying as low to the ground as he can manage without falling over. There are a lot more than two hazmat suits, distributed in a long ribbon across the floor, marking the path Joker had cut when he decided to chase after Bruce.

The orange material is thick and unpleasant under Bruce’s fingers and when he lifts one of the suits he’s shocked by how heavy it is. He really should have expected as much, but just thinking about that kind of weight bearing down on his broken arm makes him nauseous. Hauling two of them over his shoulder is a whole lot harder than it should be, the fabric keeps trying to slip out of his grip and he’s sure he’s making too much noise.

Having gotten what he came for, Bruce dashes back to the wall and heads towards the broken decontamination booth. He looks towards Joker, waiting for some kind of sign that he’ll be done soon. He wishes the clown would have clued him in on this plan before launching into it. It would make everything so much simpler.

Joker continues his efforts to irritate Jones, laughing uproariously when they cut through pockets of children. Bruce itches to leap into the fray and pull the two of them apart, but he doesn’t have the nerve or the strength to be a real contender in that fight.

A group of children, apparently unaware of the fight taking place in their midst, walk over to the decontamination booth and start rooting through the wreckage, evidently looking for something specific. One of them pats Bruce’s knee as they pass, smiling up at him with a generically bland smile. They don’t talk while they work, holding piece of plastic up to each other and shaking or nodding their heads in response. Most of what they take is long and slim.

In a voice barely above a whisper, Bruce asks. “What are you doing?”

The children turn to look at him as one. “We’re building.” They say the word with awe, like they can’t quite believe it’s coming out of their mouths.

“What are you building?” Bruce shuffles closer to them, crouching down till they’re at eye level. His knees crack horribly, pain shooting up his calves.

“A ladder.” Says one.

“A big one that can reach all the way to the ceiling!” Another continues, the faint traces of what might be called excitement sparking in their eyes.

Bruce frowns. “Why?”

“The man with the white willy told us to.”

Bruce’s stomach sinks. “How far along are you?”

“We’re doing good.” Two of the children tell him at once. “Everyone’s working on it. When Waylon and the man with the white willy are done, we can give him the ladder.”

“We think he’s going to break it.” A third child says. “It makes sense. If there’s nothing left to break, you have to build something new, then break it. The man with the white willy is very smart.”
“He’s something.” Bruce agrees. He rises back to his feet and his calves scream, the ache of over heated muscle pulsating through his body. He temporarily loses his grip on the hazmat suits and they go clattering to the floor.

The sound gets Jones’ attention. With a roar, he raises his arms and pulls Joker off his shoulders. Bruce is worried that the clown has had his limbs torn off and a whole lot more worried that he’s been knocked unconscious when Jones holds him out like a particularly offensive ragdoll and throws him towards the nearest wall.

Joker lands with a sharp crack and falls to the floor. Bruce holds his breath, waiting for him to get up and walk it off. It seems to take forever.

When Joker does swing himself upright, Jones has already redirected his attentions to Bruce and is barrelling towards him. “You leave them alone!”

“Time to fly, little bat!” Joker calls. Bruce watches him wobble to his feet, laughing when he shakes and has to hold the wall for balance.

Bruce grabs the hazmat suits and finds the speed to get to the door before Jones gets to him, but he can feel it draining what little energy he has left. He falls across the threshold of the stairwell and the wall crunches audibly behind him where Jones hits it like a cannonball. Bruce doesn’t know if the building actually shakes, but it feels like it should.

The good news is that the door isn’t large enough to let Jones through head on, giving Bruce the smallest sliver of the head start he needs if he wants to survive this. He needs to get himself up the stairs as fast as possible, ideally before his pursuer gets through the door.

Bruce isn’t going to think about those jaws opening wide to expose serrated teeth. Arms strung tight with more muscles than a normal man, pulling apart bodies like tissue paper. The sentient human may be real, but so is the animal mask, the rational hidden by the instinctual. Bruce has to be smart, he has to be quick.

Being quick is so very hard.

He stumbles towards the stairs and grips the bannister hard enough to hear his joints crack. Gritting his teeth, Bruce forces himself to take the stairs two at a time despite the protests of his aching bones and pounding head. It’s still slow going, having to wade through a sludge clogging his bloodstream while life rockets past him at super speed. He’s out of breath by the time he’s reached the top of the first flight of stairs, ready to collapse in a heap at the top of the second.

It takes a mercifully long time for Jones to get through the door. Bruce is sweating buckets and nearing the top of the third flight when the victorious howl of a freed animal echoes up the stairwell. His breath catches, adrenaline taking the shape of fear as the first reverberations of something heavy and alive step onto the first flight below.

There are still three flights to go before he reaches the next floor and Bruce can’t move fast enough. The shaking of the stairs beneath Jones’ feet knocks Bruce off balance, sending him crashing into the opposite bannister so that his injured arm takes the brunt of the impact and he screams. His feet slip from the stair in front of him and he can barely move as his headache builds with the rattling of metal through the stairwell. Jones is moving fast behind him, the rhythmic pounding of his feel growing louder by the second. When he’s right below Bruce. He reaches up and tries to grab his ankles through the gaps between the steps.

Bruce keeps moving, stepping out of the claws trying to tear at his legs. He falls forward,
unintentionally throwing the hazmat suits forward, one landing on the platform leading up to the next staircase and another slipping through the space between the steps. He reaches down to cradle his stinging ankle and feels blood bubbling up between his fingers. He has just enough time to understand that he’s not going to survive this before the whole stair shaft shakes and shudders entirely independent of Jones’ footsteps and he’s thrown down half a flight of stairs.

The stairs shake again and Bruce starts slipping ever further downwards. He grabs the first solid thing he can reach, wrapping his bloodied hand around cool metal and bracing his legs against lower steps that he has to hope can still take his weight.

The steps fall away. A booming groan echoes around the creaking of damaged metal as Jones drops with the rest of the stairs. Looking up, Bruce can see that the flight he’s holding on to is listing dangerously to the left. It’s broken away from the wall entirely and is bonded to the next flight up by little more than a handful of screws.

Jones’ momentum must have been enough to pull the bottom three flights down. Bruce hangs from the very end of the forth flight and without the use of a second arm he has no way to pull himself up.

From the sounds of the muffled grunts below him, Jones is stunned but not unconscious. He’ll climb the walls to get to Bruce if he has to, claws more than thick enough to dig out a path through the concrete.

Bruce can’t move. Bruce has to move. With a grating keen, the stairs lurch as a few more screws come loose. All he’s doing is delaying the inevitable, after so many years of doing what he can to suppress his fears, it’s so silly that he should be scared now. The image of Alfred pops into is head, viewed from round corners when he thought no one was looking, reciting Shakespeare to the furniture while he cleaned.

There’s provenance in the fall of a sparrow…

Closing his eyes, Bruce lets the image morph into sharp teeth bearing down on him. And really, it would be a cleaner way to go than dying over a matter of days from the radiation leaking from the plant. The stairs he’s holding onto shake but they don’t fall. He’s glad of it, he’s going to do this on his own terms.

Bruce lets go. For a glorious moment he is in freefall, dashing across the night sky with all the city spread out before him. There’s a decel line in his hand, ready to spring, but what would be the point?

Laughter sounds, distant and faint and vibrant and up close and everything in between. Cool fingers wrap around Bruce’s wrist and he stops falling.

He starts moving up towards the next flight of stairs. Bruce opens his eyes and they are filled with green.

“I seem to remember a promise I made to to that bird brain scene stealer, not that I’m one for keeping promises, but I’m pretty sure I get to feed you your own intestines before you go pulling stunts like that. You want to be careful who sees you treating your life with such reckless abandon, love. People might think you were crazy.

“Joker!” Bruce gasps as he’s hauled up and over the shuddering wreck of the fourth flight of stars.

“Yes, it is! Your gallant saviour.” Joker laughs. “I’m afraid you’ll have to save the mushy true love’s first kiss first kiss stuff for when we’ve gotten ourselves out of this hot water.”

“You’ve kissed me before.”
“But you’ve never kissed back. I do like the implication that what we have is true love though, I’m gonna hold you to that.”

“I’m very ill and I’m running for my life. I can’t be held responsible for the things I say.”

Joker pulls Bruce up to the stable platform at the bottom of the fifth flight of stairs. He wraps Bruce’s hand around one of the bannister supports and starts fiddling with the edge of the ruined staircase for just long enough to be accused of wasting time, till it breaks away and goes clattering to the floor below.

Judging by the noise Jones makes, it hits him on its way down. Joker doesn’t bother checking to see what state their assailant is in, instead urging Bruce to his feet with a whole lot more grabbing of his buttocks than is strictly necessary.

“So, we’ve got a temporarily out of commission Croc, a nuclear reactor about to do some serious damage and a bunch of very stupid children who make good ladders. Reckon you should be able too devise an escape plan out of that.” Joker babbles, slinging the hazmat suit over his shoulder, sliding an arm round Bruce’s waist and tugging him up the stairs. “Whatever you come up with, we gotta move fast.”

“Joker…even if we get out of here…when the reactor blows…”

“None of that!” Joker snaps, poking at Bruce’s injured arm as punishment. “We’re getting out of here, come what may.” The arm he’s not using to hold Bruce up is clenched at his side, hiding the bouncy ball. It’s stupid, but all Bruce can think about is how he’s never going to know how much of Joker’s story was an out and out lie. If he really did meet Diana in the remains of Metropolis and take up her challenge to save the world.

Preposterous. No one’s getting back into Metropolis, not for thousands of years. Bruce is good, Batman is better and neither of them can envision immunity powerful enough to withstand something that can kill a God.

The climb to the top of the stairs is gruelling and Bruce couldn’t say how long it takes them, he zones out until the only things that matter are setting one foot in front of the other and the press of Joker’s body, cool enough to temper his fever, down his left side. He doesn’t think about the sounds coming from below, he doesn’t think about what’s going to happen when they reach the top. All he knows is that no matter how hard he pushes himself, Joker is always urging him to move faster.

They reach the top of the stairs and Bruce wants to collapse into a heap. Joker doesn’t let him.

“Come along now, Places to see, deaths to avoid.”

Stepping out into the corridor overlooking the lab, the first thing Bruce notices is that everything is much warmer than it’s supposed to be. For a moment he thinks it’s the fever redoubling its efforts but there’s a whiff of smoke in the air, the heat rising the further they move. The rector must have caught fire.

A ladder pokes through the broken middle window and a handful of children are wandering around the corridor in a daze. Bruce glances down into the lab and sees more of them making the climb.

“No time for that!” Joker grabs Bruce’s chin and directs his attention away from the children. “They chose this, remember? If you don’t want to choose it too we have to keep moving.”

Going where, exactly? Heading back down the lift shaft would be impossible in Bruce’s current condition. He opens his mouth to say something about how opposed he is to leaving anyone behind
but the sentiment dies on the back of his tongue. His throat feels scraped raw.

This is all to much.

Bruce jerks himself out of Jokers grip and in classic slapstick fashion, the clown keeps going a few paces before blinking at the empty space at his side and turning to face him with an expression of overblown shock.

With no one to support him, Bruce’s legs give out almost immediately and he slides ungracefully to the floor. The concrete is no longer soothing on his skin, not when Joker had been so wonderfully cool. He tries to drag himself onto his hands and knees winds up sprawled out on his front, unable to summon the strength of will to keep moving.

Joker stamps his foot and starts backing away slowly, threatening to leave Bruce there by himself.

Bruce doesn’t protest. It’s not like he’ll be able to get out of here in time to stop the radiation from slicing through him. Everyone in the building has no doubt already received a dangerously high dosage.

The next crack in the rector seems to cut right through the foundations of the power plant, shaking the building hard enough that Joker loses his balance and falls forward, barely managing to catch himself before he winds up in the same position as Bruce.

His fist unfolds and the green ball skitters away from him. More by luck than design, Bruce opens his hand and catches it before it gets too far. Joker throws a look of mutual understanding his way, the air around them exploding like fireworks. They’ll all be fireworks soon enough, that last crack must have split the reactor wide open.

Nothing left to lose. Bruce wracks his brain for the details of Joker’s tall tale from his travels in Metropolis. It takes a human to activate an asclepion. Presumably all you have to do is squeeze.

This one’s for you, Diana, Bruce thinks, summoning what strength he has left and pushing down hard on the bouncy ball. Nothing happens, the energy bled form his bones and the rubber holding firm.

Then Joker closes his hand over Bruce’s, spiderlike fingers so much stronger than they should be pushing against his, giving his grip power. The rubber splits open in Bruce’s palm, liquid spilling down his wrist and onto the floor.

At first, it’s just liquid, a green gloop that sits glittering up at them, laughing at Bruce for being so credulous in his final moments.

Then white blocks out the world, all consuming. The building rumbles and shudders beneath Bruce’s body, trying to tear itself apart, He hears screaming and he thinks some of it might be his but most of it is high pitched and distant, children realising their folly all too late. They’re not loud enough to cut above the laughter, the loudest thing in the room, the loudest thing left alive. Joker’s fingers stay tight around his, till Bruce’s eyes fade to black and the consequences of their actions are consequential no more.
Chapter 33

Bruce breathes. That, in itself, is surprising.

The suffocating heat of the fire has faded to nothing, the air is smoke free and weightless. He has no idea how long he’s been lying on the floor. It could have been ten minutes, or ten hours, it could have been days. Bruce’s vision is blacked out but he can feel the concrete pressing up against his chest, hear the faint clatter of rubble falling into new configurations, feel fingers wrapped around his own.

“It’s safe to come out.” The voice is familiar, caught on the cusp between hostile and uncharacteristically benevolent. Bruce doesn’t know what it’s talking about; there’s nowhere to come out from, there’s nothing left.

The fingers closed over Bruce’s hand vanish into thin air. He floats in the black momentarily before deciding he doesn’t like it, reaching out to chase his invisible companion. He moves his arm every which way, blind and unable to articulate what he’s looking for.

He doesn’t have to look for long, cool wingers interlock with his of their own accord, steadying his hand and hushing him. “I gotcha! You can open your eyes, you know?”

That’s completely illogical, it’s far too dark for opening his eyes to make any difference. But the voice sounds so friendly, so Bruce tries, staining his eyelids and waiting for a second wave of dark to envelop him.

It turns out that beyond the thin shielding of skin and capillaries, there is light in the world. The sun is shining through a hole in the ceiling of the room through the glass to his right, though it’s not so bright where he’s currently lying. He’s in a long room, riddled with broken glass and populated by some very confused looking children.

“Hey! Eye’s up here.” The voice comes from somewhere above his head, attached to long pale limbs, barely more than a loose collection of skin and bones topped by a crow’s nest of green hair. Malachite eyes shine down at him, like satellites signally him to come into their orbit.

The rubber band of disbelief doesn’t snap back into position, it snaps in two. Bruce drops Joker’s hand and lurches back, only remembering his headache when his blood starts rushing through his head hard enough to sting. He clutches at his skull and wills the room to stop spinning around him, uncomfortably aware of the throbbing of his right arm, the swelling now severe enough that the tissue is pressed up hard against the splint.

Joker laughs long and loud. “Let me know when you come back to yourself, Bats. Can’t say I blame you for the brain fart, this stuff is pretty powerful. For a moment there I thought I was an accountant I mean, can you imagine?”

“What happened?” Bruce groans, and his voice dashes against his cranium.

“Oh, you know.” Joker shrugs. “You saw no other way out of an impossible situation so you took a chance on little old me and whaddaya know, I was right! Completely doomed the rest of the world in the process, mind, but it’s kinda flattering when you think about it. The whole wide world just so Batsy could prove his undying affection for The Joker.”

“I…what?” Bruce tries to think back, bringing up scattered images from what feel more like half remembered dreams than recollections. Children in a laboratory, an impending threat to their safety.
He thinks Waylon Jones might have been there, chasing him up a flight of stairs but that can’t be right. Memory replays the cracking of something in his fist, liquid slipping across his palm.

That had been when everything went white.

Something that sounds too much like seismic activity for comfort echoes up from underneath them and Bruce has the strangest notion that he should know what’s causing it. Joker sits up a little straighter, looking over Bruce’s shoulder with concern flickering in his face. “Your little amnesia spell is wildly entertaining and all but we oughta make our excuses and get out of here ASAP.”

The sound comes again and Bruce decides that just this once, Joker is right. They get to their feet and the clown is much steadier than him, offering around an arm for support that snakes around his waist and pulls him in close. Easy, natural.

They need to get out of here, the question is, how did they get in? What scattered memories Bruce can pull together of what he thinks constituted a break in tell him nothing. A great stretch of black followed by the feel of an ankle beneath his hand. Something about a reactor…

“We’re in a nuclear power plant.”

“Well done!” Joker says with parental overenthusiasm. “Retard’s first revelation, look at you go.”

“That’s not-“

“Skip the lecture on language, would’ya? After the years I’ve spent in a subpar mental health institution as a result of my neurotic abnormalities, I think I’ve earned the right.”

That’s definitely not now this works but Bruce can’t summon the mental fortitude to argue with him. He’s conscious that Joker is doing most of the moving for both of them, tugging him forward with such ferocity that it would be impossible not to keep up.

They pass a flight of stairs that feels familiar and Bruce makes a vague effort to redirect their path towards it. Joker stops him with a sharp kick to the back of his calf. “That’s the way we came in, we’re getting out my more traditional methods.”

Bruce frowns. “What’s that mean?”

“We’re going out the front door.”

Joker leads them towards the far end of the corridor, past a long row of windows that look down on a room filled with broken bits of metal. Bruce knows that if they were able to stop for a couple of minutes he’d be able to work out why none of this feels new.

At the end of the corridor, Joker steers them down a different flight of stairs that play havoc with Bruce’s calf muscles. He must have been climbing earlier, the familiar burn of muscles going down what had once been scaled creeping up his legs. He tries to work backwards from that to ground himself but they pop out into a wide atrium that he doesn’t recognise at all and he loses himself all over again.

“Where are-“ A roar cuts Bruce off, echoing up from behind them. It sinks it’s teeth into the walls, reverberating loud and long.

Joker’s smile wavers. “Let’s just pretend that was a shared hallucination. No time for questions Batsy, we gotta keep moving.”
The atrium looks something like an entrance hall. The dirty white walls may once have been presentable and there are dried out flower stems poking out of several tactically placed vases. Ahead of them, the concrete gives way to a glass structure framing a set of double doors, looking out onto an empty car park and a thick field of grass.

It’s not a field, Bruce remembers that much. It’s just all the glass there is.

“Look, see!” Joker points towards the doors. “I knew I’d get us out of here. Now we get to the fun stuff.”

The fun stuff, as it turns out, is not much fun at all. The door swings shut behind them, barely taking the edge of the animalistic howl that rips through the building. Bruce finally manages to put the sound into context, right alongside the less than elastic twitch of Joker’s smile.

They’re being hunted. They need to keep moving and, most importantly, they need to keep out of sight.

Easier said than done. Save for the grass and a mesh fence that will do little to nothing to cover their tracks, there’s no cover here whatsoever, Joker’s eyes skim the horizon and eventually settle on a point in the distance. It looks a very long way off. Bruce groans in frustration but he’s no position to cut a path of his own so he lets the clown drag him along.

They stumble down the front steps of the plant and across the car park. Joker has a bright orange hazmat suit in his free hand and it trails out behind them, scraping across the tarmac. Bruce wants to warn him not to tear it but he can’t find the words. That colour is definitely going to be a problem, Joker’s hair is bad enough as it is.

They push on, down a paved strip of land leading towards the entrance to the plant compound. If this were Gotham, it would be trimmed with barbed wire, the gateway clearly marked by ominous guard towers and thick brick posts but here it’s little more than a gap in the mesh, a hole where an insubstantial metal gate may once have stood.

It’s not a long way from the plant proper to the gateway, but it’s enough that the echoes of whatever is chasing them are dulled by space. They’re past the gates, out on the road leading to the plant, Joker pushing Bruce to hop down the opposite verge and continue through the overgrown marsh of the riverbank, when the sound of shattering glass breaks the late morning air. Bruce looks back over his shoulder to see if he can get a look at what’s coming for them but Joker chooses that moment to push him over the lip of the grass bank and down to the ground.

Bruce’s injured arm screams. He groans in pain and Joker drives his face into the earth to muffle the sound. “Gotta stay quiet, little bat. Croc’s about.”

Croc. Waylon Jones. Angry because Bruce was trying to take something from him. The hazmat suit, perhaps.

The foliage is thicker here than the lawn surrounding the power plant, the grass grown high and interspersed with weeds and ferns that look like they’ve never been cut back. The ground beneath Bruce is cool and when Joker gestures for them both to start moving, he finds it’s not nearly so awful as trying to run.

Joker curls the hazmat suit into a ball and stows it underneath his stomach where he seems to enjoy using it as a rudimentary wheel, rolling himself along it until it reaches his toes, then pulling it back up his body and starting over. He has to move at odd angles and he’s biting his lip hard enough to draw blood to keep from laughing.
The blood runs along the length of his mouth and he turns to look at Bruce with bright red lips. He looks like distilled nostalgia.

Jones follows behind them, not exactly hot on their tails but getting closer by the minute. He must be able to smell them, that was one of his more prominent animal attributes. The marshy area between the road and the river has a powerful odour though, it should provide some cover. The heady lilt of rotting plant matter and the stench of the peat. Dying and giving life, dust to dust again. Bruce could swear he’s been told the same thing in every church he’s ever visited. Something dies and goes back to the Earth so that something can rise again in the same shape. Keeping the biological niche active. An organism performs its function so well that when extinction claims it something else steps in to fill the gap.

Cool peat keeps Bruce moving, not quite keeping up with Joker but only by virtue of his broken arm. It feels good to be in motion, it makes it easier to think.

They are running from Jones because Bruce tried and failed to take something. Together, he and Joker did something which stopped his memory from functioning properly. They are probably crawling towards the river. If they can hang low in the water for long enough, provided the current doesn’t sweep them away, they can disrupt the pattern of their scent. Then it won’t matter if Jones can smell them through the peat or not.

They are naked because the last time they were naked in a river together they had to run before they could grab their clothes. They have nothing to wear and no food and Bruce has a fever and an infection that needs medical attention and it might kill him. If it does, he’ll just have to live with it.

“I can smell you!” Jones growls.

Joker manages not to laugh outright but can’t manage to hold back a halting snort. Scared is perhaps the wrong word but he always was wary around Waylon Jones. Human minds are easy enough to play with but manipulating something more bestial requires a different skillset.

The ground turns from peat to mud closer to the river and there’s a short stretch of land without any plant cover that they’ll have to cross to reach the water. Jones is rooting through the undergrowth a short way behind them, the longer they wait the greater the chances that he’ll find them. They don’t have time to make plans.

Bruce looks to Joker, a rivulet of red running down his chin and the hazmat suit begrudgingly pulled out from under him. He mouths something in Bruce’s direction, overstretching his mouth to give clarity to unspoken words.

*Move fast.*

*When?* Bruce asks back.

Joker holds up three fingers and starts counting them down. When he gets to one he gets to his feet but stays low, scuttling across the empty patch of mud. He beckons for Bruce to follow him, waving his hand around like a dying fish.

They’re going to be seen, Bruce knows it as soon as Joker moves. The suggestion of discretion is there but the orange of the hazmat suit and the green of his hair and the sharp movements of his hand are just too much. There’s no way Jones can miss them.

Joker winds back his waving and starts urging Bruce to move away. “Run along now, Batsy. I’ll catch you later.”
Jones roars loud enough to shake the rushes. He’s definitely seen Joker. The clown turns to face their pursuer with a wide smile, his hair appearing to stand on end as he straightens himself out, holding the hazmat suit over his head like a beacon. His arms open wide, ready to receive the charging man-beast.

Jones’ footfalls shake the ground as he dashes towards Joker. He comes into view and neither of them are visible for that long before they fall into the river with a mighty splash.

At first Bruce doesn’t move, trying to convince himself that whatever just happened was nothing more than a figment of his addled imagination. When he does summon the energy to shuffle forward, he knows he’s too late to stop Joker and Jones doing terrible things to each other. He drags himself to the lip of the bank and stares into the rushing water, displaced silt clouding the surface. There are claw marks running up the sides of the bank where Jones must have tried to gain purchase before pushing into deeper waters.

Bruce looks around, waiting for the water to break open and reveal the both of them. The river is much wider here than it had been in Morestown, even as strong a swimmer as Jones would need time to reach the opposite bank. They’re most likely still out there, but the gentle swell of the water is unmarred by any signs of a struggle.

Even knowing that there’s a half man half crocodile fighting a dangerous mad thing beneath the water, the river calls to Bruce. He shuffles in carefully, having to swing his legs round at an awkward angle to avoid putting unnecessary pressure on his injured arm. When he’s planted his feet in the riverbed, the water reaches to his navel, the current strong enough that he has to grip the bank to maintain balance. Nice as it is against his overheated skin, a shiver ripples through him where his fever meets the water. His headache is brought into sharp focus, sending him reeling. He staggers forwards and feels the strain on his fingernails trying to keep hold of the land and stop him going under.

If Bruce goes under, he’s not entirely convinced he’s going to be able to get back up.

Even if Bruce knew where Joker and Jones were, there’s no way he’d be able to intervene. The best thing he can do right now is to get out of the way and trust that the clown will catch him up. It’s slow going, having to settle himself after every step he takes to maintain balance but the longer he stays in the water, the clearer his head and the more he can remember.

The children he had tried to take with him, the stairs giving way beneath his feet. Joker appearing out of nowhere in the nick of time and dragging Bruce out of whatever self-imposed death sentence he had dreamt up for himself. He has a lot of questions, but for now it’s better to remember something than nothing at all.

Bruce doesn’t think in distance or time. When he first peeks over the edge of the bank he’s pleased to see that the power plant is a way behind him but he couldn’t say how far. He might have been walking for hours, it might be getting on for nightfall. Joker still hasn’t appeared and every time Bruce thinks about his slim white form vanishing beneath Jones’ great green one he wants to retch.

When he comes across a boat moored to a post, worn down by more than a year’s neglect, Bruce doesn’t know what to do. He can feel the chill starting to settle dangerously deep in his bones but if he crawls out of the water his fever will overpower him. The vessel looks flimsy and its oars are absent, but it’s managed to survive by itself for at least a year so it can’t be completely useless. He forces his vision to come into proper focus to read the name painted on the hull. *The Scuttler*. His indecision leaves him swaying in the water.

He can always drop back into the water later if the heat gets too much. Bruce takes a long drink then
begins the inelegant task of climbing into the boat.

When he’s lying in the belly of the prow, staring up at a bank of clouds that the sun can’t quite manage to break through, he can’t remember how he managed to get from the water to here. All he knows is that his heartbeat is going a mile a minute and he feels like he’s just run a mile. He stays still till he starts to dry off and heat starts creeping back to replace the deep seated chill. Bruce pulls himself upright and collapses over the side of the boat to stare out across the water, waiting for a familiar flash of green to burst up from below.

Nothing happens, seemingly for hours. Bruce gets in and out of the boat a few times too cool off and he wishes the clouds would make good on their promise to rain so he could stay put. He fiddles with the mooring rope and is dismayed when it comes apart in his hands, casting him loose.

Bruce reaches helplessly towards the bank, but it’s too far out for him to grab. The current takes him out into the middle of the river, pushing downstream at quite a pace. He lets out a strangled cry that might be intended to be Joker’s name but it comes out garbled and insubstantial. There’s no way they’ll find each other again after this.

The boat rocks as something bangs against the underside. It’s probably Jones but Bruce’s stomach can’t quite find it in itself to sink. He watches the bottom of the boat, waiting for long teeth to poke through and rip the tiny thing to shreds. Then he can fall into the water and into Jones’ maw and this will all be over.

Another shudder, a thump violent enough to knock the prow askew. Then Joker emerges over the side, hair plastered to his forehead and grinning wide.

Bruce isn’t sure if he’s a hallucination. “J-”

He doesn’t get a chance to ask, but he gets an answer. Joker barrels over the side of the boat towards Bruce, pushing a hand up underneath the cowl and kissing him hard.

Bruce is too stunned to know if he wants to respond in kind, so he lies limp, lets his mouth hang open as Joker stitches seams along their lips, pushes his tongue into Bruce’s mouth and skirts his teeth in search of a response. He’s desperate, pushing the two of them flush together and gripping Bruce’s shoulder hard enough to bruise.

“You gonna make me do all the work?” He breathes and Bruce isn’t sure if there’s any space between them or if Joker is speaking straight into his mouth.

He gets a hand between them and pushes Joker back, far enough that they’re forced to look each other in the eye. The clown’s eyes are like the deepest parts of the ocean, you could fall in and never stop drowning.

Joker sucks in a breath. “Fuck, you’re out of it. We gotta get you fixed up because you aren’t gonna be any fun like this.” He sits back, turns to look upstream and tries to shift their course by rocking his body hard to starboard. Nonchalant as anything, like he hadn’t just been kissing Bruce with all the fervour of a drowning man coming up for air.

Bruce is still trying to process the fact that he’s alive.

The cowl has been unsettled. Bruce pulls it off and is relieved to expose his skin to the air, releasing the heat that had been trapped against his face. His eyes stay fixed on Joker, the ridge of his spine standing proud through paper-thin skin as his eyes track something invisible on the horizon.

Bruce takes a deep breath and wills his tongue for form the words he needs to say. “How did you-?”
“I’ll always find you.” Joker doesn’t take his eyes off the river up ahead. “That’s what I do.”

“And Jones?”

Joker turns back to Bruce, smiling properly, like he could take a bite out of the sky if he thought it would make a good enough joke. “Do you really want to know?”

The boat rushes on down river. Bruce lets his good hand run through the water, fingers still tangled in black rubber. He’s not paying enough attention to notice when the cowl slips away too join the rest of the rubbish heading out to its final resting place at sea.
Bruce stares into the water and watches his reflection ripple around his hand where it bobs and shifts through the wake of the boat. The river ranges from blissfully cool to frigid depending on what his fevers’ doing. They could have been travelling for days, weeks for all the attention he’d been paying but Joker insists it hasn’t been more than a few hours.

“But what do I know? I’m crazy, remember?” He grins. The boat is small enough that they can’t get away from each other, always touching. Joker has his legs spread wide with his feet hanging over each side of the boat and the soles of Bruce’s feet are still pressed into his thigh.

“How far?” Bruce asks, leaning up ever so slightly to get Joker’s attention and immediately regretting it when his head starts spinning. He forces himself to lean far enough over the edge of the boat to take a drink, it’s far from a cure but he’s dehydrating alarmingly fast.

Joker snickers. “Did you just ‘are we nearly there yet?’ me Batsy?”

Bruce isn’t entirely sure where they’re headed. “Doesn’t this river lead to Gotham?”

“Yup.”

“And you don’t mind?”

Joker blinks. “Why would I mind?”

Bruce shrugs and his shoulders feel like lead. “You didn’t want to go.”

“No, I suppose I didn’t, but seeing as we’ve wasted our one chance to stick Metropolis back together we might as well go somewhere. What else am I supposed to do? Lay you out on the grass to watch you decompose? It might be fun for a while but that’s a very slow joke, much better done as a timelapse video. This way I figure I get to see the look on your face as you toddle off into the light. That’s got to count for something.” Joker’s voice bites, unable to suppress his bitterness.

He doesn’t want to be here. He never does anything he doesn’t want to. If the effort wouldn’t leave him more exhausted and out of breath than he already is, Bruce would reach over and shake him. Instead he pulls himself into his best impression of a sitting position, hunched forward and swaying slightly with the movement of the boat. “What are you doing?”

Joker bristles, mouth drawn tight. “Whatever I can do, love. The world’s changing, you gotta change with it.”

“You haven’t changed.”

“Whoever said I was talking about myself?”

Bruce tries to stare him down but Joker steadfastly refuses to meet his gaze. The clown reaches into the water to pull up handfuls of weeds, holding them over his head and ringing them out straight into his mouth. After a minute or two all the tension is bled from his face and he’s back to smiling like he wants to be here.
They had a chance to save Metropolis, they could have killed the radiation at its source. Instead they’re on a slowboat to Gotham, one of them deranged and the other out of his mind with fever. Bruce wishes he’d been a little more credulous, he wishes he hadn’t broken open the asclepion in the power plant. He’s not sure what else he would have done, their fate would be pretty well sealed by now if he hadn’t, but he still wishes he could go back and do it all over, better this time.

Joker sits, apparently contented, twirling streams of weeds around his fingers and laughing to himself. Bruce shakes his head. “I will never understand you.”

“Yes, you will.” Joker says, matter of factly, not looking up from his hands. “You already do, you just don’t want to think about it because you think understanding is the same thing as acceptance. It’s a pretty common misconception but I’m sure we can talk you out of it. Take me, for example. Do I understand the stream of consciousness you call logic and how you hold it up to society to validate your worldview? Almost. One thing certainly does lead to another and it’s nice to think that everyone winds up with their just deserts. Do I accept it or think that it’s the kind of outlook on life that would work for me? Absolutely not. More people are on your side of the line though, see, so I get called crazy for daring to suggest that they might just have it wrong. I must say, I’m hoping that this strange consensus that we should all work towards a universally accepted middle ground will show itself to the door now that everything’s gone kaput. I guess the next few years are gonna make or break me.”

“I thought you were going to crumble into dust when I died.”

“But of course! Why? You planning on going out soon?”

“Not planning on it, but I may not have much choice in the matter.”

Joker’s eyes darken, setting somewhere above Bruce’s head. “That’s frightfully disappointing of you.” He snaps. “Well, hey ho. There’s gotta be a comic angle in there somewhere, the man who wasted his life hoping for a happy ending only to pack it in as he approached the finish line.”

There’s an honestly in Joker’s face that can’t be faked, and though he’s trapped by the heat suffocating and surrounding him, something is trying to burst through Bruce’s ribs. Bold and awful, the realisation that they are both selling themselves down the river to their doom. Neither of them want this, and neither of them have any idea what else to do. They have left a trail of bodies behind them, in dribs and drabs and in a great handful of children who laughed themselves to death. But when Bruce looks at Joker he can’t summon up a phantom of the rage he had felt in the moment. All he feels is regret, that they’re both still here, staring down the bones of Gotham. By the time they reach the coast nothing will be left of the city he used to love, he can feel it in his blood. Really, would it be so bad if a few more bodies were thrown on the pile, if only it meant that some small fraction of rainy streets, skyscrapers vanishing into the mist, the stench of waterlogged refuse drifting through downtown on still mornings, the sun striking rainbows through an oil heavy sky, homeless gangs shackled up in the basements of luxury flats, the rallying cries of abandoned children rising through the East End, a skyline that would never be iconic because it changed so much from year to year, the chemical red of sunsets bleeding into the ocean, the winking eyes of criminals the town treated like old friends, good people trying to keep their backs straight as they waded through the mire, the flood of young psychiatrists making their way out to Arkham to sink or swim, the crack of the world torn asunder just so the Batman could put it all back together again; if only it meant that some of that survived?

Bruce forces himself to focus on Joker, till the strain makes stars burst behind his eyes from the pressure. “You should go.”
“What?” Joker shakes his head, like a cartoon character making the most of their double take.

“I can’t stop you. We can’t save the city. Doesn’t make sense for you to stay.”

Joker pulls his legs into the boat and sits forward, snickering. “Honey, I would have saved Metropolis to put some spice back into my life but I have never in my life tried to save Gotham. That’s the whole point, it’s still there no matter how many times I’ve tried to strangle it. Oh no, you’re not getting rid of me that easily.”

“I’m just a man.” Bruce pleads. “Maybe you wanted me to be something more but I’m not.”

“It’s not about what we want, it’s about what we are. You with your big strong manly man symbol status, you’ve always taken yourself far too seriously. I’m gonna hang on and make sure you have a bit of fun before you tap out. One big smile and – kaboom!” Joker throws his arms wide. “Baby, you’re a firework. But you’ll need me to add some sparkle to your death rattle.”

Bruce frowns. “You think I’m going to explode.”

“Pfft, figure of speech.” Joker dismisses Bruce with a wave of is hand and leans back into the prow.

The day wears on and the banks of the river become steadily more built up. Crops of houses interspersed with wooded areas and open skies that speak of parks and half remembered country drives. No matter how fast the river seems to be moving beneath them, their surroundings drift by with painful sloth. Bruce starts to wish that they had a paddle to help speed them along, till he remembers that he wouldn’t be able to use it and Joker would probably break one as soon as look at it.

It’s impossible for Bruce to take any time to cool off in the river, to do more than slump over the side of boat for snatched mouthfuls of water and the satisfaction of the spray landing on his face. He tries to distract himself from the uncomfortable burning of his muscles with brain teasers, calling up large numbers and forcing him to multiply the one by the other.

He brings up maps of the east coast in his head and tries to work out the radius of deadly radiation coming off Metropolis, only the numbers don’t add up. If the affected area fell into a neat circle then he should be out for the count by now, as should Jones and the children in the plant. Assuming Joker’s not lying about how bad things are in Gotham, and given the number of corroborating stories surrounding it’s downfall it seems silly to assume he is, then they would be well inside the radial line for a Metropolis radiation leak.

Radiation is a funny thing, it can get through so much and be stopped by so little. It will have been soaked up in park by the urban sprawl between Metropolis, New York and Gotham and it will have been contained by the very concrete of the city it first affected. It will also have ridden the ocean currents, directing the wind straight from Metropolis to Gotham, there’s a reason that old copies of the Daily Planet used to wash up on Tricorner but never on Manhattan.

Bruce hasn’t heard anything about New York in months, he wouldn’t be surprised if it faired better than Gotham. He doesn’t know what would be worse, to find out that Joker was right and he can’t survive in his home town or to stand in what was once his city with no idea of what to do next.

Somewhere around sundown, Bruce hoists himself over the edge of the boat to drink and finds that he can’t pull himself back up. His body is unbearably heavy, and when he tries to catch his breath he can’t quite catch his breath. The thrum of adrenaline starts up along with the fear that the fever is trying to pull him down with it.
After a while, Joker hooks his fingers through Bruce’s hair to pull him upright, looking him over with displeasure, eyes narrowing as he tries to sniff out a punchline. “So what? You’re conking out on me already?”

“I don’t know.” Bruce’s voice is breathy and shallow. His arm throbs violently but it doesn’t really register as pain anymore. “I don’t think I can move my limbs.”

“In a ‘boy howdy, my muscles have gotten bored of waiting for me to give up the ghost’ sort of way or a ‘someone replaced my bones with lead while I wasn’t looking’ sort of way?”

“Second one… I think.”

