# to dash against darkness

**by** [redjacket](http://example.com/author)

## Summary

In his efforts to unite the League, Bruce Wayne offers Diana a job with Wayne Enterprises. It would be easier to coordinate if they were on the same continent.

Diana does not agree. There are many things Bruce has yet to discover about his new team mate.

Definitely not wonderbat.

Fix-it for Justice League. Reading the previous fic in the series helps but isn't necessary.

## Notes

Reading the previous [fic](http://example.com/fic) in the series isn't entirely necessary BUT it is helpful to know the following:

Steve survived the plane explosion because *waves hands* LOOK OVER THERE!

His has permanent disabilities and scarring due to the explosion/gas exposure. For more, see the end notes.

See the end of the work for more [notes](http://example.com/notes).
Chapter 1

The job offer from Wayne Industries came a week after the photograph was delivered. It arrived at the end of a Saturday and it was sheer luck that Diana was hunting through her email at the time, looking for a recipe a colleague had sent her. Diana did not usually cook but as they were walking home from a late breakfast, Steve had gotten a brainwave about his latest project. He had been holed up in their study ever since.

Diana snorted and sat back in the kitchen chair to read it, the recipe she had been searching for forgotten.

It was a generous offer. It was a higher salary with moving expenses and initial housing covered, among the very long list of perks.

It was perhaps the most ridiculous document she had read all week. Diana had been in meetings with marketing all week. That was an impressive feat.

She was very tempted to reply with a simple no. But something this audacious and amusing should be shared first.

Plus, she wanted to eat and Steve had been holed up too long.

He was in their study, a banker’s box full of records open on the desk beside him. He was hunched over an old, handwritten account book with a magnifying glass. Even then, he was squinting, the pen and notepad beside his hand still for the moment. Diana read the furrow in his brow easily. Whatever inspiration had struck him had passed but he was being stubborn.

She perched on his desk and, because it was what Etta would have done, scolded him: “You’ll ruin your eyes.”

Steve's lips twitched but he straightened in his seat with a groan and stretched his neck from side to side. “Haven't yet.”

Diana ran a hand through his hair and smiled at him. “Were you right?”

“Yes and no,” Steve said. “There are discrepancies in the accounting but it's not what we’re concerned with so mostly I've opened a can of worms for someone else to deal with. I'll call Tonisha on Monday, give her something new to groan about.”

He put the papers aside and stretched. Diana frowned at his posture and made a mental note to remind him to call his massage therapist on Monday as well.

“What a waste of a Saturday,” Steve said, leaning back in his chair and regarding her with a very familiar look in his eyes.

“It sounds as though you have advanced the cause of knowledge. That is never a waste,” Diana said, completely straight faced.

That had long since stopped working on Steve who was far too well acquainted with all the ways she liked to tease. He raised an eyebrow at her and slid his hand up her leg. “I can think of better ways to spend the day.”

That was a tempting idea. For later. She wanted dinner first. She leaned forward and kissed him.
lightly. “I’ll make eggs. Come see what Bruce Wayne has sent me now.”

“Oh god,” Steve said. She flicked his ear for it as he got up and followed her into the kitchen. “Don't tell me he found my baby pictures.”

“There are baby pictures of you?” Though she knew there were not, Diana found the idea of that delightful.

“I'll trade them for yours,” Steve said. He took a seat in front of her laptop and blinked at the document up on the screen. “Really?”

“Really,” Diana said. She opened the fridge and frowned. They needed more milk and cheese.

“There’s pasta salad in there from yesterday,” Steve said, absently as he scrolled through the offer. “If you want that instead.”

He paused, reading, as she rummaged through the fridge for the right tupperware container. “Is this... Is this his idea of hitting on you?”

Steve sounded far too gleeful at the idea but Diana would be lying if she said the thought had not crossed her mind. More importantly, she had found the pasta.

“Yes!” she said as she seized it and emerged triumphantly.

Steve looked at her, his grin wide and ridiculous. “So, I’ll clean out the fridge tomorrow?”

“And we need to go to the market,” Diana said.

She grabbed two forks and the container before sitting down beside him. Her plans for the evening did not include stopping to do dishes.

Steve laughed at her but took a bite. He waved his fork in the direction of the screen. “So Bruce Wayne, or is this particular move Batman? is hitting on you with a fairly ludicrous job offer?”

“Possibly,” Diana allowed, her mouth full. “I would not discount it but it is probably not his main motivation.”

“No, just a bonus, I’m sure,” Steve said, he looked at her, his face teasing. “It’s a big number. Lots of perks. Do you have to live in Gotham?”

“No amount of money would get me to live in Gotham,” Diana said. “I would live in Metropolis and commute.”

“Shitty commute.”

“You have forgotten I can fly.”

Steve snorted. Diana fed him a forkful of pasta because he was distracted and not eating. “You should pick a better city if flying’s involved. Boston, New York, San Francisco...”

“I will bring it up. Perhaps I will make moving company headquarters conditional to accepting the offer,” Diana said.

“That’s one way to turn him down. I doubt even a god could shift Bruce Wayne from Gotham City,” Steve said, smiling. “How long are you going to make him wait?”
Diana sighed. “He is lonely and guilt ridden and he did us a kindness. I will respond Monday during regular business hours.”

Steve grimaced. “I am sorry I was...occupied for so much of today.”

“I can hardly begrudge you for advancing the cause of knowledge,” Diana said, smirking slightly. “I will allow you to make it up to me.”

A slow smile that was anything but sweet spread over his face. “That’s very kind of you.”

He took an enormous forkful of pasta and winked at her, saying around a full mouthful: “Stamina.”

Diana laughed.

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The revised offer came three days after Diana politely declined the first; the third two days after that.

When she forwarded the second offer to Steve he replied with a truly outrageous list of demands and texted her a gif of a dark haired actress rolling around in a bed of money.

She replied to Steve with a gif of someone smacking their head against a desk and regretted that Marie, their neighbours’ teenage daughter, had decided they were cool – or perhaps uncool – enough to warrant a tutorial on how to text: “So you're not doing it like my grandma.”

Bruce received another polite decline of the second offer.

After the third offer, she wrote to him directly with a simple: No. Steve responded to the annoyed text she sent him about it by having lunch from her favourite restaurant delivered to her entire department and met her after work so they could walk to Île Saint-Louis. Steve waited on a bench as she spent an hour wandering between shops before she decided what flavour ice cream to buy. They picked different flavours, two each, and stole bites from each other as they walked home along the Seine.

“So what do you think his next move will be?” Steve asked.

Diana made a face and handed him his cone back. “I don’t like the grapefruit.”

“It’s a good thing it’s mine then,” Steve said. “The caramel is good.”

“The caramel is always good,” Diana told him. “He may revise the offer a time or two more. Perhaps he will try to dig further into my past.”

“That’ll go well for him,” Steve said. “It would be interesting to see how he would react if his passport was suddenly flagged. Remind me to tell Jenny not to do that.”

“Especially when there is nothing for him to find,” Diana said. “Mmm. Try the mango.”

Steve leaned over and took a bite. She watched him lick his lips. “Hmmm. Oh. Yeah, that’s good. You picked better than me tonight.”

“Grapefruit is evil.”

“It’s an interesting flavour, I’ll grant you,” Steve said. “It’ll be an invitation to a gala next or a donation.”
“That is my thought as well,” Diana said. “He will want to try and convince me face to face. If he has no sense, he will show up at the Louvre.”

“A sudden coincidental Paris vacation?” Steve considered it, she could practically see him turning the problem over in his mind. “Hmm. If he's trying to coax you away, I think he'll want you to come to Gotham, to show off what he's – what the job – is offering. Not in Paris, with all the reasons you have to stay.”

“He does not know all the reasons I have to stay,” Diana said. Steve was the home that would follow her anywhere but there were other people that tied her to Europe, to Paris and its short hop to London.

“That’s true. He might try to figure out what they are but it’s Paris and you work at the Louvre. You have every reason to stay on the surface of things,” Steve shrugged. “Bet you an ice cream on it?”

Diana huffed a laugh. “Three flavours. He will come here next.”

“High stakes,” Steve smiled. “Three scoop cone it is. He’ll try something to lure you back to Gotham next, show you its charms.”

Diana gave him a look. Steve laughed. “I know, I know. Deal?”

They stopped and shook on it. Steve looked inordinately please. Diana finished her cone and raised an eyebrow at him. “You will not win.”

“I disagree,” Steve said cheerfully. He took another bite of his ice cream and made a face. “Yeah, okay, you were right about the grapefruit.”