“Goodie!” Joke drops Bruce and he falls down hard enough to rock the boat as his weight resettles. “We can do something about that.”

Joker lurches towards the other end of the boat and pulls something up and out of the water where it had been hung on the prow. It’s the hazmat suit. He throws it towards Bruce as if there’s any chance of him making use of it by himself, babbling about how its supposedly geared up to make everything better.

Bruce graces him with what is left of a withering look. He just about manages to get a grip on the suit but from then on out he’s useless. His attempts to use his feet to ground the material and give him purchase go nowhere. Predictably, Joker sits back to watch the show rather than do anything to help. He giggles loudly every time the suit slips out of Bruce’s hand and he’s forced to go back to square one. Time isn’t working properly, and it feels like every attempt takes hours, though realistically they can’t take more than a few minutes.

After a while, Joker starts flicking water at him to ‘keep things interesting’. It’s supposed to be annoying, and it mostly is, but it’s also somewhat soothing. Bruce sort of wishes he’d do it with a bit more gusto.

“The longer you let me struggle with this, the more radiation I’m going to be exposed to.” Bruce’s voice comes out thin, like someone’s set a weight on his chest that won’t shift.


“You think the hazmat suit’s gonna make me feel better. It’s radiation.”

“So what if I was kind enough to point out how to solve your little problem? Why should I care if you feel like shit?”

“Joker!” Bruce groans. Talking is so hard.

“Listen, Bats, you don’t even know. You weren’t there.” Joker’s voice slips into a Californain drawl, an obvious mockery of veterans. “Whatever you’re feeling now, it’s gonna get so much worse. The air’s gonna turn you into sausages. Ha! Imagine that, bat sausage.”

“Is that what it was like in Metropolis?”

Joker shakes his head. “Nah, Metropolis was a whole lot more boring than this. Nothing to take my mind of it all, ya know? I probably won’t even notice how gross I fel this time with you to keep me company.”

“But what did it feel like?”
“Like being squeezed through a tube of toothpaste while having to recite the alphabet backwards. It was kinda funny, I’d been doing so well up till then but suddenly – poof! – I was almost useless.”

“And you still managed to tear down that Superman statue downtown.” Bruce’s mouth twitches into the bare bones of a smile. It’s comforting to thinking that Joker could have that kind of energy when by all rights he should have been suffocating. Some part of the old world will find a way.

Joker rocks forward in a half bow. “My finest hour.”

A handful of attempts later, Bruce is no closer to getting the seal of the suit open. Now that he knows what to look for he can feel it distinctly, the weight of the air bearing down on him, more like the atmosphere had been pressurised than something off the electromagnetic spectrum. It weighs on him with a purpose, promising worse things to come. It’s so silly for him to sit around suffering when the answer to his problem is in his lap.

“Joker.” Bruce pauses, takes a deep breath, begs forgiveness from every past version of himself. “I need your help with this.”

Joker is the picture of exaggerated shock, flinging his arms wide to catch himself on the sides of the boat. “Say what now?”

“I can’t get the suit on by myself. Will you help me?”

“Hmm. Depends. Can you say the magic word?”

Bruce shoots him a deadpan stare.

Joker shrugs, “I mean, if that’s how you wanna play it. But I need a little magic to get me going in the morning so if you don’t have the right spell, I’m afraid I’m going to have to pretend I didn’t hear you.”

Bruce speaks from between gritted teeth. “Joker, will you help me into this hazmat suit, please?”

Mouth sloping downwards in disappointment, Joker shakes his head. “I didn’t hear any magic words.”

Bruce blinks. “Uh…abracadabra?”

Leaping forwards, Joker lets out a stream of giggles, clapping his hands excitedly. “Well, since you asked so nicely, I’m sure I can work something out.”

Even with help, getting into the hazmat suit is no easy task. Joker wastes plenty of time pretending he has no idea how to get the thing open despite Bruce pointing out the clasps and zips to him and he tries wearing it as a hat for a while before he does anything useful. By the time he gets round to actually helping, Bruce could swear the pressure bearing down on him has increased.

Joker coaxes Bruce to his feet so they can stand side by side. The motion shakes the boat and the clown has to throw an arm around Bruce’s waist to keep them both steady.

Bruce looks up at him, trying not to notice how close they’re standing, how easy it would be for Joker to turn his head and close the distance. Maybe if he were to try to kiss him again, Bruce would respond in kind. He’s got nothing left to lose, he can just about stand to admit to himself that he wants to give it a try.

For now, it’s enough that he can stand upright to get the ridiculous garment on. Why does it have to
be bright orange anyway? Bruce screws his eyes shut and tries to wish the hazmat suit down to a plain grey, he only has room for one bright colour in his field of vision and Joker has already called dibs.

Joker holds up the open back of the hazmat suit with his free hand. “Left leggie first.”

It makes no difference which leg Bruce tries first but he follows instructions nonetheless. He couldn’t manage this without Joker to hold on to, he’d fall straight over the side into the water.

The first leg is the hardest, the second leg sliding in easy. After that, Joker resigns himself to being helpful despite his worst intentions, discarding bits of the splint so that Bruce’s injured arm will fit into the fabric, zipping up the back and slotting the helmet into place.

The air filter rattles when Bruce breathes, loud enough that he worries something’s come loose and it can’t fulfill its function. The material is heavy with the layers of lead stitching necessary to make it effective as a radiation shield. Out here it’s enough to stop the worst of the radiation slipping through, but hazmat suits can never be one hundred percent effective. If Gotham’s as bad as Joker says it is, he’s going to feel it at the very least when they arrive.

“Looking good, Bats. You know what they say, orange is the new black.” Joker stands back to get a better look at him. Now that one of them is clothed it makes his nakedness stand out, all that white skin that had become its own kind of normal at the periphery of Bruce’s vision thrown into sharp focus.

The boat tilts as Joker moves and Bruce is able to hold his centre of gravity and not go tumbling over the side. The pressure in the air appears to have vanished entirely and while he’s sure that the heat percolating through the hazmat suit is going to cause its own host of problems, it’s nice to be able to breathe properly. Slipping the helmet on and off for a drink of water every now and then shouldn’t be the end of the world – there’s a huge difference between the amount of pressure necessary to restrict breathing and the amount needed to kill him.

Joker is saying something, but Bruce doesn’t pay him any mind till he stamps hard enough that Bruce needs to sit down to keep from falling.

“Pay attention, darling!”

“What?” Bruce scowls up at him.

Joker purses his lips and continues in a simpering customer service voice. “The emergency exits are here, here and here. In the event of an emergency you’ll most likely drown because there’s no way that thing you’re wearing is gonna help you swim. Should your captain,” he indicates himself with a jab to the chest, “lapse into a morose pile of dung because the radiation’s still strong enough to knock him on his ass up close, I guess you’ll have to play it by ear.”

Soon enough, the radiation is going to start weighing down on Bruce all over again. If he’s lucky, the hazmat will keep him from dying, but it’s doubtful it will keep him from being plastered to the bottom of the boat when the levels get too high for the lead lining to completely eradicate it.

The boat drifts on into the night at an unbearably slow pace. By the time the sun rises, Bruce is exhausted. Sleep hangs just outside the realm of possibility and the cumulative effort of holding his body in a sitting position while encased in the heavy suit is taking its toll. He wriggles forward and finds Joker half asleep at the prow, waking himself up every time he snores too loudly. It would be funny, if Bruce could find it in himself to laugh.
Something shimmers on the horizon, past the stacks of identikit houses lining the river bank. In the early morning light, everything looks green.

With a final honk, Joker wakes himself up properly and launches forward to indicate how very wide awake he is. He turns to follow Bruce’s line of sight, eyes landing half way up the sky towards the tip of whatever it is, shining down at them.

“Yup.” He grins. “That’s Gotham.”

Chapter End Notes

I think I've been inconsistent with where Gotham and Metropolis are compared to each other. I don't really have anything to say about that right now except apologies to those of you that noticed and I will go back and fix this all at some point in the future.
Chapter 35

As the boat winds through Gotham’s mainland suburbs, Joker’s shoulders start to sag under the radiation. The city rises up to meet them, glowing green and terrible in the early morning sun. Proud and silent, its statuesque vibrancy impossible to replicate. Green dust hangs in the air, coating the buildings on the river bank though not as thoroughly as it has smothered the distant skyscrapers.

As they approach the mouth of the river, it occurs to Bruce that they have a very serious problem on their hands. “We don’t have any oars.”

“You’re not afraid to say what everyone is thinking, are ya Bats? You should do stand up, people love that shit.” Joker says, staring listlessly at the river ahead of them.

“How are we going to steer?”

Joker shrugs. “Use your hands? I’m sure you can manage doggy paddle.”

They don’t have much choice. Bruce looks down into the water as it swirls and eddies around the boat, the fog of silt displaced by the overtures to myriad currents that cut across Gotham bay can’t hide the handfuls of old garbage caught in the riptide. The waters will guide them between islands, turn cartwheels outside the ports and eventually take everything out to open water before they are lost for good. Maybe their bodies will wash up on some far off shore, maybe someone would recognise The Joker or Bruce Wayne.

Bruce looks to the vague outline of a lighthouse just visible off the tip of Tricorner. Really, what difference would it make? A rose by any other name and all that.

Save for the rushing of the water, everything is unnervingly silent. Bruce’s city was a writhing mass of sound: the sirens, the street vendors, old friends and new enemies, cries for help drifting up towards the atmosphere and all the effort he would put into putting things right. The thing before him doesn’t even breathe. Still and sombre. Dead and changed in the same instant.

“Yo ho ho, me hearties! Get ready to ride the waves and kiss yer landlubber lives goodbye.” Joker lets out a half hearted laugh.

“It looks…” Bruce starts, trying to bring his eyes into focus over the tip of Wayne Tower. There’s a strange shape lined up next to it, but at this angle it’s impossible to make out what it might be.

Joker hums in agreement. “It sure does.”

They hit the mouth of the river at just the right time, in the breathing space between waves when there’s a clear space for them to pass through. The boat barely shifts as they cross out of the safe inland waters and into whatever comes next. They’re spat out about as far south as they can possibly be, Tricorner to their left and the nose of the boat pointing south east to open waters.

“Paddle on the left side.” Joker huffs.

Instinctively, Bruce ignores him and dives towards the right side of the boat, shoveling water back behind them. His hands feel heavy beneath the suit but he pushes on until the craft starts twitching to the north.

Joker rounds on him, snarling. “I said left!”
“That will take us further south, we need to head towards the city.”

“Would it kill you for once to trust that I know what I’m talking about?” Joker backpaddles with admirable speed, reversing Bruce’s progress.

Bruce glances back towards Tricorner and moves to the left side of the boat. “If we get cast out to sea, I’m throwing you overboard.”

Joker lets out an ugly snort of laughter. “We both know that you won’t, but it’s nice to hear that I make you wanna be a worse person.”

They paddle together, till the boat moves through a ninety degree turn and is facing south along the coastline. There are clouds hanging low on the horizon but the air is a whole lot clearer than it ever was when Gotham lived, pollution siphoned away by the prevailing winds spilling off the Atlantic. Now the only thing to move on from here is the radiation. Bruce realises that places in Europe and Africa may have been getting on fine for the best part of the year but that ocean currents may carry the radiation to them anyway, in dribs and drabs.

“Stop.” Joker pulls himself over the edge of the boat with notable effort. Bruce almost asks him if he needs help, till he remembers he’s in no position to offer it.

They’re stuck in a current heading away from the city. Joker eyes the prow like a hawk, shifting the boat with his body weight when he decides that they’re drifting off course.

Bruce frowns at the back of his head. “When do we turn around?”

“Silly boy, always taking things so literally.” Joker chuckles and does nothing assure Bruce that the path they’re taking is sane.

“If we’re still headed south in ten minutes, I’ll turn this boat around myself.”

“Ok, daddy.” Joker smirks, then throws himself wholesale into the right side of the boat and starts screaming for Bruce to paddle.

Bruce obeys, trying to ignore how the heat rises within the suit as he does so. The boat twitches, the nose swinging violently from side to side before it flips on an invisible axis and starts heading north towards the city.

Bruce blinks. “How did you…”

“Gotham Supervillains 101: Whether you’re into smuggling, trying to break out of incarceration or just planning a fun scheme, sooner or later an intimate knowledge of the local water currents is gonna save your ass.” Joker flings himself down at the front of the boat, slouching his shoulders and keeping an eye on the waters ahead like they might still be dragged off course.

For as long as Bruce can remember, the water in Gotham harbour has been black. Looking into its depths now, he could swear there’s a green tint to the water, a few hundred shades darker than the shining city before him but unmistakably of the same ilk. He used to have a block of rock the same colour tucked away at the back of the cave for security purposes, but it never did him any harm. He’s going to spend the rest of his life wondering what happened to this kryptonite to make it deadly to humans. Mad scientists working in underground labs, there really is no telling what a person is capable of once they’ve decided that the rules don’t apply to them.

They slip up past Tricorner and Bruce breathes deep, tastes the faintest hint of grime and misery on the air, rainy rooftops after dark. Even as a corpse, it’s still home. “Where are we getting off?”
Joker’s voice is hoarse when he replies. “This current will swing us up past Arkham Island, then it’s a straight shot into the city. We should be able to make the leap along the north side of Midtown.”

“Arkham Island lies in the path of a slipstream heading straight into Gotham?”

“But of course, darling! How else do you think everyone kept getting away in one piece?”

Bad city planning is one thing, but the lack of care taken in piecing together the component parts of his hometown often makes Bruce want to scream. If he could go back and do something about it…if only…

“Please don’t tell me you’re trying to work out how to redirect the fucking ocean.” Joker giggles. “You don’t get to pretend you’re not a god then fantasise about messing with nature like that.”

“It doesn’t feel natural.” Bruce frowns at himself. The words don’t sound right, he knows what he means but he doesn’t mean what he said.

Joker nods, his neck uncharacteristically lose but his eyes earnest. “Almost seemed like someone designed this place, right? Like it rose up out of the ocean fully formed. Huddles masses, yearning to sink into a mire built over their heads. People can be boring and predictable but even a windup toy can go on exciting adventures if you set it on the right path.”

“Even a broken clock is right twice a day.”

“Yeah!” Joker beams, honest and open.

Bruce wants to kiss him. He doesn’t want to want to kiss him, but that doesn’t change a thing. The world doesn’t shudder to a halt. Beneath the ocean spray, the city could smell like rain.

Even knowing exactly where Arkham Island is, Bruce is taken aback by the shift in perspective that brings it into view. It always catches him out, he expects it to emerge out of left field but it’s tucked up close to Uptown, looking like a part of the island till they round the final crest of Midtown and the spires rising from the mansion are clearly visible. In a city full of unnecessarily dramatic architecture, the asylum is a Victorian nightmare laughing at the pretenders that followed in its wake. Joker’s eyes follow the island as they pass, the boat coming within touching distance of the outer ring of rocks that circle it and they both look up at the cliffs before them, peppered with the outputs of various sewage tunnels long since run dry.

They peel away from Arkham Island and it takes them a good few minutes to redirect their attention to the bank up ahead. Joker’s promise that the current would carry them through the city holds true. They travel through the gully between Uptown and Midtown, the nose of the boat listing ever so slightly south.

Joker lets out a long, relieved sigh. Bruce frowns at him. “What?”

“I’ve never made this trip in a boat before. And for all I knew it was all that shipping that made the currents around the city in the first place.”

“You risked our lives on a supposition that may have been rendered false by the absence of largescale shipping.” Bruce growls. It’s not a question.

The clown doesn’t answer, save to twitch himself ever so slightly to the right and send them barrelling towards the bank. Bruce doesn’t have much time to work out what he needs to do next and is endlessly grateful for the fact that the hazmat suit seems to mostly be keeping the radiation at bay. Judging by the way Joker is firmly unmoving in the bottom of the boat, he has no intention of doing
any of the hard work himself. There’s a ladder leading over the floodwall to the waterline. Joker says something but his voice is garbled and incomprehensible and of course this is the moment that heat chooses to surge through Bruce’s body, setting his head spinning and his blood throbbling through his extremeties.

“This is no time to get cold feet!” Joker snaps as Bruce wobbles into a standing position, nearly upsetting the boat.

“Hot feet.” Bruce corrects him. He stretches out with his good arm as they come close to the bank and his fingers lock over one of the struts of the ladder.

Having a hold of the ladder is a start, but it’s not going to be enough on its own. Bruce’s elbow cracks painfully when he draws his arm in, pulling them closer to the bank.

“I’m bored.” Joker drawls. “Can’t you make this thing stop moving?”

“I don’t have any mooring.” Bruce replies from between gritted teeth.

“What does that mean?”

“It means I can’t.”

“Oo!” Joker squeals without enthusiasm. He flops onto his back, breathing heavily. “Time for the old duck and roll.”

“Not really a duck and roll.”

“Circus dismount then. Whatever. We still have a moving thing that we’ve gotta get off of before your arm gives out.”

“You’re not wrong.” Muscles twitch in Bruce’s arm and he has to tense quickly to keep his grip. If he lets go now and the current moves them away from the ladder, then they’ll have nothing to keep them close to the bank and there’s no guarantee they’ll get the chance to try again.

They both know exactly what they need to do without discussion. Joker hauls himself to his feet and crawls up onto Bruce’s shoulder. He drags himself up onto the ladder and makes a show of groaning and hawing his way up the next few till his feet are at Bruce’s eye level.

“Tell me when you’re ready.” Bruce says.

Joker flashes him a wink. “I’m all yours, sweetcheeks.”

It’s strange to think that if he messes up this next part, this monstrously simple thing, Bruce has as good as failed. After all the distance he’s travelled to be here today.

“C’mon, it’s easy.” Joker coos. “All it takes is a little push.”

The boat shudders underneath Bruce’s feet as he braces himself, trying to slip downstream and leave him behind. Before it can knock the legs out from under him he lets go of the run and for a moment he’s in freefall, just waiting for the decel line to reel him back in. Then his fingers close over Joker’s ankle and with more energy than he knew he stilled possessed, he pulls his feet onto the bottom of the ladder.

He breathes deep, doesn’t spare a glance for the boat being pulled away downstream. Joker starts moving at a snail’s pace, dragging Bruce’s arm up with him every time he moves his right foot.
When they finally reach the top of the bank, collapsing onto the overgrown promenade, the clown is breathing heavy, like every gasp costs him years of his life.

Beyond the once neat lawn of the river front, the commercial district surrounding the Gotham Knight’s stadium stretches up towards the sky, a pale washed out blue that looks like it’s trying to stain itself green in the city’s image. Kryptonite dust crunches under Bruce’s boots, insistent and unshifting. A light breeze trails through the trees lining the pavement up ahead, the rustling the only sound save for Joker’s breathing.

Bruce waits for triumph to wash over him, the efforts of the past year finally come to fruition. But Gotham doesn’t cheer for him, its silence more passive than damning in the face of a wave of grief building inside him that doesn’t want to break.
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: Joker laughing about suicide attempts and making eating disorder jokes. Lovely.

I maybe play fast and loose with science in this one - radiation and antibiotics probably don't ever work like this but ooooooohhh well

Also I've been slacking on my update schedule and I apologise

“Just how I remember it.” Joker wheezes.

They’re coming up to the southern bank of Midtown, moving down what was once a major thoroughfare leading to a bridge stretching on to the financial district. They leave a trail of barely visible footprints in the dust, the only sign of life that Bruce has seen in the past few hours. If anyone’s been in Gotham over the past year, they’ve covered their tracks well. There’s a creaking in his bones that has nothing to do with the heat pulsing through him. Joker casts Bruce a glance out of eyes that refuse to go dull, like the residual heat burning off freshly blown glass.

“We should keep moving.” Bruce huffs. He steps forward and stumbles, only managing to stay on his feet because Joker grabs him under the armpits. It’s almost funny, how the clown’s whole body is tense beyond tense from the effort of holding himself together and he’s still got a better handle on himself.

“Not that I don’t enjoy your overdramatic self-sacrifice routine, but we are headed in totally the wrong direction for the zoo.”

Bruce frowns. “Why would we go to the zoo? It’ll be empty, and it’s on the mainland.”

“Well at least let me find you a nice vet to check in with.” Joker hoists Bruce’s arm over his shoulder and bows under the effort of having to support both of them. His eyebrows wriggle over a grin that’s entirely too wide for the occasion, hinting at a joke that not everyone in the room is well placed to understand.

“What?” Bruce struggles to find his feet. “I don’t need to go to the vet. I don’t-“

“Shoulda known you were too out of it for the comedy routine. I’d give you an earful about wasting good material but I don’t think my voice goes high enough for you to hear.” Joker breaks off into a stream of stuttered giggles.

“That’s not funny.”

Joker winks at him. “But you got the joke.”

There’s a momentary scuffle that neither of them have the energy to turn into a fight, Joker tugging back as Bruce tries to urge them both forward. Bruce wins out, Joker surrendering with a shrug. “I spoil you.”
The roads are thick with empty cars. Bruce tries not to look into them but given the lack of people pancakes in the city he doubts he'd see anything unpleasant. Joker weaves them between the vehicles, eyes sliding hungrily from one car to the next, stripping them down to spare parts in his head. It would take a very long time to rebuild anything from this mess but it wouldn’t be impossible. The resources are here, it’s just a matter of using them properly.

It looks like everyone burned up on impact, and if the radiation trickling through the gaps in the hazmat suit’s defences is anything to go by, Bruce doesn’t think anyone but Joker would be able to survive in this environment now. When they passed Robinson Park the undergrowth had been still and silent, the flowers encrusted with a layer of dust so thick it was impossible to tell what colour they were supposed to be. Bruce has no idea how long they can keep growing. There are no insects flitting through the air, the leaves that fell last autumn haven’t turned to mulch. The cycle of life has been well and truly stopped in its tracks.

It takes them the best part of an hour to reach the crest of the West Harlow Bridge where it curves up with the intention of allowing ships to pass beneath it. Bruce’s breath catches when he gets his first proper look at Downtown. Gotham boasts plenty of architecture too ornate to be practical but the gothic towers of ages past have long since been overshadowed by skyscrapers standing shoulder to shoulder with their more diminutive cousins. He’s absolutely certain that no other city in the world looks like this.

Most of the tower blocks have faded to obscurity with their logos masked by the green dust, but Wayne Tower is still obvious amongst the fray. It’s not the tallest building in Gotham by a long shot, not anymore, but it takes up an entire block, leaving it squat and mighty against the sky. Bruce can still remember, in intimate detail, the exact location of every gargoyle on that building. He closes his eyes and imagines the wind tugging on the ears of the cowl, loud enough to drown out all but the most insistent sirens drifting up from below.

The image shifts from high open skies to fog and rain, because what would Gotham be otherwise? A body beneath him that knows how to move with him, how to move against him, that knows too much.

“What the fuck is that?” Joker asks, dragging Bruce from his daydreams.

It doesn’t take long to work out what Bruce is supposed to be looking at. Spiralling out from somewhere to the east of Wayne Tower, a flower as tall as a skyscraper has its head facing firmly towards the sun, listing ever so slightly from side to side in a way that doesn’t look to have anything to do with the wind. It’s as thick with kryptonite dust as the rest of the city, glittering ominously, but Bruce swears he knows what colour it’s supposed to be underneath.

Deep red. The kind of red that lingers on the edge of his nightmares, just past the laughter. “It’s Ivy.”

“Huh.” Joker stares at the flower, equal parts enchanted and unimpressed. “It’s a good look on her.”

Once they’ve noticed her, it’s impossible to look away. Stumbling through the traffic over the bridge, they list from side to side, almost falling into each other as they resolutely pay more attention to the flower marring the neat lines of human architecture crowding the city ahead, till they get close enough to the financial district that the buildings obscure the view and they’re forced to look straight ahead.

They drop off the raised road just past the bridge and make for the city centre. Between them they knows enough shortcuts to put a city tour guide to shame, though in their present condition not all of them are passable. More than once, Bruce finds himself staring wistfully towards rooftops he’s in no position to reach without the aid of a grapple.
“Less of that.” Joker hisses, pulling them both onwards towards the Diamond District.

The urge to turn off south, just to stand at the foot of Wayne tower and see if it looks as he remembers is strong. Bruce passes between shop fronts advertising brands imported from out of town, the kind of faceless monotony that mirrors the rest of the country as the same big name brands pop up again and again. Gotham was a fashionista’s paradise if one knew where to look, but you had to spend some serious time in the city to work that out. He plods onwards, waiting for the streets to revert back to something more distinctive.

The tight grid of pedestrianised shopping areas abruptly gives way to the would-be motorway that sweeps through Chinatown and back to the mainland, parting buildings like the red sea. It’s packed six cars abreast, looking far too wide for a town this claustrophobic and Bruce is hit by a wave of nostalgia for the many times he’s been caught out by this gap in the city layout, a sudden hole that required a surprising amount of ingenuity to cross unnoticed. The heat that used to pour off the assembled vehicles was an experience, enough to shake the bone deep chill of winter winds and making thermals in the summer that could carry him up to the atmosphere if he wasn’t careful.

The road barrels towards the squat form of Gotham General. Joker jerks his head towards the hospital. “That’s our destination, old chum.”

“I don’t need to go to hospital.” Bruce grumbles, but he doesn’t protest when he’s pulled south all the same.

“You? Who said this had anything to do with you?” Deary me, Bats. Have a heart. They have shiny x-ray rooms up there and I think we both know that this kind of radiation treatment is no good for my complexion.”

Bruce frowns. “What?”

“You get a lead lined suit, I get a lead lined room.” Joker explains. “It’s only fair.”

“We won’t be able to stay.”

“Well of course not, but I figure I can catch my breath before we keep up this pointless little highlights tour. Next you’ll be saying that you want to go to Arkham.”

It’s miniscule, and Bruce is so far gone that it might just be his mind playing tricks in him, but he swears he sees Joker flinch when he brings up Arkham. What must that have been like? To wade through the soup of your former peers, unable to see a thing, trying to break through security systems that never accounted for the end of all things. And after all that to rise up out of the ashes and find that the place that had been your home had died while you weren’t looking, walking the streets in search of some last gasp of life. Bruce supposes the easy thing to do would be to go mad.

“I don’t need to see Arkham.” Bruce’s fingers tighten momentarily where he’s holding on to Joker’s shoulder.

Joker breathes out a sigh that doesn’t sound at all relieved. “That’s my clever bat.”

The closer they get to the hospital, the harder Bruce’s heart hammers in his chest. He sort of wants to cry but the emotion keeps getting stuck in his throat. The more of Gotham they see, the less space there is to pretend that any part of this city is still alive. He stops, pulls himself it from under Joker’s arm and does what he can to straighten his spine. Looking back the way he came he catches sight of a clock tower, a skyscraper as wide as a city block, a flower that could swallow the Moench Roundabout. Something old, something new.
“Don’t…” Joker hisses, far too late. His shoulders are hunched forward and his eyes set firmly on the ground. He flaps his arm uselessly behind him till he finds Bruce’s hand, encased in lead and heavy spun canvas. He doesn’t move, but the will to do so is there, held in the space between them.

“It’s just things.” Bruce tells him, helplessly. Like his blood isn’t roaring through his veins, like it may ever run cold again.

“Liar.”

“What can I say?” Bruce tries to quirk his lips into something of a smile. “I’ve had a lot of practice.”

They hold position for a minute, standing in awe of the silence, then Joker’s fingers hook more firmly around Bruce’s and he pulls them onwards.

Gotham Central has been a major point of interest in every city wide disaster. Given the target it presented for terrorists and super criminals, it was equipped with borderline military grade security systems, designed to act as something of a fortress once you’re passed the main gates and permanently stocked liked it was preparing for siege. What with how empty and off kilter the rest of the city is, Bruce instinctively looks for enemy snipers hiding on the upper floors, like they would have been back in the old crises. He’s expecting the front doors to be locked but when he and Joker throw their combined weight into the main entrance the green dust casing cracks with minimal fuss. They stumble into the dark of the foyer, dust coated windows casting green light along white halls.

Bruce leans against the wall, the effort of the walk catching up to him all at once. The heat within the suit is starting to shift from uncomfortable to unbearable and on instinct he reaches up to fiddle with the seal at the back of the helmet.

Cool fingers stay his hand. “Not yet. When we get to one of those x-ray rooms.”

Joker guides them through the hospital, seemingly far more familiar with the layout than Bruce is. Bruce has only ever been here for photo ops and the occasional well wishes passed to sick children. He’s never been a patient here before.

He’s pretty sure Joker hasn’t either.

“Worked as a porter here for a while, just to see if it was any fun. Spoiler alert: it wasn’t. But I learned some fascinating titbits about how easy it is to hide in the ventilation system and you’d be surprised by what supposed medical professionals divulge about their patients when they think no one’s listening. The observation room in the psych ward was a riot, hearing about all the ways people tried to off themselves. When it comes time to end it they got so creative.”

“Shut-”

“Yeah, yeah. I know. Shut up.” Joker snorts. “I mean, it’s never worked on me before but six trillionth time’s the charm, amiright?”

The main reason Gotham General stayed a three story building in a city of skyscrapers is that transporting seriously ill and injured people up and down multiple floors was usually more hassle than wheeling them from one end of the building to the other. On the one hand, this means that Bruce doesn’t have to negotiate any stairs, but on the other it means they still have a long walk ahead of them to get where they want to be. It would be easier if Joker weren’t so easily distracted, but he insists on stopping to root through every doctor’s office they pass in search of stickers and lollipops and by the time they’ve gone two hundred metres he’s picked up more than twenty stethoscopes.

Bruce tries to move on without him, but shuffling along the wall is painfully slow going and Joker
catches up to him in the blink of an eye.

He pulls a bright red lollipop from between his teeth and mashes it against the glass of the helmet. “Wanna taste?”

Bruce fixes him with a withering glare and doesn’t reply.

Distracted as he is, Joker still keeps them moving in the right direction. Bruce doesn’t know how he manages it. To him, everything looks green and dark and identical but the clown doesn’t need to backtrack or check the signs plastered to the walls. It takes a long time, far longer than is strictly necessary, but they eventually reach the radiology department.

Bruce frowns. “Radiology isn’t…”

Joker rolls his eyes, tongue slipping out to wet his lips. In the shallow light it’s possible to make out where the lollipop has stained it red. “And what is an x-ray?”

“A beam of electromagnetic – oh.” Bruce squeezes his eyes shut and wills his brain to work faster. “Radiation. Right.” Similar protective protocols can be put in place for therapeutic and diagnostic radiation. Right now this wing is probably the safest place in the whole city aside from the lead lined panic room ten miles north in the batcave.

They head through the department, past research laboratories and consultants’ offices, till they round a corner and come face to face with a set of heavy looking double doors. There’s wiring surrounding the doorframe, indicating that they were sealed with an electric lock that they’ll have to hope was left open when the bomb knocked out the national grid. Either way, it looks a lot heavier than the front door.

Joker disentangles himself from Bruce and mimes rolling up imaginary sleeves. “Ready, Bats?”

Bruce is not at all ready but he pushes as hard as he can all the same. The doors shift slightly, not fully sealed but given the resistance they put up it seems likely that there’s at least a cursory lock on them. After five minutes of shoving with no success, Joker waves him aside and starts doing something complicated with a left over bed pan and some string he seems to pull out of thin air. He hums a familiar tune while he works, something that Penguin used to have playing in the background at the Iceberg Lounge. A timeless jazz lilt supposed to cast a veneer of respectability over dubiously legal activities.

A few clicks, a couple of twists and this time when they throw their weight behind the doors something snaps and they fall open, scattering Bruce and Joker across the floor in a mess of limbs.

Joker makes a soft ‘oof’ as the door hits his side when it slides back into position. Bruce is beyond noise, the floor beneath him is vinyl and he thinks that if he weren’t wearing the suit it would feel delightfully cool against his skin.

“C’mon, you can’t just lie there all day expecting me to take care of you.” Joker looms over Bruce, a barely distinguishable shadow in the almost total dark of a room without windows. He stoops to get his hands under Bruce’s armpits. “Wowzers, you’ve really piled on the pounds since you started wearing that thing. Is it the colour? It’s not very flattering, if I were you I’d have something to comfort eat about.”

Once he’s on his feet, Bruce can appreciate how different the air feels in here, like the vice squeezing his temples has loosened somewhat. Joker’s no longer hunched over like he might fall on his face without warning and his smile looks less like it’s sapping every ounce of his energy to maintain.
“How does it feel?” Bruce asks.

Joker raises a hand in the universal symbol for ‘ok’. “Pretty fucking good.” He scrabbles for something tucked down next to the door and with a crack it lights up in his hands. A glowstick, no doubt installed in case of emergency, that’s much brighter than the thin light it manages to emanate into its surroundings.

The room is large with several compartments tucked to the side of the area they’re standing in, which appears to house the now useless control panel for the machines. The two doors at the back clearly indicate that the x-rays themselves were once taken within them, while a smaller cubicle to their left looks like a changing room. Joker’s run round and checked them all in a matter of seconds but Bruce feels it behoves him to make sure the clown isn’t storing up any nasty surprises.

The back two cubicles have one x-ray each, run from the same source. The larger of the two is mounted over a metal slab table that Bruce hoists himself up onto to rest, gripping tight to the edge with his good hand and wincing when he temporarily forgets that he shouldn’t be moving the right. He wants water, he wants so much water. He closes his eyes and tries to wish the perfect stillness of the city into his brain. He’s pretty sure he would be horrendously nauseous if there were anything left in his stomach to hypothetically throw up.

He opens his eyes and sees the shadow of a dark puddle sat in the corner of the room, barely visible by the light of the glowstick drifting over the top of the cubicle. Bruce’s breath catches and his heart tries to stutter to a halt. “Joker!”

“Wassup?” Joker replies.

“There’s something in here.”

“What are-“ Joker slams through the door to the cubicle, glowstick held high, and follows Bruce’s line of sight to the puddle. “Well, wouldya look at that.”

“Do something.”

Joker stares at Bruce, letting out an incredulous laugh. “Do something? I’m not your fucking maid. Jeez, surely you didn’t think I’d be remotely interested in cleaning up your silly little nightmares just because I’d rather you didn’t die on me just yet.” He moves towards the puddle, giving it a little kick and giggling when it glides seamlessly across the floor.

Pushing himself off the table. Bruce makes for the cubicle door. He arrives in the control room breathing heavily. It’s stupid, he knows he’s being stupid, it’s just dead tissue reconstituted into something new. It can’t hurt him. He’s seen so many dead bodies in his time that he can’t possibly be fighting through the shock of it all.

But he still doesn’t want to exist alongside the dehydrated leftovers of whoever used to work in this building. There’s a world of difference between seeing something dead and working around it.

Behind Bruce, the door to the cubicle slips open and Joker’s bare feet slap across the floor. “You’re really gonna have to get better at this, ya know?”

“What are-“

“This place has some shielding, if you’re interested. It ain’t perfect but the weather’s so much better than it is out there. Kinda like Arkham, I guess, seeing as how everyone up top turned to steam but put enough ground between yourself and the bomb and boom! Something gets left behind, just like our esteemed friend The Puddle back there or an assorted soup of my former colleagues.” Joker
moves to the control panel and starts fiddling with ted defunct controls. “No ground here of course but the lead lining kinda feels the same. You could probably slip into something a little less uncomfortable.”

Bruce spares Joker a disparaging look. That’s a terrible risk to take. “It’s not safe.”

“Oh, live a little, Bats! The worst that could happen is you die and stop having to deal with this bullshit. I promise to treat you very nicely if you turn into schlop.”

Much as Bruce hates to admit it, Joker’s not wrong. He’s desperately overheated, indescribably thirsty and he has no idea what they’re supposed to do when they get out of here. Against his better judgement, Bruce starts negotiating the series of clasps and zips that keep the hazmat suit on. It takes a long time when Joker is so very uninterested in helping him out, but eventually Bruce manages to open the seal of the helmet. There’s a light hiss as the unfiltered air is let in and then the pressure hits him like a ton of bricks.

Bruce collapses against the wall, unable to stand. The vice that had eased off his temples through the night doubles down and he swears he’ll feel his skull start to crack any moment. He gulps, trying to close the seal of the helmet but his hands feel overlarge and uncoordinated and he only manages to knock it clean off. He sits, gasping for air, waiting for his lungs to collapse.

“Sucks major donkey dildo, right?” Joker’s all fake sympathy.

“I can’t…can’t…can’t move.” Bruce wheezes.

Joker shrugs. “That can happen. It’ll come and go. You’re not melting though so I guess we can call that a win. Time to pop some bottles.”

It’s difficult to appreciate how much cooler he is now the heat is not trapped in the suit with him, but Bruce knows he must be cooling down by the clearing if his vision. If this is what the radiation feels like with shielding he’d hate to tackle it head on. For now he has to focus on the positives. They’re in a hospital, there will be supplies here. A proper plaster cast, maybe some antibiotics. It’s not like anyone’s been by to raid the place in the past year.

Before he can spare the attention for anything else, he needs to get a look at his arm. With great effort Bruce wriggles out of the top half of the hazmat suit and what’s left of the split falls to pieces immediately. In the scattered light from the glowstick, now abandoned on the floor by Joker’s feet, Bruce can see how the skin shines, ugly and red. The line of his femur is decidedly out of whack, and there’s a deep seated itch that probably signifies the bone struggling to heal itself at the wrong angle.

Wile Bruce attempts to play nursemaid on himself, Joker pulls himself away from the console and starts striding back towards the double doors. “Well honey, I figure we need a few bits and bobs so I’m gonna pop off down the shops. I’ll pick us up something for dinner, a bottle of something nice, maybe a few candles to really get us in the mood. How’s that sound?”

“Wait!” Bruce hisses after him. He’d meant to should.

Joker pauses and looks back over his shoulder. “What?”

“Can you get to the pharmacy?”

“Oo, I dunno about that.” Joker makes a face. “That’s a pretty specialist request, I don’t think I’m the guy you want.”
“I can…I can explain.”

“Yeah but you know how it is with me. Scatterbrain Joker! That’s what my mother used to call me. You could explain to your heart’s content and I’d still probably get you the wrong thing.”

“Joker…please.”

Joker gives Bruce a long hard look before something snaps and he comes bounding over to squat in front of him. “Is this one of those things were you’re actually gonna pass on if I can’t open up the cavernous reserves of empathy I have in my heart?”

“Pretty much.”

“Well, I can’t promise I’ll try, but I’ll try to try. No promises though. If I find something fun along the way I might forget all about you and there’s just no accounting for that. What do you need?”

“Plaster strips,” Bruce starts. “Lots of them. Amoxicillin and Streptomycin if you find any kept in sterile conditions. Clindamycin if they have it. Some Zofran and painkillers wouldn’t go amiss.”

Joker nods along, mining writing an imaginary list on his arm. “Boy am I glad I got all that down.”

“You’ll remember?”

“Like I said, no promises. But I’m a smart guy, I’m sure I’ll work it out.”

With a little persuasion, Joker agrees to help Bruce into one of the cubicles before he leaves. There’s no way he’s capable of crawling back into the suit just yet and he doesn’t want to be right in the line of the doors when they open. Joker leaves him in one of the changing cubicles, tucked up next to a bench built into the wall. There’s a moment of blinding pressure as the doors to the x-ray room slip open to let the clown out but it fades before Bruce is knocked unconscious.

Either Joker takes a very long time, or time passes slowly when you’re suffering the effects of a major injury and major radiation. Quite possibly both. Bruce continues to examine his break in the light filtering in over the top of the cubicle door. The skin surrounding the break doesn’t feel nearly as warm as he was expecting against the back of his left hand and as best as he can tell there’s no unusual discolouration. It’s absurdly painful but at this stage that’s hardly a concern. Everything hurts. He has to kill the fever before he moves on from that. Now that he’s here it's somewhat astonishing to think that he’s in the best possible place to cure himself, that there is a future available to him that doesn’t involve a persistent headache and the inability to pay proper attention to what’s in front of him. If he’s very lucky there might even be a future where his limbs don’t feel like leaden weights.

That future involves leaving the city. Every time Bruce tries to envision what that would be like his mind throws up a blank. He never wanted to be anywhere else.

Joker’s return is heralded by another spike in pressure, sharp enough to do something horrible to Bruce’s left knee. He roars in pain and despite the radiation and his sore muscles he lunges forward to clutch at the skin just below his patella. When he forces his eyes open there’s a mess of something dark and gloopy on his hand and a hole in the top of his calf.

“Need bandages…pressure.” Bruce rasps, not sure if he’s asking for the radiation to back off or for someone to help him stop the wound from bleeding. He’s not going to exsanguinate anytime soon, as far as he can make out, but the steady dribble of blood leaking out between his fingers is the last thing he needs right now. He pushes down as hard as he can, fumbling for the edges of the wound and praying that Joker has brought some useful supplies back with him.
A crash that sounds like multiple items falling on top of each other precedes Jokers re-entry to Bruce’s cubicle. He throws open the door with a flourish, grinning wide and singing loud and off-key.

“Pressure! Pushing down on me, pushing down on you, no man can ask for.”

“Joker-“

“UNDRE PRESSURE! That brings a Batman down, splits a kiddy in two. Puts people in the round.” Joker starts laughing, shutting himself up rather effectively as he drops down next to Bruce. “Look at that, Bats. Can’t leave you alone for five minutes. What happened to the leg?”

“The walls of the cubicles aren’t thick enough to protect me. You didn’t come back in fast enough.”

It takes a moment for understanding to wash over Joker’s face and it’s unnerving to see that he doesn’t find it particularly funny. “You mean to say that this is the beginning of a Batsy pancake?”

The answer to that question is not one that Bruce wants to give voice to, so instead he nods towards the wound. “Got to stop the bleeding.”

“Hmm. Call me crazy, and you wouldn’t be the first, but I don’t think it’s bleeding all that much. Look.” Joker bats Bruce’s hand aside and scrapes away the excess gloop. When he’s done, the hole doesn’t look nearly as big as it had felt and though it’s hard to say for sure there only appears to be a thin trickle of blood leaking out from one side of it. Like its been cauterised. The blood should clot soon enough.

Joker licks excess goo from his fingers. Bruce makes a face. “Disgusting.”

“What? You taste good!” Joker laughs. “And you’re not allowed to call me disgusting. I’m playing hero for the day so it’s against the rules.” He holds up an IV bag in front of Bruce’s face.

Bruce squints, trying to read the label. “What-“

“Amoxicillin.” Joker’s clearly very pleased with himself. He throws the bag into Bruce’s lap along with a catheter and a needle. “And I remembered all the accessories.”

“Thanks.” Bruce mumbles. “The other drugs?”

Joker holds up empty hands. “The refrigerator was bust and everything else looked like shit. I got some pills though, snagged you a couple of packs of Vicodin. I’ve heard they’re supposed to be fun to those of you without massive resistance to toxins but if you can’t find it in the stash I brought back then you’ll have to make it up yourself from scratch.”

Of course most of the drugs have gone bad. In the dim light the Amoxicillin looks ok but it’s a pretty mighty risk to assume that it’s not going to poison him. It’s somewhat heartening to hear that Joker raided the tablets though, the clown might have unwittingly picked up something useful.

Joker watched with rapt attention as Bruce struggles to connect the catheter to the IV bag and the needle to the catheter. His hushed laughter ringing loud in Bruce’s ears.

The hardest part is getting the needle into a vein when the light is minimal and Bruce can barely pick out the edges of his arms let alone individual vessels. Bruce asks Joker for help but the clown shakes his head. “You got this.”

Bruce almost doesn’t believe him until he’s got everything linked up and the first cool rush of foreign
liquid hits his bloodstream. It will take a few hours at least to find out if the drugs are working.

Fitting an IV bag shouldn’t be an energy intensive activity, but by the time Bruce slings the bag up onto his shoulder and collapses against the bench he’s exhausted. Joker slinks closer to him, leaning up against his good side and reaching down to thread their fingers together.

“This is nice.” Joker purrs. “Just you and me, some real quality time in our most favourite city.”

“I’m very sick, Joker.”

“Shh! Don’t ruin the moment.”

Bruce spares Joker a glance but finds that he can’t look away. In the low lighting the clown’s eyes shine all the brighter, two wide beams trying to suck the room in. Everything else fades to black. They could be anywhere. The night is all around them and Joker’s eyes are green neon drifting up from the alleyway below. A storm rages across the city and Joker is the only person strong enough to withstand the winds.

Bruce wants to brush his fingertips over Joker’s cheek just too be sure he’s really there, if only his injured arm would let him. He wants to hold the clown’s cheek against his palm and feel the two of them move toward each other of their own volition.

“Oh, Bats.” Joker breathes, fingers tightening over Bruce’s. “You can’t just look at a gal like that and expect nothing to come of it.”

“Like what?” Bruce’s voice is barely above a whisper.

Joker’s brow droops into an expression of temporary pity. He does what Bruce can’t, reaching up to trail a thing along his jawline and leaning in just a fraction as he sighs out his disappointment.

This would be the moment, Bruce thinks, when he’s loopy from the fever and exhausted beyond belief and he swears he can hear the rain hitting the concrete, the pervasive humidity of a Gotham night sticking to his skin. In the boat he had been so passive, unable or unwilling to do anything about Joker’s tongue pushing up against his own. If the clown should try again, maybe…

When Joker swoops in to close the distance he doesn’t aim for Bruce’s mouth. The quick peck to his forehead is affectionate but it’s not desperate. It’s not a drowning man reaching for salvation.

Bruce nods back fast. “Fucking hell Bats, is it hot in here or is it just you?”

Bruce nods towards the IV bag resting on his shoulder. “Should help with it.”

“Well, if you wanna trust your fate to a clear baggie that’s been left to go mouldy for a year, that’s your business.” Joker folds himself into Bruce’s side, retracting overlong limbs till he’s a fraction of his full height. The Gazette used to run cartoons of him as a stick figure half the size of the Batman, Bruce never could understand how they got it so wrong.

It’s nice, having that much cool skin pressed against him. Joker doesn’t sap the heat from Bruce’s bones so much as he surrounds it, a reminder of what happens to fires that burn too long. Bruce lets himself lean into it and when Joker throws his spare arm over his waist he doesn’t protest.

“What-“

“Do you ever shut up?” Joker grumbles. “You’re supposed to be ill. Sleep it off. I can almost guarantee that the city will be exactly where we left it in the morning.”
“And if it’s not?”

Where the clown’s head is pressed to his shoulder, Bruce can feel Joker’s smile leaping into action. “Then we take it as it comes, my dear. The same as ever.”
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: One character is acting under the affects of medication which affects their willingness to go along with bad ideas - nothing that they haven't wanted to do while sober though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bruce wakes with a stiff neck and an aching knee to a room significantly darker than he remembers. Flashes of white highlight the stickers used to mark the corners of the door and the edge of the bench but otherwise everything’s cloaked in black. The glowstick must have worn itself out. He feels a lot less awful than he had when he went to sleep, the break in his arm still throbbing but the fire receded considerably and his headache retreated to two distinct points at is temples. Against all the odds, it would seem that the antibiotics are working.

Carefully disentangling his fingers from The Joker’s, Bruce reaches up to check the IV bag. It feels about three quarters empty, which could be very good or very bad, depending on how long he’s been asleep. He must have managed to hit a vein though, he wouldn’t be feeling so much better otherwise.

The weight of the air is still pressing down on him but Bruce can move more easily now that the heat’s backed off somewhat. It’s a welcome relief, having his assets back under his control and as soon as he’s decided that standing up doesn’t sound like such a bad idea he wants to move.

Moving is tricky when you have a clown stuck to your waist. Joker’s skin shines in the dark like the safety stickers, fingers curling into Bruce’s hip. When Bruce tips his head to the side he can feel soft hair tickling his cheek, eyes following the sharp lines of Joker’s sleeping figure down to his buttocks where they curl into a leg that’s tried to hook itself over Bruce’s in sleep, still pleasantly cool against him.

“Five more minutes.” Joker mumbles when Bruce tries to move out from under him. The grip on his hip becomes insistent and he clown shifts to rest his head on Bruce’s chest rather than his shoulder.

The leg threatening to slip over him makes good on its promise and everything clicks into place in entirely the wrong way in Bruce’s head. The knowledge that he could roll into that touch, sling an arm across Joker and lie here as long as he wanted tries to tempt him into submission and just like that, the latent arousal left unattended since the river comes storming into play.

Joker’s arm is entirely too close to Bruce’s crotch for any of this. Swallowing the hitch in his breath, Bruce peels long fingers away from his hip, rolling out from under the offending arm and stumbling to his feet as fast as possible.

“Come back here.” Joker sulks.

Bruce leaves him in the cubicle without another word, keeping his back to The Joker and cradling his injured arm.

Outside the cubicle, Bruce sees the glowstick still emitting a faint light where it’s pushed up next to
the door. He picks it up, using it to light his way till he finds the second of three tucked away by the
door. Bruce cracks it into life against the doorframe and holds it over his head, revealing a mountain
of assorted supplies stacked up in the middle of the room. No wonder Joker vanished for so long on
his foraging mission.

Bruce has no idea how the clown managed to carry all this by himself. The stash is loosely encased
by a web of bandages but they’re not wound tight enough to allow the loot to be dragged along the
ground without most of it falling out. Tinned and dry foods are thrown haphazard into the mess
alongside hundreds of pill boxes, extra catheters, needles, bedpans and what looks like a set of
crutches. Bruce drops into a crouch, rests his bad arm on his knee and starts working through it all.

The tablets come in all shapes and sizes and Bruce rather suspects that that’s the point. Yellow heart
medication, Viagra for blue, Carbamazepine glinting green and Acebutolol knocks out purple and
orange in one hit. By the time he finds the Vicodin Joker mentioned Bruce has been through fifty
different pull packets and doesn’t know whether to be impressed that these are the first white tablets
he’s come across or frustrated that they’re the only painkillers Joker thought to bring. Surely there
must have been some paracetamol left over.

Bruce doesn’t much like taking painkillers, they dull the senses and remind him too much of doctors
and street dealers providing unsuspecting victims with gateway drugs into their own little portion of
hell. At this stage though, his arm is like a leaden weight and he can’t remember what it feels like for
it not to sit thrumming with pain. He doesn’t bother to check the dosage, popping open the cap and
throwing two pills down his neck before he can think better of it. He chases them down with half a
litre of stale water from one of the vending machine bottles scattered through the pile. Only
afterwards does he wonder if the pills are going to react badly with the Amoxicillin.

Other treasures from Joker’s stash include the promised second bag of antibiotics and a sling. There’s
no plaster cast in sight but that’s a lot better than nothing. It’s an effort to get the sling over his head
but once he’s done Bruce’s whole right side feels lighter.

Joker emerges from the cubicle with hair significantly more mussed than it had been when he awoke
on Bruce’s shoulder. He peers around the room with the vindictive sneer of a stroppy teenager forced
to wake up at a sensible time on the weekend, shuffling right past Bruce and reaching into the pile of
supplies without looking to pull out a spray-can of whipped cream.

Bruce watches in horror as Joker pops the cap, points the nozzle straight into his mouth and squirts.
He makes a big show of swallowing and when he's done there's still cream flecking the corners of
his lips.

“Want some?” Joker sees Bruce staring and holds out the can.

Bruce makes a face. “No thanks.”

Joker shrugs and treats himself to another squirt. He plops himself onto the floor next to Bruce and
begins picking his way through the supplies. There's all sorts in there, not just the standard tinned
affair of soups and beans but chocolate, fizzy drinks and handfuls of teabags.

“How did you get all this in here?” Bruce asks.

Joker waves a and dismissively. “Oh, you know. Stack it up outside, push it all in at once. Here.” He
passes Bruce a surgical grade sticking plaster, comically large, and points to Bruce’s knee.

The hole in his calf is strange to look at, dark and imposing were the scab has started to form. Bruce
presses his fingers to the edges of the wound and they come away sticky, a thin film of white blood
cells forming over the exposed skin. The flesh probably won't grow back entirely. He opens up the plaster with some difficulty and slaps it over the hole.

“Welp, guess no one's leaving till you're back in your supersuit.” Jokers voice is muffled by another mouthful of cream.

Bruce nods. “We should leave today.

“Leave? Urgh, but we just got here.”

“Give it a couple of hour and you’ll be bored out of your mind.”

“Hey!” Joker yelps, spraying Bruce with excess cream. “How dare you use your impeccable knowledge of my character against me?”

Bruce points to the IV bag. “We’ve got one more of these and I’m guessing you don’t remember if that’s because there are no more left in the pharmacy or because these were the only two.”

“Again with the ‘you know me so well’ schtick.”

“So we should leave. Or I should leave. I’m going to leave and you can come with me, if you want.” Bruce blinks against a wave of wooziness riding over him. The tips of his fingers are tingling. “Because I can get somewhere where there should be more antibiotics, but I should wait to use the second bag till I’m there.”

“Easy, tiger.” Joker lays a hand on Bruce’s knee to steady him and a jolt runs up Bruce’s spine. “Reckon those exciting painkillers have kicked in. You wanna sit down.”

Bruce breathes, lets himself fall back onto his buttocks. “I just…you can come too.”

“Like you could stop me if you tried.” Joker snorts. “Here!” He picks something off the top of the pile and passes it to Bruce.

Bruce blinks down at the tin he’s just been handed, excitement growing to fever pitch. It’s tuna, proper protein, not from a badly cooked owl. He fumbles with the lid, holding the thing firm between his knees and twisting back the metal tab while Joker laughs uproariously at the fool he’s making of himself.

The fish is salty and vibrant on his tongue, probably too rich for Bruce to be eating on a tender stomach but he doesn’t care. There will be time enough for plain carbs in the future. There’s always time for plain carbs. Joker’s even been nice enough to pick them up some pasta.

“You get this from the kitchens?” Bruce asks around a mouthful of tuna.

“I assume so. That would certainly explain all the food. Looked like they were planning for a siege down there.”

“They were.”

“Who from?”

Bruce shrugs. “You, Penguin, Two Face. It’s Gotham, you know how it is.”

“Even our hospitals are prepared for war.” Joker laughs. “They oughta put that on the sign coming into the city.”
“That’s one way to keep the tourists out.”

Joker grins at Bruce, teeth flashing brilliant white in the light from the glowstick. He reaches up to swipe a stray flake of fish from Bruce’s cheek and the urge to lean into that touch is overwhelming.

Cold fingers sweep round to stroke Bruce’s chin but the chuckle that accompanies them is warm. “You going soft on me, Bats?”

“I don’t take pain medication very often.” Bruce replies, as if that’s an excuse. Joker absent mindedly squirts another jet of cream into his mouth and its delicious for all the wrong reasons.

Not that there are any right reasons for him to be connecting those dots. Bruce frowns to himself and pulls away. The air feels thick and soupy in a way that seems disconnected from the radiation hanging over them, like nothing quite matters the way it did half an hour ago.

“Sure you don’t want some?” Joker asks, letting a spout of cream coat his tongue.

Staying silent is easier than lying, so Bruce returns to the mountain of supplies and starts rationalising, separating things out into essentials and desirables. He moves on autopilot, trying to focus on the spacey feeling in his limbs and not the blood rushing between his legs. This is ridiculous. He’s not a young man anymore, he should have more control over himself.

It’s the Vicodin, or at least, it’s mostly the Vicodin. It’s a drug, it gets you stoned, that’s all this is. It just has the rather pleasant secondary effect of dulling the ache in his broken arm.

He should really try to bring the ends of the bone into line before they heal too far. Once upon a time Alfred would have laid him out and pinned his arm properly but he no longer has that kind of luxury. Bruce is never going to trust Joker to perform surgery on him, that’s for sure.

He trusted Joker to pull him through the elevator ceiling, to carry him to dry land, to support his weight as they moved through the city. For one brief moment, he trusted that the story Joker had trained himself to believe was true and that trust paid off.

“Earth to Batman!” Joker singsongs. Bruce somes out of a dae staring a tin of cherries. “Penny for your thoughts?”

“Fresh out of thoughts.” Bruce replies. He’s not exactly tired, but the drugs and the radiation make him feel like he should be.

Joker catches him before Bruce even realises he’s falling back. “Now, this isn’t the Bat I know.”

“Wanna lie down.”

Joker smiles down at him, bright and dangerous, Bruce’s shoulder caught in the crook of his arm. He adopts an expression of mock seriousness, brow curving into a little glitch. “Looked like you were doing important things.”

Bruce waves in the vague direction of the pile. “Supplies. Need to work out what we’re taking with us.”

“I guess. Or we could just scoop up as much as we can carry and make a break for it. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“We could die.”
“Oh please. If we were gonna die we would have done it by now. No reason to think we’re getting off this train if we don’t jump off.”

“You’d jump off. If the train was boring, you’d jump off.”

Joker breaks into a series of snorted giggles, entirely undignified but so enthusiastic that Bruce can’t help smiling along in sympathy. “That metaphor really got away from you, huh? I mean, you’re not wrong, but I’d at least have the decency to spice up the place before I made my exit. Murder on the Orient Express style. Old Agatha should pay me royalties.”

With great effort, Bruce readjusts himself; head to Joker’s shoulder, back to his chest. They reach for a tin of cherries in tandem. “Which part of this is you spicing things up?”

“Oh, you know.” Joker shrugs. “Those little explosions I was nice enough to rig up by the church, the kiddies at the mall. The asclepion was supposed to be my finishing move but I fudged it. Well, technically you fudged it but I’d be a poor artist if I couldn’t take responsibility for my work.”

Memories of white light and nothingness are all that Bruce has left of the asclepion. “It worked.”

“Told you.” Joker winks, tearing the lid of the tin free and going to press a cherry to Bruce’s lips. The over sweet syrup the fruit has been preserved in hits his tongue first. Bruce bites down so fast that Joker’s fingers get caught between his teeth, the clown yelping in shock.

It’s kind of funny, the perfect alarm that crosses Joker’s face. Then his eyes narrow and his mouth splits into a wicked grin. Bruce reaches for a cherry and when he brings it to the clown’s mouth there’s nothing accidental about the way teeth scrape over the pads of his fingers. Predatory hunger flashes through Joker’s eyes and despite himself Bruce feels a flash of arousal.

Joker’s eyes flicker towards Bruce’s crotch but don’t linger. He opens his mouth to free the fingers still caught between his lips and it’s almost a disappointment.

“I should have saved it.” Bruce says. “We could have saved the city.”

Joker shrinks in on himself as he laughs, burying his nose in Bruce’s hair and holding him tight enough to shake the two of them. “You are so precious. We were gonna save the world, Batsy. That’s a whole lot more than one city.”

“I’ll always save Gotham first.”

In another life, Bruce never doubted Joker when it came to asclepion and they still came to Gotham first. In that timeline, Bruce likes to think he would have taken more time to scour the streets for survivors, sitting at the foot of whatever Ivy has become and insisting that that was enough to justify opening the little green ball on the back of this dead beast. They wouldn’t have saved the world, they would have patched up a handful of islands still caught in the winds carrying radiation up from Metropolis but it would have felt like a victory to him. The hyper resistant might have been able to survive here, a city populated by the hardiest, those with nothing left to lose caught in a post-apocalyptic playground. Something new, something outsiders would never understand. That’s the Gotham Bruce remembers.

“Should have listened…”

Bruce feels Joker shrug around him. “Eh, I don’t think you were ever going to. That’s not your style, Bats. You’re paranoid as sin and that’s the only thing that’s kept you alive all these years. You probably had protocols in place to handle your super powered friends going off the rails, amiright?”
There’s no point denying it, all his old kit has been rendered obsolete or useless. Bruce nods. “Kryptonite for Superman, a batsuit with super-fast reflexes for The Flash. Wonder Woman…” The details of Joker’s story come back to him. Diana strong as an ox when she landed but breaking down so fast there was no time to stop it happening. Dying in that great green tomb because she had to be sure Clark was dead and she wasn’t used to having to watch her step. His good fist clenches. “You really saw her die?”

“’Fraid so.” Joker says. “I wouldn’t shit you about that. Pretty disappointing, if you ask me. Not her performance, she did spectacularly for someone who was getting tanked by the radiation either way, but we never got to have a proper fight. It was all magical ropes and annoying truthseys coming out of my mouth. I normally try to watch my tongue, but she insisted.”

“Diana was incredible in battle. She would have crushed you.” Bruce looks up at Joker. “You would have loved her.”

Joker’s still hunched over him, one arm twisting round Bruce’s waist to hold him steady. Like this, it’s possible to count his eyelashes. They’re darker green than the rest of his hair, a fact Bruce knows from hours spent pouring over photographs of the clown as part of various cases.

“C’mon, man. Try to sound at least a little jealous.” Joker huffs.

Bruce shakes his head. “You’d come back to me.”

“Such faith.” Joker grins. “I thought I was the one who was supposed to deify you.”

His eyes shine like sunlight through stained glass windows, casting rainbow shadows on the floor of the church from Bruce’s childhood, a human approximation of the divine. Maybe it’s the Vicodin talking, but Bruce can’t hear the rain hitting the concrete, can’t see the city spread out before him, can’t feel the motion of the dance rising beneath his feet and he still wants to kiss The Joker.

The angel’s all wrong, heads tipped towards each other but not lining up the way they’re supposed to. The effort required to lean upwards, pushing through the radiation and the drugs and the bone deep exhaustion that Bruce will never entirely shift seems an almost impassable obstacle.

He makes it work, rising up, tipping his head till everything comes into line, feeling Joker go rigid when he realises what’s about to happen.

Bruce closes the distance with the lightest touch, dry lips pressing against dry lips for little more than a second. His heart catches up to him a moment later, a hefty shock of adrenaline sending his pulse into overdrive, hammering in his ears, alarm bells he no longer cares to pay attention to.

They fall into a freeze frame with less than an inch between them. Up close, everything blurs together, regardless of how well the antibiotics are working. The only thing he can be sure of is that Joker’s eyes are wide open, in surprise or terror or everything. He desperately hopes that it’s everything, it has to be everything. After all this time, nothing less will do.

Joker makes the next move for both of them, twisting them round, pulling them onto their knees facing each other. There’s a cold white hand on Bruce’s shoulder and it’s the only thing keeping him up. The other hand swoops in to cradle his cheek, thumb pressing hard against his lips. Bruce doesn’t open up to let it in. He doesn’t want that. It’s all just foreplay before the main act.

“I—” Joker starts.

Bruce is so sick of hearing him talk. He lets gravity carry him forward, hand finding purchase on Joker’s hip as their mouths find purchase against each other. This time he doesn’t bother with
opening gambits, just opens his mouth and waits for the clown to catch him up.

Joker kisses like he fights. Unpredictable, one step ahead and ten behind and perfectly in line with every move Bruce tries to pull against him. Whatever initial shock had frozen the two of them vanishes as soon as Bruce’s tongue pushes into his mouth and the clown comes to glorious life, nipping at his lips, tracing his teeth, pushing up against him like he might be able to pin Bruce to the air.

There are hands everywhere, slipping up Bruce’s back, pawing at his buttocks, crawling through his hair. Bruce growls in frustration at having to do this one handed, unable to hold tight to Joker’s waist while keeping his head still.

Joker gasps when Bruce slips his hand into his hair and pulls hard, then uses the opportunity to surge into him, trying to regain lost ground. When he inevitably has to give up everything he’s fought for it doesn’t feel like losing.

The pressure from the radiation drives them together and stretches out time until they can hide in a little pocket of the stuff built just for the two of them. When Bruce finally pulls back he’d be hard pressed to say whether they’ve been at it for ten seconds or an hour. All he knows is that his heart is still screaming at him to back away and he wants nothing more than to ignore it.

The faintest blush of colour is visible across Joker’s lips, the pinkish plush of the over-kissed that will fade to blue and purple where Bruce has left teeth tracks. It makes him look fractionally more like himself, even if the expression of delirious joy is too honest for the picture to hold.

Joker leans down to press his forehead against Bruce’s, laughing low in his chest. “Fuck me. That’s been a long time coming.”

“Depends who you ask.” Bruce breathes. He’s very uncomfortably aware of the weight of a full erection tugging between his legs.

Joker’s eyes don’t leave his. “So. You know what happens next?”

A vague shake of the head. Undecided, facetious. Bruce smiles back at Joker. “I have some idea.”

Chapter End Notes

Only took ’em 37 chapters and 150K+ words

(please note that I am not a pharmacist and I have no idea if it’s a good idea to take Vicodin when you're on Amoxicillin)
“This isn’t exactly what I had in mind.” Joker grumbles. He’s hovering in the doorway to the hospital pharmacy, which he thoroughly trashed on his last visit. “This is boring. I was thinking we could do something that wasn’t boring.”

“We need to get out of here.” Bruce replies, pulling aside the swivel chair at the back desk and uncovering a flurry of prescription medication that Joker had spilled across the floor along with a handbag tucked down the side of the table. Inside he finds a phone, a wallet and a packed lunch that looks remarkably fresh considering how long past its sell by date it is. He empties out the contents and throws the bag to Joker. “Put the food in there.”

Joker’s eyes narrow, eyeing up the bag with suspicion. He’ll cave soon enough. He’s already had to drop everything he tried to carry out of the radiology department because he wasn’t strong enough to hold it without the thin layer of lead to protect him and Bruce is only standing because he worked up the energy to wriggle back into the hazmat suit. He needs a moment of fake non-compliance though, like he’s not being asked to do something that benefits the both of them.

“Where exactly do you propose we go? Wanna go take tea with Ivy and wait for the radiation to break through that suit of yours?”

Grabbing a handful of rolled bandages, Bruce runs through one final check of the stored IV bags to be sure he’s not leaving behind anything useful. “I know a place a few miles outside the city. Assuming we can cross the Palisade bridge within four hours it shouldn’t take us longer than a day to get there.”

Joker’s eyebrows fly to his hairline. “The Palisade? We’re headed to Bristol County? Who do you know with a bank account big enough to set up shop out there?”

Bruce cocks a curious brow in his direction and Joker says nothing in response, dropping to the floor to start gathering up the trail of cans and medication leading back to the x ray room. Bruce goes to help him, focusing on the brief touches of Joker’s hands against his. It’s not like he can feel it through the thick material of the hazmat suit but he imagines what cold skin would feel like against his all the same. It’s silly, school level stuff. The taste of Joker’s tongue is fresh in his mind and he has every intention of keeping it fresh, but he never prioritised that sort of thing over survival before and he’s not about to start. Not with Selina, not in the few good years he had with Talia and certainly not with Joker.

The clown fixes him with headlight eyes and wraps a hand around Bruce’s good wrist. “Ya know, we could always save this shit for tomorrow. The x-ray room’s just back there and there’s no guarantee this little hidey hole of yours is gonna give us any protection. If you wanna make the best of this we might as well duck out of the line of fire and get down to business.”

Bruce shakes his head. “I don’t want-“

“Don’t tell me you don’t want to.” Joker snarls, tightening his grip. “We both know that you do. You really expect me to wait this long and not make the most of however long you’re gonna give me?”

Tugging his hand free, Bruce shoves the last few packets of dry goods within reach into the bag and
stands up. “If you’ve waited that long, you can stand to wait a little longer.”

“But Baaaaaaaats! I don’t wanna.” Joker stamps his feet.

“Patience is a virtue.”

“I’m hardly a virtuous soul.”

“Then think of it as anticipation.”

Joker pauses, and on is chin and staring intently at the floor. “I mean, ok. But that means you gotta make the main event extra special.”

Speaking as they are in cryptic half-truths, Bruce is mostly sure that he follows. The parts of his brain that are adept and denying himself simple pleasures are digging their heels in while the parts desperate to engage and find out if it was all worth the years of thinly veiled build up are starting to run through practicalities that he’s never been bold enough to properly consider before. Usually the specifics don’t matter to him, sex is just a thing, a physical action that he can throw his weight into and being able to get excited doesn’t mean that he finds it remotely exciting all that often. Bruce struggles not to lose himself in the idea of pale flesh pressing around him, half remembered dreams that he’s spent years convincing himself were nightmares. The problem was never that he wasn’t interested but that he so rarely felt that attraction that the idea of having those feelings stirred by the worst of Gotham’s underbelly was too much to bear.

“God.” Joker breathes. “Jesus fucking Christ, Batsy. Just look at you.” He steps in close, fingers ghosting down the side of the hazmat suit’s helmet before leaning up to plant a kiss on the glass right over Bruce’s mouth.

Bruce wavers, just for a moment. It would be so easy to cave.

“Wait for it.” He breathes, even as his good arm slips up to wrap around Joker’s waist. Anticipation – it’s everything.

They leave the hospital hand in hand, having packed the baf full to bursting with potentially useful medicines and food. Under the faint grey light of dawn, the city looks all the stranger, still glittering and silent but with none of the ecstatic shine that had felt so tangible in the full light of day, first impressions little more than a façade designed to disguise the more unsavoury elements of this downfall.

Gotham wouldn’t be Gotham without unsavoury elements. Joker’s eyes fall on the flower rising over the skyscrapers, wilting ever so slightly without daylight to sustain it. “I was just joking about tea with Ivy.”

“I’d like to see her.” Bruce finishes for both of them. It’s not that he misses her, or that he’ll be sad to never have to pull killer plants from the walls of this city again, but if she’s the last thing breathing out here he’ll be damned if he doesn’t stop by to pay his respects.

Getting to Ivy requires that they take a different route from the one that got them to the hospital. They pass in front of Wayne Tower and Bruce has to take a moment to look up, taking stock of all that he’s lost. The long shadows of the early morning throw the edges of the architecture into sharp relief and he swears he can see the outline of the large letter W that adorns the summit through the dust.

Just so long as it’s not an S. The world looks empty without the flurry of graffiti he’s come to expect from disused settlements. Gotham used to be the most heavily painted city on the eastern seabords, dripping with gang signs and upcoming artists in equal measure. The rain and the concrete seemed to
suck the paint away from the surface within a matter of weeks, but you could always tell Gotham rubble when it came time to put it under a microscope because it lit up like a Christmas tree, half a hundred different brands of spray paint splashing their way across the batcave screens.

“It’s just a tower.” Joker shrugs, following Bruce’s line of sight. “If you ask me, the youngest Wayne was compensating for something when he added those extra floors a few years back. We get it, kid! You had the widest building in the city, you wanted to have the tallest too.”

Bruce casts him a long sideways glance. The penny, surely, is seconds from dropping but the clown would rather watch it suspended in the air, willful ignorance making up for what he lacks. Wayne Tower hasn’t been the tallest building in Gotham for more than fifty years and he only added those extra two floors to give Lucius enough space to keep Bat family business within the company. Bruce had had a difficult time writing it off as a publicity stunt and had stuck another gargoyle on the tower in the hopes of forcing the lie to stick.”

“I always liked Wayne Tower.”

Joker snorts. “I bet you did. How many stone gremlins does this thing have again? Bet it was your very favourite lookout spot.”

He’s not wrong.

Bruce is a long way off being properly healthy, but the short term effects of the antibiotics make walking in the city significantly easier than it had been the day before. Encased in the hazmat suit, he can feel how much less stifling it is and though he’s more acutely aware of how the radiation is affecting him, even through the suit, he can appreciate the fact that he’s no longer a throbbing ball of nerves.

They find Ivy in Harlow Park, her roots spread so wide that she’s effectively the only thing left in it. It looks like she moved fast, tearing up trees that had been there long before she was born. More than any of the buildings they’ve passed, the faint green haze covering her looks wrong, dulling the vibrant pallet that she always loved to work with. Her babies weren’t just the brightest thing in their gardens, they shone.

“Just looks like a plant.” Joker says, but his fingers tighten over Bruce’s. He and Ivy never got on, even before Harley entered the picture and muddied the waters for both of them. He was too willing to burn down everything in his path and she was too particular about what she wanted to save.

Below the dust, vines knot together, strengthening themselves and each other as they spiral towards the sky. Leaves spill out of the park and drape across the roads and adjacent buildings, the largest more than thirty metres from tip to stem, cascading towards the ground in an elegant loop. The sunlight most be able to permeate the kryptonite or she’d be dead by now.

The closer Bruce and Joker move towards Ivy, the further into darkness they’re pushed where the leaves and petals block out the sun. Bruce tries and fails to classify the plant, something entirely Ivy’s own devising. The flower has reams of petals, each coming to a sharp point around a centre too high up to get a good look at. Neither of them quite realise the scale of the thing till they’re up close and it becomes clear that most of the roots tower over Joker’s head, it takes some cunning manoeuvres for them both to get to her, picking their way forward carefully, to the point where the roots conglomerate into a single bower, bulging and pulsating with life.

After a minute of staring blankly at the mismatched stem of the flower, the roots start to shift, pulling themselves apart and creating a hole big enough for Bruce and Joker to walk through.
Joker hisses out a breath and coils backwards as Bruce steps forward. “We don’t wanna go in there.”

The inside of the bower is dark. Bruce waits for some sense of danger to wash over him but nothing comes. He shrugs. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

“We could be crushed to death by a killer lesbian plant. You know what they say about redheads and fiery tempers.”

Bruce breaks into a wry smile. “I thought you said something about plot armour.”

Joker blinks at him, momentarily nonplussed. Then he tips back his head and lets out a strangled laugh that doesn’t quite hit his usual high notes. “Touche! Alright then, let’s head into the belly of the beast and pray for sunny skies with a minimal chance of murder.”

They step through the opening in the stem together. Bruce holds his breath, waiting for the threads of the vines to close up behind them and trap them inside. He needn’t worry, the gate stays open and as they move further into the shadows the inside walls of the stem light up in deep green, stretching high over their heads till it swallows the black.

If his mouth is hanging open in surprise, Bruce doesn’t care to close it. Joker steps in close, fingers tightening around his as he lets out a short gasp. “It’s so…”

It’s not the same shade of green as kryptonite, it’s not even the colour of the waters surrounding Gotham. This is something richer, more intense. They stand completely still for a long minute, taking it all in, Bruce struggling to give a name to the tearing sensation in his chest.

It’s longing, nostalgia. The bright coloured lights of the city repainted as something Earth-born and wondrous. Familiar enough to stir up fantasies of returning home with some kind of triumph to rest across his shoulders.

Joker breaks the silence, in a small voice that betrays nothing and everything. Eyes wide and face temporarily blank. “There she is.” He points to a spot above their heads, where the undulating vines push a scant patch of colour into odd shapes. Bruce blinks, cocks his head, tries to work out what he’s looking at.

Slinging an arm across Bruce’s shoulders and leaning in close so as to better map the trajectory of his line of sight, Joker traces shapes in the air. “You see the way that bit goes there, and that bit’s out on its lonesome? And the colour’s just a bit…”

“That’s odd.” Bruce agrees, looking along Joker’s outstretched arm to where a vaguely humanoid outline is stamped into the wall of the stem. Faint traced of red ring one end of it before dispersing into the green. As the flower grows it will eventually bleed into the rest of the plant and be lost.

Two pricks that might be eyes, a wide knot that makes it look like the shape is smiling. “Of course she’s happy about this.” Joker rolls his eyes. “Guess the old girl finally got what she’s been wishing for all these years.”

“She wanted the complete destruction of humanity and a new world order dominated entirely by plants.”

“Eh.” Joker waves his hand in an uncertain gesture. “She liked Harley too much to want all of us gone. I reckon she wanted humanity scared, give the plants a change to take some of this back. This is more or less her dream scenario.”

But Harley’s gone, as best as they can tell, Lost with the rest of the city, floating through the air as
the last few particles that were once part of her body struggle to move on with the prevailing winds. Most of her will have been scattered far and wide.

Leaning in to kiss the side of the helmet, Joker chuckles. “Fertiliser, my dear. So Ivy can grow her roots in the soil of her choosing.”

Bruce wonders why he ever bothers to speak out loud. “You said ‘us’.”

“What?”

“When you were talking about humanity, you said ‘us’.”

“Yeah, well. Nobody’s perfect.” Joker steps back, sliding his hand back into Bruce’s and tugging him towards the exit. “C’mon, you said we had four hours to quit this dump.”

But Bruce hangs back, pieces of a puzzle falling into place behind his eyes. “Back at the power plant, with the asclepion. I couldn’t open it at first.”

Joker lays a hand over Bruce’s mouth as if it’s going to do a thing to silence him with the helmet in the way. “Shh!!”

“‘But-‘

“It’s gone now, that’s all that matters. Leave it in the past.”

They keep moving, and it probably takes them longer than four hours to get out of Gotham. On reflection, Bruce doesn’t think he’s ever had to cross the city entirely on foot before and he has to concede that it would take him a long time even if he could move properly. Once they settle into a rhythm the heat starts building fast in the suit. Unable to pull the helmet off to cool off or grab something to drink he has to focus hard on keeping the tuna and cherries he’d eaten that morning down on pain of having to finish the rest of the trip up to the Manor standing in his own vomit.

The rest of the trip for now. Wayne Manor isn’t a long term solution, even if it turns out to fall outside the worse of the radiation accumulating in Gotham. Sooner or later it will kill Bruce, or Joker will get bored and demand a change of scenery, but having a base of operations might give them time to think up a way to deal with the endemic radiation.