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It took a week for Bruce to make his next move. Neither of them were expecting it when it arrived. Diana read the email at work, cursed in so many languages it would make Sameer proud, and forwarded it to Steve. He called three minutes later: “Huh.”

“I owe you ice cream,” Diana said.

“Yeeeeah, I think the way he’s got this set up we should count it as a draw,” Steve said.

“I still want ice cream.”

“Oh, we’re still going for ice cream tonight,” Steve paused. “It’s unfortunate you don’t like to drink.”

“He may drive me to it.”

Steve laughed. Diana smiled at the sound but then sighed. Steve made a sympathetic noise.

“His timing is terrible,” he said.

“He could not know,” Diana said. She would grant him that and nothing more.

“It’s still terrible,” Steve said. “Do you want me to make the calls?”
Diana made a face. He knew her too well. The Louvre would not turn an offer like this down – not with the donation that came with it – and she would not let them down. Still.

“Not yet,” Diana said. “Let’s talk about it tonight.”

“Okay,” Steve said amiably. He waited a beat. “Mac and cheese tonight? I'll use my version of Leila’s recipe.”

“Please.”

“Want me to pick up the ice cream ahead of time?”

“Yes.”

“Vanilla?”

She considered it; vanilla was for comfort, the first flavour of ice cream she had tried. She was not looking for that tonight. “Hazelnut and raspberry.”

Steve whistled. “Lucky me.”

“We may not talk tonight.”

“Tomorrow then,” she could hear the smile in his voice and could not help but respond in kind. “I love you.”

“Love you too,” Diana said.

Diana turned back to her work. She did not think of Bruce Wayne for the rest of the day.

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It was not warm enough to leave the windows open that night, but they had not secured the curtains properly and moonlight had drifted through the glass to spill over the bed.

Steve’s head was resting on her naked thigh, his thumb still rubbing against her knee. It was unlikely either of them would move for some time, both deeply satisfied. Diana ran her fingers through his sweaty hair. He hummed softly and kissed her skin.

The first time they had lain together, Steve had gone down on her for a very long time, so very shocked but thrilled when she demanded it of him. His experience had been somewhat lacking but he made up for it in stamina, a sweet eagerness to please and the promise of skill to come. His mouth had become less adept, after the explosion, hampered by the scarring and the reconstructive surgery. He had to pull away, panting, to catch his breath more often, but he made up for it with his fingers and enthusiasm, his long familiarity of her preferences and his skilled reading of her body. He was a very good, giving lover. And she was going to kiss him thoroughly as soon as one of them felt like moving.

“You know,” Steve commented, after a time. His voice was a little hoarser than usual and his breath was warm against her thigh. “It's not what we planned but we haven't been to the States in a while, not for fun. We could tack on a few days, go to New York, head down to Boston and see the old homestead, even head Northwest. Hell, we could even hit California, rent a convertible, drive up the coast again.”

Diana hummed, considering, a habit she blamed Steve for entirely. She scratched his head gently
and he made a low appreciative sound.

“We have not seen Napi for some time,” Diana said. “Do you want to go back to Boston?”

“Not really,” Steve said. His feelings about his hometown were...complicated. “New York would be better, I think. California would be more fun, but longer. I'd pick visiting Napi first, though.”

“That is not a bad idea,” Diana said. “If we're going to have to reschedule anyway.”

“It could be fun,” Steve said. “Not what we planned but not a complete loss.”

Diana considered it. “You're calling Leila.”

“That's just not fair,” Steve said but he was laughing. “I'm not the one with the bat infestation.”

Diana groaned. “My problems are yours, remember?”

Steve laughed, a puff of breath against her skin. He kissed her thigh again, once more and finally pulled himself up the bed. She stretched as he flopped down beside her and rolled onto her side to face him. He grinned at her, sated and pleased with himself. She kissed him and then kissed him again because his lips tasted sweet.

He ran his fingers through her hair, down her side. His smile turning drowsy, lazy and pleased as his hand settled broad and warm against her side. She curled closer, their heads sharing the same pillow. It had not been the most comfortable at first, sleeping on an incline, but she had grown used to it for him.

“It'll get cold in the night,” Steve said but his eyes had already closed.

They should pull the sheet up at least, Diana knew that, but she did not want to move again and Steve was not going to. She wrapped an arm around him instead, tangled her leg in his.

“I will keep you warm,” Diana told him.

Steve chuckled, smiled with his eyes still closed and pulled her a little closer. He kissed her lips unerringly and sighed, content. “You always do.”

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“So do you want to tell Mr. Wayne that at least three of his paintings are forgeries or do you want to give someone else the pleasure?”

Diana looked up from her section of *le Monde* and swallowed her mouthful of oatmeal.

“Three?” she repeated.

“At least,” Steve said. He didn't look up from the inventory list he was scrolling through on their tablet. “Possibly one more but I would have to see it in person. You can tell he's not really into art from after the Renaissance at the very outset. Well, unless it's got a bat on it. I'm not sure why he included it but he probably should have stuck to antiques.”

Diana flicked a blueberry at him. Steve looked up and raised an eyebrow at her.

“You're an antique,” she told him with her mouth full. Steve snorted and smiled. “Eat your breakfast, it's getting cold.”
Steve took a bite of his oatmeal but his attention was still on the tablet. Diana sighed. “He skipped an offer targeted to my department for a grand move. It could be called...bold, if we are being charitable.”

“Sloppy, if we’re not,” Steve offered. “Does he know what's in his full collection these days?”

“I don’t know,” Diana said as she reached over and stole a bite of his toast and wrinkled her nose. She would never understand why he liked such tart jam.

“I put the strawberry out for you,” Steve said. Diana stuck her tongue out at him. His eyes crinkled when he smiled at her.

“I always imagine you to have better taste,” she told him.

“I do where it counts,” Steve told her, smirking as he tried to be sneaky and steal her coffee mug. She let him and watched as he took a long sip.

“There is more, you know,” Diana said.

“Maryam yelled at me. I’m cutting back.”

“Mmmhmm,” Diana smirked as he took another gulp of hers.

“Oh hush,” Steve said but he put the cup back down in front of her. He was scrolling back up the catalogue now. “All of his antiquities look like they check out and that’s where he’s actually made his own purchases. You’ll know better than me though. The fakes were definitely inherited pieces. Whoever was interested in impressionists hasn't been around for a while and they haven't made the museum rounds.”

Diana tilted her head and studied him. “Which one is bothering you so much?”

“I like a good puzzle,” Steve said but he also tapped the tablet before passing it to her. “If that's a Van Gogh I'll eat my hat.”

He took a long swallow of his orange juice and stole a section of the newspaper. “You may have a genuine Wacker on your hands though.”

Diana made a displeased noise. Steve looked at her over the front page. “That was probably more to impress Jean-Luc than you. I would imagine the never before displayed mosaic and all the pottery is for you.”

“That was foolish of him,” Diana said. “Since I took over Jean-Luc’s department.”

Steve shrugged but his smirk was downright impish. She flicked another blueberry at him. He caught it and popped it into his mouth.

“If you want to be nice, you could flag it for him before Blair signs off,” Steve said, around a mouthful of toast. “She feels the same way I do about Wacker. Mr. Wayne can probably still withdraw it gracefully at this point. Should've gone to d’Orsay anyway. Unless you want to teach him a lesson.”

Diana sighed. “He means well.”

“I think so too,” Steve said. His hand found hers across the table and he smiled at her. She smiled back.
His other hand found her coffee mug. The blueberry hit his forehead this time, bouncing off into his oatmeal. Diana laughed at his expression and took her mug back.

“Fine,” Steve grumbled but he was grinning helplessly as he drank his orange juice.

Diana would think of it later that day when she sent a private email to Bruce regarding the discrepancies in his collection. She heard nothing back.

An updated catalogue was sent out the next day. Several pieces had updated information. A few new pieces had been added. A very few had been removed, citing outdated records. Among them were two Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot landscapes and the van Gogh’s still life of flowers.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Bruce Wayne arrives early and unexpectedly to pick Diana up for a gala.

He was not expecting her to have someone with her.

When he was playing Bruce Wayne, Bruce made it a point to show up fashionably late to the society events he was obliged to attend. It was best that Gotham society expected as little of him as possible in that guise and he did his best to lower their expectations even further.

It made his pursuits easier.

He arrived early to pick up Diana for the gala at Gotham Art Museum. He had hoped she would email or call when she got in yesterday afternoon – she had booked her own itinerary, separate from her colleagues, and seemed to be making a side trip to Western Canada, of all places, on her way home – but she had not.

She had not rented a car in Gotham either. Bruce had considered simply sending on for her but...well, if nothing else, they had business to discuss – business that should not be overhead.

Bruce took the service elevator up to the penthouse suite – all the curators were staying in the same hotel; he had simply arranged for Diana to have the best accommodations. He did not want to be bothered. Most the visiting curators were thrilled with him, of course, but the ones from Gotham weren’t entirely pleased. He wanted to avoid all the factions for as long as he could. It was bad enough he had to be on display for all of them at the opening gala.

To his surprise, the latch of her room door folded out, keeping it open slightly. Bruce was immediately suspicious. He had gone to great lengths to ensure the hotel would be secure – not an easy feat in Gotham. To see that casually disregarded was a surprise.

He eased into the room cautiously. Nothing else seemed amiss.

He didn't trust it.

Bruce Wayne was not a man who liked surprises.

Finding a man with a scarred face sitting in an arm chair in the sitting area with his feet up and a coffee mug in his hand was an even bigger surprise than finding the door ajar.

“You must be Bruce,” the man said. His voice was hoarse and his smile was twisted by the faded scars on the right side of his face, where his skin was darker, like it had been smeared with ash, and discoloured.

“I am,” Bruce said, shifting slightly to draw himself up.

He thought he recognized the man and that was rarely a good sign. It seemed like it would be easy to take this interloper out but Bruce had learned to be prepared even when the threat appeared easy to subdue. He had had to.
“And you are?” Bruce asked.

“Steve Trevor,” the man said, cheerfully. He took a sip of his drink. Bruce realized he was wearing a thick, slightly lumpy, brown knit cardigan over a well-worn t-shirt and lounge pants. All his clothing looked...soft. “I’m Diana’s assistant.”

“I see,” Bruce said. He did not believe it for a moment. “And Diana is...”

“Getting dressed,” Steve said. “She’ll be out in a minute. Nice place, by the way. Thank you for sparing me the trouble of arranging it. That was a nice email to get.”

Bruce studied him a moment longer. “She didn’t mention she was bringing anyone with her.”

“Mmm,” Steve said, eye straying away from Bruce, down the hallway, as if tracking something. He smiled. “Yeah, that sounds like Diana.”

Bruce frowned and opened his mouth to speak. Diana walked into the room before he could. Her hair was pinned up and her dress was a stunning, vibrant silvery blue. Long, thin, diamond earrings dangled from her ears. She looked like perfection, as she always seemed to.

“Is that Blair again? I told you we would...” Diana was saying.

But Bruce didn’t think she was entirely surprised when she spotted him.

“Oh,” Diana said. “Hello Bruce.”

“Diana,” Bruce said. He was ready, if she needed assistance.

Diana walked the rest of the way into the room, standing to the side of the armchair and resting her hand on the back. The man glanced up at her for a moment and she glanced down at him.

Then they both looked at Bruce expectantly.

“I’ve just been speaking to your...secretary,” Bruce said, pushing down his surprise.

Diana looked at him and then back at the man in the chair. He met her gaze with a raised eyebrow and shrugged his shoulder.

“Your call,” he said.

Diana looked back at Bruce, her face impassive.

“My husband, you mean,” Diana corrected.

Bruce blinked, flummoxed.

“If we’re going to be honest with him, we never technically got married,” The man-Steve? said. He looked at Bruce and smiled a little. “Amazons don’t have marriage, you know.”

“And most men do not warrant it,” Diana said. They shared a small, private smile that bloomed into something much, much more on Diana’s perfect face. She leaned down and kissed Steve lightly. “You are not dressed yet.”

“I was letting you finish up in the bathroom and finishing my tea,” Steve told her. He shifted in his seat and winced a little. She frowned.
“You’re still sore,” she said. “You should have let me call the concierge last night.”

“It’s fine. It’s not enough to stop me,” Steve said.

He put his cup, and his book, Bruce could see now, down, and pushed himself out of his chair. Diana steadied him for a moment, and then handed him the cane that had been leaning against the wall. “Give me ten minutes, and I’ll be ready to go.”

“We won’t stay at the gala that long,” she told him.

“Up to you,” Steve said, with a small, teasing salute, before he ducked out of the room. Diana smiled at him, even after he was gone.

It was not the same smile, by the time she looked back at Bruce. She raised an impeccable eyebrow at him. “I thought we were meeting at the gala.”

“I thought we could talk business on the way there,” Bruce said. He did not know what to say. “I didn’t know you were bringing...someone.”

“I was not sure he would be attending the gala with me,” Diana said. “Steve has a reputation within the museum world but...it has been useful to us for him to remain mostly anonymous. It is easier for him to blend into the background than me and it has been necessary for some of the work we’ve done.”

Bruce thought of the man’s scars and his cane, the limp when he walked. He could not see him fitting in or belonging in either of Diana’s worlds.

“He was a spy once,” Diana continued. Bruce realized she was watching him very carefully. “A long time ago. I learned a great deal from him.”

“He’s one of your people then,” Bruce said. That explained it, at least.

Diana smiled. It was not the way she smiled at her...at Steve. “No. Amazons, as your legends say, are only women. He is a man, like you.”

Bruce blinked again. “Have you been...married long?”

“We began saying so after the war. It made things easier,” Diana said. Bruce felt his eyes bulge. “He is right that we never had one of your ceremonies, though, there was once a forgery in a church in England that claimed we did.”

“The...First World War,” Bruce said. “You’ve been together since 1918.”

“Yes. You have seen the photo yourself. That was taken not long after we first met,” Diana said.

Bruce could not think of a thing to say. That was where he recognized him from?

He needed to look at that photo again.

“He has his own reputation among curators, as I said, but most know him by his deeds rather than his name,” Diana continued. “When I became a director at the Louvre, we thought perhaps it was time to make the connection between my husband and his research. My colleagues at home are already well acquainted with him and ours is not an overly large community. We have put it off several times before but this seemed as good an opportunity as any.”

Bruce could not help but suspect that it was also so he would be well aware of it.
It was not the most flattering thought.

“How are you planning to explain his age?” Bruce asked.

Diana looked at him like he should have already known the answer. “I was not planning to show them pictures of him from 1918.”

“Oh,” Bruce said, forcing a smile. “That makes sense.”

He felt like nothing made sense.

“It is actually an anniversary, of sorts, for us today,” Diana told him. She was watching him very closely, Bruce thought. “The launch of this...exhibition did not have the best timing.”

Bruce had designed the entire thing to make it all but impossible for her to decline to participate. He smiled the way he would at a board member to try and make them think he wasn’t paying attention to what they were saying.

Diana just looked at him as if she could see right through him.

“We should arrange a time, later, to discuss...business. Another day,” Bruce offered.

“We can discuss it in the car,” Diana told him. At Bruce’s incredulous look, she continued: “There is nothing I know that Steve does not.”

Bruce did not allow his jaw to drop. “Are you telepathic?”

Diana looked deeply amused. “No. We simply speak to each other.”

“So you tell him about the-your colleagues?” he gestured; he realized it was vague.

Diana tilted her head at him. “We have been together for a hundred years. We stopped keeping secrets from each other long ago. This is what you struggle with?”

“What are we struggling with?” Steve asked, walking back into the room. Diana turned and smiled at him.

“That you and I are not telepathic,” Diana told him.

Steve looked like he was seriously considering the statement. “There was that one time but we never could replicate it.”

Bruce had questions. He did not know where to begin. Diana walked away from him, to Steve, and straightened his already perfect lapels. Steve only had eyes for her.

“Do I pass muster?” he asked.

He was wearing a dark grey, full piece suit. The colour complimented Diana’s dress well and his tie and pocket square matched. It was more...vintage than Bruce ever wore but, it was perfectly tailored and undoubted suited him. He had switched his cane for one that was black and sleek.

“I supposed you will do. I have something for you, to make it perfect,” Diana said, still smiling, her face so bright. She handed him a small, velvet box. “I know what you have planned for later but this will match your outfit.”

“That was supposed to be a surprise,” Steve complained. “You know, I used to get to surprise you
all the time.”

Then he opened the box and laughed. Unabashedly laughed.

Even Bruce had to admit it was a good laugh. Joyous. His whole body seemed to shine with it.

Bruce didn’t know how to process that.

“Oh, love,” Steve said, beaming. His hand hovered against her hair, touching it so softly that not a strand fell out of place. He kissed her cheek, then her lips. He laughed again. “Yes, I’m wearing these tonight.”

“I thought you might. Here, let me help.”