A flicker of excitement whips through Bruce every time he thinka bout the Manor. For all the time he’s spent hoping to get back to Gotham he spent precious little envisaging a future in which he made it home. Even now, working their way through Uptown and catching glimpses of Kane Country through the streets, the hills rising green and empty over the pieces of Gotham that have spilled over to the far bank, it feels like a fantasy. He can hardly wait to climb into a bed that’s truly his own and sleep off the last year.

The faintest suggestion that the exhaustion hugging his soul is shiftable makes Bruce want to laugh. He doesn’t know what he’s holding it in for any more, save that he likes the way Joker stiffens next to him when he doesn’t. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re trying not to laugh. I’ve been watching you for years, love. I can see the signs.”

“I was thinking that I’m probably going to be tired forever. I can’t imagine what it would feel like to wake up and not have every day feel like a chore.”
Joker frowns. “If you don’t mind me saying, your sense of humour is wack.”

“I never claimed to be a comedian.”

“I’d say something about how you’re still a joke but we both know that’s bullshit. Let me handle the funny business from here on out.”

“I’m trying.” Bruce draws his arm tight around Joker’s waist as they come to the Palisade Bridge to better drag him up the steps to the footpath. “But if you ask me what’s so funny every time I try not to laugh you’ll have to get used to my wack sense of humour.”

“Guess you’re right.”

“Same was I got used to yours.”

“Hey now! You never laugh at my jokes, you haven’t adapted to my wit.”

“I said I got used to it.” Bruce points out. “I never said you were funny.”

Half way across the bridge they stop and silently agree to turn back to stare up at the urban jungle at their backs, jutting up out of the ocean, blank eyed and proud for reasons it can’t remember. The shadows of low lying clouds paint dark patches over the green ocean even as the sun catches every spire, flowing with mindless, stress free happiness.

Dead eyes tearing things apart for want of something to do. The radiation here will kill you or change you, they have to move.

“You think we’ll ever see the old girl again?” Joker asks, eyes scanning the tops of buildings for some sign of life.

Bruce shakes his head, and though he doesn’t see the value in attaching gender to inanimate objects he plays along. “She died over a year ago. See her in your dreams.”

“But were gonna be tired forever, remember? You said so, just a few minutes ago. We’re not gonna dream.”

“I remember.”

“Guess this is goodbye.”

Dragging himself away from Bruce and straightening out his spine, Joker snaps his feet together, raising an arm in salute to Gotham. It’s a gesture Bruce has seen him make facetiously on numerous occasions but for once in his life the clown is deadly serious.

Bruce follows his example, feeling not entirely ridiculous.

When they reach the other end of the bridge, something snaps into place. They look to each other, finality crackling through the air.

Joker lets out a long, low breath. “That’s it then.”

Bruce nods. “You gonna stay around for the next chapter?”

“As if I have a choice.” Joker giggles. “You still need me to carry you up to your Bristol County hideaway, wherever the fuck that may be. It is yours, right?”
“Yes.”

The flats leading to the hills surrounding Gotham are marshy and insubstantial and entirely the wrong place to build a large volume of cheap housing, not that that stopped anyone. Bruce had campaigned against the development but even with the full clout of Wayne Enterprises behind him he hadn’t gotten far. The stiff little apartment blocks are already starting to sink with no one to handle their upkeep. Not even five years old and it’s possible to see damp eating into the brick.

Joker catches him staring. “You wanna go take a look?”

“No.” Bruce doesn’t elaborate. This place was never significant to him and he has no idea how far outside the city they need to be for the first people pancakes to start cropping up.

The residents of Bristol Country were willing to pay through the nose to enforce bylaws forbidding new developments on the hills so once they’re out of the swamp the land is clear and vibrant. The well-kept lawns of people who Bruce would have described as his neighbours despite the miles between their respective estates are a thing of the past, bursting full of wildflowers and singing with their own green in addition to the kryptonite. It takes very little elevation for the thick coat of dust that still holds Gotham in stasis to retreat to a light dusting, the chitinous casing reserved for the bay.

Everything’s familiar and new, the gardens overflowing with the colour and the faint buzzing of the few brave insects that have managed to breach the radiation and get back to pollinating. Bruce strains his ears for the calling of crows, the silence of the hills unsettling without the thrum of helicopters and city traffic rising up from Gotham.

They crest the first hill and Joker takes a step back, able to stand on his own. Bruce asks how he feels and he shrugs.

“Not as bad as Gotham. Nowhere near as bad as Metropolis but I mean nowhere ever will be. You better keep the suit on, hot stuff. Would wanna risk the rest of you going the way of your knee.”

Hot stuff is right. Bruce is sweating like a pig inside the hazmat suit and the further they go the harder it is for him to hold his injured arm still enough not to jolt it as they walk. Joker takes the bag off his hands, skipping ahead a few paces and casting heavy lidded glances back at Bruce every few minutes.

Even if it did take them more then four hours to get out of Gotham, Bruce was more or less right when he predicted it would take them the rest of the day to reach Wayne Manor. The kryptonite has started staining orange, burnished by the setting sun striking out across the water. Even the city has taken on some of its hue. It might take a while, all day, a few lifetimes, but sooner or later nature takes everything back. It rains on the just and the unjust alike, because the skies can’t tell the difference.

“Well, would you look at that.” Joker whistles, impressed.

“It’s beautiful.” Bruce agrees.

“WHA- no! Not the sunset.” Joker tugs Bruce round by his good arm so he’s staring yp the road ahead, towards a familiar set of stone posts set into a high metal fence beyond which lies an impressive house that looks like it might just as easily fall down any moment as survive the end of all things. “Wayne Manor!”

“Home.” Bruce breathes, almost simultaneously.

Incredulous and shocked, Joker whips round fast to look at Bruce. He scans his face with startling
intensity, tracing the unmistakable Wayne nose, the distinctive bow of his mouth which he inherited from his mother.

“No fucking way.” Joker grabs the top of the helmet, twisting Bruce’s head this way and that, like this is a joke that will fall apart in his hands if he can find the right switch. “You’re Bruce Wayne?”

He says it with such furious disbelief that Bruce can’t help but laugh. Scrabbling at his sides and struggling to maintain his balance as his body is rocked by the sharp reminder that people only ever take in as much of what’s in front of them as they wish to see.

Chapter End Notes

Bruce Wayne is a greyaromantic demisexual who would describe himself as asexual to save time and that's that on that

I have taken some liberties with exactly how far outside Gotham Wayne Manor is - call is artistic liscense

Ten points to the first person to spot the part where I lovingly rip off Watchmen
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Warnings for this chapter: Mentions of slavery, lots of grief and heavyweight melancholy. There are no on screen deaths but there's some pretty serious dealing with death stuff in here.

Alfred liked to keep the doors locked the old fashioned way, despite Bruce having the Manor on five different electronic security systems. He argued that an extra layer of protection between them and the outside world couldn’t hurt and on the rare occasions they’d fallen victim to power cuts and broken generators Bruce was glad for the set of keys hanging next to the kitchen door.

Now, however, the analogue locks are proving difficult. When he had bought them they had claimed to be unpickable and Bruce had scoffed, knowing that wasn’t really possible, but he has to concede that the maze of tumblers is proving quite a challenge.

Joker is being no kind of helpful, still gawping at Bruce like he’s grown an extra head. “How the fuck did I miss it? All this time, right in front of my face. Ha! Bot oh boy do I look like an idiot.”

"It’s been days since I was last wearing the cowl, I assumed you already knew.” Bruce remembers the feel of black rubber slipping through his fingers while Joker sat bedraggled and smiling, fresh back from whatever he had done with Jones.

Ice cracks across Bruce’s spine. Joker had asked him if he wanted to know what happened to Waylon Jones and he hadn’t been able to answer. He supposes silence is an answer of sorts, after all, it doesn’t take much imagination to work out the ends to the clown’s scheme much as the means can shift and switch. Acid hidden in a flower tucked into a button hole, spring loaded fists hitting hard enough to rupture a spleen, hand buzzers primed to electrocute, gas lilting through the early evening air and twisting small bodies into shapes they were never meant to take, lips pressing against his and promising that they’ve been waiting to do this for years. It doesn’t make sense, you can’t fit all those warring factions into such a small space. Joker, surely, is too thin to contain such complexity. The long line of his legs, slim waist, wide shoulders, eyes lighting up the catacombs of America with enough raw joy to keep every survivor on the edge of their seats.

Bruce shudders and turns back to the lock. If Joker spots his cold feet he doesn’t say a word, craning over Bruce’s shoulder and offering useless advice.

“You do the hokey cokey and you- No! You need to put your left ear in, you’re not listening!”

“I know what I’m doing.” Bruce growls.

“You’re doing a piss poor job of getting us inside is what you’re doing. It’s nothing to be proud of, a brick would have a better time of it.” Joker appears to pull a brick out of thin air, raiding it in his right hand and laughing. Bruce spots its trajectory just in time and reaches up to stay the throw.

In the back of his mind the window shatters anyway and even that is unbearable. Bruce has to reach up high to slow Joker down and he’s still not quite tall enough to reach the clown’s wrist, pressed cheek to cheek and glowering at each other in close quarters.
Joker laughs and reaches out to steady Bruce before his precipitous balance on the balls of his feet gives way. “Easy, easy Don’t wanna hurt yourself.”

“Put the brick down, Joker.”

Joker complies, opening his fingers and letting the brick drop. He leans in fractionally and Bruce has to work hard not to follow suit. He bites the inside of his cheek and tries not to think about how they’d almost certainly be kissing again if he weren’t wearing the helmet.

If he were to kiss the Joker right now, the clown would use his temporary distraction to put the brick through a Manor window. Bruce knows how this game works, he and Selina used to play it on a regular basis. It’s fun, so long as no one gets hurt.

He had seen her two nights before he boarded a Wayne Enterprises jet to Sao Paulo and unwittingly kissed Gotham goodbye. She had spoken in innuendos and half truths, as she always did when things were going well for her and the city was rife with valuables to be stolen. Bruce had let her back him up against a wall in an unnamed alley as he tried to pull secrets from between her teeth, whispering low promises about what he might be able to do for her if only she could find it in her heart to hold off on the thievery.

He never had anything she wanted, but they both liked to pretend that he did. The best he could ever offer was a head start, the understanding that if she were brought in it would be the GCPD and not him who produced the handcuffs.

Bruce lets his eyes soften, just to watch malice creep back into Joker’s, the split second in which he thinks he’s won. It’s electric to see how he stiffens, muscles wound so tight he could snap at any moment.

Joker doesn’t snap, he bends. Twisting his morals into impossible shapes that look as dazzling as they do painful.

“So.” Joker hisses, voice just the wrong side of sultry, pushing up under Bruce’s overheated skin to irritate. “How long are you gonna keep me waiting?”

The hazmat suit is the worst thing in the world and Bruce can’t wait to take it off and never put it back on again. “Learn some patience. Let me pick this lock.”

“Patience? Honey, I invented patience. Trust me when I say it’s overrated, you don’t need nearly so much of it as the papers would have you believe.”

“Patience made me who I am today.” Bruce replies, returning to position and going back to work on the lock.

After another few minutes without success, Joker storms over and pulls Bruce away. “Gimme that.” He casts the rudimentary picks Bruce had fashioned out of some dry twigs aside, setting one hand on the door handle and the other on the frame directly opposite.

A quick twist, a flick of the wrist that Bruce can’t quite follow. Joker presses down hard on the doorframe and a crack rends the evening air as the tumblers fall aside. Another jerk of the handle and the door falls open like it’s nothing.

Joker stands aside, bowing deep. “M’lord.”

“How did you do that?” Bruce asks before he can pick his jaw up off the floor.
Joker shrugs. “Natural talent. A Magician never reveals his secrets. It came to me in a dream. Take your pick, just remember that I’m the lock whisperer.”

“Is that how you got out of Arkham?”

Snapping into sharp focus, Joker’s eyes turn cold before he turns away and stalks into the Manor without another word.

Just past the door, Wayne Manor opens up into an ornate foyer. Bruce knows this because he’s spent his entire life crossing this threshold like it’s normal. He knows every painting that skirts the walls of his home, every secret passage, every sight-line, ever chip in the old oak paneling. Today the house looks dim and uninviting, the shadows blocking out everything but the doormat, a ragged old thing that Alfred had wanted to replace for years.

It couldn’t be replaced though, because Bruce has memories of his mother taking a full ten minutes to wipe off her boots on it after a trek through the grounds after the rain, of his father wearing away the soles of the cheap trainers he wore to work on it over a matter of months, of Alfred propping it up outside on wet mornings to keep it clean and grumbling that he hoped the water washed it away completely.

“What are you waiting for?” Joker calls from the shadows. It’s all wrong. He shouldn’t be here. Bruce has spent so many hours ensuring that the clown never wound up within these walls, armed with the knowledge of the Batman’s true identity.

Bruce tries to step over the threshold and his feet fail him. “I…”

Pale fingers emerge from the dark to wrap around his wrist. Joker tugs, gently yet insistently, pulling him forward, crossing the line. For a long moment the only thing Bruce can see before him is white skin slowly taking on the shape of The Joker.

The rest of the room comes into view gradually, the rich reds and browns that crowd the foyer as familiar to Bruce as breathing, recalling the way the colour scheme appears to shrink the space. The ceiling reaches high over his head. Room to grow, Alfred had called it. The smell of moth eaten carpets and decades old taxidermy from hunts long past have been left to mingle with wood polish and fresh plastic and as Bruce looks round he’s able to recite from memory which lighting brackets are originals and which ones were forged by his butler for the sake of keeping up appearances.

Bruce breathes in and waits for the dust soaked air to reach his lungs, but the hazmat suit filters it down to something more normal, identical to the breeze striking out across the Bristol Country hills.

“So, this is your super-secret bachelor pad.” Joker says, eyes scanning the room, looking vaguely impressed.

“It was never much of a secret.”

“Coulda fooled me. I spent ages trying to find where you were cooped up.”

“No you didn’t. You never cared.”

Joker grunts in feeble disagreement but his heart’s not in it. “I liked to think I did.” His fingers slide from Bruce’s wrist to his fingers once again. His grip is steadfast and tight and he’s either nervous or so far beyond excitement that the distinction no longer matters.

There’s so much to see and no matter what pull his bed might have over him, Bruce is determined to see it all before he sleeps. He squeezes Joker’s hand. “I suppose I should give you the grand tour.”
Joker leans in to wrap himself around Bruce’s good arm, grinning. “I’d like that.”

Bruce leads them through the colonnade that arbitrarily marks the line between the foyer and the great hall beyond. It’s very dark, the high ceilings creating a sense that the black over their heads is infinite. Joker cranes his head back, trying to spot the edges of the sky.

Bruce copies him, the phantom scent of pine trees long since thrown on the fire ignites in his nose as it always has done, looking past the balcony to the point where the star of the Christmas tree would lie each year. He would always go to the trouble of bringing in a real evergreen from the grounds for the kids and Alfred to decorate with light and colour. The smell never quite leaves and they all would find needles hidden between the floor boards the whole year through.

Nothing ever really leaves here.

The lighting brackets are of no use to them now the wiring has blown, but there are candles scattered throughout the room at tactical intervals. Alfred had spent days and hours and years working out precisely where to position live flames so as to make the place look like it was illuminated by candlelight when in fact electrical lighting was doing most of he heavy lifting. Bruce moves towards a table tucked up against the nearest column and drops Joker’s hand to swipe the candle off it.

“What’cha gonna do with that?” Joker eyes the candle with suspicion.

Without answering, Bruce leads him towards a hidden panel in the western wall. He presses against the wood until he finds the right pressure point and it pops open, revealing one of Alfred’s secret stashes. Cleaning rags, silver polish, spare candles and a box of matches.

Joker blinks at the selection and lets out an undignified snort of laughter. “Oh man, this is taking that ‘Be Prepared’ boyscout bullshit to a whole new level. Did you often have to take down evil doers in your fucking ballroom with a dirty cloth?”

“I make a point of not inviting evil doers into my home.” Bruce tells him, reaching for the matches. “And this isn’t the ballroom.”

Joker chokes on his own laughter. “Woah, woah, hold up a minute. So there is a ballroom but this isn’t it?”

“You catch on fast.”

“Just how big is this place?”

“It’s a Victorian mansion that almost every subsequent generation has added to. It’s not small.”

“Victorian, eh? Your ancestors must have been major players in the sugar industry to afford a place like this.” Joker’s eyes flash in challenge, the bait obvious and uncomfortable.

Bruce can’t quite meet his eye. “I can’t say I’m proud of the Wayne family’s historic ties to the slave trade, but it is what it is. We’ve moved on since then.”

“Yeah, I bet you have.” Joker giggles. “Bet you’ve paid out sooooooo many reparations. That’s why you’ve still got cash to burn.”

“I’m not having this argument now.” Bruce turns away and starts fiddling with the box of matches. Getting one lit one-handed feels almost impossible.

“Why not? It’s the perfect time. No one expects you to pay them back anymore so really we’re just
dealing with hypotheticals. You won, Brucie boy! Played the system just like mummy and daddy taught you.”

The air goes static around them. Bruce slides the matchbox closed and looks back at Joker, who at least has the decency to look slightly alarmed at himself.

Bruce goes first. “That’s…”

“It slipped out!” Joker holds up his hands in surrender. “Or I dunno. I wanted to find out how the name fits. Won’t happen again.”

It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t make a blind bit of difference what Joker calls him, but Bruce’s skin crawls. He couldn’t say if it’s the name coming out of Joker’s mouth or the fact that no one has called him that in over a year, but he hates it.

Joker looks from Bruce’s face to the candle tucked under his arm to the box of matches. He holds out a hand to take over.

Foolishly, Bruce hands over the box and immediately realises that he’s made a tactical error. The clown pulls out three matches and strikes them all at once, holding the flame an inch from his nose. Fire does less to light a room than one might think, doing little more than highlighting the white of Joker’s face. “Wouldn’t it be a shame if I were to just…” Joker holds the matches out to the oak paneling, letting the fire lick along the wood.

It takes more than two seconds’ exposure to such a pitiful little flame to set fire to well-seasoned oak. Bruce swipes Joker’s hands away and the matches scatter, flying across the well-polished floor in three different directions till they still and burn out to nothing. Joker cackles and the sound doesn’t echo so much as expand to fill the room.

“Give me back the matches.” Bruce snaps, reaching for Joker’s wrist and inevitably missing.

Joker rolls his eyes. “C’mon, Bats. You don’t seriously think I’d risk burning Wayne Manor down? I know I’m not the sentimental sort but even I know that would be sacrilege. This is some primo Gotham history, can’t let go of that.”

“Then give them back to me before you change your mind.”

While lighting up another match, Joker considers the proposition. He holds it out and Bruce meets him with the candle.

The box of matches is thrown over Joker’s shoulder, clattering along the floor till it comes to a halt somewhere in the dark. “Better?”

“Slightly.” Bruce concedes. “Come on.”

They head through the gallery. Thick dust coats the floor and the windows have mottled without anyone to clean them. The curtains are open and it’s easy for Bruce to see where the older portraits have suffered the effects of light damage, washing out everything save the strip of rich red carpet running down the middle of the room.

Joker scuffs a foot through the dust and laughs at the cloud that he puts up. He rushes over to the middle of the room and starts tracing something through the dust. A long curve ringed by a sharp fence.

An S symbol. Bruce frowns and starts to move away.
“Who’s that? Joker asks, straightening up abruptly and pointing to a large portrait on the northern wall.

It takes Bruce a moment to remember the name. “Silas Wayne. My great uncle. He was known for-“

“Who’s that?”

“Solomon Wayne. He was a very influential lawyer. I-“

“Who’s that?”

“Alan Wayne.”

Joker blinks at Bruce. “What, no fancy story for this guy?”

“You weren’t listening.” Bruce pushes past him, moving towards the far end of the room where the only paintings he really cares about are housed.

Between the doors through to the ballroom hang two portraits. The first is of Thomas and Martha Wayne posed around the drawing room fire, beaming at their infant son. In the picture Bruce looks serene, resting in his father’s arms but as he understands it he had fussed and whined all day. It was a story he heard from Alfred and never stopped wondering what it would have sounded like coming from his parents.

The picture next to it is a much happier affair. Bruce had it painted as a birthday present for Alfred years ago as he wouldn’t stop bemoaning the fact that the lord of the Manor hadn’t taken upon himself to add his face to the family art collection. It’s a dated portrait, done before Cassandra, Damian Luke, Harper or Duke came along but after Barbara had been confined to the wheelchair and before Jason was back on speaking terms with the family. Bruce is in the middle, in the same armchair as his father with Kate taking Martha’s place. They’re surrounded by Dick, Tim, Barbara, Jean Paul and Stephanie with Alfred himself standing slightly off to the side, expression of smug pride captured perfectly. Helena was being difficult at the time and missed the invite and when Bruce asked Selina if she’d like to join them she had laughed in his face.

He’d been thinking about getting a new one done. One with everyone.

Hey, that guy looks like you!” Joker slips forward so quietly it’s a shock to find out how close they’re standing.

Bruce follows Joker’s line of sight and finds him staring at the portrait of his parents. “That’s my father.”

“I was talking about the baby.”

“Oh. That’s me.”

“Ha!” Joker leans in close so his nose nearly touches the canvas. “God, you were pathetic back then. No fashion sense.”

“I was an infant. You would have been little better.”

Joker shrugs. “Who knows?”

They get side-tracked in the drawing room when Joker finds an old pipe tucked down the back of the bookshelf that dominates the west wall and starts using it as a prop in his Old British Man act,
hobbling around the room and giving every item long, hard looks. Meanwhile Bruce holds tight to the back of his father’s armchair to keep himself from shaking. The kids used to have sleepovers in here and Alfred would spend days afterwards combing the room for signs of anything out of place.

“By Jove! What have we here?” Joker crows when he finds the elevator doors at the back of the room. It used to go down to the cave, the only way Barbara could access the lower levels.

Bruce draws an unsteady breath. “Let’s go.”

They sweep through the ballroom and onto the conservatory, where the handful of cacti and arid plants Alfred kept have flourished and everything else has died. The scent of rotting plant material without the damp musk of the forest underlying it is strange, the residual heat of the afternoon still percolating through the air. They used to do family breakfasts in here on Sunday mornings. No one was obligated to come but it was mandatory you put in an appearance at least once a month.

“What’s the point of all this? Joker gestures to the wicker seating tucked between the dead plants. “Don’t tell me you couldn’t afford a proper greenhouse, Captain Moneybags.”

There’s a rather small greenhouse out on the grounds. If Bruce had ever been inclined to extend it, repeated attempts by Poison Ivy to weaponise the one at Arkham put him off the idea for good. He shrugs. “It’s nice.”

“You think a bunch of mouldy plants and a few rickety chairs is nice? Bats, you really don’t know how to spend your money.”

They reach the loggia in time to catch the last of the light, the lawn drowned in purple till it gives way to the black mass of the flower beds and the trees at the far end of the garden. Alfred would recruit whoever was available to help him with upkeep but they never could stay on top of it all. No matter how green Jean Paul’s thumb or how much Cassie enjoyed tearing across the ground on the tractor mower. Bruce had never been able to bring himself to hire a gardener, that would have meant bringing in someone from the outside.

Joker skips ahead towards the library. It’s probably open. After all, what would be the point of installing an advanced locking mechanism at the front of the house if there weren’t a door for everyone to leave unlocked round the back?

The library smells of old paper starting to decay, the same as ever. The books are kept in strict order, so that when the days, weeks of minimal sleep and constant action start to catch up with him it takes no effort for Bruce to find what he’s looking for.

So of course, Joker is pulling books off the shelves at a pretty pace and casting them aside without so much as looking at them.

“Put those back when you’re done.” Bruce tells him.

Joker snorts, flicking through a thick book detailing ways to resist torture and not stopping long enough to read anything. Bruce uses his distraction as an opportunity to slip ahead into the study and ensure that everything’s locked down the way it’s supposed to be.

He’s not ready for the rush of cold air that hits him as he steps into the room and sees his father’s desk exactly as he left it a year ago, a dossier on malfunctioning CCTV cameras open where he had been trying to connect the dots on a string of muggings involving knockout gas. He had suspected it was a whole new villain, a fresh chapter in the history of Gotham city. He hasn’t thought about the case since Brazil.
Across from the desk, the grandfather clock ticks along lifelessly. It claims that it’s twenty to seven and Bruce has no idea if that’s anywhere in the vicinity of accurate. He can hear the pendulum swinging, moments falling through his fingers but the clock hasn’t been wound in so long, it’s unlikely it’s still functioning properly.

No one knows what time it is anymore, it doesn’t matter.

Glancing to the door to be sure Joker’s not watching him, Bruce starts checking the seal around the clock. He’d been meaning to carry out some upgrades to the security system on this entrance to the cave; for reasons of sentimentality he was never going to be able to scrap it entirely and redirect the tunnel through the library as was the obvious solution and the metal seal is uncomfortably visible against the suspiciously fresh wallpaper.

“Whatcha doing?”

Bruce is startled again by Joker’s silent arrival. He takes a step back, carefully keeping his expression neutral. “Checking the state of my assets. This clock is a family heirloom. It’s very old, could easily have been damaged due to lack of care this past year.”

“Yeah, ok.” Joker raises an eyebrow and glances pointedly towards the line of metal framing the back of the clock. “I thought it was kinda funny that I hadn’t seen any of that shiny special bat gear you used to bring to our sparring sessions about the place but I suppose you wouldn’t have kept the big Bruce Wayne is Batman secret for long if you were so careless and I’m guessing it’s not hoarded away in your bedroom because surely at least one of the airheads you liked to bring home would have the requisite brain cells to work out that the batsuit by the night stand wasn’t part of an elaborate kink. But here we’ve got a nice little inner sanctum, probably unchanged since your grandfather’s time, you sentimental goof, and a nice big fancy family heirloom sitting on a rather new and shiny looking hunk of metal and-” He pauses to rap on the wall next to the clock. ”I hear metal lining and a great big bunch of nothing. Got a secret you’re like to share with the class, Bats?”

Shaking his head, Bruce backs away. He can come back here in his own time to wallow in the grief of ages past, straining his ears to hear the sound of the television blasting in the next room. But Joker can’t be here to see him do it and he certainly can’t be allowed anywhere near the cave. There are weapons and chemicals down there that could cause real damage, even without working electronics.

Joker reaches out to stop him. “Don’t walk out on me, darling. Who knows what I might get up to when my back is turned?”

A wave of heat plunges through Bruce’s body, reigniting his headache with a passion. He’ll need to lie down again soon. “Just…leave it, would you?”

“Would I?” Joker grins, slipping his other hand up to push against the metal, searching for an opening. “I dunno, Batsy. That seems like a pretty mighty ask. I mean, the house is nice and all but these musty old rooms with all the style of a soggy hankerchief are starting to wear on me. Reckon I need a change of scenery.”

Bruce squeezes his eyes shut and prays that Joker will be standing in front of him when they open. “Come with me, now. We can look down there in the morning.”

“The morning? Urgh, that’s ages away.”

“You can be patient.”

“Oh, I know I can be patient but it’s really a matter of whether or not I want to be.” Joker moves
away from the clock and Bruce’s heart jumps with relief. “I guess it’s a question of whether or not it would be more fun to see the place with or without you. On the one hand, going in alone means I won’t have you trying to babysit me while I make myself at home. On the other, I go in without you I won’t get to see you silly sad eyes when you realise it’s as dead as everything else.

“My eyes aren’t- come on, Joker.”

“What’s in it for me?”

“I don’t know. Whatever you want.”

“I want to see what’s behind this clock. Right now, if you please.”

“Other than that.” Bruce groans. “You can have any sweets leftover in the pantry. You can turn one of the guest suits into a funhouse. You can share my bed. But not that, not yet.”

Joker pauses. If he were going to dive into the cave he would have done so by now. All that’s left for him to decide is if the trade he’s being offered suits his mood.

Shrugging, Joker holds out a hand for Bruce to shake. “Throw in free reign to rip the shit out of the lawn and you’ve got yourself a deal.”

Bruce juggles the candle into the crook of his neck and takes Joker’s hand. It’s just a lawn, after all. “What do you want to wreck the lawn for?”

“How should I know?” Joker giggles. “I might befriend a local pig, or take up gardening, or have a go at digging a really big hole just for the hell if it.” He keeps hold Bruce’s hand and plucks the candle away.

The living room is absurdly minimalist in contrast to the rest of the Manor. Impersonal and cold, the faux leather furniture chosen specifically because it was so easy to wipe down if anyone every spilt anything on it and the cream carpet a tactical mistake. They move through to the dining room quickly, where Bruce starts heading towards his preferred seat on autopilot.

There’s a seat at this table for everyone, regardless of how often they would come to dinner. For the first time in months, Bruce is forced to consider who might have been here when the bomb went off as he passes chairs that he’s under no illusion will remain empty for the rest of his days. Dick was based in Chicago, Cassie in Blüdhaven. Barbara, Harper, Luke, Kate and Helena had their own places in the city and Jean Paul liked to pretend he did. Tim was living in the Manor but his day job as a low level employee at a downtown tech firm occupied most of his time. It happened in the middle of the day so Damian and Duke should have been at school though it was rather touch and go as to whether Damian would bother to show up for classes. Jason liked to keep away from the house as much as possible.

Bruce struggles not to take these deductions to their logical conclusions. He doesn’t doubt that Blüdhaven is experiencing similar levels of radiation to Gotham. All he can do is hope that the rest of them were resistant. “How’s the radiation?”

“Oh, err… lemme check.” Joker tucks the candle into his armpit, sticks a finger in his mouth and holds it out like he’s testing the wind. “Cloudy with a chance of meatballs.”

“Let’s try again with a more sensible answer.”

“Were you always such a strong disciplinarian? No wonder you had so many kiddies running around your ankles, I mean, who could resist?” Bruce tightens his grip and Joker actually winces. “Ok, ok.
Jeez, give a guy a chance to get to the point. S’alright here. Just look at me! I’m not having to squash myself down at all. Kinda weird, maybe the hills are nice enough to let us rise above all that or maybe your paranoid ass managed to install something to slow the tide."

“What does ‘alright’ mean? Better or worse than the x ray room?”

Joker frowns. “See, that’s confusing. If I say the radiation is better does that mean it’s better at being radiation so its stronger or that it’s better for you?”

“Is it stronger or weaker?” Bruce rephrases from between gritted teeth.

“Weaker. Way weaker. I’d be real surprised if you went kaput under this heat.”

“And you were planning on telling me this when, exactly?” Bruce tries to pull his hand back to loosen the clasp on his helmet but the clown matches his grip and stops him short.

“I wasn’t planning on telling you. But I just did. So, you’re welcome.”

He doesn’t let go of Bruce’s hand till they’re through to the servery, a strange little room that Alfred would spend an inordinate amount of time in, especially on Christmas, insisting that this final stage of food preparation was essential. In the flickering shadows cast by the candle, he could almost still be here, hunched over the table against the back wall as he does something complicated with the plating.

The crockery is still out, stacked up ready for dinner. Bruce’s breath catches, he almost wishes the candle would go out.

Joker drags them both over to examining the heavyweight blue and gold Spode that Bruce’s mother had decreed was for everyday use on account of it being comparatively difficult to break. He picks up one of the plates and Bruce doesn’t hesitate to wrench his hand free and snatch it away.

Not today, not now. Some part of his desperate rage must show on his face because Joker holds up his hands and backs away, snickering. “Hey now, I can take a hint. You’re clearly going through some complex emotional shit and it would be such a shame to spoil that for you.”

Bruce swallows the snarl brewing on the back of his tongue. He tries to centre himself, tries to pretend that everything here is exactly as he expected and that he’s just rolling with the punches. He moves toward the hidden door on the other side of the room to the semi-secret passage beyond.

Joker steps through the door and immediately bursts into laughter. “Is this one of those secret alleys high society types used to build so that they never had to look The Help in the eye?”

“It’s a servants’ passage. It connects the kitchen, the dining room, the billiard room, the old nursery and the butler’s quarters.” Bruce corrects him.

“That’s a yes then.” Joker snorts. “Wait, hold up. Were the butler’s quarters occupied or did your elitist ass just forget to take the tags off when you inherited the place?”

The press never cared all that much about Bruce Wayne’s staff. Alfred wasn’t so much an unknown quantity so much as no one outside the manor cared. Bruce could talk about how important he was as a friend and father figure as much as hired help but it would feel disingenuous. People weren’t concerned with Alfred Pennyworth when he was alive, he’ll be damned if he hands him over in death.

Joker quickly tires of waiting for an answer and sets off down the corridor, taking the candle with
him. “Well, I for one wanna see what a billiards room looks like.”

“It’s down the-“

“No! Don’t tell me. I wanna find it myself, see if I can’t get good and lost before you decide I need babysitting all over again.

Watching Joker go, the light shrinking around him, Bruce tries and fails to let his relief at being left alone get the better of him. He should chase after the clown, keep his hands off that which isn’t his. Or he can turn off to the kitchens, get himself something to eat and enjoy some alone time until Joker inevitably breaks something.

Was that what it had been like before, knowing the clown was out there but unable to summon the energy to keep up with him all the time?

It’s not like there’s anything of particular sentimental value in the billiards room. Bruce slips through the door down to the kitchens just as Joker vanishes round the corner at the end of the hall, snuffing out the light. The stairs are dark but familiar and the kitchen shines grey, cast in nothing more than starlight streaming through the windows. The boots of the hazmat suit clack against the tiled floor, ever so slightly muted by a year of dust. The large oak table that dominates the centre of the room is dotted with partially rotten sludge where vegetables had been left out before the bomb. The bread on the counter is in a similar state. There are still plates waiting to be washed from breakfast.

His hand shaking, Bruce releases the catch in the helmet. He immediately starts worrying that Joker lied to him, that the Manor is unsafe, but the pressure that floods into the suit is perfectly manageable, if unpleasant. It will wear on him, but it won’t turn him into a puddle.

The cupboards above the toaster were always kept packed with dry goods that shouldn’t have decayed. The cooker occupying the back wall has electric ovens but a gas hob so they might be able to cook a meal or two on the residual gas, assuming the pipes haven’t been damaged.

Tinned food was stored in the pantry, so this is where Bruce heads first. He sidesteps the table and his heart stops. Broken glass fans out from the sink where someone’s hand slipped as they ceased to be a person. The plates still waiting to be washed match the handful sitting in the drying rack and there’s no way Alfred would have left a job half done like that.

There’s no way.

There’s no.

There’s.

There’s a dark circle next to the sink, clearly visible against the tiles and Bruce doesn’t need light to know that it’s dark brown. The pressure compounds on him, knocking him to his knees and clawing up his throat. A wretched sob bursts past his teeth and he’s sure this is the moment the ground should open up and swallow him. There’s a difference between knowing and being certain. Evidence is damning. Life goes on.

Once upon a time, a happy family lived in this house and when that family was broken something new took root. One man stayed to see both through to the bitter end. All the laughter and the fighting, the raging highs and soaring lows that made this house, all of it cut short. Bruce looks at the puddle for as long as he can stand, till the tears crowd his vision and he doesn’t have any choice but to look away.

He knew this was coming, he has known since he was twelve, watching a great aunt die and coming
to understand that his parents were not the only impermanent people on this Earth. Alfred should have been permanent though, it felt like he was supposed to be. There are twenty year old photos in which he looked much the same as he did a year ago. Old as the hills. None of the stories he ever spun about his past quite added up but it didn’t matter because he was there, in the moment, right where he needed to be.

Bruce draws breath, seemingly for the first time in his life, and tries to nudge aside the voice at the back of his mind screaming “what now?”. There is no now. There is no next. Surely, this is where the road runs out and he gets to slip off the grid. Joker has a line, one that comes after his tedious drivel about bad days and the instantaneous state change of leaving sanity behind. Madness is akin to gravity, all you have to do is fall.

Except you don’t and he’s wrong. If that were all there was to it, Bruce would have gone mad years ago. He would have been eight years old watching his parents’ blood spill across they alleyway and he would have laughed. Instead, he had picked himself back up, pulled himself above what he might once have been and let history be made in his wake. He’s better than this, the version of himself that sits snivelling on the floor is born of shock and grief. He’s not always better than this, but this is not the version of himself that wins out.

Bruce pulls himself to his feet. He looks at the puddle and flicks through chemical makeup. If the human body is at least fifty percent water then there’s no more than half of Alfred left and it’s not his spark, his steady hand, his razor wit. It’s not him. Joker may be wrong about madness but he’s right to say that people don’t want to live in a house with dead things.

Just inside the pantry is a plastic bag full of plastic bags. Bruce wipes his tears with the scratchy fabric of the hazmat suit and sets to work cajoling the people pancake into a bag from the convenience store in the foothills that the kids would sometimes walk to to get sweets in defiance of their training diets. The puddle is brittle and worn, snapping easily under his hands as he sweeps it away and when he’s done the bag is full to bursting.

The back door to the kitchen leads out into the garden via an alcove in which the potting sheds were kept. Bruce grabs a shovel from where it’s proper up by the wall of the house and heads out onto the lawn. The moon smiles down at him from a bank of clouds untampered by smog. The flower beds that ring the edge of the lawn are overgrown and unruly, impossible to trace where the plants were intended to grow.

Bruce lost his taste for gardening once Ivy showed up but Alfred would happily spend every spare minute he had tending to the plants. He’d been particularly proud of his herb garden, tucked up close to the house so that in the spring the scent of lavender could drift up over the patio.

It’s too late in the summer for lavender, but the mint looks like it had a bumper year and the thyme is growing strong. The small bay trees and oversized rosemary bushes flanking the bed smirk at their smaller rivals, still the largest plants here. The sorrel hasn’t fared so well and the chives are either done for the year or over forever but otherwise everything is living, unafraid of being dragged away to serve up as part of dinner.

Alfred had been a pretty good cook, not that Bruce cared about the quality of his food. That’s what so many of the kids failed to understand. He didn’t stay on as butler because of the money or the prestige or the sense of personal obligation to the Waynes. He did it because he loved it.

Bruce starts to dig, between the twigs of oregano past it’s prime and stunted parsley waiting to reach its full potential. He digs until he’s satisfied that it’s going to be difficult for anything else to get down that far, till he can feel blisters forming inside his gloves. He ties off the plastic bag and sets it in the hole, then fills it in and packs down the soil as tight as possible.
Somewhere in the house, something breaks. The crack echoes out across the grounds, followed by a high pitched cackle. Bruce doesn’t need to deal with that right now; he can take a moment.
Something akin to memorial, but memory is a funny old thing.
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

Warnings: There's a brief moment in this chapter where a character considers retracting consent only to decide that this isn't something they could easily do (everything is fine, no one winds up in a position where they feel uncomfortable but that wobble is in there). Also, here be a dash more sexual content - check the tags if you want to know specifics.

The skylight in Dick’s old bedroom opens up onto the roof. The kids used to go up there all the time when they didn’t want to be found but still wanted to be findable, bringing friends and dates up here to look at the lights, slipping alcohol and marajuana past Bruce and Alfred who were sure to pretend they had no idea what was going on right under their noses.

You can see the whole city from up here; the Manor is perched above Gotham, looking down the lay of the land towards the islands. It used to be that you could map the place by the colour of the lights. The garish cacophony of amusement mile and the tasteful blue and white of the shopping districts. Come Christmas, it would all glaze over to red and green.

Tonight, it’s completely dark. Dense cloud cover sweeps in from the sea, promising rain in the morning and blocking out the moon. Bruce lets his eye rest on something that he imagines is Wayne Tower but may as well be Ivy rising up over the city.

It may as well be anywhere, the rotting corpse of a whale beached on the shore. Bruce might have stayed, delayed his trip to Brazil for a week or a month. Maybe he would have survived, felt something strange in the air but been unable to put a word to it. He could have gone trailing through the Manor in the mid-afternoon, assuming that everyone was out and Alfred was in the garden. He might not have realised the full scope of what he had lost till he tried to go down to the cave that night and found the doors sealed shut.

And all he gets to keep is a useless, good for nothing, murderous clown. Faces flash in front of Bruce’s eyes, not just Bella and TJ and the children at the mall, though a worn-out string of rage manages to wind its way through his heart in their memory, but all the people who came before them. The uncounted, faceless masses who died laughing because that was the only death going back then.

They died with knives in their back and crowbars sticking out of their heads. Jason was beaten half to death and set at the heart of an explosion and Bruce had spent years in the aftermath fantasising about the man that did it all. What kind of a father had he been?

The weight of a blanket falling across his shoulders pulls him back into reality. Bruce looks round and grabs Jokers wrist. “What are you doing?”

“It can get cold out here.” Joker grins. “I dunno. I had some crazy fantasy about the two of us snuggling up under a duvet and looking at the stars. Stars had other ideas though.”

Bruce is probably gripping Joker harder than necessary, but it's hard to care when the fading memory of Jason's battered body is still dancing behind his eyes. He doesn’t let go, even when the clown
settles himself on the roof, neglecting all etiquette on personal space.

Joker's found some clothes from somewhere, dressed in a pair of black jeans that are very baggy on him despite stopping half way down is calves and a pink and blue tshirt advertising some Korean pop group Dick swore he only listened to ironically. He shuffles closer, resting is head on Bruce's shoulder.

The roar of traffic drifting up from the freeway is absent, there are no animals calling to each other around the grounds. Bruce wrestles with the urge to push Joker away, to throw him off the roof all together. He doesn't lean into him, but he's still holding the clown's wrist tight enough to hurt.

Joker's spent the past two hours flitting from room to room, laughing uproariously whenever he finds something unexpected and he doesn't seem to ave anticipated much. The billiards room is now host to several broken lamps, a lot of the good silver is scattered across the ballroom floor and a zipline of sheets connects Tim's room to Dick's across the second floor balcony. Every time Bruce tries to care he's brought up short by the thought of Alfred working his way through the washing up in the last few seconds of is life. There's no soul left in any of this, and anger is so much effort.

A hand snakes between Bruce's shoulderblades. “You're very tense, love.”

He's right. The pressure of Joker's fingers digging into sore muscles is soothing, even through the hazmat suit. Bruce's first instinct is to pull away, but Jokers thumb finds a knot just shy of is neck and the sting of it starting to unwind is just enough to persuade him that he ought to at least give the clown time to finish up before they have it out.

The vague throbbing in his skull has raised itself up to a full blown headache and even without the helmet, the temperature in the suit will soon be untenable. Bruce doesn’t want to think about the effort involved in getting himself off the roof but he'll need to go looking for the second bag of Amoxicillin before the night is through. If he can get some proper sleep that should set him up nicely to go looking for his own antibiotic stash come the morning.

“You know, any self respecting doctor would have prescribed you a full course of antibiotics, patched up your arm and sent you to bed for a week.” Joker muses, removing his and from Brucehs back.

“Do you know of any self respecting doctors still accepting patients?” Bruce snaps.

Joker laughs and presses a hand to Bruce's forehead. The blessed relief of cool skin against is searing scalp is even more distracting than the hand at his back.

Joker lets out a whistle. “Wowzers, Bats. You're burning up. Far be it for me to care for your well being but ya might wanna get yourself back on the meds sooner rather than later. Remember Croc's lair? You were so out of it, kinda of a miracle you pulled through.”

“Thanks to you, I suppose.”

"Really, darling. You give me too much credit.”

“You care about my well being.” Bruce lets is eyes fall closed and presses is head into Jokers touch. “If you didn’t, I'd be dead by now.”

Joker makes an unconvinced series of grunts. “I care about you not being dead by anyone's hand but mine. I'd say that's a pretty important distinction.”

The backs of Bruce's eyelids are painted with the dead. He should be doing something, he shouldn’t
be lapping up what little succour Joker has left to give. They'ree here, home. They made it. No more excuses.

**What are you going to do with me?**

“It’s like when something’s really cute, ya know? You kinda wanna cuddle it but you kinda wanna rip its head off. That’s where I am with you.”

Bruce frowns and with a great effort, pulls back. “You won’t let me die because you think I’m cute?”

“The cutest.” Joker giggles and pinches Bruce’s cheek. “Why, I could just eat you up.” He leans in, eyes darting to Bruce’s lips like he’s hoping for another kiss.

That’s too much. Bruce rears back, twisting Joker’s arm back on itself as far as it will go. Irritation flashes across the clown’s face and when he laughs there’s a manic light in his eyes that spells nothing but danger.

“Don’t.” Bruce hisses.

The change in Joker is instantaneous. He rips himself free of Bruce’s grasp and pounces forward, lack of discernible muscle mass no match for his momentum. Bruce’s head hits the roof hard enough to jog his vision and he roars in pain when the heel of Joker’s hand slams into his right arm just over the break and the bones scrape against each other.

The incline of the roof isn’t steep but once he’s laid out on his back with Joker rising over him, Bruce feels gravity start to carry them towards the edge. He starts scrambling with his feet, trying to stop them before they hit the drain.

The Joker slaps him across the face, shocking Bruce into inaction. The friction of the hazmat suit against the tiles brings them to a neat standstill.

“Get off me.” Bruce wheezes.

“No fucking way.” Joker snarls. “You don’t get to start re-growing that idiotic conscience of yours now. You’ve been doing just fine without it for days.”

Bruce wriggles, trying to shuck him off. “I never-“

“What happened to Croc?”

“I was sick.”

“I was sick.” Joker mimics in a whiny little voice that sounds nothing like Bruce. “You’re sick now, so what’s the fucking difference? What’s the point of having values if you’re willing to compromise them when you feel a little under the weather? What’s the point of having values at all?”

Because there as to be something. Because when all is said and done, all we have is that which we build for ourselves and if we can’t build uncrossable lines then we’re no better than animals.

Joker digs is fingers into the break. “You can walk around for days on end with this old thing weighing you down, but you can’t quite keep hold of all that juicy anger you’ve been cultivating for me. You kissed me, Bats. You were hard as fuck for me. You don’t get to come back from that.”

Bruce whimpers at the residual pain in his arm while trying to shove Joker off him with his legs. The
phantom pressure of lips pressing against his own rises up to meet him. They feel nice, welcoming. Just a few more steps and all that can be his, all he as to do is cross the line.

What was a good idea in a dark hospital room with the force of the end of the world driving the two of them together is not necessarily a good idea in is old family home. This place is dead, the living shouldn’t be here.

With great effort, Bruce curls in on himself and uses the resulting tension to push Joker away. The clown makes a show of rolling the rest of the way down the roof so that Bruce has to rush to grab a hold of him before he falls.

“Look at that!” Joker crows once Bruce as pulled him back up to the roof. “You still can’t work out were your fucking lines are. Shoulda let me drop, Bats. The fall might have killed me.”

“I don’t want to kill you.”

“You don’t want to kill me, you cant lock me up. You want to bury your cock in my ass but you don’t want to want to bury your cock in my ass.”

Bruce shoots him a warning glare. Joker chuckles. “I don’t hear a denial.”

They look down the driveway, preposterously long – why did Bruce ever need such a long driveway? Why did anyone? The hills rise and fall in gentle undulations as they make towards the city, never quite managing to obscure the view. Bruce thinks he can see Arkham Island lying to the west of Gotham but for all he knows it’s nothing more than the shadows cast by interlocking currents. He sits up too fast and blood rushes through his body like wildfire, sending sparks flying behind his eyes.

His arm really hurts. Bruce has had broken bones before but he’s sure they didn’t feel like this. He doesn’t know what he’s doing up here anymore.

“I just…”

Joker looks at Bruce with rage and love and glory and there is no cage that can hold him and no argument he cannot win. His body is as flexible as his morals, his skeleton as strong as his resolve. He slides a hand into the budding growth of Bruce’s beard and tugs at the short hair there.

Bruce tries to pull away but Joker’s other hand shoots out to hold him steady. “When is a bat not a bat?”

Maybe it’s supposed to be a joke, Joker’s certainly smiling wide enough for it, but there’s steel in his eyes that suggests otherwise. A challenge that Bruce should be able to sink his teeth into but he’s exhausted and ill.

“When it’s ajar.” Bruce replies.

For a moment Joker holds his form, then he dissolves into a peal of high pitches laughter, his shoulders relaxing and his hands falling away to slap at his thighs. “Oh, Bats! You do crack me up. Or at least, I think that’s what it’s called when you throw someone from a great height and snap all their bones, but what do I know?”

“I never did that.”

“But you could! It would be so easy!” Joker walks to the edge of the roof and grabs one of Bruce’s feet to plant it in the middle of his chest. “Go on then, last change.”
Bruce looks from his foot to Joker. “I’m not going to push you.”

“Then it’s decided!” Joker drops the foot and claps his hands excitedly. “I get to live and you get to live with it.”

“You were always going to live. I just need to…” Bruce loses his train of thought as he remembers ungentle fingers pressed into his skull, hunting for cracks. There were no cracks.

What are you going to do with me?

“Then what are you going to do with me?” Joker throws his arms wide enough to block out the view of Gotham. Or, he was the view. The heart and soul of this stinking east coast monstrosity.

Locking Joker up is impossible, killing him unbearable. The last light of the past that Bruce has to hold onto, he wouldn’t want to live without it.

The Batman is never selfish. But for all his insistence to the contrary, Bruce is more than just the Bat. “I’m never going to let you out of my sight.”

Joker softens, drops his arms. The fire in his eyes fades to a phosphorescent glow, surviving in the dark when all else fails. His smile shrinks till he looks like he means it as he steps around Bruce’s legs and makes his way back up the roof.

“That’s my Bat.” He breathes. “That’s my good Bat”

“I’m not going to let you hurt anyone else.” Bruce continues, trying to keep his voice hard bit it’s so difficult when Joker is sliding a hand into his hair with the lightest touch, pulling him round to face him with commanding force.

“You never let me do shit.” Joker chuckles, leaning in till his nose Brushes Bruce’s. “I have to fight you at every turn. And I love it, Bats. I really do. I love-”

Bruce can’t bear to hear him finish, so he rushes forward and presses his lips against the clown’s. Joker melts, collapsing half on top of Bruce and pushing them both down. His broken arm is jogged and Bruce growls in pain, straight into Joker’s waiting mouth. Their teeth keep clashing till they find their rhythm and it seems impossible that they will ever separate again.

They can’t ever separate again. If Bruce leaves Joker to his own devices the clown will start killing. He has to play the hunter and the hunted, the scouts running ahead to warn everyone of what’s coming and the rear guard checking for survivors once the danger has passed. Sooner or later, Joker is going to get bored and Bruce is going to grow weary of the radiation. They won’t breathe Gotham air forever.

This place is dead and they are so very much alive. Joker writhes under Bruce’s hand, living and breathing and untouchable.

Joker pulls back first, one hand thrown out to steady himself and the other high on Bruce’s inner thigh.

Bruce isn’t stopping him. Bruce is thinking about dead bodies and the blank eyes of children he will never save and he’s having to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from begging Joker to close the distance. The material of the hazmat suit is uncomfortable against his erection, his head is pounding. He can ride this storm.

“We gotta…we gotta…Fuck!” Joker curses. Bruce could scream when the hand leaves his thigh and
slams into the clown’s forehead.

“We can…” Bruce starts but he doesn’t know how to finish.

Joker shoots him a look just shy of dirty. “You said I could sleep in your bed.”

Being in bed right about now sounds wonderful. Moving to a bed sounds terrible. They’ll have to walk back through the house, back through all the years Bruce has lived within these walls and what if is nerve should fail him?

He doesn’t think he’s going to change his mind but there’s always a possibility. The person he is right now doesn’t want to consider a future in which he doesn’t give in.

They hold each other’s gaze and Joker’s eyes light up like the birth of new life. It rises up, it pushes back. It twists and turns and finds ways to overcome any obstacle placed in front of it. A brick wall is as nothing, a mountain is a passion project.

“C’mon.” Joker jerks his head back towards the skylight and holds out a hand to help Bruce up.

Bruce doesn’t take it. Joker snickers as he gets to his feet and it’s a relief to see that the front of the clown’s trousers are tenting much the same as the Hamat suit.

“Is that a knife in your pocket or-“

“You’re just happy to see me.” Bruce finishes for him.

Joker tips back his head and howls with laughter. “Bats, we’ll make a comedian out of you yet.

Dropping back through the skylight is harder than climbing up to the roof had been. Bruce has to balance on an old chest of draws that he’s sure wouldn’t have taken his weight a year ago and move to the bed before sliding to the floor. Without a candle the Manor is hard to navigate, his head rushing fast enough that colours are beginning to blur into each other all over again. He should really just grab the Amoxicillin and call it a night.

He let Selina rip the batsuit off him atop an East End rooftop where anyone might have caught them at it. He plunged headlong into Talia without considering all the reasons that the daughter of the most dangerous man on Earth might want him under her thumb. He’s never been all that good at doing what’s best for him.

Joker swings down from the roof in one fluid motion and Bruce’s stomach swoops trying to follow the line of his shoulders. Searching for tension stored in the muscles there, trying to work out if he’s going to be challenged to a fight before he takes another step.

Looking back at Bruce. Joker’s face is clearly distinguishable against the blue-black of the Manor. His teeth shine between split lips to bare his trademark grin. “I was promised the grand tour, and there’s so much of this house I haven’t seen.”

Bruce leads the way. Past Jason’s old bedroom and his feet don’t falter. Past the elevator he had installed so that Barbara could get to the first floor and his feet don’t falter. Along the banister of the balcony looking down into the atrium and though his ears are filled with ringing laughter and cracking bones his steps don’t falter.

Smashed furniture litters the way, whatever Joker had been doing while Bruce was burying Alfred, he did it thoroughly. Bruce waits for terror or rage to hit him but nothing comes. Just so much trash crunching under his feet.
He left the bag with the Amoxicillin down in the kitchen. Stupid. If he had it with him he could have wired himself up to the IV bag as soon as they were done.

When they’re done.

Done with what?

Joker is breathing down the back of his neck but they’re not touching. Bruce tries to focus on the specific details that his mind offers up and is almost overwhelmed with excitement and nausea. He steadies himself against the door of his bedroom and breathes deep. If he wanted to change his mind, this would be his last chance.

*Sorry, I don’t think…*

Apologies are worthless.

Joker slides up behind him, wrapping one hand around Bruce’s waist as the other reaches for the doorhandle. He giggles and there’s nothing erotic about it except that Bruce’s skin is on fire and he hopes it never stops.

“Easy there, Big Guy. Don’t want ya going all humpty dumpty on me.”

“You’d put me back together again.”

“Ha!” Joker tugs Bruce in close, hard enough to hurt. “Who do you think you’re dealing with? Don’t go giving me all your lines.”

The windows of Bruce’s bedroom are wide open and it stinks of eu de cologne. Moonlight dashes across the bed, illuminating the rumpled covers and the feathers that have been spilled from a torn pillow.

Joker must have been here already. Bruce never care much for personal accoutrements and his room has always been bare save for the necessities, which have been deftly smashed across the floor. He takes a step forward and hears the scrape of cufflinks pushing against each other under his boot.

“On the bed.” Joker hisses, straight into Bruce’s ear.

The temptation to fight back makes the moment of surrender all the sweeter. Feeling the clown loosen the fastenings on the back of the suit so he can step out of it, feeling the rush of cool night air pushing through the open windows and salving his skin. Bruce crawls onto the bed, letting feathers tangle in his hair, shifting back till he hits the headboard and he can feel something sharp and metallic digging into the small of his back.

Frowning, Bruce reaches round to get a hold of whatever it is and finds the Amoxicillin, a catheter and a needle. He looks to Joker. “Why is this here?”

“We need to get you better, of course.” Joker says, all traces of flirtation vanished from his voice. He speaks in the semi even guise he adopts when he has something to hide but doesn’t want to give anything away. “Now, I’ve done a lot of digging and I couldn’t find a nurse’s outfit for the occasion so you’re going to have to take me as I am or not at all.”

Bruce pulls himself up by his good arm a shade too quickly and is set upon by a rush of blood to the head. “What?”

Joker snorts. “What are you so excited about? I’m afraid you’ve got to take it easy, Bats. Doctor’s
orders.”

Blood is still pooling in Bruce’s groin, leaving him naked and erect beneath Joker’s inconsiderate gaze. He throws his good arm over his face and groans out his frustrations.

Joker sidles over to the bed, swinging himself up into Bruce’s lap. The heat of his crotch spurs another jolt of arousal up Bruce’s spine.

Without paying his genitals a bit of mind, Joker snaps his fingers for Bruce to pass him the IV bag. Typical. Just as he could take hold of the thing he’s supposedly been chasing after for as long as they’ve known each other, the clown decides to change the game. Bruce can’t help but laugh.

“You’re in a good mood. Are you sure you’re really sick?”

“I don’t want to think about how high my temperature might be.”

“Probably not as high as you think. Your immune system is a modern marvel, and I would know. I’ve run the thing ragged over the years.”

“Feels like I’m gonna combust.” Bruce mumbles into the crook of his elbow.

Joker snickers, shifting his hips forward in what is apparently an attempt to position the needle. “I bet it does.”

There’s no need to beg for it this time round. Joker assembles the drip in a matter of seconds and holds out his hand for a vein. Bruce reluctantly drags his arm away from his face and when he dares to look the clown in the eye, wild and agile and only pretending to be tame, he can’t bite his tongue fast enough to keep from whimpering. A self-satisfied smile dances across Joker’s face but for once in his life he doesn’t make a performance out of it.

“You wanna hear a joke?” Joker grins down at him.

Bruce nods hesitantly. “Go on then.”

“This won’t hurt a bit!”

The needle plunges into the crook of Bruce’s arm far faster than necessary and he tenses against the unexpected pain. “Not funny.”

Joker’s laughing too hard to disagree. He opens the tap on the IV bag and throws it to Bruce before setting around rearranging the two of them into a satisfactory position. Pressed flush to each other’s sides, Joker’s head in the crook of Bruce’s arm, twirling the catheter around a finger.

His skin is so delightfully cool, even through his clothes. His doctors used to think so too, back at Arkham, but they never could find a thermometer that confirmed their suspicions that The Joker has a lower average body temperature than anyone else. They had only wanted to prove that he was deadly ill so he could be transferred to a specialised facility out of state and hopefully remove him from their patient rosters for good.

Idiots. Joker would have come back, more angry and dangerous and brilliant and beautiful than ever before.

There’s beauty in chaos, if Bruce hadn’t learned to see that he would have lost his mind by now. He leans in and plants a kiss on the top of Joker’s head. Because he wants to and there’s no one there to stop him.
“Hmm…less smooching, more sleeping.” Joker doesn’t sound remotely tired.

The soft push of the duvet underneath them is delightful and in theory, sleep should come easy for Bruce. But every time he closes his eyes he’s besieged by memories of fights staged in rain soaked streets, wrestling over detonators, kissing The Joker on the roof, whispered words that struck terror into his heart, kissing The Joker in the hospital, hours and days spent obsessing over vocal ticks and mismatched details in blurry photographs, The Joker gasping out his name as he touched himself in the middle of the street, urging himself to give into the instinct to kill but unable to bridge that gap, the years spent pretending he wasn’t thinking any of it.

It might be two hours or it might be two minutes, but eventually Bruce gets bored of lying on his back as his pulse races and he begs his brain to calm down enough to fall asleep. He carefully disentangles himself from Joker, who’s either asleep or doing an excellent job at pretending to be.

Cutting a wide arc around the dressing table to avoid any stray broken glass from the bottle Joker had smashed, Bruce makes his way to the ensuit bathroom with the IV bag tucked into the crook of his neck. He instinctually reaches for the light switch and pauses for a moment, waiting for the fan to come on. He blinks into the dark, till he’s sure nothing’s coming to relieve it, before pulling himself through the doorway and, he hopes, out of sight of the bed.

Bruce closes his eyes and lets every thought that has fought to keep him awake wash over him, remembering the sensation of denim pressing up against his naked skin and how easy it would have been for Joker to reach between them and do what he’s been threatening to do since the day they met. In a matter of seconds he’s unbearably hard and the sharp relief he feels when he reaches down to take himself in hand is indescribable.

“I thought you said you weren’t going to let me out of your sight. Or was that just the sexual haze talking?”

Bruce could scream. “Please…”

“No need to beg, darling. I don’t mind watching.”

Joker’s voice is uncharacteristically even; commanding, comforting. Bruce moves slowly, not taking his hand from his penis as he peers around the corner of the bathroom to see the clown proped up on one arm, smiling through the dark. His mouth spreads wide when he locks eyes with Bruce, beckoning him to step forward.

Electricity crackles along Bruce’s nerve and he knew it wasn’t going to take much to get him over the edge but he never imagined it could be this easy. Joker looks like a great snake waiting to hypnotise him and lull him to sleep between his jaws. Bruce scrambles into view, planting his feet at either side of the doorway and demonstrating himself, soft underbelly and all.

Bruce touches himself fast and desperate and Joker doesn’t blink until he’s done.
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Warnings for this chapter: A passing mention of an offscreen kink, Joker engaging in 'lol suicide' shock factor nonsense, some light pseudo sexual murder threats

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Come the morning, Joker has all but forgotten about the grandfather clock. Bruce spends day after day on edge, waiting for him to ask about it. They spend a lot of time sleeping in the first week; rather surprisingly, Joker takes great delight in conking out for long periods of time.

It’s strange, Bruce rarely caught him sleeping on the Arkham CCTV stream.

“Well it’s not like there’s all that much to do round here.” Joker whines over a breakfast of corned beef. “Being unconscious is much more fun than being bored.”

Bruce is barely paying attention to him, concerned as he is with fashioning a cast for his arm out of sheet plastic and the meagre supply of plaster strips he found under Alfred’s bed. It would be easier to get his good hand to behave if he hadn’t taken another two Vicodin before he set to work but the painkillers were a necessary evil. Even Joker had jumped at the noise he made when he dragged the ends of the bone back into alignment. He doesn’t want to think about how much it would have hurt without the pills.

The Amoxicillin drained out over the first night, and though it left Bruce feeling much better in the short term he has no idea what to do with himself when the fever starts to pick back up again until he finds some very broad spectrum antibiotic tablets in the top drawer of Tim’s dresser that he can work with for the time being. All the supplies Alfred had kept in his room have decayed so far as to be unusable, which is hardly surprising if a little disappointing. There are more down in the cave that might have survived but those are behind a thick steel door that he doesn’t have the energy to open right now. At least Alfred’s propensity for forward planning has left a kitchen full of dry and preserved foods that allow them both to eat their fill. Joker even appears to be putting on weight.

By the end of the third day, Joker has headed out to the lawn to start mixing together the chemicals from under the sink in the hope of doing something horrible to the grass. He can blow the whole thing sky high so long as the herb garden is undamaged, as far as Bruce is concerned. Bruce takes himself off to the pool – green with algae but exuding enough chlorine stink that he trusts the water isn’t going to do him any harm – and tries to cool off.

Beyond that first night, Joker isn’t bothered by Bruce’s promise to never let him out of his sight. On the few occasions he does bring it up it’s usually as a finishing argument in an inane discussion and it invariably sends Bruce’s mind back to the bathroom doorway, the white stains on the carpet they’re both pretending don’t exist.

Nothing like that has happened since. Though they kiss sometimes, Joker emerging out of the blue and crowding Bruce against the nearest wall. It never lasts long enough to go anywhere. They leave each other breathless and flustered, and soon enough Joker starts to develop a rash across his cheeks.
from Bruce’s beard, his lips stained blue from biting and when Bruce catches his reflection in any of the surviving mirrors in the Manor he sees dark bruises forming at his neck in the shape of the clown’s teeth.

It’s tortuously slow. It’s far too fast. Bruce counts the days since he arrived in Constance and reaches a miserably low tally. He’s very pleased that neither Camilla nor Stephanie took him up on the offer to join him. He doesn’t want to worry about who might be watching when Joker’s groaning into his mouth and fist his hair.

In the end though, the time they spend wrapped around each other is minimal. It’s everything else that’s sustaining Bruce’s headache.

Joker goes rummaging through a different bedroom every morning in search of clothing. He barrels through the house in oversized suits from Bruce’s wardrobe, floaty black dresses from Cassie’s, a seemingly never ending stream of hoodies dug out of Duke’s drawers. He laughs himself sick when he finds Damian’s dinner jackets. “Were you raising a little clone of yourself?”

“I was raising my son.”

“Yeah? What was his name, Bruce junior?”

It still feels wrong to go handing out the family’s secret identities like that. If Joker really cares, he can find everyone’s names marked down in various places around the house. “He was the fifth Robin. The last Robin.”

“Huh.” Joker looks round Damian’s room, almost as sparse as Bruce’s save for a collection of dog bowls stacked in one corner and the school books on the desk. “Wonder what happened to him.”

They haven’t found any more people pancakes. Far be it for Bruce to accuse Joker of human curiosity but he’s pretty sure the clown is actively hunting for more of them. He ransacks every room he enters, but he moves with purpose, sweeping from east to west, tackling all of the upper floors before he sets to work on the living room. He heads all the way up to the attic and spends an afternoon in the wine cellar trying every remaining bottle before deciding that he doesn’t like alcohol.

Some of those bottles have been down there since his grandfather’s time but Bruce doesn’t mind. He’s never cared for alcohol. It dulls the senses, makes people act foolish.

Bruce swallows another two Vicodin and muses on how little substance there is to Joker’s buttocks, how elegantly he swings from the first floor balcony. His fever spikes.

In his apparent quest to break everything that isn’t nailed down, Joker brings to light more than a few items that Bruce considers useful enough to set aside. Tim’s medical supplies are the tip of the iceberg. Duke’s bike is still in working order, Cassie stole Batarangs and sharpened them into something lethal, Jason’s hand catapult is still tucked under his bed.

Dick has padded handcuffs and a huge quantity of soft rope hidden in a panel below his bedroom floor. Joker unearths them, giggling, and immediately ties himself a noose. “Kinky.” He sticks his head through the hole and pulls the rope tight enough to cut into his neck.

Bruce lurches forward to snatch the noose out of Joker’s hands; it would be just like him to get so caught up in the perceived humour of the rope that he forgot to let it go slack in time. Finding purchase in an inch of give just above the clown’s collarbone, Bruce pulls hard. Joker doesn’t surrender without a fight and by the time they’re done they’re breathing harder than necessary.

Hunched over one another, Joker’s slim form trapped between his knees, Bruce holds his breath. The
clown looks up at him like he’s a piece of meat.

Neither of them take the opportunity to get in another hit. Joker wriggles out from between Bruce’s legs in an instant, then swans out of the room like it’s nothing. Bruce grits his teeth and tries to work out what on Earth they’re both waiting for.

The master bedroom looks out onto Gotham, and though Bruce could never bring himself to take over his parents’ bedroom he’s had the room next to theirs since he turned eighteen. He wakes every morning and stumbles to the window, watching the city gleam in the light dribbling through the clouds, shining green and dead.

Every morning Joker drags him back into the house, with an arm around his waist or with the sound of something shattering deep within the Manor.

“Come on, darling. We have a full day of wasting time between here and the grave to get back to.”

Bruce doesn’t bother to explain the drudgery of convalescence to him. He drags barrels out from the sheds and sets them on the patio to catch rainwater for them to drink while Joker spreads tracks of dead leaves across the lawn. A thin dribble of water had fallen from the kitchen taps but it’s not going to last them more than a few days. Combined with the water they had brought from the hospital, they have about a week’s supply if they don’t want to go trekking off to one of the tributaries streaming down into the bay.

Joker doesn’t drink that much anyway. He sometimes wanders the halls with a bottle of red, waiting to catch Bruce’s eye before emptying it over the nearest carpet. He’s completely unfussed when his childishness is met with indifference.

“We won’t be here forever.” Bruce tells him when Joker tries to needle him about his apparent lack of care for the destruction of his personal affects.

“Now there’s a nebulously true statement if ever I heard one.” Joker grins, digging Bruce in the side with the butt of a kitchen knife as they sit out on the patio to watch the sunset. “In the grand scheme of things you’re not wrong, ain’t none of us gonna be standing in the same spot forever. Our sad little lives won’t stand the test of time and when all is said and done we’ll be forgotten. Us, probably not as fast as other folks, but we’re only human.”

“I thought you were a monster.”

“I thought you said I was human whether I liked it or not.”

Joker has a pulse, blood running through his veins and breath in his lungs Bruce has known all this for years, he’s been watching. He’s seen sweat form on the clown’s brow and watched his face twist into unnatural shapes when he’s in pain. Everything about him is supposed to be ugly, the sharp relief of his features standing proud where the evening light highlights all his sharp edges, the mottled plains of his brow and cheeks. A surge of irritation flares up beneath Bruce’s skin.

Clubs used to meet across the country to discuss their attraction to The Joker. They made their own pornography starring his likeness, they published graphic accounts of their fantasies on the internet. The morning news shows would bring some of them in from time to time for lack of anything more interesting to talk about, ragging on them like they were uncommonly perverted.

Plenty of Gotham sex shops sold clown masks. That was the city’s equivalent of adding a bit of spice to the bedroom. Barbara had a thing or two to say about that.

Joker leans into kiss him, so soft and slow that Bruce doesn’t know how he’s supposed to respond.
He doesn’t realise that the clown is trembling till after he’s pulled away and started wandering back into the house, muttering furiously about leaf patterns and the days it’s going to take to get everything how he likes it.

It would appear that Alfred had been saving up for the end of the world. Non-perishable food is stored behind every secret panel Bruce tries that doesn’t hide cleaning supplies and a few that do, all meticulously wrapped in several layers of cling film to protect against the intrusion of vermin. Bruce stacks it all up on the kitchen table, feeling vaguely irritated when Joker comes through to pull the stash apart in search of more tinned fruit. He pursues sweet things with single minded focus, and when he finds an old bag of sweet popcorn in Jason’s room he howls with delight.

Bruce has no idea how old it is, but he doesn’t bother pointing this out to Joker. After everything else he’s ingested, it doesn’t seem likely that a case of food poisoning is going to knock him out.

His knee is healing up nicely, what had once looked like a small crater has been downgraded to an overzealous scab. His arm still aches to the point of distraction but having any kind of cast to hold it in place does wonders for the healing process. Bruce takes Tim’s antibiotics and spends long hours in the pool to take the edge off his fever. The pressure from the radiation saps his energy slowly, leaving him sluggish and unfocused, though the painkillers can’t help with that. If he were to compare how heavy the air feels now with to a month ago, he’d consider his current situation dire.

Bruce’s head throbs every time he lets himself be realistic about the long term effects of the radiation. They should be miles and miles away by now but where would they go? He’s sat on the edge of a precipice, waiting for Joker to drag him over the edge but if the clown can’t get a decent hold of him before he decides to move there’s no telling where they’ll end up. Joker will kill more people, Bruce will be angry enough to split the stars.

He hopes he’ll be angry. Bitter, white hot rage. He tries to visualise it but can’t remember what it used to feel like, so he holds tight to his illness as an easy excuse. Who knows where the Batman went, the real thing, the absolute dark?

“You’ll always be Batman to me.” Joker hums. “The masks never counted for shit.”

“I only ever had one mask.” Bruce reminds him, slinging an arm around Joker’s shoulders as the settle down for bed.

Joker’s penis is hard against his thigh, his fingers’s tracing Bruce’s abs. He won’t close the distance. He’ll make jokes about people he killed almost a decade ago until Bruce pulls away in a fit of faked outrage, but the truth is that he can’t remember their faces anymore. All he can remember is the gaping gash of a smile across Joker’s face as he congratulated himself for being just awful enough to provoke a reaction; his hands shaking when Bruce leans in to kiss him slow.

“You’re still wearing bits of your fleshy human skin mask. That won’t go away in a hurry. But you’re doing so well, my dear. Why, your company is practically bearable.”

“You’re using that word wrong.” Bruce smiles, kicks Joker in the shins below the covers to watch him yelp and sets them both laughing. He could live like this, right here, with no one else to intervene. That would be workable.

They stay in the same bed together, sometimes pressed up close and sometimes hanging off opposite sides of the bed. They wake with the sun and Bruce goes back to the window to stare out at the green corpse of Gotham. He opens his mouth to ask if he should feel guilty for destroying the asclepius before they made it home but he doesn’t think he’d like the answer.
Any answer. If he should feel guilty and he doesn’t then he’s a terrible person. If he shouldn’t feel guilty then Joker is wrong about everything anyway.

Sometime towards the end of the second week, Bruce comes downstairs to find the curtains in the drawing room removed from their runners with the backing fabric carefully separated from the rich velvet front. He frowns. The curtains themselves are new but the pattern is the same as they’ve always been, Alfred managing to find perfect replacements every ten years or so. Deep red and vibrant yellows spiral out into vaguely floral patterns across a maroon background. Archaic, perhaps, but they have a flourish about them that he’s always adored.

Bruce doesn’t care, it’s all dead. Except that he wants to care, he wants to know that when he finds it in himself to walk away from all this it’s going to sting.

Joker’s in the living room with half the fabric, cutting out shapes and laying them alongside one another, his mouth full of pins. He doesn’t look up when Bruce enters the room, working with the kind of diligence he used to save for the last crucial minutes of a scheme going wildly off the rails.

“What are you doing?” Bruce asks.

He can’t make head nor tail of Joker’s answer, there’s too much else going on in his mouth. It’s fascinating to watch though, the speed with which he moves from one task to the next, barely measuring anything before cutting along lines he hasn’t drawn. No hesitation, hands twitching over dead air till they hit their target and can start work all over again.

He’s wearing one of Jason’s old dress shirts and nothing else. It fits him surprisingly well, the long white lines of his legs all the more prominent for the lack of anything trying to smother them.

Bruce leaves him to it. Joker can pull apart all the curtains and all the formalwear in the house is he so chooses. Bruce has been living in tshirts and track suit bottoms since they got back.

In the kitchen Bruce finds some unopened crackers that are still crisp and starts munching through them for breakfast. Outside the clouds block the sun, it could be any time of day.

Or any day of the week. He catches himself labelling this a Monday but there’s no reason for it to be. Weekdays mean very little at this stage, as do weeks. As do months. Maybe it’s June, though they could be pushing into July. Bruce could swear he had a firm idea of how much time has passed since the bomb not that long ago but he can’t remember how it all works out.

He gets to work on the stack of food on the kitchen table, lining everything up in order of how energy rich it is. The two tins of condensed milk they have left are high priority, the tinned mushrooms not so much.

Bruce moves aside a large bag of pasta and finds a packet of marshmallows hiding underneath, still sealed, squishing quite acceptably under his fingers when he prods at them. He picks them up cautiously, scared that they’re going to scatter into nothing before his eyes.

Plans form of their own accord, centering themselves around fires and warm nights. The kids shrieking with delight as the flames licked up the tower of garden waste set to burn, Joker getting distracted by the earnest leaping of the flames and trying to leap along with them. It would make them awfully visible, but who’s really going to be able to hurt the two of them at this stage?

Brutalised bodies, blood, knives, screaming, laughter through the night. The memories congeal at the back of Bruce’s mind where it’s easy enough to ignore them. He takes another pill to combat the thumping of his head and the stinging in his arm. He’ll be sorry when he runs out of painkillers but
for the time being everything’s easier if he doesn’t know whether the cotton wool in his head is the result of the drugs or the fever. Bruce moves back out to the swimming pool to cool off and he keeps looking for Joker, doing something he doesn’t really understand on the lawn before he remembers that the clown is back inside. He debates the pros and cons of masturbating here and now, to the thought of something that doesn’t look like Selina any more.

Selina Kyle left nothing at Wayne Manor, she didn’t even let her finger prints linger on the furniture. Bruce has gone looking for traces of her time here, a coat left in the cloakroom perhaps, or an item of clothing bundled up at the back of his drawers; something that might still smell like her. It’s all gone. She adapted to her environment but she never presumed she’d need to retrace her steps.

Wayne Manor will be left with Joker’s imprint sitting atop its years of history instead. Bruce forces himself out of the pool and heads to the sheds where he starts the arduous process of moving aside the disused garden machinery to get at the log pile beneath.

The rest of the day is dedicated to building a tower of flammable garden waste in the middle of the lawn, as much as he can get his hands on. Bruce doesn’t have it in him to split the logs from the shed down to kindling so he makes the journey down to the treeline to scavenge for twigs. He rakes up the grass that Joker’s exploits have managed to displace, searches the herbaceous borders for plants past their prime. A cleaning exercise, of sorts. He can hear his father reaching through the years to tell him that all this fresh air will mean he sleeps very well tonight.

Bruce has slept well every night since they got back to the Manor, despite the great cold thing sharing his bed. But it feels good to be working muscles that have gone unused amid the simple drudgery of moving north in his attempts to get home. He’s going to ache in the morning, in that bright, clean way that muscles ache when they’ve been put to good work.

It’s almost dark by the time Bruce is done, the would-be pyre almost as tall as he is. The stack has expanded and now backs onto one of Joker’s lines of leaves that crisscross the lawn in meaningless formations. He stands back to admire his handiwork, satisfied that he’s done enough.