Steve fumbled with his sleeves for a moment; Diana was more graceful. Together, they removed his, from what Bruce could see, utilitarian cufflinks and replaced them with new ones that had more sparkle. He thought there was a shade of blue in them that matched her dress.

They did not look away from each other once.

Steve kissed her again, once they were fastened, more thoroughly this time. Bruce looked away. This had turned out to be a very bad idea.

“Do you want me to...?”

“No, no, when we get back,” Diana said, her voice teasing. “It is supposed to be a surprise.”

“Well then,” Steve said and he held his arm out. “Shall we?”

Diana grinned, kissed his scarred cheek, and took his arm. She looked at Bruce, when he did not fall into step with them. “Are you coming? We have business to discuss.”

“Right, yes,” Bruce said and followed.

Their arms stayed linked in the elevator. They were still smiling at each other, besotted, as if they had only just fallen in love. Bruce cleared his throat.

“You said there was a problem?” Bruce asked. It felt like they both looked at him in the same second – dark eyes and blue – and neither of them had any idea what he was talking about. “With your room?”

They exchanged the slightest glance. Bruce doubted he would have even noticed if he hadn’t been watching them.

“You said there was a problem?” Bruce asked. It felt like they both looked at him in the same second – dark eyes and blue – and neither of them had any idea what he was talking about. “With your room?”

“The plug wasn’t working in the bathtub. Steve’s hip gets stiff sometimes,” Diana explained. She touched his face and Steve smiled at her. “Hot baths help.”

“It was the built in kind and the seal was broken. They came up and fixed it this morning,” Steve continued. “No big deal.”

The elevator door dinged. Bruce stepped out first. Steve was...a touch slower, on the stairs, and Bruce turned back to wait when he got to the car. He had planned for Diana to sit in the front with him but he supposed he was acting as chauffeur now.

He paused, went back and held the door open for both of them. Steve smiled at him and nodded. It was only when Diana was passing him that he thought to ask. “What anniversary are you
Diana grinned at Bruce so brightly it took him aback: “On this day, many years ago, I plucked him from the sea.”

Steve groaned from inside the car. “I thought we agreed not to tell that story!”

“I would never agree to such a thing,” Diana said and climbed in beside him.

They left Bruce to shut the door.

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Bruce kept losing sight of Steve Trevor.

He spent as much of the gala watching him as he could, this new element that he had not had time to research or plan for, whom Diana had felt the need to keep from him, who had been wry and insightful on the car ride over, and who knew more than he liked about Bruce’s plans – everything Diana did, apparently.

It was not as easy to keep an eye on Steve as Bruce had assumed. Steve moved more stealthily than most men, even those without a limp and a cane. Bruce watched people glance over him and look away, discomfort in their expressions, even a hint of distaste, but Steve always seemed to step back or turn his head before it was enough to become memorable.

Yes, Bruce could see what Diana meant. Strangers saw the cane and his face – smiling but not...entirely pleasant to look at – and did not particularly want to acknowledge him. Steve used it to his advantage.

It was too clever by half. Bruce didn't like it, even if he grudgingly respected it, and whenever his attention was distracted – too often – it took him too long to find Steve in the crowd again.

It was different when Steve was on Diana's arm. He held himself differently with her, made himself more noticeable, and her colleagues reacted with genuine pleasure, and a little surprise, when she drew their attention to him. Judging from their reactions, the reputation Diana had alluded to was a positive one.

Bruce needed to investigate that.

And...there was a fluidity to their movements that spoke of a very long familiarity. They touched each other constantly, unconsciously, and when they weren't touching, they leaned toward each as if their bodies were not used to being apart and couldn't bear it for long. There was a certain way they compensated for each other when they were standing side by side, Bruce thought, as if they always expected the other to be there beside them, as if they couldn’t imagine the other person not being there when they reached out for them.

People smiled at them because of it.

Bruce had downed the glass of wine he was drinking rather quickly when he realized it.

He needed to take another look at that photograph. He needed to figure out who Steve Trevor was.

And Bruce had lost sight of him again. Dammit.
He scanned the room until he caught sight of Steve’s odd gait. He was walking out onto a balcony, a single glass of champagne in his hand, toward where Diana was standing, looking out on Bruce’s city.

It would have been hard for him to manage two, Bruce imagined, given the crowded room.

Bruce took two more from a passing tray and went to join them.

He was not entirely surprised when Steve handed Diana the drink. Diana smiled at him and linked her arm through his before taking a sip. They smiled at each other and looked out at his city again. Bruce paused. He waited for a moment to see if they would say anything.

“You make such...interesting friends without me,” Steve said, dryly.

Diana snorted, completely inelegant. “That is quite a claim for you to make.”

“I didn’t say my friends were any less interesting,” Steve smiled. He watched as she took a sip, perfectly at ease as he said, very quietly: “Do you think Batman is going to try to interrogate me again?”

Diana did not choke on her drink but it was close. Bruce gritted his teeth but if anything she smiled a little more widely at him. “You are a menace.”

Steve shrugged and Bruce could see the corner of his widening grin. “I have to keep you from getting bored somehow.”

“Mmm, you do excel at that. You are many things, beloved, but never boring,” Diana said. She turned her head just slightly, enough to catch Bruce’s eye and raise an eyebrow at him. “Are you going to join us?”

Steve was looking at him too, now. He did not look abashed. He looked like he had been fully aware that Bruce was eavesdropping on them.

“Diana’s remarkably good at figuring out where cameras and microphones are,” Steve said, addressing Bruce’s complaint before he could make it. “We’re fine on this balcony. It’s actually a bit of an oversight on the part of museum security.”

Bruce smiled and didn't comment. It was not a particularly nice smile but he knew how to put on a good show. He offered Steve one of the glasses of champagne.

Steve took it. He mostly looked amused though his grin had gone wryer. Bruce could not say how Diana’s face had changed, exactly, but it had. She looked a little less open, maybe, than a moment ago.

“Are you enjoying the gala?” Bruce asked blandly as if he wouldn't prefer to grit his teeth and glare.

“It's not half bad,” Steve said. “Diana hasn't asked me to fall down so we can leave yet.”

“We have only done that twice and it was your suggestion both times,” Diana said. She poked Steve’s shoulder as he grinned at her, setting the glass of champagne down on the balcony ledge. Their bodies were still tilted toward each other, leaning into each other. “However tempting it is to make a habit of it.”

“They can be tedious,” Bruce allowed. He would never show it but he itched to be out patrolling
the city. He hated events like this in Gotham, they were prime targets. He had been on edge all evening.

“Diana prefers it when there's dancing,” Steve said, tipping his head toward her.

She laughed and looked at him warmly. “What passes for dancing. And it is rare to find at these kind of galas. They are usually an excuse for avaricious people to flaunt their money at each other. That is most useful when they try to outdo each other with donations.”

The thought that he should arrange for there to be dancing next time flitted across Bruce’s mind before he could stop it.

“You're being a bit harsh tonight, love,” Steve said.

Diana gave him a look. Steve raised an eyebrow at her and smiled. “Want to go tell a few more people how we met when you 'plucked me from the sea'? We might have to leave the plane crash out of it but I’m sure can come up with a few good stories about why I was drowning.

Diana chuckled and smoothed her hand over his collar before her hand fell to his wrist, to brush against his cuff link. “Perhaps later. I'm sure Blair would enjoy whatever tale you came up with.”

Steve laughed. “Yeah, okay. That's fair.”

He picked up his champagne glass and clinked it against hers. Bruce noticed that the liquid in her glass was not quite the same shade as the champagne. It was darker, the liquid perhaps a little thicker.

He thought his heart might stop.

Diana grabbed his wrist before he could move. Her grip was like steel.

“It is ginger ale,” she said, quiet and intense. She had angled her body in front of Steve’s without even blinking. “I prefer not to drink while I am working. This is easier than ditching the endless drinks other men bring me. Steve can only drink so many for me.”

“They don't mix so well with my pain medication,” Steve said lightly. “But I don't tend to get offered as many as Diana does. I had to take advantage of the novelty of you offering me one.”

He took a sip of the glass Bruce had handed to him instead of Diana. He was watching Bruce, his body carefully relaxed where both Diana and Bruce were still tensed, slightly, as if they might need to attack or defend.

Bruce shifted, took half a step back. Diana stood down as well.

Steve looked amused but just said, mildly: “Coffee works too. People assume you've got a shot in it.”

Diana gave him a look but went along with it. “Yes, if you want to be awake all night.”

“I did want to be awake all night the night we tested that method,” Steve replied. “I wasn’t planning on having an early night tonight either.”

“We have to stay for some time yet,” Diana told him, her lips curving just so, sly and satisfied. She smoothed her hand over Steve’s shoulder again as if to straighten the fabric of his suit, though it did not need it. Steve’s eyes were very bright.
Bruce put his untouched champagne glass on the balcony ledge. “We should finish discussing our other business, at some point. We didn't get very far in the car.”

The drive here had not gone exactly as he had planned and it had always been too short to get into the details they needed to, let alone give him enough time to convince Diana it would be better for the...team they were assembling if she considered relocating to Gotham.

Bruce was already reevaluating how that negotiation had to be changed, now, or if there was any point to it at all.

“Not tonight,” Diana said. “We have plans after the gala tonight.”

Steve’s expression shifted, hardly noticeable. He looked anticipatory and very pleased with himself.

“Tomorrow,” Diana said, finality in her voice. “My meetings should be done by early afternoon.”

“Steve is free before then,” Diana continued. There was a teasing note to her voice suddenly and she flicked his lapel lightly. “He did not bring any work with him.”

“I'm on vacation,” Steve said, grinning. For some reason, they both seemed very amused by it.

“Tomorrow then,” Bruce said. “After your meetings.”

Steve looked at Diana. There was a moment of silent communication between them. It put Bruce’s teeth on edge. Steve raised an eyebrow at Diana, finally, smiled and took another tiny sip of his champagne, deferring to her.

“How would you like to meet?” Diana asked.

“I'll send a car,” Bruce said. Steve looked away for a moment, toward the city, and Bruce got distinct impression he was rolling his eyes.

“We should be finished up by four, as I am sure you know,” Diana told him. She nodded at something behind him. “Hello, Dr. Neil. Congratulations, the evening is going well.”

Bruce turned and smiled blandly for the director of the Gotham Art Museum. He looked as furious as he had for the past two weeks.

“Ms. Prince,” Dr. Neil said. He frowned slightly.

Diana put her arm around Steve’s back. “This is my husband, Steve Trevor.”

His frown deepened as he shook Steve’s hand. “I know that name.”

“I've done some recovery work,” Steve told him. His left hand was back on his cane. “When time allows.”

“Oh, yes,” Dr. Neil said, suddenly less prickly and even slightly interested. “Yes, you were involved in identifying the entry points for that ring falsifying Iraqi antiquities a few years ago.”

“Oh, I just stumbled into that when I was researching something else. It's not really my area,” Steve said. His hair fell into his eyes a little. He looked convincingly modest. “I do what I can from Paris, generally.”

“It was a good piece of work, from what I've heard,” Dr. Neil told him. He looked at Diana and
nearly smiled. “I apologize for interrupting. May I steal Mr. Wayne for a moment?”

“Of course,” Diana said, pleasantly.

“Do you mind, Mr. Wayne?” Dr. Neil asked. He seemed agitated again and said quietly: “There is an issue with the contingent from London.”

Bruce groaned inwardly; Dr. Neil was wont to forget that the Gotham Art Museum did not actually own the Wayne family collection, however much they felt they did. Outwardly, he nodded at Diana and Steve and allowed himself to be led away. Diana looked at him sympathetically; Steve looked amused. He never seemed to stop looking amused. It made Bruce’s teeth itch.

Bruce did not mean to glance back but he did, as Dr. Neil stopped, introduced him to the curators from the British Museum. They were looking out at his city again, Steve's hand on Diana's back. His head tilted closer to hers for a moment, Bruce could see him say something to her, quietly, that made her smile. She leaned over and kissed him briefly. They parted and stood there together until one of her colleagues came and interrupted them.

Bruce turned toward Dr. Neil again, smiling blandly.

It was going to be a long night.

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Bruce went to work as soon as he got back from patrolling.

It was hard to figure out where to start. Steve Trevor wasn't a particularly common name but it wasn't uncommon either. There were a high number of false results to wade through and nothing about him on the surface web. Even on the deep web, there was only the barest amount of information to thread together. Banking, his name on a deed, driver’s license, passport. His travel mostly matched with Diana’s – Diana travelled without him more often than he travelled without her, a trip here and there to London, mostly, and usually she was already away. Bruce could see he had booked a car in Gotham, and a car and chalet near Banff that corresponded to Diana's flight for her side trip from, from his credit card records.

Apparently he had interrupted their anniversary trip. Fantastic.

Bruce was surprised to find Steve’s passport had registered in Boston the morning after the Doomsday attack. Bruce could find no record of how he had gotten there.

The pilot's license was something of a surprise: rental records for a plane out of a small airfield in France. And he had voted in every American election there were digital records for, a New York address was listed, in Greenwich, with his name on the deed of the house going back to the late 70s. It was split into apartments, his name listed as the occupant of one of them. There was also a house in California and one in England with his name on the deed.

Diana, he already knew, had property in Paris, and Rio de Janeiro, and Cape Town, and Seoul. The paper trail he had found for her was...neat, all above board.

It was all a little too tidy.

There were no health records for Steve at all. The closest were medical accommodation notes on flights – for oxygen – but the records just weren't there. It was as if they were being hidden.

There were no images of his face online either. None.
Bruce knew where the cameras were in the art gallery. The balcony may have been free of them but Bruce knew there was one that would have caught the three of them as they walked in. But there was nothing. He went through the footage from the whole night and the most he found was footage of Steve turned away from the camera, recognizable only by his cane and the way he walked.

There were no captures of Diana’s face either. It was like they had been scrubbed from the footage. Bruce began to entertain the idea that they had back up he had not considered. He would need to rewrite his facial recognition program; it needed to be faster.

He went back and checked the reports around the smuggling bust Dr. Neil had mentioned. He had floated that piece of information to a few of the other curators, since Steve did not appear to be hiding it. There were a few stories of him identifying forgeries or tracking down pieces of smuggling rings that was tempered by some annoyance of him identifying pieces in their museums that had been...historically acquired by morally questionable means. But among the curators it was mostly gossip, just a general reputation and too many stories from friends of friends that everyone seemed to know.

Nothing identified Steve Trevor in the Interpol reports. There were a few oblique mentions of a source called Rockwell, mainly listed as providing information that lead to arrests or further leads.

Bruce paused when he saw that name, went back and looked at his own files. He sat back in his chair and stared. After Clark had died, he had taken the time to become an expert on Lex Luthor. There were two instances when shipments had been...delayed at customs because stolen art was identified. Read far enough back in the police reports, and Rockwell came up as one of the information sources.

Bruce followed the reports from various agencies until the records simply didn’t exist in digital form. There wasn’t a great deal of description of what Rockwell had contributed but the cases tended to turn after his involvement was noted.

Bruce called up the photo from 1918 again. It was easy, looking at it now that it had been pointed out to him, to recognize Steve Trevor standing beside Diana.

Bruce couldn’t find anything about what had happened to him – he suspected it was locked away in the medical records he could not access or, perhaps, on paper files in the bowels of some filing cabinet.

Or someone had scrubbed whatever files there had been.

The majority of the physical damage that had been visible tonight was on the right, bottom side of his face, a diagonal cut of scars – burn scars, Bruce thought, or maybe chemical – from his ear, across his cheek and chin, clipping his mouth. If Bruce had to guess, Steve had some reconstructive surgery done at some point, but it seemed too rudimentary to be recent. The scarring appeared to continue past his collar, even past the collar of the faded t-shirt he had been wearing when Bruce first met him.

Although he was not willing to rule out the possibility that Steve was acting, there was also the cane and the limp. Bruce didn’t have enough footage to go on to determine what, exactly, Steve’s injuries were. From the way Steve had talked and moved, he suspected a chronic disability.

What he would like to get his hands on were the damn medical records.
Bruce stared at the photo on the screen for some time. There were no names on the back of it, he knew, but he had one now. There were ways he could request Steve Trevor’s files.

The trick was doing it without tipping Waller off. Steve hadn’t been included in her files, not the ones she had seen. Bruce wasn’t about to give her anymore leverage on any of them. Not if he could help it.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Steve had arranged the car. It was not Diana’s favourite but it was red and fast and unlike her favourite sports car it was not too low to the ground for Steve to get in and out of comfortably.

“Sorry, no Skoda’s in the US,” Steve said, handing her the keys.

Diana cut him a look that most men would quail from. Steve laughed at her.

There were many reasons she had spent the past hundred years loving him.

“Do you want to tell me where we’re going?” Diana asked.

“I thought you had already guessed,” Steve said, tilting his head in her direction. He looked so pleased and happy she could not help but lean over to taste the smile on his lips.