Bruce treks back to the kitchen where the pack of marshmallows is still sitting on the table. He picks it up, fishes a couple of skewers out of the cutlery drawer and managed to juggle it all into the crook of his good arm along with the click lighter that has lived next to the cooker since time immemorial. He hits the button to ignite it and is relieved when a flame sprouts at its tip.

“Well, someone’s run himself ragged.”

Bruce doesn’t need to look up to know that Joker’s standing just out of sight in the stairwell leading from the servery corridor to the kitchen. “Couldn’t let you have all the fun.”

A giggle drifts through the half dark, a shiver runs up Bruce’s spine. “Too right. I was starting to worry that the winds would change and you’d be trapped in the pool forever. It looks horribly green in there, darling. You want to watch out, you’ll catch your death.”

“Not if you catch it first.”

“Oo! Mister Batman, was that a challenge?”

Bruce moves back to the door through to the garden. “I have something for you.”

“Is it a fist to the face? Because if it is, I think I have a headache. I’m not in the mood. Wrong time of the month.”

“I’m not going to fight you.” Bruce pauses with his hand on the door, listening out for the sound of
Joker moving behind him. “At least not tonight.”

Joker strays a few footsteps behind Bruce as they walk across the lawn, his feet falling soft on the grass. Bruce doesn’t turn back to make sure he’s following, lessons learned from Orpheus best held close to the chest. He’s sure that if he were to turn around now, Joker would be gone. Vanished like so much dust along the wind, reconstituted into pure laughter.

If he ever existed at all. Maybe Bruce is going to wake up on the floor of the vestry in Camila’s church. Maybe he slept on his arm funny, maybe his fever is just light reverberating off the white walls and drowning him.

The night is dark, the moon hidden behind a thick bank of clouds that had rolled in over the afternoon. Bruce stops moving when he hears the crackle of dead leaves beneath his boots. He crouches down, reaching towards the edge of the pile and hunts for the opening he left to the kindling sitting at the centre. He drops everything else and clicks on the lighter, reaching inside and waiting for it to catch fire.

The dry twigs burn up fast and the fire starts leaping up towards the outer layers. People have argued that pyromania is an inherent trait of the human condition and Bruce can’t say he’d disagree. The drugs definitely help, but he’s always enjoyed watching flames strip away layers of fuel until there’s nothing left. The way it dances from one log to the next, impossible and beautiful and wild.

By the time he straightens up and steps back, the core of the fire is set, the first tongues of flame licking over the summit of the pyre. Everything outside its penumbra is too dark to see.

Joker steps up to Bruce’s side. “So…you built me a fire? Far be it for me to refuse a gift but I gotta ask, why?”

“I-“

“No! Don’t tell me. It’s a metaphor for the old world going up in flames, a symbol of the fiery passion between you and I, a physical representation of how dashing I am.”

Bruce snorts and rolls his eyes. He’s brought up short when he turns to face Joker and gets a good look at him for the first time – he’s made the best of the drawing room curtains, that’s for sure. Bruce’s mouth goes very dry and he suurrupticiously tries to shuffle back to get a better look at him.

Joker’s still wearing Jason’s shirt, the first few buttons open so that the dip of his collarbone is clearly visible in the firelight. It’s tucked into a pair of slim cut suit trousers and overlaid with a tailcoat that pinches around his hips perfectly, both cut from the velvet front of the curtains. The ensemble fits him so nearly it looks like he was stitched into it, emphasising the long lines of his body and the terrible elegance with which he carries himself.

In the shifting light of the fire, the patterned fabric appears to dance. He looks incredible. Bruce wants to reach out, let his hand trace the tight circle of Joker’s waist and feel the cloth slide against his palm before settling in the small of his back. He wants to pull them towards each other and lean up to kiss him.

“You look-“ Bruce has no idea how to finish that thought. Joker doesn’t seem to realise that he’s said a thing, stepping forward to inspect the fire with amusement writ large on his face. He pays no mind to the marshmallows or the skewers.

Bruce should really deal with those, but he doesn’t want to look away. He doesn’t want to miss the moment that Joker finds the funny side to this, the briefest blip in time when his joy will be entirely
innocent, after the realisation but before the laugh. The laugh will last forever, it’s everything else you have to struggle to hold on too.

“I’m guessing this isn’t your party piece, it’s not really your vibe. And if I remember correctly, Bruce Wayne used to throw a pretty decent party back in the day. Not as epic as mine, of course, but mine only ever worked when they came as a surprise.”

Bruce jerks into uneasy action, reaching down for the marshmallows. Jokers eyes fall on the bag and light up.

Just there, the split second of something honest. Then he tips back his head and laughs. “Now there’s a turn up for the books! How long have you been hiding those?”

“Just since this morning.” Bruce pulls out a handful of marshmallows and slides them down a skewer. He passes it to Joker who whoops in triumph, performing a miniature celebration dance before dashing over to the fire.

“That was very naughty of you not to say anything.”

“You seemed busy.”

“I was. I can be quite the industrious little worker bee when I put my mind to it.” Joker practically dives into the fire trying to toast his marshmallows. The tails of the coat slip neatly over his backside, practically nonexistence but willed into life by the cut of the cloth. He casts a heavy lidded glance back towards Bruce, grinning ear to ear. “Do you like it?”

Heat rises fast under Bruce’s skin. “It’s…yes.”

“What do you like about it?”

Bruce likes the way the suit makes it look like the fire is already in Joker and around him, how easily it sends the mind to sordid places. Sordid, but never dark. The riot of colour splashed across Joker’s body should be too much but he swells to accommodate it until it looks like high fashion, till he looks like he was born for it.

“It suits you.” Bruce says.

Joker straightens up, the first marshmallow on his skewer blackening around the edge as it melts. He’s reversed his angles, curling out of the slight hunch he normally lives in to lean back and push his hips forward. His tongue slips out to wet his lips before he shoves the skewer into his mouth and pulls it away clean. He makes a big show of chomping his way through the marshmallow and some of it slips out to dribble down his chin. Bruce wants to kiss him clean.

Joker wipes away the stray line of sugar with his thumb before it can damage his outfit and nods towards the fire. “C’mon, it’s bat roasting time.”

Fire licks up and around Bruce’s skewer, pounding on the outer shell of the marshmallows. Bruce has never been a big fan of candy but right now he’s craving the energy burst the sugar’s going to grant him. He turns the skewer slowly, trying for an even coat of caramelisation.

“Not like that!” Joker snaps, snatching the skewer out of Bruce’s hands. “You gotta really stick ‘em in there, get them nice and juicy. Like eyeballs! Oo, I tell you what, if we had a little paprika, some fresh thyme, we could really spice these up.” He pulls the marshmallows from the flame once they’ve started to deform in the heat, as black as his own had been. Joker blows on them to kill residual flames and plucks one off to press to Bruce’s lips. “Here comes the choo choo train.”
Bruce opens his mouth and lets Joker push the marshmallow along his tongue. It slips down his throat before he’s had a chance to chew but he’s less focused on the warm pocket of sugar than the cool fingers chasing after it, pads moving against his tongue. They don’t taste like blood, they don’t taste like anything much.

They pause, neither one of them quite looking at the other. Bruce seals his lips around the base of Joker’s fingers and sucks hard, watches the clown’s eyes flutter momentarily. He moves his hand to Joker’s waist, stroking down the gain of the velvet and trying to usher him closer.

Bruce is going to start working up to an erection soon enough. He wants Joker to feel that, how easy it would be to tip the scales. He doesn’t understand why they haven’t made the leap yet.

“Well, wouldya look at that? Seems like you can teach an old dog new bones.” Joker snorts. He shuffles forward, till Bruce is pressed up against him, leaning down to rest their foreheads against each other. “This is what you want? You wanna flash me those big puppy dog eyes and wait for me to take you for walkies? You might have to beg for it first, Bats. You up for that?”

Bruce is ready to spit out Joker’s fingers and kiss him. Wherever that leads, he’s fine with it.

Joker thumbs at the corner of Bruce’s mouth. “Careful, honey. I’ll hurt you and I’ll like it, we both know that. Question is, will you?”

A sharp pain in Bruce’s neck has him flinching backwards but Joker twists his fingers up to hook against the roof of his mouth, trapping him like a fish. The tip of a skewer presses against Bruce’s jugular, threatening to break the skin.

“Everyone always tells you not to play with your food but who wants to eat a bring ass perfunctory dinner? No one ever tells food not to let itself get eaten. You’d think, if it really took such objection, it would get out of the way.”

Malice stretches Joker’s mouth wide to expose sharp teeth. Bruce’s pulse is working overtime, adrenaline pushing past the dim haze of the Vicodin in an effort to prepare him to fight for his life.

“Joker…” Bruce starts, but his tongue feels heavy and with his mouth stuck open it’s almost impossible to speak clearly.

In the time it takes Bruce to consider how easy it would be for him to bite down on Joker’s fingers till he was forced to let go, the clown shifts his grip. His fingers slide out of Bruce’s mouth and up to the back of his head to hold him steady by his overgrown hair. “No use taking that tone with me, honey. I’m not your little house cat, I’ll do a whole lot more than scratch up your curtains.”

“You’ve already ruined my curtains.”

“You call this ruined?” Joker cackles. “I look fucking fantastic, Bats. No use pretending otherwise, I saw you looking. And I don’t mind if you wanna look or touch or waste away in that swimming pool but you best be sure you’re ready for whatever happens next.

Bruce is still half hard. He wants to fight back, push Joker down, straddle him, lose ground, feel blood on his hands when one of them takes things too far. Instead he pushes forward against the skewer and the hand in his hair, close enough that his lips move against the clown’s. “Do your worst.”

A shriek of laughter cuts through the night and is answered by the distant clap of wings as a lone crow is put up from the woods. Joker twists Bruce round, pushing him towards the fire, close enough that he can smell his hair starting to singe. Bruce starts to struggle, but his feet are locked over one
another at such an angle that the clown is the only thing holding him up. If Joker drops him, he’ll fall
into the fire.

“My worst is a lot worse than this, but I’m sure you already know that.” Joker grins, pushing the
skewer all the harder into Bruce’s neck. “You had-“

He’s cut off by the steady rumble of fire spreading fast, like when someone lights a trail of gasoline.
Joker looks up in confusion which Bruce uses as a distraction to back them away from the fire and
move out of the clown’s grasp to get a better look at what’s happening.

The leaves are catching fire, the trail of flames following the crisscrossing pattern Joker had drawn
with them over a week ago. Joker’s confusion turns to joy on a dime, Bruce apparently forgotten as
he drops the skewer. “I know I was a genius but I never suspected this was gonna work so well so
soon.”

“What did you-“ Bruce follows the fires with a wary eye. They shouldn’t be standing too close to
any other leaf trails here but it doesn’t hurt to stay vigilant. The lawn itself doesn’t appear to be
catching fire though, and whatever Joker has done, the trails don’t go close enough to the treeline to
be a danger to the forest. “Methane and ethanol, from decomposition?”

“Who knows how these things work?” Joker chortles. He waves Bruce aside and leaps towards the
closest trail to better inspect his handiwork. He moves from row to row, laughing till he can barely
breathe.

None of this would have happened if Bruce hadn’t built the bonfire in the first place.

The packet of marshmallows lies on the ground, forlorn and forgotten. Bruce scoops it up and sets
off after Joker, throwing him one of the sweets and watching as he uses his fingers to hold it over the
flame till it chars. When he pulls his hand away there’s a thin costing of black on them, but no
blisters.

The phantom chill of the skewer is still pressing into Bruce’s neck, and he figures he should be angry
about that. But be it the drugs or the fact that there’s no one else here for him to perform his outrage
to, he’s just not feeling it. Joker is like a dog, there’s no use punishing him for something once his
mind is on something else.

Joker spends a long time examining his handiwork, till everything but the bonfire burns out and he
loses interest. He looks up to see Bruce standing next to him. “What are you still doing here?”

“Where did you think the marshmallows were coming from?”

“I assumed I had acquired godlike powers to bring them into my possession.” Joker shrugs. He starts
wandering back to the house without sparing Bruce a glance.

Bruce wishes he wasn’t so disappointed. At least it’s a treat to watch Joker leave in that suit.

“Ya know, Bats.” Joker calls over his shoulder when he’s half way back to the kitchens. “You
should have a think about what you really want, lose the pills maybe, then come see me. I’ll give you
my card.”

There are no more joker cards left in Gotham, unless you have a very old deck. Laughter pulsates
through the empty echelons of Wayne Manor, chiming perfectly with the crackling of the bonfire still
burning at Bruce’s back.
I've just realised that I've so far failed to credit the magnificent geckobot for their Wayne Manor floorplans which heavily influenced my vision of the Manor while writing this. Apologies for the slip up.

When stacks of leaves decay and aren't shifted (as you would do when making compost) they start to ferment and produce ethanol which is flammable. And the general process of leaf decay produces methane, which is also flammable.

Joker's suit is lowkey inspired by like.....every suit Shinee have ever worn. Bless you Shinee. Rest in peace Jonghyun.
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

The rating for this fic has gone up again - I really recommend checking over the tags to get some idea of what's coming. I don't wanna go into too much detail here for the sake of not spoiling how this all plays out but a general 'here be dragons' warning applies to this chapter

A note on the 'consent issues' tag - No one winds up doing anything they don't want to and everyone has a fun time. That being said, one character makes it clear that they intend to proceed regardless of whether consent is given and at one point threatens to continue to do something that the other character has explicitly denied consent for.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next morning dawns dark and cloudy, a proper Gotham summer. Bruce stands on the balcony looking down at the city, reduced to a green blur in the distance. It should be lit up like a beacon, setting fire to the rain. Joker once devised a contraption for doing just that. It was supposed to pump petroleum into the atmosphere so that the next time it rained it would take little more than a spark for the whole of Gotham to go up in smoke.

It didn’t work, petroleum is too heavy to stay in the air. But the streets had a rainbow sheen to them for a month afterwards.

A trickle of water slips from the lip of the drain, landing on Bruce’s shoulders and soaking into his t-shirt. It’s uncomfortably cold, with fever broken and he no longer needs any help cooling his blood.

Bruce hasn’t gone looking for Joker yet but he woke up to strains of Debussy floating through the Manor so he has to assume that the clown is in the drawing room. The thought of going down there and finding him at the piano prickles underneath Bruce’s skin. He slept terribly, trying to think about anything but the clean white of Joker’s teeth as the clown pressed sharpened metal to his neck.

The fingers on Bruce’s good hand tighten over the metal railing at the front of the balcony, pressing up hard against his skin. When he pulls it back to wipe sleep out of his eyes it leaves damp residue slipping down his face.

He doesn’t even want to think about what the back lawn must look like. Riddled with scorch marks, the marshmallows still lying where they fell, Bruce doesn’t care, not really, but something about the sheer pointlessness of it all needles at him. It’s one thing to blow the grounds sky high but to leave the job unfinished seems wasteful.

A waste of good entertainment. Bruce shakes his head and steps back inside. He should probably change. He’s been wearing the same t-shirt and tracksuit bottoms for four days straight and he probably stinks while Joker’s dressed up to the nines. Bruce wonders what would happen if he were to follow suit.

His injured arm twinges just thinking about forcing it into formal wear. There’s a pack of Vicodin
still sitting on Bruce’s side of the bed and the temptation to kill the pain is strong, but not stronger than the memory of Joker’s retreating back.

Bruce growls and walks over to deposit the box in the bottom drawer of the night stand. There’s no harm in testing a theory.

He changes quickly into one of the last clean pairs of tracksuit bottoms he has and a GCPD Academy t-shirt he kept around in case anyone needed to go undercover. It used to be very tight across his chest but now hangs lose. Bruce slips on his boots and starts making his way to the drawing room via the kitchen to pick up a tin of beans for breakfast. Beneath his feet, broken things crunch and shatter, moving closer to sand. It must be nice to smash things up just because you can, to stop caring about the intrinsic worth of anything long enough to decide that it’s all pointless.

Pretty much ever portrait in the gallery has been vandalised. Chunks of canvas cut from one, splashes of ketchup adorning another. Solomon Wayne has his own bucket of water, slowly bleeding out. Bruce barely notices the destruction until his eyes fall on the other end of the room and his gut clenches in anger. The painting of him and his parents has been slashed clean through, two gaping holes running parallel down each side though the baby has been left unharmed. The other family portrait is covered in oily handprints blacking out every face but his own.

It’s not important. It was never important. But when all you have left of the past is what survives and what stays stuck in your head you have to hold your relics in high regard.

Bruce takes a deep breath, trying and failing to steady himself. He throws open the drawing room door and imagines how satisfying it would be to throw Joker against a wall.

To hit Joker in the gut. To tie him up. To smash into little pieces. To see blood pooling between his teeth and lean in to taste him. He would taste so good.

Joker is sat at the piano, right hand tracking a quick little tune over the upper keys while he stares out of the window, across the loggia to the pool and down to the ruined lawn. He’s still wearing the suit, bright colours all the bolder against the dim greens of the drawing room. Superimposed over the dreary grey skies he’s back to being the brightest thing in Gotham; he looks like bad special effects on a painfully realistic background.

Bruce’s fingers tighten over the door handle. He wishes Joker would turn around.

“Come in or go out, but close the door. You’re letting out all the atmosphere.” Joker hums.

Bruce’s eyes narrow. “What atmosphere?”

“Oh, you know. A sort of wistful melancholy for times past mixed with a dash of hope that the future won’t be so bad after all.”

“You don’t strike me as the wistful sort.”

“Come now, Batsy! I’m very wistful, I’m full of wist. It’s in my nature.” Joker slams his hands down on the keys in a discordant mess and spins to face Bruce.

Bruce steps inside and lets the door fall closed behind him.

Joker beams. “There’s a good boy.” His voice drops just low enough to needle at the phantom sensation of fever still cloaking Bruce.

“Never knew you played.” Bruce nods towards the piano.
“Neither did I! Funny what you wind up forgetting. I’ve tried playing a few things by ear in the past but it always gave me a headache. Reckon I’ll stick to hands from now on.” Joker stands to approach Bruce, reaching out like he intends to touch him.

Bruce sidesteps him. He doesn’t think he could take the heat. Joker’s eyes widen in surprise, then he snorts and heads for the sofa. “So, what do you have planned for us for the day? Some light demolition for me, a bit of drug fuelled emotional turmoil for you, then a long evening’s rest before we crash and burn ready to do the whole thing over tomorrow? Man, we’ve got a bad case of the Groundhog Days.”

“You can do what you want.” Bruce shrugs.

“That sounds tedious.” Joker’s eyes flick over Bruce’s face with intense concentration. “Look at you grinding your jaw there. That arm starting to hurt? If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were sober. It would certainly explain the prickly temperament.”

“I was taking too many pills. Didn’t want to build up an addiction.”

“Sure, sure. That’s what this is, avoiding addiction. Because you’ve always been so good at holding back on unhealthy obsessions.” Joker nods. “Of course that’s it. Just that. Nothing else.” He stretches out along the sofa, shifting his hips forward in a manner unnecessary and lurid.

Bruce watches him like a hawk. Rooted to the spot, wound tight and ready to take off.

Joker stares him down and his face cracks into a wild grin. “God, you should see your face.”

There’s no need for Bruce to see his own expression, not when there’s a fire in Joker’s countenance that echoes everything he’s feeling. Kissing Bruce on the rooftop, sharing his bed, watching as he brought himself off in the doorway of the bathroom. It doesn’t make sense. Why won’t he close the distance?

“What do you want?” If Bruce’s voice shakes, Joker’s nice enough not to say anything.

Joker shrugs, kicking his feet over the armrest of the sofa. “I wanna dance.” His tongue slips off the final soft consonant and vanishes between his teeth. Bruce knows what it feels like for the muscle to press against the seam of his lips. Cold and wicked – irresistible. He knows what that body feels like, pressed up against his mid-fight. He wants to know more, he wants to know everything.

Bruce holds out his good hand and the scratchy thing stuck beneath his skin snaps and crackles in frustration. “So dance.”

Joker sits up, reaching for the offered hand. Bruce steps back before he can get a hold of it and has to bite his tongue to keep from smirking. The clown stares at the empty air in front of him with glee. He looks up at Bruce with wide, green eyes that could swallow the world.

“Oh, baby. Let’s dance.”

He flies to his feet, raiding his arms overhead and stamping his feet in a parody of the opening steps of a flamenco. He moves towards Bruce at a leisurely pace that’s easy to stay ahead of. Tracing a circle around the piano. When he comes close to backing Bruce into a corner it’s an easy thing to go low and step out of his way.

Every time Joker reaches out to lay a hand on him, the prickly feeling rises, sending Bruce snarling across the other side of the room in a heartbeat. The clown laughs and looks back at him with such warmth that it feels a cruel thing to keep him at arm’s length.
Bruce moves towards the door out to the great hall and pauses to make clear his intentions. His hand wraps around the handle and his eyes bore into Joker’s.

Joker stops, drops his arms. Sometime during the dance he’s risen up high on his feet, trying to achieve a ballerina’s point in dress shoes.

He weighs little enough that, with the proper footwear, he could probably manage it. The image of Joker in a bright purple leotard suggests itself to Bruce, tight fitted to show off ropey muscles, the lines of his skeleton, the elegance with which he can carry himself when he so chooses. He could probably lift Bruce over his head without breaking a sweat.

The idea shoots straight to Bruce’s groin. He sucks in a hurried breath and watches understanding wash over Joker’s face.

“You know, darling.” The clown starts, taking a careful step forward. Bruce tenses but he doesn’t move out of the way. “In here there’s a certain…wonder to the dance. Outside of this room though, who knows what might happen?”

“You won’t catch me up.”

Joker laughs, quiet and fond. He leans in so that is lips almost brush the shell of Bruce’s ear. Almost, but not quite.

“Are you sure about that, beloved? I’m not. I think I’m going to run you ragged. I think I’m going to trap you in a box you’re not built to escape. I’m going to strip you down, work you over and leave you struggling to regain your sense of self.”

Bruce doesn’t manage to swallow the tail end of a whimper that slips past his lips when Joker pulls away. The clown smiles down at him, alive and electric.

“Is that a promise?” Bruce asks.

“I would never lie to you.”

They could save the theatrics and go at it on the sofa right now. Get whatever this is out of their systems. Except it won’t be out of their systems, because it’s been stuck between the two of them for as long as they can remember and it’s not going anywhere anytime soon. It links them, it drives them. One day it may kill them both but that’s the sort of risk you have to take if you want to live a full and happy life.

Bruce nods once and lets the door swing open.

The chase comes at him full force, sharpening his reflexes and extending his peripheral vision into something unnatural. The Manor is more than empty rooms and broken furniture, it is a landscape, a city in miniature and he knows all the best places to hide and all the best vantage points. He could close his eyes and dance this number just as well. Bruce can smell smog curdling in the rain and ozone washing over him. He needs to play this one defensive.

“You get a thirty second head start.” Joker laughs, his voice tumbling off the high ceilings of the great hall. “Then all bets are off. Good luck!”

Luck has nothing to do with it. Luck is not enough. Bruce makes for the billiards room with the crisp cackles of a thing he will never fully understand and never really want to echoing in his ears. He looks without seeing, eyes glancing off the unimportant details of his shattered home with cool
indifference as he bursts through the door. There’s a stack of pool cues in one corner and he grabs one, breaking it across his knee and saving the thicker end as a makeshift weapon.

Bruce counts down the seconds, running out faster than he can put them to good use. He leaves through the secret door at the back of the billiards room and moves to the server’s corridor. Up ahead, a door swings open and he has to hope that Joker’s heading for the kitchens rather than his way.

Bruce clears the corridor as fast as possible and ducks into the servery. His ears strain for the sound of laughter ricocheting off the stairs down to the kitchen and he’s not disappointed. He’s barely through the breakfast room door before the sound starts advancing on him, Joker cackling like the end of days.

Maybe he picked himself out something sharp, a kitchen knife to slip alongside the edges of that preposterously well cut suit. The temptation to stop and get a better look at him is almost overwhelming and Bruce supposes this is what it must have been like for Joker all those years, fighting the urge to look over his shoulder and mangle his freedom in the need to see his nemesis in the flesh.

Back then, Batman always won. Sooner or later, Bruce is going to be hunted down. He doesn’t have the stamina to stay ahead of the chase anymore.

Bruce flies through the breakfast room and the thick oak door that closes behind him does nothing to soften the sound of Joker’s laughter. He slams the living room door shut behind him in the hope it will slow the clown down but he gets distracted by the offcuts from the curtains still littering the white carpet and loses his lead.

He hears the door open behind him and barrels forward into the study. Joker is impossibly fast, which makes him infuriating prey and a formidable hunter. His laughter rises to fever pitch and he snatches at the back of Bruce’s shirt but can’t quite get a hold of him.

But Bruce doesn’t realise he’s missed until he’s looking back over his shoulder with the intention of hitting him in the side with the pool cue. He meets Joker’s eyes and thinks he might breathe his last right then and there.

“Careful, darling.” Joker hisses, leaning in to press his lips to Bruce’s for the briefest second before pushing him away. “People might think you’re not taking this seriously.”

It’s definitely a carving knife that Joker whips through the air, missing Bruce’s neck by a matter of millimetres. Bruce raises the pool cue to knock his hand aside and steps into the opening to kiss the clown back, pressing his tongue up hard against non-existent lips.

He’s gone before Joker can open his eyes, dashing through the library, out to the loggia and into the conservatory, trailed by a thin strain of giggles. Scattered soil and de-potted plants line the floor. With the sun vanished behind the cloud bank the room is cold, raising Bruce’s skin to gooseflesh.

Bruce’s mistake was thinking that just because he used the door, Joker would be so good as to follow suit. He realises his folly a moment too late and doesn’t have time to step out of the way before he’s surrounded by a rain of broken glass as the clown leaps onto his back. He can feel glass caught between their bodies, digging into him at unpleasant angles but the blood dripping down the arm that reaches round to grab him by the throat is definitely Joker’s. Bruce reaches back with the pool cue and hits the clown’s skull as hard as he can to try to shift him.

Joker shrieks with laughter and licks a stripe up Bruce’s neck that burns like frostbite. Long legs
wrap around his waist and Bruce is at least grateful that Joker isn’t heavy enough to throw off his centre of balance.

His right arm jerks at precisely the wrong angle as he adjusts to the body on his back and Bruce snarls in pain. He barges through the door to the ballroom and takes advantage of the extra space to cant forward, using the momentum to swing Joker up and over his head. The clown skids across the floor, his passage aided by the oily black S symbols painted across the floor that break apart as he moves through them only to find his feet at the last minute. Bruce brings the cue up just in time to stop Joker from bringing the knife down between his eyes and the wood gives under the pressure.

Curling out from under the knife, Bruce can’t escape the arm that pulls him back in, pinning him against the clown’s body. Joker bites at his bottom lip and Bruce opens up to let him in, groaning deep in his chest when the edge of the knife presses up under his chin.

Joker pulls back just far enough as to be unreachable without Bruce risking his jugular getting sliced open. “What do you want, Bats?”

Bruce wants to kick his head in, strip his bones clean, push up against him and feel him come undone. “I want-“

“I don’t give a fuck what you want.” Joker seethes. He marches Bruce backwards till his head hits the wall with a resounding thump, pushing black spots into his vision and drowning out everything but the tongue surging back into his mouth.

Bruce arches forward and it’s nothing short of sweet relief when the clown kicks his legs aside and grinds up against him. Joker is hard as a rock, they both are. The knife is still pushing against Bruce’s throat and there’s a hand on his shoulder irritating his injured arm. It hurts, everything hurts. It feels like flying.

Joker betrays himself with the smallest grunt and the pressure on Bruce’s shoulder eases off ever so slightly. Bruce takes advantage of the opening, getting the pool cue up between the two of them to ram the clown in the stomach.

Joker falls back with a soft noise of surprise that segues into hysterical laughter in the space of a moment.

Uncomfortably aware of the pressure in his groin, Bruce runs. He dashes through the gallery and can already hear Joker gaining on him. He puts his feet through portraits that have been left lying in his way, trying to send them back into the clown’s path in the hope of slowing him down.

It doesn’t work. The slap of Joker’s bare feet on the filthy floor is replaced by the scraping of wood against wood. Bruce ducks out of the way as he crosses the threshold of the great hall and the clown sails straight past him, riding a painting like a skateboard.

Bruce can’t vanish into the shadow of the colonnades fast enough. He pulls up his old League of Assassins training, trying to become one with the dark but he hasn’t gone two steps before Joker’s head whips round to follow him, teeth shining in a light that can’t possibly exist.

“Don’t try that on me, darling. You may be the darkest thing in this place but you shouldn’t imagine that I can’t see in the dark.”

Heart in his mouth, Bruce scrambles backwards, aiming for the staircase. He wants to look away but he can’t; he’s drowning somewhere between the corners of Joker’s smile and the light in his eyes. In the gloom of the Manor he’s lit up like the flash of a car bomb.
Bruce tries to smile back at him. Not so wide as Joker’s but be puts his heart into it. His howling, shrieking heart that will not still, His feet hit the bottom step of the staircase and he finds it in him to turn tail and run.

Deftly avoiding Joker’s attempts to trip him up as he takes the stairs two at a time, Bruce veers off to the right when he gets reaches the first floor, moving past the kid’s rooms. The thunder of Joker’s feet hitting the wooden stairs fades to the soft thump of feet on the carpet, interrupted by the frequent screeching of broken glass and crockery slamming into each other. They keep moving, past the dusty guest bedrooms till they wind up back at the top of the staircase, facing the doors to Bruce’s parents’ suite.

Bruce hesitates. Joker grabs him by the hair and smashes his face into the doors. He pushes up behind Bruce, till the line of the clown’s erection falls between his buttocks.

“Is this what you want?” Joker asks, breathing heavy. His free hand wanders over Bruce’s hip, across the top of his thigh to tug at his balls.

The sound Bruce makes is inhuman. The years of thinking about Joker touching him without wanting to admit that the thought had ever crossed his mind compound on him, crushing him under their combined weight.

“Y-yes.”

Joker lets Bruce go and Bruce doesn’t bother trying to escape. He turns in the clown’s arms, kissing him hard, spreading his legs wide enough to make space for him, fisting his hair and revelling in the sounds he makes.

Bruce hooks a leg over Joker’s hip and the clown reaches down to hold him steady. They move against each other with short, jerky motions, little more than a mess of tongues and teeth.

The kitchen knife is still in Joker’s hand. Bruce can feel the dull edge of it pressing against the underside of his raised thigh.

“We need…we can’t…” Bruce knows exactly what’s supposed to happen next but the words are far off and unwilling to work with him.

Joker laughs in his face. “Clown got ya tongue?” He leans in to rest his forehead against Bruce’s. “Show me.”

With a shaking hand, Bruce reaches down to trace the outline of Joker’s erection, watching the clown’s eyes flicker closed. He runs the flat of his palm down the shaft before wrapping his fingers around his balls and squeezing just the wrong side of too tight.

Joker jumps ever so slightly and lets out a strangled sob. His eyes stay closed, his laughter erratic as he lets himself be led by the genitals along the top balcony to Bruce’s bedroom door.

Bruce’s back hits the wood with a resounding thud. He leans up to kiss Joker and with a lurch realises that he’s never kissed anyone he’s had to stand on tiptoes to reach before.

As Bruce’s hand leaves his balls, Joker’s eyes open and he lets out a manic little giggle. “This is it then? The main event, the big show. Roll up, roll up! Ladies and gentlemen! See the world famous Batman – half man, half beast – fuck the man of his nightmares. The one, the only, The Joker.”

“Whoever said I wanted to sleep with you?” Bruce smirks. His voice comes out husky and breathless, bone deep arousal failing to disguise itself beneath the façade of a flirtatious playboy.
Joker snorts and leans in to press a kiss to the side of Bruce’s mouth. “You’ve been saying it for years, love. All that black leather, all that rage. God! I could see it in you a mile off. Your hand on my cock just now cleared up any doubts I might have had.”

Bruce rubs the heel of his palm against Joker’s erection and the clown tips back his head to expose the columb of his throat. Bruce wants to bite it, so he does.

“Yeah, just like that.” Joker mumbles as Bruce’s teeth sink into the flesh just above his collarbone. “Fucking hell. I’m sorry for ever doubting that you’d messed around with guys before.”

Bruce has slept with men twice in the past, and five times total with people with penises. He’d hardly call himself an expert, but his tongue glides over the indent left by his teeth and the clown shudders with his whole body just the same.

Lowering himself off the balls of his feet, Bruce dips his head and starts worrying at the top button on Joker’s blood splattered shirt with his mouth. It falls away and the fabric parts to reveal more of the clown’s chest. Much as he’s seen him naked plenty of times in the past few weeks, seeing his skin unveiled from a new angle sends a wave of heat through Bruce’s body. He starts on the next button, read to peel away the covers piece by piece.

He keeps going till he can’t comfortably reach any further without dropping to his knees. Not that he would be opposed to doing so, but he’d rather not out here. Bruce rises back up to bite hard at the skin beneath Joker’s ear and the clown melts into him with a drawn out groan, grinding up hard into his hand.

“We should take this inside.” Bruce mumbles.

Joker nods fast and buries his face in the crook of Bruce’s neck. “Lead the way, bucko.”

They avoid the broken glass scattered across the carpet with practiced ease. Joker slides a hand under the back of Bruce’s t-shirt and rakes his nails across his shoulders, hard enough to break the skin. Bruce winces, unsure if he likes it but willing to stay the course.

The backs of Bruce's calves hit the bed and he sits down, letting his legs spread. He’s not used to being in this position without being a lot better put together. Well fitted suits casually falling off shoulders, hair and nails trimmed, having had a proper shower sometime in the last week. Like this, with his overgrown beard, wearing whatever was close to have and comfortable, he can’t look that impressive.

Joker lets out a soft gasp and hooks a hand under Bruce’s chin, forcing them to see eye to eye. Burning green stares into blue, electrified and urgent. “Beautiful.” He breathes. “Abso-fucking-lutely stunning.”

Bruce wants to return the compliment but he doesn’t know what to say. None of the vocabulary he’s picked up in his years of charming beautiful young things into bed feels adequate. How do you tell a person they look like all the worst parts of your soul set on fire and make it sound sexy?

“Your eyes say it all, my dear.” Joker giggles, his smile turning wide when Bruce sits up to lift his shirt over his head.

The clown follows the line of Bruce's abs down to the waistband of his track suit bottoms, not pulled up nearly high enough to fully cover the thick crop of dark hair spilling from his crotch.

Where he’s sat on the bed, Bruce’s nose comes to Joker’s navel. He rips off the last few buttons of the stained dress shirt and pulls it out from where it’s tucked into the suit trousers. The pale expanse
of Joker’s belly is revealed, the vague suggestion of abs, dusky purple nipples, a thin line of dark green curls leading from his bellybutton to his waistband.

Bruce reaches between Joker’s legs to plant a hand on his buttocks and pull him forward. He licks a stripe up the clown’s happy trail and is met with a string of hysterical titters.

“Tickles, Bats.”

“Do you like it?”

“Hey, if it gets a laugh it’s good comedy.”

Bruce does it again and Joker’s hands fly into his hair, gripping hard enough to hold him still. The prickling of his scalp is wonderful.

“What else can that mouth do?” Joker purrs. He lets go with one hand to slip a bloody thumb between Bruce’s lips.

Bruce parts his teeth and pulls him in. The angle is odd, letting saliva pool in the corners of his mouth. Beneath the coppery tang of his blood, so absurdly mundane, the taste of sugar and charcoal is still noticeable.

Moving his hand from Joker’s insubstantial buttocks, Bruce brings his hand forward to wrap around Joker’s erection as best as he’s able through his trousers. He strokes him slowly, enjoying the drag of velvet against his palm.

Joker has no definition in his hips whatsoever. Once they’ve been undone, the trousers slip off him without coaxing to pool around his ankles. He’s not wearing any underwear and his penis falls forward, bouncing happily in front of Bruce’s nose. He’s big, flushed blue with arousal and his foreskin pushing up just past the base of his glans. A bead of pre-come sits atop his slit, glistening in the grey light pouring through the bedroom window. Bruce leans in to lick it off then wraps his lips around him.

“Fuck!” Joker’s hips cant forward, leaning Bruce gagging. He throws the knife across the other side of the room. “C’mon, Bats! You can do better than that.”

Bruce gives Joker a few experimental tugs. There’s no way he’s fitting all that in his mouth. “I’m not sure I can.”

“You’re no fun.” Joker grumbles, but he lets out a desperate keening noise when Bruce pulls as much of him as he can manage into his mouth and starts working him over. Tongue swirling over his head, letting saliva dribble down his shaft whilst Bruce’s hand do the rest of the work. He’s not had much practice at fellatio and is aware that his capabilities add up to little more than the basics but whatever he’s doing it seems to be working. He wants to keep going till the clown comes undone in his mouth.

Which is strange, seeing as Bruce isn’t at all fond of the taste of semen.

Before he can see this new found fantasy through, Joker steps back, out of range and leaves Bruce with his mouth hanging open and drool dripping down his chin. With a wordless grunt of frustration, Bruce leans in to pick up where he left off only to be met by a hand pushing him away.

Joker laughs down at him. “Easy, stud. Can’t let you have all the fun.” He grabs Bruce by the good arm and drags him to his feet, taking advantage of his outrage to tip back his head and kiss him, practically slipping his tongue down Bruce’s throat.
When he pulls back, his lips are ringed with the pinkish discolouration of a fresh kissing rash. Bruce reaches up to thumb at it, nothing like the lipstick he used to wear but looking more than ever like his own self. He wonders what it would have been like to steal into the half dark of a rooftop in a busy city and let red lips wrap around his penis while Gotham looked on.

“I would…should have done this years ago.” Bruce mutters, leaning in to kiss the clown again. 

“Now he gets it.”

Stripping someone naked is easy enough with two working hands but it’s almost impossible with one. In the end, Joker takes pity on Bruce and discards the bloody shirt and jacket himself, leaving Bruce as the last of the two of them wearing any clothes.

Joker grins, fixing Bruce in the eye before plunging a hand down the front of his tracksuit bottoms. Bruce cries out at the slide of cool skin over his erection, steadying himself against the clown’s shoulder. Joker’s very good at this, and though his hand should be coarse and bony it feels smooth as anything. He did always used to wear gloves, maybe they prevented him from completely trashing his hands.

Perhaps Bruce is starved of human touch or maybe Joker just gives a really good handjob, but it would be horrifically easy to come like this. All Bruce would have to do would be to close his eyes and let the rush of his own blood drown out everything.

Bruce doesn’t want that. He grabs Joker’s wrist to pull him back. “Not like that.”

“Oh.” Joker’s pupils are unable to maintain a solid circumference. “Oh, Batsy. Now we’re talking.”

They fumble the track suit bottoms off and wrap themselves around each other, fully naked and writhing into the sensation of skin on skin. Bruce slips an arm round Joker’s waist and Joker pulls him in by the neck as they kiss, fast and desperate and where Joker’s erection curves to the left, Bruce’s curves to the right so that when they’re pressed together like this, face to face, they’re almost perfectly aligned.

“There’s lubricant in the second drawer on my side of the bed.” Bruce says between kisses. “Condoms, too. They’re probably past their sell by date but they should work as advertised.”

Joker laughs in his face. “And we would need condoms because?”

“Sexually transmitted infections.”

“Pretty sure I’m immune to all those and if you were suffering you would have been scratching around in your nadgers a whole lot more than you have been.”

“Just get the lube already.”

Joker darts over to the other side of the bed and an unexpected well of rage opens up in Bruce at having the clown torn from his arms. He growls low in his throat and is rewarded by a positively reverential stare from Joker. “You hold that thought, honey, I’m coming back to pick to pick up where we left off.” He pulls the drawer open and scatters its contents across the floor, catching the lube before it falls.

His body is covered in tiny lacerations that Bruce could swear are healing before his eyes. A few lines of dried blood mar his arms and torso, painting him like an open canvas.

Bruce hoists himself up on the bed and crawls towards where Joker’s standing, the feral trace of a
growl still heavy on his breath. The clown isn’t looking at him though, he’s staring at the bottle of lube like he’s never seen anything like it. “Remind me why we need this again?”

“Penetration. To reduce the risk of injury.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

“I can assure you, it’s no fun without it.”

Joker remains unconvinced. “But I was quite clear about how much fun I was going to have hurting you. I’m a man of my word, Bats.”

A rush of cold kills the animalistic growling thing in Bruce’s throat, the anxiety that he may have been cornered with no recourse. The thought does nothing to slow his arousal.

“Get up.” Joker clicks his fingers, not looking away from the lube. There’s a tug in Bruce’s chest that makes him want to obey but more than anything he wants the clown to join him on the bed. He stays put.

Joker looks around in confusion at the empty air in front of his face before his eyes fall to Bruce, half lying on the bed. “What are you doing down there?”

“I—” Bruce is cut off by the back of Joker’s hand slamming into his jaw. Before he can react, he receives a matching blow to his right cheekbone. It’s not enough to knock out any teeth, but the tingling pain in the wake of the blows sparks along his spine.

Joker scuttles to the end of the bed, laughing. Bruce launches himself to his feet with a snarl and does his best to tower over the clown.

By the time his feet hit the bedroom floor, Joker has retrieved the knife from where he let it drop and has it aimed at Bruce’s chest, the tip grazing his pectorals.

It’s such a light touch, it almost tickles. Bruce sucks in a sharp breath and watches the way his chest expands when he breathes. A couple of millimetres forward and Joker would draw blood.

He could step back towards the bed and be free in a matter of seconds, but he doesn’t. Bruce runs through all the exit routes from this room in his head and can’t think of a single one that sounds better than standing here under threat from Joker’s knife.

The clown winks at him. “That’s more like it.”

Bruce takes a tiny step forward and feels the bottom drop out of his stomach when Joker doesn’t give any ground. The knife sinks into his skin, just a little, enough to force a few drops of blood to run from the wound, across what’s left of his abs before collecting in his pubic hair. The pain is far from discouraging, if anything his penis is harder than ever. Bruce’s face is going to be bruised come morning and just the thought of blue stains seeping out across his skin makes him shudder.

Something that Joker put there, just for him. He takes another step forward, so that the few drops of blood leaking down his front become a small rivulet. You have to approach the ribs from a lower angle to have a chance at breaching them, he should be fine.

Joker’s mouth hangs open in a gormless grimace, like he can’t quite believe that this is happening to him. He shifts the knife ever so slightly downwards and the tug of his skin being split makes Bruce gasp. He looks down and sees the wound hanging ever so slightly open, just a couple of inches but deep enough to leave a scar. Blood wells up from within, shining ever so invitingly against the silver of the blade.
Peeling off the pressure, Joker leaves little more than a thin scratch as he trails the knife down to Bruce’s navel. He settles the point in the dip of Bruce’s bellybutton and looks up to make sure that he’s watching. “It would be so easy.”

“Wouldn’t it just.” Bruce catches him by the arm, drawing him in till they’re breathing the same air. They look down at the soft skin of his underbelly, ready for carving. Joker’s probably not going to do it, but if he does…

It was always going to happen sooner or later. Bruce gives his penis a cursory tug to relieve some of the ache building in his groin. He wants to stand and watch till the tension snaps of its own accord but if something isn’t done to curb his arousal soon he’s going to cry.

“Patience is a virtue, my dear.” Joker breathes. “

“There’s nothing virtuous happening here.” Bruce replies. “My dear.”

Joker’s smile falters, just for a moment and Bruce could swear he feels the clown shake against him. He bounces back with admirable efficiency, snickering under his breath as he pulls the knife away and raises it to his mouth, sliding it along his tongue and sucking hard to clean away the blood. His eyes roll back in his head and he hums happily.

Bruce is rather disappointed that none of the blood sticks to his lips. He nips at the corners of the clown’s mouth till he does away with the knife entirely and opens up to let himself be kissed. He fumbles for Joker’s other hand, still holding the bottle of lube and pops the cap off. One or both of them squeezes too hard and a jet of cool, slippery gel runs over their hands.

“Ha!” Joker laughs as Bruce bites down on his neck hard enough to break the skin. “You didn’t say it would be so delightfully gloopy. I take it all back, this stuff is gonna be fun.”

A thought occurs to Bruce, he looks up from Joker’s collarbone. “Have you done this before?”

“Done what?”

“Anal sex.”

“How on Earth am I supposed to know? Maybe! Probably! It seems like the kind of thing I’s do.”

Bruce can’t say that sex has ever appeared to be particularly high on Joker’s list of priorities. The distinction hardly matters when a lube slicked hand reaches down to work its way between his buttocks, barely bothering to warm him up to the idea before pushing a finger inside. It would appear that the clown at least understands the basics.

This is hardly Bruce’s first time, Selina had a strap on and she knew how to use it, but she never used to dive in quite so fast. His whole body goes rigid at the intrusion, clenching down on Joker’s finger.

“You need to go slower.” Bruce tells him from between gritted teeth.

“And you need to loosen up.” Joker giggles. He wrestles his finger half an inch out of Bruce before plunging back in, giving a sharp tug outwards to stretch him open.

A familiar burn starts up and Bruce is reminded that this is the worst part. Once he’s loose enough to let a second finger inside it should be more or less plain sailing. He’s endlessly glad that Joker is using plenty of lube.
“I like this stuff.” Joker waggles the bottle in front of Bruce’s face. “So slippy! Do you have any more of it? We could make a great water slide.”

Dick had had the exact same reaction when he first discovered lube. The only reason that escapade hadn’t ended with a trip to the hospital is that the boy wonder was a world class acrobat with a knack for landing on his feet.

Bruce grips tight to Joker’s shoulder as the clown fingers him open, focusing on the steady stretch of the muscle. A second finger pushes inside him sooner than he’d like and he jumps, cold hands making him uncommonly aware of how much of him is being touched.

After a few minutes, Bruce relaxes all at once and Joker’s able to slide his fingers into him wholesale. The first touch to his prostate is glancing, but it’s been long enough since anyone was that deep inside him that Bruce whimpers into the crook of the clown’s neck.

“That took more effort than I was expecting.” Joker snorts.

“Touch it again.”

“You mean this?” Joker presses down on his prostate with fractionally more pressure than Bruce likes and starts rubbing it in steady circles, laughing every time Bruce shudders against him.

Warmth spreads through Bruce’s abdomen and out to his limbs, lighting him up like no kind of fever. The consistent pressure helps him to loosen up, and when Joker leans in to kiss him whilst introducing a third finger Bruce groans loudly into his mouth.

When he manages to open his eyes, the clown is looking down at him with a mixture of humour and awe, scanning his face like he might be able to unlock the secrets of the universe if he stares hard enough. ”That good, huh?”

Bruce nods. He’s ready, or at least, as ready as he wants to be. When Joker pushes inside him, he wants to still be tight enough that it stings. He tentatively pulls reaches down to stroke The Joker’s erection, still very firmly in place. “’You know how to use this?’”

“I’ve had it for a good few years, reckon I’m getting the hang of it.”

Bruce ignores the opportunity to ask how old Joker is. No matter what the clown might say, he’s sure he wouldn’t like the answer. He moves back towards the bed and Joker steps with him. “Show me.”

Joker grins wide, kissing Bruce till their eyes slide closed and using the distraction to guide him in to place. It’s immediately obvious that they’re not heading for the bed, though Bruce doesn’t pay all that much attention to exactly where the three fingers crooked inside of him are leading them both till he hears the sound of a latch falling open and is pushed out on to the balcony.

When Bruce opens his eyes, everything is green. The Joker spins him round and pushed him against the railings hard enough to partially wind, then slams his fingers forward, leaving Bruce reeling.

The green doesn’t go away. The hills are starting to fade from the bright well of spring colour to late summer brown but down towards the ocean, Gotham shines. Rain hits Bruce’s skin but it’s too light to offer any real reprieve from the heat building inside him.

He feels the brush of Joker’s thumb skirting his hole. “What do you think-“

“I think that if you try to fist me I will break your hand again with the walls of my anal cavity.”
Joker positively shrieks with laughter. “Now THAT is a proper threat! You leave me in a very
difficult position, Bats. On the one hand – ha! Hand – I’ve got you all soft and pliant just for me and
it would be a shame to waste that. On the other, you just offered a whole other class of party.”

Balancing on shaking legs, Bruce reaches behind him with his good hand to get a hold of Joker’s
penis, thumbing along his slit. The clown lets out a happy hum, pressing his nose to the back of
Bruce’s neck and scraping his teeth along the vertebrae there.

It’s little more than a counter offer, but Joker is happy to settle. Bruce lets him go and he pulls his
fingers away.

Bruce grinds back on instinct, trying to find something to replace Joker’s hand. The clown’s penis
slides between his buttocks, moving easily through the lube collected there and the head catches
against his hole, not quite at the right angle for penetration but making it clear that it would be so
easy.

Joker delivers a sharp bite to the skin between Bruce’s shoulder blades and Bruce arches into it till
the clown’s tongue slips out to soothe the worried flesh. The sound of the lube bottle popping open
precedes the slick squelch of Joker lubing himself up. He sets a hand on Bruce’s hip and the excess
sits sticky on his skin.

“If you have any objections, now wold be the time to voice them.” Joker says, lining himself up.
Bruce tries to back up onto him and the clown pushes his head down towards the railing and kicks
his legs open. “I mean, this is a total kangaroo court, but people like the idea of checks and balances
more than they like seeing them enforced.”

“Well? Will you just stick it in me, already?” Bruce snarls.

Joker grabs a handful of his hand and jerks Bruce’s head back hard enough to crick a muscle in his
neck. “Now, now, Bats. Such vulgar language.” He lets go and before Bruce can steady himself,
Joker slams into him, stuttering out a shriek that echoes down the pointlessly long driveway.

It’s too much all at once. It’s perfect. Joker’s penis isn’t uncommonly thick but it fattens around the
base, stretching Bruce out at the last and providing the final burn that makes stars pop in front of his
eyes. He’s never been penetrated by anything quite so long before and the shock of nerve endings
being stimulated for the first time has him struggling to catch his breath. He opens his mouth to
scream of moan or something in between but the sound that comes out is choked off and
insubstantial. He brings his good arm up to steady himself against the railing and looks down too see
the trail of blood still running down his front and mingling with the rain.

“Oh. Fuck.” Joker pulls out. “Yes!” He slams back in, bringing a hand down on Bruce’s buttocks
that makes a sound like a thunderclap. “Fucking, fucking hell, Batsy. I knew you were a tight ass but
I never expected your ass to be so tight.”

Bruce clenches around him and feels Joker’s penis kick up against his prostate. The clown lets out a
joyful whine and wraps an arm around his waist, pulling him upright. With his legs spread wide,
Joker’s arm is the only thing holding Bruce up.

Joker fucks him hard but not fast, pausing every now and then to bite at his neck or run his hand
through the thin trail of blood down his front. It’s a frustrating pace, constantly waiting for the next
thrust but never receiving the kind of stimulation that could push him over the edge. Bruce grinds
back on to him as best he can but it’s hard when he’s not able to hold his own bodyweight, caught in
a storm of arousal that doesn’t feel like it’s ever going to break. He does what he can to maintain
purchase on the railing with his good hand, meaning that he can’t touch himself and Bruce knows
from bitter experience that without something touching his penis, he can’t get off.

There will be a clown shaped hand print on his buttocks for days, his face will be bruised for a week or more, his body will burn with residual scratches and that’s before Bruce factors in the toll the sex is going to have on his pelvis. He watches blood drip sluggishly from his chest to the floor, painting the tiles red. He relishes it.

Gotham stares back at them, unblinking and dead. Joker adjusts his grip on Bruce’s hips, angling him so as to better hit his prostate and drawing forth sounds that Bruce didn’t know he was capable of making, the high pitched whine pushing past his teeth sounds like it was pulled from someone else’s mouth.

Bruce’s nerves scream, insisting that the damn needs to be cut loose or it will collapse in on itself but Joker keeps rutting into him and he keeps landing with his feet on the balcony tiles.

The clown laughs, till Bruce manages to transfer enough of his weight onto his arm that he can writhe back into him and his giggles turn to groans as he collapses forward, unable to take his own insubstantial bodyweight. It takes Joker a minute to recuperate and the seconds in which neither of them are moving are tortuous.

“My God.” Joker breathes as Bruce grinds back on him in neat little circles.

“Touch me.” Bruce turns his neck to try to get a better look at Joker and the clown slams his head forward, holding him against the railing.

“I am touching you, silly.” Joker slides his hand to grip Bruce’s throat and squeezes, not tight enough to choke him but enough to remind him that he could if he wanted to.

“My…I can’t…” Bruce rasps. Every time he thinks he’s going to reach the end of his sentence Joker pushes back into him and the only thing he can focus on are all the parts of him that aren’t being touched.

“Come now.” Joker starts and has to pause to laugh at himself. “That’s not the Batman I remember. Where’s your can do attitude? You gotta get your boyscout on.”

“I’ll thank you not to mention boyscouts when you’re eight inches deep in me.”

“Pretty sure it’s seven.” Joker snorts. His hips stutter forward and he trails off into a low purr. “Hold that thought, I gotta take care of something.”

He picks up the pace and Bruce no longer knows if the sounds leaving Joker’s mouth are laughs or grunts. The fingers at Bruce’s hip grow all the tighter while the hand around his throat slackens off to almost nothing, Joker losing concentration as he rams into him with unfathomable force.

Grunting becomes a whine becomes teeth sinking into Bruce’s shoulder, a flash of green at the edge of his field of vision. His focuses all his energy on moving in time with Joker, working in opposite directions but winding up back in the middle every time.

Bruce takes a leap of faith and trusts that Joker’s hands with be enough to keep him upright as he reaches back to grab a handful of the clown’s hair, still unbearably soft. His fist tightens till he can feel the hairs pulling away from Joker’s scalp.

Three more thrusts and Joker lets out a wail, his body going taught as he shudders to a halt inside Bruce. He holds his position, like his orgasm has frozen him in time, till his jaws fall open of their own accord and he lets go of Bruce’s shoulder.
Bruce’s arm flies out to catch the railing and regain his balance as Joker’s hands peel away from him. The clown pulls out and he feels so empty, the fire burning through everything he has to offer. He tries to keep hold of the sensation of Joker moving inside him before it’s lost to memory and reaches down to finish himself off.

“D-don’t.” Joker snatches his arm back with shaking hands, he sounds exhausted. “One hand behind your back, Bats. I’m sure you can manage, you’re a resourceful guy.”

Irritation becomes a flare of blind rage. “I’m going to make sure I come whether you like it or not, Joker.”

“Please, honey.” Joker mumbles as he presses messy kisses down Bruce’s spine. “I may be an evil mass murdering psychopath, but I’m not mean enough to leave you hanging.”

He bites at the raw skin of Bruce’s buttocks, still tingling from the slap, pausing to worry it before dipping sideways to his cleft.

Bruce sucks in a breath and goes very still. No one’s done that to him before. After a few more swipes along the seam with his tongue, Joker puts one hand on each of Bruce’s buttocks and pulls them apart to get at his hole, still hanging open and hoping to be filled. He licks around it, cleaning up the excess lube dripping down Bruce’s thighs.

It’s nice. Not as visceral as sex but more than enough to keep him hard. He feels like he’s been hard for days. Soon, surely, it will prove too much and he’ll spontaneously combust to save himself the trouble of enduring this limbo any longer. Bruce falls forward against the railing and lets himself relax into it.

The first swipe of Joker’s tongue over his hole take’s Bruce by surprise. Raw nerves howl at the direct stimulation and he jackhammers forwards, earning him another slap on the rear from the clown.

“Hold still. You wouldn’t want me to slip.” Joker starts to tease with the tip of his tongue, skirting Bruce’s rim before pushing up inside him. It’s nothing like having a penis up there. Joker’s tongue is fast and clever, undulating along sensitive strips worn down to almost nothing. With such a tightly strung canvas every stroke feels like lightning.

Joker digs in, slipping far enough inside that he almost reaches Bruce’s prostate. When that doesn’t work he reintroduces a finger, moving more gently this time round.

A steady stream of groans born as much from frustration as pleasure spill from Bruce’s chest. He tries to move his hips in time with Joker’s rhythm as the clown sucks hard on the outer edge of his hole, making a vulgar slurping noise that makes Bruce’s tremble.

Cleaning him up. Using one’s mouth to clean bodily fluids out of another person’s anus is highly unsanitary but thinking about it too hard just makes Bruce’s penis jump all the more excitedly, his balls tightening into a stranglehold.

“Joker, please.”

Finger inside him, tongue struggling to slip up alongside it, Joker hums and the vibrations rocket through Bruce hard enough that he thinks he might lose his balance despite the railing. “Well, I suppose you have been rather well behaved for a flying rodent.”

Joker keeps tonguing at Bruce’s hole, but he pulls his hand away and reaches between Bruce’s legs to roll his balls together.
Bruce pushes himself down into the clown’s hands and he could swear he feels Joker smile against his buttocks.

Reaching up to wrap long fingers around Bruce’s shaft, Joker moves painfully slowly, pausing once in a while to rub his thumb along the slit and making him cry out in frustration.

The push of Joker’s tongue against his hole, the slow but steady friction against his penis. It’s not enough to drag Bruce over the edge in a hurry but with a little patience he’ll get there. He closes his eyes and lets it all wash over him, till he’s no longer convinced there was ever a time when he wasn’t waiting to come undone in the clown’s hands.

There’s no change of pace or finishing flourish that gets him where he needs to go, Bruce simply reaches the end of the line. One moment he’s struggling with the fire nipping at his ankles and the next he’s overwhelmed by it, dashing through his extremities from an origin deep within his gut. The noise he makes as he comes in Joker’s hand is more sob than anything else and he’s not sure how he’s still standing, because surely his legs have fallen out from under him, that seems like the kind of price he should have to pay for tasting this forbidden fruit.

Joker keeps up his ministrations till just past the point of discomfort. He gives Bruce’s balls one last tug and plants a final kiss over his hole before joining him up against the railing, staring down at the city. He’s got a faraway look in his eye, somewhere out in the blackness of space there’s a light that shines just as he does, but he was never meant for Earth.

Joker’s got eyes like kryptonite. For the first time in his life, Bruce fully appreciates what Clark was so afraid of.

“Well.” Joker says, voice rough. “Now that we’ve got that out of the way…”

“Don’t.” Bruce murmurs, straightening up and reaching out to pull him closer.

Joker blinks. “Don’t what?”

“Ruin the moment.” Wrapping an arm round Joker’s waist, Bruce leans up to kiss him nice and slow, revelling in the way that they are both still burning embers, every touch scattering excess energy across his skin. He wants to sleep for a week. He wants to run a mile.

Joker tries to bite his tongue, turn the kiss dirty or competitive and every time Bruce pushes him back. Slowing him down until they’re moving as one.

With shaking hands, Joker cradles Bruce’s face. Meeting in the middle, perfectly matched, the blood on their skin mingling till it's impossible to tell who it belongs to. The thin scattering of rain turns heavy and they barely notice the downpour for all the heat held in their bones.

Chapter End Notes

When I was initially writing this I was so sure I was doing the least hardcore version of a BatJokes sex scene and that I could save all the kinky stuff for porny one shots but this...wound up pretty kinky. Whoops. I guess vanilla BatJokes sex just isn't a real thing.

I find sex scenes super hard to write so apologies if this sucks
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

AHHHHHHHH!!! We are so close to the end

I'm gonna have withdrawal symptoms when I post the last chapter of this story

There's a handful of references to off screen kinky shit going down in this chapter

Bruce rises from a mid-afternoon nap with the taste of semen sitting heavy on the back of his tongue. He frowns, and swallows, trying to shift it. He’s definitely not a fan. The barrels on the patio should be full after the three days of rain they’ve had, he can run out into the garden to wash his mouth out.

Joker squirms further into Bruce’s side. He’s not quite asleep and not quite awake, fallen into a kind of stupor that’s more about recharging than proper rest. He’s draped in one of Bruce’s old dress shirts, now covered in grease stains. It covers his behind but leaves his legs free, one now hooked over Bruce’s waist to hold him still. Everything that should be covered is covered, but it would be desperately easy to grab him by the hips and start over again.

He shouldn’t. They were at it for a few hours that morning and while Joker can bounce back from anything, Bruce will be lucky if he’s ready to go again come evening. He carefully disentangles himself from the clown, trying not to disturb him.

“No!” Joker hisses, hand flying out to catch Bruce’s wrist. “Come back here, you’re comfy.”

“The bed is comfy.”

“Meanie.”

“Guilty as charged.” Bruce slides off the edge of the bed and into his discarded tracksuit bottoms left next to the broken wood of the night stand. He’s gotten three splinters off that thing already, it’s high time they had another bonfire. He’d been foolish enough to kick his boots off in the bathroom the night before and has a job to pick his way between the shards of porcelain from the broken sink and the remains of his dresser to retrieve them. The carpet burns against micro cuts on the soles of his feet, he hadn’t been particularly careful when making his way into bed.

When he’s got his boots back on, the floor cracks and jingles under Bruce’s feet. Joker hasn’t worn shoes for the best part of two weeks and though he heals up fast there are large splashes of blood adorning the floors in almost every room.

“Get me breakfast.” Joker whines. He moves to the centre of the bed and wraps himself up in the soiled duvet.

Bruce doesn’t pause to entertain him. “Get it yourself.”

The bedroom doors were ripped off their hinges and sentenced to death on the hardwood floors of the great hall almost a week ago. They hadn’t had it in them to scream. Bruce starts down the stairs feeling for the few that creak under his weight. He suspects today will be the day Joker decides to knock them down.
He calls it redecorating. There’s very little left to be done here though, they’ve been busy.

Bruce stops in the kitchen for a tin of preserved mushrooms. They’re perfectly foul but they fill him up so he can’t complain. He’s been keeping an eye on the treeline, looking for crows taking flight. If he asks very nicely, he thinks Joker might catch one for him. They could roast it over a fire out on the lawn. It would be good to get something fresh in his system.

They’re a long way off running out of food, but most of what’s left requires cooking. Bruce had assumed it would be a dwindling supply of sustenance that would force them out but he’s no longer so sure. The air in the house is growing stale, cloying at their skin and trying to suffocate them; the grounds are little better.

It’s a nice day. A warm breeze hurries the clouds along fast enough that the sun gets to peak through every now and then. The wreckage of the second bonfire dominates the view, a huge pile of ash born of furniture and dead wood. Joker had felled a tree to serve as the base for it – Bruce has no idea how he did it but seeing him emerge from the woods with the thing slung across his shoulders was a sight to behold.

Bruce sticks his head in the nearest barrel and drinks deep. He’s sure mosquitoes have been laying in it but he can’t quite bring himself to care. Like everything else, he blames the radiation. His arm is healing nicely and though he’s only had the makeshift plaster cast on for four weeks, he reckons he can take it off in another two. He’s morbidly curious to find out how bad the bone has set.

Something crashes inside the Manor. Bruce has no idea what it might be, he’s pretty sure they’ve broken everything worth breaking.

Except the grandfather clock. Joker hasn’t asked about that again, though Bruce knows it’s coming.

Today would be a good day to get all of that over and done with. They’re really starting to push it with the havoc they cause. They break things, the have sex, they try to break each other during sex and keep coming deliciously close. Bruce is covered in bruises and scabs, and a pair of welts running down his left side where Joker struck him with a belt. Bruce begged him to do it again and the clown had been cruel enough to decline.

Bruce hauls himself onto the loggia and into the library through the gaping hole where the window used to be. Joker took this one out with a legal text book that no longer had a place in modern society and Bruce had let him get away with it. Bruce had smiled.

The funniest thing about the whole situation is that either of them ever thought there was something left to be saved. The Manor is dead, Gotham is Dead, Metropolis is dead. It’s hard to feel bad about using the asclepion to save their skins when it wouldn’t have made a bit of difference anywhere else. This isn’t the end of the world, just the start of a new one.

The library has been emptied, refilled and emptied again. Sat on the burn riddled desk is a thick wad of papers taped together by Joker. It’s not a proper book, just a handful of pages that had been scooped off the floor and pulled into formation. Partly because it’s fun to read things out of sequence but mostly because Joker has the foresight to know that he’ll be bored again soon enough and the best thing he can do for such an eventuality is to prepare something for him to wreck when the moment arrives.

There are a handful of intact pages sitting in the upturned ends of the bookcases. Bruce uses his hand and teeth to tear them into shreds, feeling tension rippling out of his shoulders as the paper gives. He moves through to the study and is entirely unsurprised to find Joker already in there, sucking on a handful of uncooked spaghetti like a lollipop.
“Once upon a time, a Bat made a promise that he would take his dear beloved behind the iron curtain the following morning. But there have been quite a few mornings since then and he hasn’t held up his end of the bargain. Why is that?”

“You never asked.” Bruce leans against the clock.

Joker has paired the oversized shirt with some bright pink swimming shorts that were probably left behind by Harper. His thighs vanish into the inner netting and Bruce has half a mind to follow after them. The clown pulls a strand of pasta free and hurls it at Bruce’s head; Bruce ducks and it shatters against the wall. “Why should I have to ask? You’re the gracious host, you’re supposed to offer.”

“You’ve pulled my home apart over the past four weeks, why should I be gracious to you?”

“Ok first.” Joker holds up a finger. “This place was a dump before I got here. I’ve done you a real favour on the interior design. And second.” Second finger. “You helped. So it doesn’t count.”

“Well you know what they say. If you can’t beat them, join them.”

“Who says that?” Joker laughs. “Who is left to say stupid bullshit like that?”

“I just said it.” Bruce shrugs, a slight smile. Joker’s mouth curls into something bordering on fond and heat blooms in his chest.

Joker launches himself up from where he’s being sitting on the remarkably unharmed desk and doesn’t seem to mind when his bare foot lands on the broken nib of a fountain pen. He saunters towards Bruce without taking his eyes off the clock. “I’m not asking, Bats. I’m telling. It’s time.”

“I know.” Bruce nods. “I know. I’ll need your help though.”

“Oh, so I gotta do everything round here.” Joker pushes Bruce out of the way and starts trailing his fingers down the seal between the clock and the wall.

Bruce has found scant minutes here and there to come here alone and do the same thing. He’s tried resetting the hands of the clock in the old combination to get the passage to open and he’s tried hooking his fingers across the back of the wood and pulling as hard as he can. The trouble is that the door to the cave is reinforced steel with a triple locking mechanism that even Selina had never been able to get around.

Joker stands back, brow furrowed but face alight. “This one ain’t gonna be easy. You got a failsafe built into this puppy that I should know about?”

“All the failsafes were fun on electronic mechanisms. There’s an elevator shaft hidden in the wall about two feet east of here but it should be sealed up even tighter than this door.”

“Nice, nice. Good to see your paranoia pulling its weight.” Joker giggles. “You got any ideas?”

“Beyond getting a steam engine in here to do the work for us, not really. I figured you were the man who got out of Arkham when the grid went down, you probably have a better idea of what to do.”

Joker’s mouth slides into a disappointed droop and he shakes his head, tutting. “Dear me, Batsy. Are you saying it was all a lie? You cruelly took advantage of my emotions and slept with me to buy my loyalty, just so I could come through here and open up your super-secret cavern? You’re lucky I’m a sentimental fool or this plan could have totally backfired in your face.”

He jams the rest of his spaghetti into the gap between the door and the wall, watching carefully as
just one strand manages to stay in place. He nods like this is significant and whips round to face Bruce with his biggest and best smile. “I’m gonna need a tin of paint, three bay leaves, a can of engine oil and a crowbar.”

Despite everything, Bruce flinches. He knocks Joker’s hand away when he tries to touch him. “Don’t…there’s…”

“Oh, come on! That was one little boy and it happened years ago. You should learn to let it go.”

Bruce steps away from him, trying to ignore the rush of guilt tugging at the back of his mind. It will always be too soon for some jokes. “Get them yourself.”

Joker rolls his eyes. “Fine! If that’s how it’s gotta be.” He vanishes through the living room door, pausing to knock at the wall covering Barbara’s access elevator to the cave and tittering to himself when he’s met by a hollow echo.

Bruce doesn’t do himself the discourtesy of pretending that he’s going to stay angry with Joker. It will sting, it will hurt, then the clown will smile at him with just the right mixture of joy and malice and it won’t seem so important anymore. What’s one dead son compared to the one person still standing in front of you when everything else has faded away?

Bruce tips his head back against the wall and watched clouds spill over the sun through the window. He can see the tail end of the swimming pool from here, the last piece of the grounds that Joker hasn’t tried to sabotage.

That and the herb garden. At this stage, Joker’s sidestepping of that particular flower bed feels uncomfortably like a kindness and Bruce is starting to wish that he would at least try to tear it up, just so he’d have an excuse to punch him in the face over it.

The thought of Joker with his front teeth knocked in, blood streaming from his nose and eyes blackened from the impact suggests itself to Bruce. He hates the way it spreads heat under his skin, he hates that it always has.

Joker returns with an eclectic selection of items pilfered from around the house. In addition to the things from his list he has the saggy carcass of a bright orange inflatable dingy, a selection of candles and a tin of silver polish jammed between his teeth.

Bruce looks him over. “What are you going to do with all that?”

The series of mumbled vowels that constitutes Joker’s reply, spat from around the tin in his mouth, are unintelligible.

“I can’t understand a word you’re saying.”

Joker lets his arms fall open and drops everything to the floor. The tin of paint he dug up from God knows where loses its lid when it falls and a slow dribble of pastel blue starts to work its way into the carpet. He spits the polish into his hand and pops the lid off. “I said, I’m gonna open up this clock-door and I’m gonna look fabulous doing it. My usual MO.”

He scoops up a handful of the dark coloured polish and runs it through his hair, sweeping it back off his forehead and fading the colour to something mossy and more natural looking. Bruce has to agree that it’s a good look on him.

Joker starts by squirting copious amounts of engine oil most likely pulled out of the garage into the miniscule gap between the clock and the wall. It’s where Bruce would have started if he were trying
to get the door open, though he probably wouldn’t have spilled so much on the floor. The clown then rights the paint pot, throws in the bay leaves and stirs it all together with his fingers.

“What are the bay leaves for?” Bruce doubts he knows exactly. Joker’s knowledge of chemistry is practically extraordinary and theoretically lax. Usually the best anyone can get out of him is a ‘it wouldn’t work without it’ but sometimes he surprises everyone by knowing the bare minimum about what he’s doing.

Joker pulls his finger out of the pain and shoves in in his mouth. He licks it clean and pulls away with a pop. “They do wonders for the flavour.”

Of course they do.

Using his hands, Joker paints over the gap behind the door, going over it again and again until he’s satisfied that there’s as much paint on the wall as will hold. Then he lets the tin drop and goes to retrieve the dingy, which he starts blowing up without a pump. It takes him a good ten minutes but he’s barely out of breath when he’s done. He drops it down in the middle of them room then leaps onto the desk, grinning at Bruce and swinging his legs like an excitable toddler. “Now we wait.”

Bruce looks at the mess of oil and pain congealing on the wall. “Wait for what?”

“For the paint to dry out.”

“And then what?”

“Then we crowbar it open.”

Bruce’s eyes flick from the clock, to The Joker and back again. “I fail to see how that wasn’t the first step.”

“You wouldn’t, you can be such a simpleton when the mood takes you.” Joker beams. “The oil goes on first to loosen it up a bit, which is important because that door was not emotionally prepared to be left alone for a year, the poor thing’s gone native. Now, you could try and pry it open after that but come on, Bats! Have you ever used a crowbar on a lubricated surface? It doesn’t go well. They slip around all over the place and always wind up in someone’s eye. So you gotta have something there to hold it steady. When the paint dries I can chip a hole in it and use that to stop the crowbar going whoopsie, then boom! That door should open right up.”

“And the dingy?”

Joker winks and pats the top of the desk for Bruce to join him. “The colour brings out my eyes. C’mon, sit with me. I’d say we’ve got at least an hour before that paint’s anything like ready to take me on.”

Bruce only manages a moment’s hesitation before he joins Joker, sitting tight up next to him so that their thighs press together and if they were to turn their heads, their noses would brush.

“How do you intend to pass the time?” Bruce asks in his best imitation of coy.

Joker raises a hand to stroke his chin and leaves a trail of blue paint behind. “I dunno. You know any good jokes?”

“Not really.”

“What about bad ones?”
Bruce digs him in the ribs, smiling slightly. “I was a father for nearly twenty years. I know plenty of terrible jokes.”

Joker’s mouth falls into a soft circle and his eyes light up. “Dad jokes? You’re telling me we’ve known each other for how many years and you’re just now telling me that you’re the kind of papi who busts out the ‘hi hungry, I’m dad’?”

“Only on special occasions.”

“This is a special occasion! You’re about to show me your deep dark secret bat cave, I deserve at least one bad joke.”

Bruce has to think for a minute. Most of the jokes that really made the kids groan only worked in context. He can hardly tell Joker to keep the orange juice in the carton if the clown hasn’t asked if he should put it in the bag.

He hits on the perfect line soon enough. “You remember that graveyard we passed on our way here, a mile or so out of Gotham?”

“Yeah?” Joker leans in, positively vibrating.

“You know why I can’t be buried there?”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not dead yet.”

Joker rocks forward, positively howling with laughter and clutching at his sides. “Dear me – a ha! – that was perfect. SO on brand. Ok, ok. Stop me if you’ve heard this one before. How do you tell the difference between a frog and a horny toad.

Bruce winces. Jason had been fond of this one but he had always thought it crass. “A frog says ribbit and a horny toad says rub it.”

”Damn, Bats. You know your shit. Ok, your turn.”

They keep going for a long time, passing jokes back and forth. A lot of Joker’s contributions are classics or unnecessarily explicit but he has a few good ones that Bruce hasn’t heard before. Some of his puns could easily pass for clues that the Riddler might have left once upon a time, it’s easy to see why the Arkham guards were of the opinion that Joker and Nygma were each less irritating when they had each other to annoy.

Eventually Joker silences Bruce mid-sentence with a raised hand. His head whips round to the clock, where the paint still has the dark stain of damp running through it but the sheen of freshness has faded. He nods towards it and stands, beckoning Bruce to follow. “It’s time.”

The crowbar is in Joker’s hands before Bruce can blink, already oiled up down one end. Joker traces it through the paint to find the crease between the door and the wall before digging in hard. It sinks through the paint with ease, clinking into place along the metal seal.

“I might need some help from my glamourous assistant with this one.” Joker winks at Bruce.

Bruce takes a step back. “I thought you were a master of the crowbar.”

“Now who’s making inappropriate dead bird gags?”
Joker readjusts the angle of the crowbar then throws all of his inconsiderable weight and surprising strength behind it. The ringing shriek of straining metal fills the study and Bruce holds his breath, watching the crowbar curve ever so slightly under the stress.

In another lifetime, Joker would have made an excellent blacksmith.

The crowbar pops free with a mighty clang, dragging most of the paint and oil mixture away with it and scattering fragments of blue across the carpet. Joker reaches for the door and gives it a tug but nothing moves.

He frowns. “Well, that didn’t work.”

It’s a disappointing result. Bruce is so used to the idea that Joker can get into anywhere that watching him fail is more than a little alarming. “Is there anything else we can try? There’s another entrance but it’s a half day’s walk from here and would require scuba gear to access. And it’s likely still sealed up.”

“Nah, no need to trouble yourself. I’ll get this.” Joker rises onto his tiptoes and reaches over the top of the clock. His brow furrows in concentration as he fiddles with something Bruce can’t see. The he stands back, drops to his knees and delivers a solid hit to the wooden panelling along the bottom.

He reaches round the side and pulls. A rush of stale air swallows the room as the door falls open, revealing the pitch back emptiness beyond. The smell of damp from the waterfall mixed with bat dung is familiar to Bruce but he’d forgotten how unpleasant the first blast of it can be. He supposes it used to be better when Harold was around to clean up after him.

Bruce lets out a hesitant breath. “How did you-“

“If I told you how I did it you wouldn’t need me around anymore, and that would be the worst. It’s easier for both of us if we keep pretending my magical powers are exclusive.”

Magic would account for every unexplained aspect of Joker. Bruce pushes past him to stand in the entrance to the cave, looking down the stairs which vanish quickly into the black. Light used to pour down from the skylights hidden amongst the stalactites to illuminate the cavern but they’ll all have blown.

“The candles were a good idea.” Bruce says, his voice echoes off the walls of the cave.

Joker pouts. “Aww, you mean you don’t wanna hold hands and go stumbling through the dark again? We had so much fun back at the power plant.”

“We can hold hands if you want to.” Bruce tells him. “And it’ll mostly be dark, but I think you’ll want to see this.”

There are matches in the desk. They each light two candles and prepare to descend.

Bruce goes first, holding out his arm so the light bounces off the rocky wall opposite the entrance. He holds out his injured hand to Joker who takes it unbearably carefully, eyes narrowing over the path ahead like he’s struggling to reach the end of his train of thought.

“It looks like an actual cave.”

“It is.” Bruce starts off down the stairs into the belly of the hill beneath the Manor.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Your batcave is an actual fucking cave?”
“It has bats in it too.”