“I have an idea,” she said, when they parted. “But I imagined you wanted to tell me.”

“How about I just give you the directions?” Steve said.

They drove out of the city. It was a nice night. Once they were far enough out of Gotham, the stars were bright and clear.

Steve took them the scenic route, as she expected he would. He knew the kind of winding, empty roads she loved.

They pulled into an empty parking lot. There were sand dunes in front of them. A wooden boardwalk disappeared over them, down into the darkness.

Diana could smell the sea.

“It's perfect,” she said.

Steve chuckled. “You haven't seen it yet.”

Diana took his hand. Steve raised their joined hands to his lips and kissed her fingers.

“It's perfect,” she repeated.

Steve smiled.

There were blankets in the tiny trunk of the car and food. Steve had a flashlight to light their way on the boardwalk. Diana took that too when they came to the stairs leading down to the beach. His hip was better, much better, since the replacement surgery but sand was uneven and tricky. They had long ago learned to save taking chances for when they were necessarily.

They sat on a blanket in the sand, another wrapped around them because though Diana did not feel the cold, Steve still did. The stars were very bright and the crash of the waves on the beach was soothing. It did not remind Diana of home, not quite, the ocean was never so rough on Themyscira, but it made her feel like it was that much closer, not so out of reach.
It was not only the anniversary of the day they had met, after all. Many Amazons had been lost when he came to their island. Antiope had died the day they had met.

Steve stayed with her, while she mourned. Her sorrows were his as his were hers. They grieved together.

But it was not all grief. The wind tousled Steve’s hair as they stared at the stars and he had crumbs on his bottom lip from the pastries he had brought – her favourites – that Diana could not help but kiss away.

“I’ve got something for you,” Steve told her, voice soft but pleased. His face was very close to hers. It was too easy to lean forward and kiss him.

“I had not forgotten,” Diana said, smiling.

He rolled his eyes at her and reached into the pocket of his jacket. She had seen him tuck it away when they left their hotel room after leaving the gala.

“I went to a great deal of trouble to keep this a surprise,” Steve told her.

“I only know that it is jewellery,” Diana said.

“Well, we won't quite match but we’ll complement each other,” Steve told her and opened the box. There were silver hair clips inside, twelve or so, with little diamonds as glittering stars shaped into constellations.

She recognized them immediately. They were the constellations that had been brightest in the sky the night she had left Themyscira for the world of men. He had even arranged them in the box to mimic the sky.

It took her a moment to remember how to speak. She looked back up at his face. His smile was so bright and happy it was like starlight itself.

She could only kiss him and do her best to steal the words from him as well. It still worked. A hundred years, and she could still make his face go dumbstruck and besotted with a kiss.

She kept him close, when they parted, her fingers threaded in his hair.

“Thank you,” she said, against his lips. “They're wonderful.”

“I'm glad you like them,” Steve said. His fingers smoothed over her cheek. “Probably best not to wear them in the right configuration.”

“Jenny would certainly object if she knew,” Diana said. She framed his face in her hands and kissed him again. “Thank you. I knew you wrote things down on your map when we left but I did not expect this.”

“It's good to know I can still surprise you,” Steve said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

“And, I will confess, I was fairly sure I remembered them correctly but I checked against Melete’s records the last time we visited.”

Diana laughed, delighted and appalled. “Of course. I should never have introduced the two of you.”

“You didn't, as I remember it,” Steve reminded her.
“I should have worked harder to keep you two apart,” Diana said. She plucked one of the clips from its velvet setting. It was beautiful. Steve had very romantic notions, sometimes. “She would so thoroughly disapprove.”

Steve laughed. His fingers were drifting into her hair again, distracted. Diana was careful to close the jewelry box and put it aside before she kissed him and kissed him, endlessly in love.

They drove back to Gotham reluctantly in the hours before dawn. Steve tried to stay awake but he was human and he was tired and he trustingly fell asleep in the seat beside her, no matter how tight and fast her turns were.

Diana kept her eyes on the road, not on his beloved sleeping face. They were nearing Gotham when she looked over at him, in the light of false dawn.

He seemed to glow in the rising light, his blond hair touched with orange and pink and red. Diana knew from many mornings lying in bed beside him that she could become mesmerized by the way the sunrise caressed his sleeping face.

She pulled over, brought the car to a stop so smoothly that he did not wake. She sat for a moment, watching him, before her fingers had to follow the path of the light over his cheek.

His blue eyes blinked open and a slow, sleepy smile spread across his face. His fingers touched her temple, then her hair, reverent.

“You're so beautiful,” Steve said very softly. “I love you so much, Diana.”

She smiled, leaning forward. “And I you, my beloved.”

She kissed him. He tasted like salt water and sunlight, like afar green fields, like home, like she had known him, would know him, always.

He sighed into the kiss, his fingers trailing lightly down the back of her neck and his smile was very sweet when the parted. Sweet but hungry.

“What do my lips taste like to you?” Diana asked him.

“Like lightning on the ocean,” Steve answered as if there was nothing unusual about the question. “Like the sea and the sky crashing together. Just...like you.”

His fingers drifted over her hair. Diana kissed him again. Sunlight. Saltwater. Home. She would love him beyond the day she ceased to be.

“How far out are we?”

“Not far.”

She saw him glance around, take in where they were and how much time they had before she had to be in meetings. He looked at her and quirked an eyebrow. “Drive fast.”

She grinned at him and did.

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Diana was exactly on time, dressed in an impeccable, fashionable dress and blazer. She poured herself a generous cup of coffee and pointedly ignored the growing grin of her colleague.
She had left Steve deeply asleep in their rumpled hotel bed, his hair a beautifully, mussed mess against the pillow, his lips swollen from kisses. It had been very hard to leave the warmth of his arms, particular when his brow furrowed just so and he made a soft grumpy noise when she had slid out of them.

“We missed you and Steve at breakfast this morning,” Blair said because Blair was an ass, who got on with Steve like a house on fire. They deserved each other.

“Steve is sleeping in today,” Diana said.

“Is he all right?” Andre, Blair’s lovely new assistant asked.

“He’s fine,” Blair said. She smirked at Diana. “They got back late last night, I’m sure.”

“This morning,” Diana said with no inflection in her voice whatsoever. Andre’s eyes were just a little wide and fixed on his paper now. “It’s our anniversary.”

“Oh,” Andre said and he smiled. “Happy Anniversary.”

“I had a lovely bottle of wine picked out and ready to be sent to your room and then I remembered you and Steve barely drink,” Blair said. “And it would have been such a shame to waste it. I toasted you both with it, of course.”

“Of course,” Diana said. Blair had sent a gallon of perhaps the most involved ice cream she had ever seen to their room. They had taken it with them. Steve had fed it to her as they drove to the coast. “And did you find someone to share it with?”

“I am offended, Ms Prince, I am a lady,” Blair said, attempting a straight face at the blatant untruth.

Diana looked at Andre, sinking into his chair in embarrassment. “If you ignore everything she says that does not concern art, your day will be much better.”

“I would be offended by that remark but it’s far too accurate,” Blair said. “Take all of your life advice from Diana, it will serve you far better.”

Blair had two perfectly lovely partners at home, one of whom gamely stepped in as Diana’s dance partner when the steps were more complicated than swaying and thus beyond the ability of Steve’s hip. The other traded spy novels with Steve, despite the fact that he had a deeply earnest love of them and Steve read them as comedies.

Blair herself was possibly the biggest gossip Diana had ever met.

“I’m surprised the boss did not ask for Steve to sit in on some of the meetings,” Blair said, her voice not quite quietly pitched. The head curator of the Gotham museum had just walked in with Bruce Wayne looking nonplussed. “He has such a knack for spotting painting whose pedigrees are...questionable.”

Andre groaned quietly. Diana took pity on him. “Blair has sworn not to get into fights about Wacker.”

Blair’s assistant looked considerably more cheerful at that. Blair pouted.

“And by a knack you mean months if not years of obsessive research,” Diana continued.
“Yes, but you can tell when he gets a hunch about something. He gets this frown line between his eyes that's just adorable,” Blair said. “Michel only does that when, well, it's not when he's looking at paintings.”

Diana rolled her eyes. “You told me it was when he was putting together IKEA furniture.”

“Exactly,” Blair said. Her voice was sickeningly innocent, her smile much less so. “Whatever did you think I meant?”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Bruce Wayne said in his blandest, most charming voice. It was immediately grating – pompous and dismissive to its core. Diana wondered how long it had taken him to cultivate it. The curators Gotham all looked surprised by it. “I want to thank you for coming. I won't take up too much of your time. Dr. Neil will be handling most of the formalities.”

“This is the first time the entire Wayne collection will be on public display together,” Bruce said. “I don't quite remember how I was talked into it but there's my signature on the bottom line.”

There were a few awkward chuckles. Diana was aware that the image Bruce calculated of himself in society involved near-or-perhaps-full-blown alcoholism. A charming enough multimillionaire that people shook their heads in fondly when they thought of him and enough hints of...problems, like the alcoholism, that they had enough to gossip about.

It kept people from looking deeper. It kept them from seeing the real him, whether it was Bruce or Batman they were looking for.

Steve thought it was a brilliant strategy. Diana was less impressed.

“But I think we've put together an exciting exhibition. We’ve started right here in Gotham, of course, but then we go to Paris, then London, San Francisco and finally New York before coming back to Gotham where parts of it will remain on display and the rest will come back to my house, I hope,” Bruce said with that bland, false smile. “Which means it will be travelling for the better part of two years. I hope you'll take care of it for me.”

Diana wondered if anyone else noticed how Bruce's eyes pinched when he said that. It had not been an insignificant gesture, this. Bruce Wayne was proud of the Wayne collection and, quietly, privately, intensely protective of it.

“I know this is not how you usually do things,” Bruce smiled in a way Diana imagined he thought was winning. “Thank you for indulging me. I'll hand it over to Dr. Neil now.”

“I think he's forgotten the big shiny buildings with countless treasures inside that we all work in,” Blair whispered out of the side of her mouth to Diana. “Or the money that comes attached to this stunt.”

*Just because there aren't enough pretty paintings to make you happy is no reason to be mean.*

Diana wrote at the edge of her notebook in flawless Italian.

Blair raised an eyebrow at her and wrote back in terrible Greek: *Here only cases of fakes. Therefore you boy guilty.*

Diana had to bite the inside of her cheek not to laugh. She should have alerted Bruce to that sooner, although it did seem like they were the only ones who had caught it. Blair just had nearly as good a nose for such things as Steve did.

“And while we're on the subject of transportation,” Dr. Neil was saying, his face thunderous. The
city of Gotham could be very protective of their Waynes for all that it killed them as well.

Diana smoothed her face out to listen. She ignored Blair poking her leg under the table with her pen cap.

It was going to be a long day.

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They got out late. Diana had expected as much and it gave Blair an excuse to complain.

“I could have had dinner plans,” she was saying. “Diana might have dinner plans. They did drag her here on her anniversary, after all.”

“Our plans tonight do not involve dinner out,” Diana said, completely neutral.

Blair reacted as Diana expected her too with a slow, salacious smile that she tried to smother after a moment. “Some of us aren’t quite so lucky with our evenings. Mine involves a bottle of wine and the hotel gym—”

Of those two things, only the gym was true. Diana did not know why Blair liked to present herself as a borderline alcoholic. She was so perfectly professional around people who didn't know her.

“–but I can see your dearly beloved is anxious to get your plans started so I won’t ask you to join me,” Blair finished.

Diana smiled. She had spotted Steve where he was waiting for her on the museum steps, leaning against one of the columns. He looked like he had slept well, even after she had left him. She knew he had chosen clothing that was more comfortable than fashionable but she thought no one else would be able to tell with him in those particular black jeans, the neatly pressed, blue button down shirt and leather jacket.

There were days when she thought she would never understand mankind at all for they did not stop and stare at his handsomeness, that they could not see him as she could.

And he had brought her coffee. Good coffee.

“Mine are never that conscientious,” Blair complained, coming up behind her.

“Pascal sends you chocolates once a week,” Diana said.

“And I am trying to maintain my figure,” Blair said.

“Andre, always remember,” Diana said, turning to Blair’s aghast assistant. “She is not happy unless she has something to complain about.”

“Heavens no,” Blair said. “If everything were perfect, the world would be very boring.”

Diana smiled and took a step towards Steve. “Have a good night, Blair.”

“Don't break the bed!” Blair called to her and she could tell by the way Steve ducked his head and laughed that she was waving extravagantly behind her.

“What were you saying about my friends last night?” Steve asked with a smile, handing her the coffee. “That I can’t talk?”
“Shall I remind you that Sameer told me the story of your first mission together?” Diana said.

“Okay, first of all, that mission was a complete success even if I nearly died from that infected gunshot wound,” Steve said. “And I can’t actually contradict anything Sameer said because I was delirious and don’t remember most of it. I have no idea how we ended up friends.”

“Did you mean to defend yourself somewhere in there?” Diana asked, teasingly.

“I started off trying to, but you know me too well for that,” Steve grinned. Diana had taken a step closer to him. She did not remember taking it but they were very close. She could practically taste the coffee on his lips, just a little sweeter than she liked hers.

It seemed silly to only get a hint of that pleasant taste when it was so easy to kiss him.

Yes, a touch sweeter than the coffee she put down on the ledge so she could touch him but achingly familiar and so good to taste all the same. Steve’s hands slid around her back, warm and broad and his lips parted for her as she smoothed her fingers across his cheek and then into his hair, scratching the back of his head lightly in a way that always made him groan into her mouth.

She was not surprised to hear Blair’s wolf whistle from across the lawn just as Blair was expecting the way Diana turned to glare at her, Steve’s arms still around her waist and her hand possessive in his hair. Her fellow curator waved again before stepping into a cab.

Steve chuckled, a low, lovely sound that Diana was close enough to feel rumbling through him. When she looked back at him, he had a very familiar, very pleased look on his face, which she loved. She ran her nails just softly through the short hair right above his ear and watched his pupils dilate ever so slightly.

It was a pity their plans did not involve exactly what Blair thought they did.

“Where did you get Bruce to put the car?” Diana asked. She had no doubt that Bruce would be in the car he said he would send.

Steve cleared his throat and visibly pulled himself together. “Around the side. I told him you were likely to come out with your colleagues. It took him a few minutes to get the hint.”

“I do not think he is used to not getting his way eventually,” Diana said. And then a thought occurred to her. “So...how long have we been keeping him waiting?”

“You distracted me,” Steve said and his face told her exactly how much he did not mind. “And his curator was the one who kept you late.”

“Perhaps we should not make him wait any longer then. I would hate for him to keep us all night,” Diana said, smirking. They were still standing in each other arms. It had not occurred to either of them to move. “Unless you need a minute?”

Steve cut her a glare. Diana laughed at him. His kissed the tip of her nose and then her smile, just a peck each.

“Come on then,” Steve said, gallantly offering her his arm. She took it and picked up both their coffees so he could use his cane properly.

They linked arms, as they walked. It seemed old-fashioned and occasionally, they would simply hold hands but linking arms had become second nature during the years when Steve sometimes needed more support than his cane. It was an easy way to do it without arousing suspicion.
“By the way,” Steve said, quietly as they walked down the steps and around the side of the museum. “Alex called this morning. Someone is outpacing his facial recognition program, getting to security cam images before it can scrub them.”

“For me?” Diana asked.

“For both of us,” Steve replied. It did not surprise Diana. It rankled to have it confirmed but they had expected as much, when they decided it was time Steve stepped forward with her. “There was also a hit on some historical newspapers that have been digitized. Reviews of plays Sameer was in, mostly.”

Diana saw red for a moment. Her family was not anyone’s business.

Steve walked a step closer to her, inhabiting her space instead of walking linked together. He was close enough to drop a kiss to her shoulder.

“I know,” he said.

“How have we protected the others?” Diana asked, swallowing down the hot coals of her anger.

“There’s nothing to find on Etta, of course, all those records are still classified and, more importantly, hard copy only,” Steve said. “Charlie...Charlie didn't leave much behind.”

“And Napi?” Diana asked.

“Chief died in the 1982,” Steve reminded her. “When we’ve met him, we've been off the grid. But I called him from a burner, just in case.”

“We will not involve him in this,” Diana said. “I do not trust Bruce to understand.”

“No, that would end badly for everyone,” Steve agreed. His fingers rubbed the inside of her arm gently.

Bruce had had the sense to bring a more nondescript car than one of the many flashy sports cars that Steve disliked climbing in and out of. Alfred was at the wheel but as they approached, the back door opened and Bruce stepped out.

“I told Alex to keep it running for now,” Steve told her, voice low. “Bruce is still getting results but no one else will be.”

“It will do for now,” Diana agreed. She frowned. This was the part she was not sure of. “You brought the files?”