When Joker laughs, the strange angles of the walls send his voice spitting into myriad patterns around them. “You are a caricature of yourself, my love.”

“I was a young man when I started putting this all together.” Bruce protests. “It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“It seems like a good idea now. I gotta ask, did you become Batman because of the bats in the cave or did you have them shipped in after you decided on a title?”

There’s nothing to gain from protecting his old identity anymore. “I picked bats because they scare me. They probably scare me because I saw so many of them growing up round here.”

“Man, Freud would have had a field day with you.” Joker cackles. “Basing your adult alter ego off your childhood fears – what kind of nonsense is that?”

“It’s not a childhood fear.” Bruce mumbles under his breath. The fluttering of wings can be heard overhead and he ducks on instinct. Without the floodlights, the bats won’t be chased to the back of the cave. They will have been crawling over his equipment, sleeping on anything that can get a grip on. His skin crawls.

Joker stops in his tracks and in order to avoid a painful twang in his arm, Bruce has to stop to. “So you’re telling me that you, terror of the night, scourge of Gotham’s underworld, the Dark Knight, are scared of a few measly flying rodents?”

“Pretty much.” Bruce looks up at Joker through the shimmering light from the candles and sees wonder, disbelief, derision. The clown’s shoulders shaking with silent laughter.

“No wonder Jonny boy had so much fun with you.” Joker gasps. “I suppose he knew, and he didn’t think to tell me. Almost makes me glad he’s dead.”

The staircase feels longer than Bruce remembers, the walls flaring out and away from the steps and making him feel like his balance is in jeopardy. He has to remind himself that they’re carved into the bedrock, stretching out to either side of this passage, it’s just hard to see that beyond the bubble of light they’re moving through.

Eventually they hit the cave floor, which had been carefully filled down over a period of months to make it safe to build the various branching platforms Bruce needed onto it. He tries to remember what he had been working on the last time he was down here. He’s pretty sure that the batmobile was in full working order but Stephanie’s bike had needed some upgrades and Tim claimed that he had put on enough muscle weight that his grapple was no longer working properly.

He struggles to remember where Stephanie’s aunt lived. This time a year ago he would have known, he would have kept tabs on exactly where she was at all times. On all of them. Now he’s stuck forever not knowing.

Joker cranes his neck back mouth falling open in surprise. “Holy shit. How did no one ever find this place?”

“People are stupid.” Bruce replies. He may have taken careful precautions ensure the cave was as hard as possible for anyone to locate but it’s enormous and filled with electronic equipment. It borders on ridiculous that no one ever found him.

They reach the first bat dung drenched work bench and Bruce flinches at the sound of moving wings
as a handful of the animals are displaced. Be it the distance from the city, the shielding from the stone or one of the various protective measures he installed in the cave, they don’t appear to have had their numbers dented by the bomb.

Joker takes initiative and scoops up a ruler from where it’s fallen on the ground, using it to scrape some of the faeces away. The table is covered in blueprints for the spoilerbike, complete with planned upgrades. Bruce had been intending to install more efficient safety gear, using an expandable gel as cushioning instead of airbags in order to streamline the whole thing, knock a few pounds off and have the bike moving faster. Dick had sulked spectacularly when he found out he wasn’t getting the upgrade first and Bruce had told him that one of the downsides of moving out of town was losing out on new gear.

Joker scans the blue prints, giggling when he comes across Bruce’s recipe for the gel. “That would never have worked.”

Bruce raises an eyebrow. He had tested the gel extensively and he was very sure that it did exactly what it was supposed to. “How do you know?”

“The feng shui’s all off. It would never have performed under pressure, certainly not at the speeds to were trying to get this puppy to go. I take it this was one of your toys.”

“The bike is Spoiler’s.”

“Ah! The little rage bird. What a nice coinky-dink. You got the real thing kicking around here?”

Bruce gestures beyond the work bench. The bike sits a few metres into the dark, chassis open and a wide array of tools scattered around it. It looks like Tim or Damian decided to take another look at it after Bruce so carefully tidied it all away. The purple shine of the metal is obscured by bat dung and they put up a few of the animals as they approach.

Bruce winces. Joker coos over him, having entirely too much fun. “Aww, poor baby! You want me to scare off the big scary bats?”

“I used to more or less live down here.” Bruce protests. “I don’t like them, but I can handle them.”

“You used to live down here?” Joker looks appalled. He makes a big show of sniffing the air to catch the scent of animal waste. Oh, honey. This place makes the holes I was camping out in look luxurious. What on Earth were you doing? You had a whole fucking mansion to work out of.”

“You’re starting to sound like Alfred.”

“Al-who now?” Is that the geezer you buried in the back garden?”

Joker’s voice is light, only casually interested. Bruce doesn’t like it. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Listen, love. You’re stuck with me, but whoever you decided was so special they deserved last rights is gone. You can tell me whatever you like, darling, it’s not like it can come back to bite them on the ass.”

Bruce bites the insides of his cheeks and watches the shadows dancing over Joker’s face in the candlelight. He debates kissing him, just to end the conversation. “He…Alfred was my butler. He raised me, he helped me out a lot as Batman. I couldn’t have done what I did without him.”

“So he was your dad.” Joker buries the stub end of one of his candles in the layer of dung covering the seat of the bike. It stands perfectly well on its own. “Well, I tip my hat to the guy for getting your
furry career off the ground.”

“He wasn’t my dad.” Bruce snaps.”

Joker casts him a withering look. “If he raised you and still put up with your shit as an adult, he was your dad.”

The rest of the cave is predictably covered by bats and their leavings, growing all the more pungent as they move towards the computer bank up the back. The computers are so smothered in guano that even if their electronics weren’t shot they would be impossible to operate. The slap of wings taking flight rises to a fever pitch, the tiny shrieks in the audible spectrum of noises that bats make echo off the rafters. Bruce jump and Joker leans in to laugh into the shell of his ear.

Joker leaves another candle on the main server and then Bruce leads them both up to the first floor, noting with some relief that there are no imminently lethal weapons stored along this way. The clown shouldn’t have been able to pocket anything untoward and now they’re off the ground the chances of anything dangerous lying in their path is dropped down to almost nothing. Bruce just needs to worry about Joker possibly finding something deadly to do with innocuous items.

The life sized animatronic tyrannosaurus rex has been a staple feature of the cave for so long that Bruce forgets that it’s a singularly unusual item. So he doesn’t think twice when they pass its open jaws and the light from his candles glanced off the teeth. He’s keen to move on, seeing specks of light reflected off the eyes of the bats now living inside the beast.

He’s pulled back by Joker. “What the-“

“It’s an animatronic dinosaur. I brought it home after I had to fight it on an island full of them.” Bruce says quickly and tries to move Joker along.

“There’s so much to unpack there.” Joker gasps. “Who made the dinosaurs? Why did you have to fight them? How did you defeat this one but leave it intact to bring home? What possessed you to bring it home? Is it the only survivor of Dinosaur Island? How the ever loving fuck did you get it in here? Does it roar? Is it called Barney?” He takes a deep breath. “Actually, you know what? Fuck it?”

He lets go of Bruce’s hand and leaps on to the head of the dinosaur, disturbing the bats within and sending them tumbling out in a nightmarish mess of wings and high pitched whines. “How do you make it work?”

“It was electronic.” Bruce explains. “It’s dead. Same as everything else.”

Joker’s shoulders slump. “Stupid apocalypse, trying to spoil my fun.”

“Yes, I’m sure the religious fundamentalists who decided to kill Superman were really focused about how bored you were going to be when they were done.”

“I’m glad we’re on the same page.” Joker pirouettes atop the tyrannosaurus’ head, sending the loose ends of his shirt billowing out like skirts until something catches his eye on the other side of the platform and he whips back round to squint at it through the dark.

Bruce has a pretty good idea of what he’s seen. He plants one of his candles on the dinosaur’s snout and holds out a hand for Joker to grab when he comes hurtling back down to the walkway.

Joker pulls Bruce along at a pretty pace, their joined footsteps ratting through the cave. He’s not familiar with the twists and turns it has to make to accommodate the rock formations of the cave sad
several times he nearly runs headlong into a stalagmite or a ridge of stone.

The smell of bat dung is less pronounced towards the front of the cave but they’ve caused enough noise to put up every one of the animals in the place. Bruce breathes hard, focusing on Joker’s hand over his cast rather than the puffs of air hitting the back of his head whenever one of the bats comes too close.

They come to a halt between the case containing the mask of the first Red Hood and the giant Joker playing card hung from the ceiling, flanking either side of the walk way. Bruce had deliberately placed these items out on their own. Unless you needed to head into the potholes surrounding Wayne Manor – and this was almost never necessary – there was no reason for a person to pass them. It kept everyone’s attention on what was important, rather than worrying about what Bruce was doing with them in the first place.

Stephanie had noticed though. Most likely they all had but were too polite to say. Or too angry. Bruce sincerely doubts that Jason kept his mouth shut for anyone’s sake.

“She wasn’t lying.” Joker’s eyes are wide, looking up at the playing card. “This has gotta be the last joker card left in Gotham.”

“People bring them in from out of town, and-“

Joker cuts him off with a sharp jab to the ribs. “Tell me if I’m wrong, darling, but I don’t believe I sent you this. Was it part of one of Harley’s hare-brained schemes or did you make this yourself?”

Defaulting to excuses has always been Bruce’s reflexive response to people asking about e playing card. “I was much younger then.”

“You can’t use age as an excuse for everything, Batsy. No need to be embarrassed about it, I’m rather touched.” Joker leans in to kiss Bruce quickly, nipping lightly at his bottom lip but not taking the time to deepen it.

Bruce wishes he would. The idea of Joker laid bare, thighs spread wide in the candlelight as he grins up at him, waiting to go at it in the Batman’s inner sanctum sends a stab of electricity running up his spine. Maybe he doesn’t need to wait till the evening after all.

Or he wouldn’t if everything wasn’t covered in bat dung.

Joker’s attention settles on the Red Hood, its case splattered with guano but the thing itself not even dusty. In the light of Bruce’s last candle, it shines. “What’s with the big red penis?”

“You don’t recognise it?” Bruce watches his face, searching for some trace of facetiousness.

Joker shakes his head. “Should I?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. I thought…”

And maybe Bruce got this all wrong after all. The pieces of the puzzle never did make much sense unless you squinted.

Chuckling softly, Joker presses his forehead against Bruce’s and thumbs over his jaw. “Don’t you worry your pretty little head about that, love. Everything you need to know is right in front of you.”

Everything that’s in front of him, all that is. Bruce closes the distance to kiss Joker, letting the clown slip a hand around his waist to hold him up. The last candle sits precariously in his left hand, the soft
heat of melted wax forming a ring around his fingers as it slips down the column.

When they pull apart, Joker’s lips are covered by a sheen of spittle. “You still have to show me the rest of this mancave. Reckon I saw a giant coin somewhere up the back there, I’m expecting a good Two Face story.”

“It wasn’t Two Face.” Bruce tells him as they set off back the way they came. “But it is a good story.”

“Ah, well. You can’t win ‘em all. Then what have we got?”

“That’s most of the big stuff. I can show you my old gear if you like.”

A rush of nostalgia hits Bruce in the gut when he thinks about the reams of equipment he has hidden down here. He’s momentarily overwhelmed by the urge to climb into an old batsuit, just to feel whole again.

Sooner or later the suit would wear out and then he’d be back to square one. His face is still covered in red patches from where the cowl had irritated his skin.

“I wanna see it all!” Joker crows, squeezing Bruce’s hand. “Then what?”

The candles have been scattered through the cave in just the right formation that the whole thing is lit with a dim glow. Bruce supposes they could break everything down here but just thinking about it exhausts him. This stuff was built with durability in mind, it won’t be as easy to dismantle as the Manor.

Joker stops them by the consoles, clearing away bat dung and tracing a pattern through the wax pooling around the candle he stuck there. Curving his fingers through a pair of wide arches that join in the middle. An S.

“Then…we go.”

“Yeah?” Joker straightens up fast, positively buzzing with excitement.

“Yeah.” It’s surprisingly easy to mean it. Like this is a simple thing, like Bruce has any idea what it means to leave this all behind. “C’mon. First I’ve gotta show you that coin.”
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

Did I procrastinate posting this or what?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Out of the batcave, the stolid air of the Manor is bright and fresh. There’s no time to enjoy the absence of bat dung though, as soon as they’re back through to the study a sense of urgency settles over them that cannot be ignored.

“I wanted to plough that ass one last time before we left but I guess I’ll have to wait till we’re on the road.” Joker signs.

Bruce laughs in his face. “How very presumptuous of you to think I’m hoping to let that happen.”

“If you don’t let it happen, I’ll make it happen.”

“I’ll meet you by the front door in an hour. Make sure to pack clothes and food.”

If Joker listens to him it will be a miracle. They split up and Bruce heads straight for the kitchen to deliberate over what’s worth taking. Pasta and rice would be smart choices, but they’ve barely tried cooking in the Manor and it’s unlikely they’ll do any better on the road. He prioritises tins containing anything green or protein heavy along with every kind of meat jerky they have cluttering up the back of the pantry and the two bags of sweets that Joker hasn’t already eaten.

They’re going to need medical supplies, matches, plastic bags. Bruce digs through the kitchen cabinets and finds an army of Tupperware containers, anything resealable and airtight is valuable. He slips out to the shed to retrieve one of the canvas rucksacks he knows are on the verge of moulding and shoves everything into it.

A new pack, to replace the one that was either taken by the children of Morestown or washed downstream by the tide. Garbage in the ocean. There are going to be fish that get tangled in the cowl and suffocate, if Bruce is very lucky, one of those fish will have its face settled in a permanent rictus grin.

The Joker fish had been pretty funny. You have to appreciate the effort people put in to keep him on his toes. Riddler was always fun, Ivy was a challenge. Scarecrow could be terrifying or hysterically inept depending on the day. The best part was that he never needed to feel bad about hitting any of them, because they were adults and all their bad choices were made under their own steam.

There will be plenty more where they came from scattered across the country and when all else fails, Joker will be there to pick up the slack. They have years ahead of them. Bruce is only forty two, or his forty third birthday has already passed without ceremony. He looks at what they’ve managed in a matter of weeks and feels exhausted and exhilarated in equal measure. This is going to be so much more fun than wasting away in the Manor. Bruce pulls kitchen knives from where they’re stuck in the counter and slips the two largest into the bag.
All he’ll have to do is stop The Joker from killing. And where he fails he can beat the clown into submission.

Bruce looks out of the open back door across the lawns, wrecked and bleeding. His jaw twitches, pulling against muscles still sore from where Joker has struck him across the face. The clown does a certain amount of that, for sexual reasons or just because he can. Bruce likes it, the firm reminder that he’s dealing with a dangerous and competent individual. He wouldn’t let anyone else put him in his place.

There are no more books to be taken from the library and if Bruce were of a mind to take knickknacks from his family’s past, most of them have been broken anyway. He’s tempted by a handful of photographs he finds in the bottom drawer of the desk in the study though, almost all of them taken by Alfred. They show family meals and ballgames in the garden, long forgotten holidays and fairground rides. Bruce makes it into a few of those, staring down roller coasters with grim determination, surrounded by a gaggle of shrieking teenagers.

There are even a couple of Selina, trying to duck out of shot but not quite making. Her olive eyes stare up at him and his heart aches at the thought of everything that could have been. A single photo of Talia, smiling with a five year old Damian at her heels. Bruce traces the edges of the picture, how happy she looks. It doesn’t look anything like her.

At the bottom of the stack is a Polaroid of a young man cradling a dark haired boy, laid out on a sofa that hasn’t been in the Manor for more than ten years, the light from the TV striking shadows across their faces while they sleep. Bruce hasn’t seen this one before and has to wonder how long it’s been here. His younger self looks perfectly at peace with the ten year old Dick Grayson in his arms. It can’t have been taken long after Dick arrived. He looks so small and he grew so fast.

Sooner or later he will lose his bag or it will be stolen from him. Anything that comes with him will eventually be lost. If he leaves the photos, they will always be waiting for him here.

They will wait forever, but it’s a nice thought. He throws them back into the drawer and goes up to his dressing room to dig for useful clothes. Thermal underwear and long trousers, replacing the tracksuit bottoms he’s wearing with jeans and digging out the thickest pair of socks he owns. It won’t be summer forever.

They should head south, find somewhere warm to spend the winter. If they’re fast, they might hit Texas before New Year. There should still be people down there, farming like their lives depend on it.

He can hear Joker flitting through the other rooms on the first floor, a great clattering accompanying his every move. Bruce wonders idly what he’s going to take with him, if he’ll even bother bringing a bag or if he’ll make Bruce carry everything important. Whatever they don't have now they can find in empty houses along the way and with autumn coming they’ll be able to pick through the fields for extra food. Deconstructed apple pie, like those awful hipster restaurants that used to line every Gotham thoroughfare used to sell.

To think that something that had lived so long and survived so much could just up and die. It reminds Bruce of English Oaks, reaching the ripe old age of a thousand before giving up. The Miagani laid roots here that were built upon and built upon till one day the skyline came to an abrupt halt.

The roots are still growing. Ivy drifts ever so slightly in the wind but she won’t fall anytime soon. Bruce pauses by the window to take a final look out at the city but when his bedroom door falls closed behind him he doesn’t feel a thing.
Judging by the crashes coming from the other end of the balcony, Joker is somewhere around Dick and Cassie’s rooms. Bruce could join him, but like the build up to a wedding it seems like bad luck for the two of them to see each other just yet. He takes himself downstairs and does a final sweep to be sure he hasn’t forgotten anything. The S symbols that Joker has painted across the walls and floors laugh at him. How could he have been so foolish as to think that he actually cared a jot about the convalescence of hope? Whoever finds this place next can make their own choices about what they mean.

Despite the radiation, people are still born and they still grow up and die. Time to fill the new world with whatever love, life, hope they can lay their hands on. A new generation is coming, one that doesn’t remember what it was like to see Superman overhead. Sooner or later, all of this will be history.

The dead are only remembered through sheer force of will. Bruce passes through the gallery and doesn’t look at any of the ruined paintings because if he can’t hold their subjects in his head then they are worthless. All he has is what he takes with him.

Neither of them have used the front door since they got to the Manor and Bruce has the strangest notion that it’s not going to open for him when he gets there. Metal crunches under his hand, trying to come to a standstill but gets to smile in relief when it falls open anyway.

Stepping out onto the clear afternoon, Bruce looks down his unnecessarily long driveway to where the road curves to fit between the scattered trees and vanishes out of sight. He readjusts the rucksack over his shoulder and is pleased to find that it doesn’t disturb his broken bones all that much. He’ll never throw a decent punch with the right arm again, but that’s a small price to pay for not dying of fever and radiation poisoning.

He settles himself on the stoop and waits for Joker to join him. Bruce listens for the sound of the clown moving in the house but isn’t remotely surprised when he comes round the side from the gardens instead.

Bruce smiles. “What took you?”

Rather surprisingly, Joker is lugging his own rucksack along, a bright red number designed for hiking that probably came out of Tim’s room. He’s decked out in the skinny jeans and t-shirt he found on the first night, along with a heavy pair of walking boots and a bright purple hoodie of Duke’s. He bounds up to Bruce, grinning wide and holding out a makeshift bouquet. “Couldn’t turn out for my best gal without bringing him a little something to sweeten the deal.”

Bruce takes the flowers, they’re bound together with a pink hair tie. There are some pansies and a few birds of paradise thrown in for colour but most of the bouquet has been picked from the herb garden. The smell of lavender almost overrides the rosemary and mint tucked beneath it but the thyme and the sorrel don’t stand a chance. Even the bay leaves are entirely decorative.

Bruce frowns. “Why-?”

“Because you’re a horribly emotional person and you’re gonna want something to remember your dad by.” Joker beams. “They’re plants, they’ll live forever.”

“That’s not how plants work.”

“Really? Ivy could have fooled me. Oh well, I suppose you can keep the bones as a memento.”

Bruce doesn’t bother trying to correct him. He takes the hand Joker offers him and lets himself be
pulled to his feet. The clown produces two rhododendron flowers from the pocket of his hoodie, each one a swirl of orange and pink. Bruce knows exactly which plant they were picked from, up towards the back of the garden.

Cool fingers brush over the shell of Bruce’s ear as Joker tucks a flower into his hair, smiling at his handiwork. “Pretty.”

Bruce manages to form a loose circle around Joker’s wrist with his right hand and pulls the clown in to kiss him. With his left hand, he takes the other flower and tucks it into Joker’s hair.

On the opposite side to his, of course, So that when they face each other, they match.

“What’s in the bag?” Bruce asks when they break apart.

Joker shrugs. “I dunno. I started off trying to be sensible because I thought it would be funny to see your face when you remember that I do have a brain worth writing home about. That’s why I got the boots, see? I think I found a tent and some blankets and more than enough clothing too keep your eyes wandering all over this ass and those ropes from the little bird’s room. Then I got bored being sensible and grabbed as much lube as I could find and who knows what else.”

Bruce lets out a snort of laughter, Joker manages an approximation of outrage. “It’s a glorious thing, darling” Wouldn’t leave home without it.”

“I know.” Bruce laughs. “Darling, I know.”

“So…time to get going?”

“Seems like.” Bruce looks the Manor over but his eyes don’t linger. It’s easier to think of it as something that’s not really there. A pretend house, built of Lego and ready to be knocked down at a moment’s notice. “I was thinking we could head west for a couple of weeks and then turn south.”

“I’m easy, honey pie. So long as you’re with me I’m sure it will be marvellous.”

A life spent sleeping in ditches. Never quite being full or warm or settled, a life of exhaustion. It sounds so much better than the disquiet comfort of the past few weeks. The long road from Sao Paulo had been a tortuous slog made all the more awful for his desperation. Bruce closes his eyes and sees green eyes shining through the night, and that shouldn’t change anything except it does. It changes everything.

Joker will take living things between his hands and gleefully squash the life out of them. Some of those things he touches will be human. Bruce isn’t going to save everyone. He repeats it like a mantra, waiting for the old anxiety to come swooping in and claim that every death is his personal responsibility.

It doesn’t hit. Bruce will stop what murders he can and pummel Joker into the ground for the ones he can’t and he’s not going to waste time wondering what the clown is planning. The Joker isn’t planning anything, he’s just doing.

“Would you like to do the honours?” Joker holds out a rock for Bruce to take, heavy enough to kill a man if you hit him at the right angle.

Bruce takes the rock with a smile. Joker stoops into a low bow and his rucksack jingles excitedly. With the rock held over his head, Bruce swings his left arm back before itching forward, letting it shatter the glass set into the front door. The sound echoes back at them from the Manor within.
“That will make thins easier for whoever comes here next.” Bruce says.

Joker waggles his head, unconvincing. “If anyone dares to try.”

“The more time passes, the more people will move. The population round here has been decimated but for all we know there’s someone out on the west coast who’s resistant enough to walk straight into Metropolis without incident.

“Variation is a thing but seeing as the goddess of something or other up and died when she set foot in that city, I don’t think you’re likey to find Metropolis-proof people anytime soon.” Joker says “And if you’re looking for resistant folk, I reckon the other side of the country is the wrong place to look.”

Bruce frowns. “What do you mean?”

“Just look at the people who can survive with this much radioactive muck in the air! You, all the kiddies, the little bird. Treat me as an anomaly and what do you have.

A medical mystery that will never be solved. Bruce shrugs. “Waylon Jones wasn’t dead when we found him, and I made friends with an elderly woman in Constance.”

“Who knows where Croc actually was when the bomb went off? And your little old lady was outside the super bad areas, she’s allowed to get lucky.” Joker takes Bruce’s face between his hands like he’s worried his attention will waver if he’s not held down. “The more time folk spent brushing shoulders with Supes, the more like likely they were to make the team for the end of the world in the immediate fall out zone. He was always zipping up and down the east coast to say hi to his pals, getting his stink all over Gotham, right? So that explains you and Wondy and the little bird. With the kids it’s like a proportion of their life. Captain Underpants was flying around bopping aliens on the head and he was a weirdo alien so I bet having him hanging around did something to change the way their bodies did the whole saying alive thing.”

It’s utterly unprovable, but it’s not a terrible theory. Bruce nods cautiously. “So their metabolism isn’t used to functioning without an adult Kryptonian in the area and after the bomb they not only survive but go slightly loopy.”

“I dunno. Would explain why they all have that weird dead eyed thing going on though.”

There may well be an elderly couple out in Kansas still tending to their farm. Bruce considers if that would mean that Lois was also still alive, till he remembers that she would have been in Metropolis when the bomb went off and would have gone down at Clark’s side.

Dick, on the other hand should have been in Chicago. That sounds like something he can aim for, a few years down the line when Bruce has thought up an excuse for the clown still nipping at his heels. The faintest breath of hope flutters in his chest.

The sun is starting its lazy descent towards the horizon, hours off darkness but the threat of night already upon them. If they were being sensible about this, they would stay for one more good night’s sleep then head off in the morning, but what’s the point of being sensible if there’s no one left to tell you that you’re doing everything wrong?

Joker slips his hand into Bruce’s and leans down to plant a kiss on his cheek. It’s a strange sensation, momentous without the momentum, when they take the first step. They set off down the drive and back into the hills, tracing the path they took up from the city for a short while before turning off west. The hills rise a short way before dropping down into the lowland area and the back end of Gotham’s suburbs, bleeding slowly but surely back into farmland in the distance.
They leave a trail of plant detritus behind them. At first, Bruce tries to hold the bouquet steady but soon Joker’s laughing at the mess they make, occasionally reaching over to stick his nose in the diminishing crop of flowers. They may never smell quite so clean again.

As they crest the highest peak between them and the rest of the country, the light shifts from afternoon bright to the faint haze of an encroaching sunset. Somewhere below them is Morestown, Stephanie, a mall full of dead children, Constance. Everywhere they’ve been. They might head right back the way they came, or they might never see it again.

Joker lets out a low whistle. “Wowzers, Bats. Look at that view.”

“I’m looking.” Bruce squeezes his hand, the chill of Joker’s skin prevents the space between their palms from growing clammy.

“B-E-A-utiful.”

“Yes.”

“You wanna know what else is beautiful?”

Bruce shoots him a long sideways glance and laughs in his face. “Really? That’s corny, even for you.”

“I was gonna say Superman.” Joker grins. His laugh is shrill and unsettling and Bruce leans in to it, drinking it in.

The sun casts a brilliant sheen over the harbour that spirals out and up the rivers that feed into the bay. The river between Morestown and Gotham snakes through the landscape, twisting and curling back on itself as it cuts its path. From up atop the hills, at just the right angle, it looks like an S.

Chapter End Notes

Epilogue to follow in the next week or so!

Thank you so much to everyone who's commented/left kudos/freaked out in tumblr tags (you know I check the tags)/screamed at me on twitter about this story. Seeing you all get wrapped up in Bruce and Joker's antics has been really rewarding and has really helped me keep up the pace with this one.

I'm not planning on ditching Batman fandom or BatJokes anytime soon so keep an eye out for new stuff ;)
The smoke rising from the fire in the centre of town has had all day to get its stink into the air. Camila wouldn’t mind so much except that on approach the ash stings her eyes something awful. She coughs and swats at the air, trying to dissipate the smoke as she slips back through the perimeter, smiling at one of the large, jittery boys Ethan has on guard duty.

The guards know her, and they like her. Which is good because it would make leaving town so much harder if they didn’t. The woods to the north are filled with edible mushrooms but she can hardly make use of them if she’s not allowed out.

The perimeter is marked by a bundles sticks affectionately known as ‘The Wall’ that ring their little settlement and give the children something to step over in fits of rebellion. It’s a nuisance. They’d be better off knocking it down.

Camila follows the road round to the town square, formerly a green lined with cookie cutter houses and now a scrappy patch of land dominated by a communal fire and lined with cookie cutter houses. Ethan and Trishna are over by the fire, deep in their daily discussion on how best to distribute dinner rations as if they don’t do more or less the same thing every day. Still, it helps them look busy.

“Got you kids some mushrooms.” Camila calls to the two of them, holding up the plastic beach bucket she uses when she goes collecting. Her haul won’t stretch very far but she likes to offer something fresh when she can.

Trishna grins and holds out her hand for the bucket. “Thanks, Cam."

“What have I told you about calling us kids?” Ethan groans, sounding all the more like the teenager he is. Or he’s just hitting his twenties. The world ended on his seventeenth birthday and if she’s been paying attention that was about three years ago.

Camila ignore his whining and nods towards the fire. “Dinner going well?”

“Really great, yeah.” Trishna nods. She insists she’s eighteen, her long dark hair bundled up at the top of her spine and her bright brown eyes hungry for positive reinforcement. She always tries to look the part, imitating what she thinks an adult ought to be like. “Actually, I wanted to speak to you about something.”

“What kind of thing?”

“Trish…” Ethan cautions, raising his bushy, strawberry blonde eyebrows in an obvious signal for her to stop talking.

Anything Ethan thinks she ought not to know, Camila immediately wants to be an expert on. “If you
need my help with something, I’ve got nothing on tonight.”

“Great.” Trishna grins, ignoring Ethan entirely. “It’s a medical thing.”

Unsurprising. They have two men in their thirties in their little gang but otherwise Camila is the only person older than twenty five. None of the others had a chance to learn anything about medical care before the bomb, even if they might have had the inclination. She nods for Trishna to continue.

“Who’s pregnant?”

“No one! Well, no one that we don’t already know about. It’s actually a guy that Terri and Mo brought back after their little hunting trip today. You know they went down to the meadow? They were looking for deer but they found this guy with a big gash on his leg and when he didn’t try to attack them they brought him back here. Would you mind seeing if you can do anything to fix him up?”

“Oh.” Camila is reasonably impressed. Mo can be a terrible coward when the mood takes him.

“Yeah. I could take a look.”

Ethan cuts in. “I mean, he’s an out of towner, so we don’t really have to do anything with him—“

“The more the merrier.” Trishna says, smile not slipping but her voice firm. “C’mon, Cam.”

Trishna hands the mushrooms off to one of the older kids and they head south of the square, towards the three houses arbitrarily designated as a hospital by Ethan’s new town management scheme. It’s one of his more sensible ideas, keeping the sick in their own space makes it harder for other people to get ill, and much easier for Camila to see everyone in a timely manner.

While Ethan trails behind the two of them at a sheepish distance, Trishna asks hundreds of questions about the quality of the first aid she administered.

“So I started by cleaning the cut.”

Camila nods. “Good.”

“Then I washed it with vodka.”

“About as much as could be done under the circumstances.”

“And when it was dry I covered it up with some of those new cloth strips that Bernice has been knitting.”

“But you didn’t stitch him up?”

Trishna squirms. “I’m not ready for that yet, Cam.”

“You most certainly are. Once you start, you’ll be fine.” Camila tells her. “This guy got a name?”

Trishna’s smile flickers in to a frown. “He wouldn’t say.”

“Sounds very trustworthy.”

“Cam! People get scared, wandering around out these by himself.” Trishna says, her best attempts to always see the good in people rarely fall flat. Then with glee. “Or maybe he’s gone mad and can’t remember what his name was.”

They reach the makeshift hospital and wait for Ethan to catch them up. The light is starting to fade
and Trishna picks up a candle from the stash just inside the door to light their way as they head through the stripped out living room stacked high with what medical supplies they've been able to gather to what was once the kitchen, where the invalid is laid out on a very worn old duvet.

He’s the only one in this house, which is probably for the best. They rarely have a huge influx of people in need of medical attention but there’s a twelve year old that they’re keeping an eye on next door who’s had a bad bout of food poisoning and is in danger of dehydrating without regular reminders to drink like her life depends on it. Because it does.

Trishna sets the candle she’s lit down in a puddle of wax that’s formed on the floor from dozens of its siblings being left to burn down before. It’s not enough to make out much of the man’s face, save that he’s white and his hair is dark and he looks like he went through a very unsuccessful attempt to cut his beard sometime in the past six months. He’s broad shouldered but wiry, nothing but power and speed. The light flickers and it looks like his right arm has a crook half way up the bicep that shouldn’t be there.

“Hey!” Trishna coos and the man’s eyes flick up to her face. “I’ve brought someone over to help you out. This is Camila, she’s gonna help fix you up. Ok?”

Camila steps forward into the light and makes a vague gesture that she’s sure Ethan will correctly interpret as a request for more candles. If he’s going to skulk about in the dark the least he can do is make himself useful.

“Hello.” The invalid waves half-heartedly in her direction. His voice is low and steady, accent trimmed in neatly at the edges like he’s used to having to speak properly.

“Good evening.” She sighs, dropping down beside the man as Ethan arrives with more candles. “I hear you have an injury that needs seeing to.”

“I have an injury that your friend has already been nice enough to deal with. If I can trouble you for something to eat and a bed for the night I’m sure it will take care of itself.”

“Or you could take advantage of our hospitality and let me put you back together.” Camilla nods for Trishna to pass her the supplies crate which doesn’t amount to much more than a very well stocked first aid kit. “C’mon, let’s take a look.”

His trousers are ripped to shreds below the knee and it doesn’t take long to hike them up far enough to take a look at the damage. Blood is seeping through the makeshift dressing half way up his right thigh. She doesn’t need half a dozen candles to make out the dark edges of the wound when she pulls it away but they sure do help when she tries to go in there with a needle, sterilised as best as she can with rubbing alcohol and run through the flame of a candle. Trishna hovers over her shoulder, trying to get a better look at how she administers the sutures to better prepare her for the next open wound that comes their way.

While she stitches, Camila tries to coax conversation out of her patient. He sidesteps any attempts to get a name out of him and is cagey with the details of what he’s been doing since the bomb dropped so she winds up doing most of the talking. When she tries to prod for details as to how he got this cut, which is almost clinically clean and deep enough that it must hurt for him to walk. The flesh surrounding it is slightly heated but it's not burning up like it's infected so she has to assume that it's a recent acquirement.

“You know, you remind me of the Batman.” She tells him, because it’s almost true.

“The Batman?” He looks unimpressed.
Trishna rolls her eyes. “Don’t start with that, Cam.” Then to the patient. “She’s got this story about how she met a guy in a Batman mask about a year after the bomb.”

“Don’t talk about me like I’m not here!” Camila snaps. “And you weren’t there, either of you. I’m telling you, that was the Batman. You would have known.”

Trishna sends the patient another disbelieving sideeye and laughs uner her breath. “Of course, Cam.”

“Like the Batman?” The patient laughs. “That’s a good one.”

Camila makes a point to jab the needle in a fraction too hard on the next stitch and is disappointed that he doesn’t flinch. “You’re about as tall as him. Skinnier, mind. And he had dark hair. And he was a stupid idiot who thought he didn’t need anyone to stitch him up. He also made me leave my home and brought a mass murderer to my door so hopefully you’re not too much like him.” She ties the thread off and clicks her fingers for the sponge to clean the blood that’s oozed from the wound while she worked. “Now listen, if you decide to hang around here we’ll make room for you. But if you go tearing off you’re gonna have to pull these out yourself in a few weeks.”

“I can manage that.”

“I’m sure you can.” Camila wipes at what looks like a thick patch of dirt encrusted to the patient’s thigh and frowns when it doesn’t come away.

She tries again. And again.

“Oh.” The patient looks down to get a better look at what she’s doing. “That won’t-“

Camila hooks her fingers under the thin fabric of his trousers and rips them further to expose a thick scar running up towards his hip, twisting his flesh in on itself. It’s familiar in a horribly specific way. She’s only seen one person with a scar like that in all her years as a healer.

“Dios mio.” Camila mutters under her breath, looking up into the face of the patient. His eyes are a brilliant blue, below the thick tangle of his beard there might be a strong jawline. She tries to paint him in black rubber and the picture almost slots into place of its own accord. “Thomas?”

He lets out a high little giggle, completely at odds with the forcefully stern demeanor she remembers. “Hi, Camila. Long time, no see.”

“Wait, you know him?” Trishna’s smile doesn’t falter.

“Yeah.” Camila sits back, stunned. “Yeah, I do. I-“

“Guys!” Ethan comes tearing back into the room. Camilla hadn’t even realised that he’d left. “There’s something weird going on out in the square.”

Thomas sits up very straight. “What kind of weird?”

“Everyone’s gone.”

“Everyone?” Camila fumbles for a logical explanation, trying to pick people away from the bustling fire she remembers from not half an hour ago. Through the kitchen window, the night has set in, leaving a strip of sunset highlighting the walls in burnt orange.

She breathes deep and it feels like the room holds its breath with her, leaving space for the faintest
susurrus to push through the empty air of a world without cars. Something that sounds so distant and yet close enough that she has to suppress the urge to look over her shoulder.

It sounds like laughter. Like the shriek of metal on metal.

Trishna doesn’t catch the mood of the room. “I wonder where they could have got to. We better go round them up for dinner.”

“No!” Camila hisses, reaches out to grab her arm before she can get too far. She rounds on Thomas, spitting mad. “He’s still with you?”

But Thomas doesn’t appear to have heard her. The laugh sounds again and he joins in for the last two beats, his eyes blown wide and his mouth hanging open in awe. In the light of the candles, his beard forms shadows across his cheeks that twitch and shift till they smother him. “You need to go.”

“What did you do?” Camila grabs him by the front of the shirt but he pushes her away, rising to his feet and moving past her in a daze.

“I said, you need to go.”

There’s an empty space in the air where the laughter is supposed to hang and the more seconds slip away from them without it sounding, the more Camila wants to scream.

Something cracks, something roars. Maybe it’s an explosion or maybe it’s a trick of her mind but all Camila can be sure of is the feel of Trishna’s wrist in her hand, the panic in Ethan’s eyes as she starts to run, praying that they will follow her just as fast as their legs will carry them. She’s too old for this but she will make herself young tonight if that’s what it takes.

She doesn’t have time to wonder why the ground beneath her is shaking, or whether the screams are hers or not, or how the hell Thomas has made himself so scarce in a matter of moments. All she has is a single pinprick of light up ahead, shrinking by the second, taunting her with its unearthly cackling as her life once again dissolves into untempered chaos.

Chapter End Notes

Finally, it is done

I already have four other fics planned in this universe (of varying lengths) - isn't life fun??? When you get ideas and those ideas won't let go???? I'm having fun.

Once again - big thanks to everyone who stuck with this story. There are a couple of people who’ve been following it pretty much since I started publishing (almost a year!) and there are people who will have just found this fic and it’s just so great that I’ve managed to hold your collective attention for 190K+ words. Big love to all of you and I hope to see you around and about the fandom

End Notes
Comments are love. Come find me on tumblr and twitter

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!