“Yes,” Steve said. His fingers tightened on her arm briefly. “Whatever you’re comfortable with. I’ll follow your lead. We don’t have to do anything with them.”

Diana looked at Bruce and fought back a sigh. She thought of Etta’s and Charlie’s and Sameer’s sprawling descendants, who greeted them with delighted smiles and open arms. Their family.

There was not much they would not do to protect them.

“I think we might,” she said.
Happy News Years! I'm travelling for the next week and I wanted to get the next chapter posted before I left! Hope you enjoy it! It's a little sappier than I planned but oh well!
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Just a reminder that I'm only writing DCEU Batfleck. I'm not using other Batman canon for this fic. And that sometimes some narrators aren't entirely reliable.

Bruce hated to admit it to himself but he had been expecting Diana to have some reaction to the Batcave.

Most people had some reaction to the Batcave.

Diana looked around impassively. She looked like she was thinking of something else.

Steve looked mildly interested. But not impressed.

And he read Bruce’s expression way too easily.

“I remember moving to Boston when I was a kid and seeing an electric street lamp for the first time,” Steve said. “Do you have any idea how mind blowing electricity was? No, of course you can’t. And seeing my first plane, the idea of flying that people could do that? Unimaginable. But if you live long enough, you start accepting that technology is going to change in a blink and just wait for someone younger to explain it to you.”

Diana rolled her eyes at him, looking more interested than she had from any of the tech surrounding them. Or the house. Or the garage with the best of Bruce’s cars, where he had made sure Alfred parked.

“I have listened to you wax poetic about new planes for days,” she complained.

“Well, yeah,” Steve said. There was clearly nothing contradictory about those statements to him. He craned his neck to look further down into the cave and looked at Bruce. His eyes were very blue and showed just a hint of excitement. “Is there a plane down here?”

Bruce thought of the carrier he was in the process of acquiring. “The car transforms into a jet.”

Steve smiled. “Now that’s impressive.”

“We can start with that,” Bruce said, trying for a smile. Maybe if he could win Steve over... “It’s down in the hanger.”

He pointed. They had just finished redesigning in anticipation of the new arrival. The Batmobile was situated further into the cave than it used to be.

Something shifted, Bruce could tell, when he pointed it out, near the back of the cave, but he couldn’t tell what. It wasn’t the excitement he had anticipated. Diana had taken a step closer and put a hand on Steve’s back.

“That’s a long walk,” Steve said nonchalantly.
Bruce paused. He looked at the way Steve was standing – normally as far as he could tell – and the way Steve gripped his cane. Bruce still hadn’t been able to access his medical records. “Oh.”

Bruce got the distinct impression that Steve was trying not to laugh at him.

“That’s fine,” Steve said. He looked at Diana and raised an eyebrow. She smiled back at him, like she too was trying not to laugh, though her amusement seemed aimed at Steve. “It’s not a problem. Here, catch.”

Steve tossed his cane to Bruce who caught it reflexively. Diana lifted Steve into her arms like it was nothing, like they had done it a million times before.

“It’s my fault. I was bored and spent too much time poking around the museum this afternoon. I should have known to pace myself, after last night,” Steve said good naturedly, his arm loose and comfortable – Bruce was surprised at how comfortable both of them seemed with it – around Diana’s shoulders. “Avoid the princess carries.”

“Huh,” Bruce said. He didn’t want to think about what they had done after the gala last night.

“Do you know why it's called princess carry?” Steve asked.

Diana groaned. Bruce didn't know what to think of that.

“I will drop you,” she threatened as if she wasn't smiling, as if she wasn't navigating the stairs with him in her arms with absolute ease.

“I thought it was a bridal carry,” Bruce said flatly.

Diana rolled her eyes again, at Bruce this time. “Do not encourage him.”

That had been about the last thing Bruce had been intending.

“No one here is married,” Steve said. He looked...gleeful. “It’s a princess carry because she’s a princess, see?”

“That joke has never been funny,” Diana said. “It is even less amusing when you must explain it.”

“Maisie thinks it’s funny.”

“Maisie is five years old.”

“Maisie is our great-great grandniece,” Steve explained, as if he could read the question from Bruce’s mind.

Bruce hadn’t found anything about Steve having relatives. “You have–had siblings?”

It surprised him when both Steve and Diana seemed taken aback. He hadn’t...realized they were trying to include him in what was clearly an old joke between them until he was abruptly no longer included.

Steve recovered quickly enough. “I had a sister, yes. She died young, though. She didn’t have any children.”

“We have other family,” Diana said, something very sharp and short in her voice.

Bruce didn't ask. He was mentally revising his search parameters for after they left.
Steve was sufficiently taken with the Batmobile, at least when it was in jet form. Diana looked politely indulgent when Bruce was answering Steve's questions about it. She had seen it before, of course, but she seemed genuinely amused by Steve’s curiosity. There was something so happy and pleased in her expression in the face of his enthusiasm, Bruce was relieved to duck behind the wing to point something out and get away from it.

It was only when they were half way back to the command centre that Bruce realized how much information Steve would have gathered about the cave itself with the few pointed questions peppered in between ones that, Bruce could see on reflection, gave Bruce an opportunity to brag about everything in it.

Which he had taken.

Steve had seemed guileless about it and Diana's indulgent looks had only helped things along. Bruce thought he might be covering for Diana, who was far quieter than he had expected her to be. She did not seem the type to let her “husband” do the talking for her.

Bruce was inclined to believe the worst but Steve was alternating between complaining about the elimination of a Canadian fighter jet program from forty years ago and how Cessnas handled. Bruce couldn't tell how much of it was an act and how much was genuine. He couldn't get a good enough read on him.

But Bruce had forgotten, for a moment, that he was dealing with a spy and for all the talking he was doing, Steve wasn't saying much of worth.

Bruce was the only one who had given anything of value away at all.

“Your facial recognition program was interesting,” Bruce said. They were almost back to the command centre. Diana had put Steve down near the Batmobile, but she was carrying him again, like it was nothing, like it was normal. “I wouldn’t have thought to look for one eliminating images.”

Steve raised an eyebrow at Bruce. “You wouldn’t have expected someone to avoid being found by scrubbing information?”

“I thought this was standard,” Diana said, mostly to Steve. Not to him.

She set him down, when they were up the stairs and they both looked at Bruce expectantly. It took him a moment to realize they were waiting for him to give Steve his cane back. Bruce has been carrying it over his shoulder like a baseball bat.

Steve gave him a nod when Bruce offered it back to him. Diana had already found a chair for him. Of course she had. She remained standing, arms crossed.

“I'm retired,” Steve said in a way that sounded reflexive. Bruce wondered how many times he had said it before. “But from what I’ve been told, it's not exactly a new practice.”

“I didn't realize how proactive you were being about hiding. It was a fairly sophisticated program,” Bruce said. He left it unsaid that it wasn't good enough, that he had still broken it. He hadn't been able to trace the source yet but he would. “And I thought you were on vacation. Not retired.”

Steve gave Bruce an amused look but it also seemed, oddly, like he was proud of him for picking up on that. Bruce sat down at his computer setup.

“Retired from being a spy,” Steve said. “I'm on vacation from my second career.”
“Working for Interpol?” Bruce asked. He pulled up the reports he had found and looked back at them.

“When they're useful. They haven't been lately. Too much political interference,” Steve said. He didn't look phased at all. Bruce almost got the impression that he was being laughed at again. “If I have something to report, it usually goes to the local police. Or the individuals who requested the information in the first place.”

“You do a lot of that kind of freelancing?” Bruce asked casually. He had mainly found Interpol records, a couple references with the FBI. He had spent some fruitless time in the databases of the Parisian police but found no references.

“There are some people at the WJRO who have known me for a long time now. I've done a lot of work for people associated with them in the past and sometimes you stumble on other information along the way,” Steve said. “More recently I’ve been finding records that would help repatriation cases. And...I know you're a private collection but you should really consider conforming to NAGPRA regulations, you know.”

Bruce was vaguely aware of that acronym being mentioned to him before but he couldn’t place who or what it was off hand. “I’ll think about it.”

Steve gave him a half smile that was as patronizing as Bruce’s answer had been before he gestured to Diana. “Diana’s my main employer.”

“There are things a curator at the Louvre cannot do,” Diana said, her voice stony. “And some things I sadly do not have time for. Steve is good at filling in those gaps.”

“I’m good at finding records and seeing the connections between them,” Steve said, shrugging as if to dismiss it. He looked at Diana again and his smile...it was soft and amused and it grated on Bruce’s nerves as much as his words did. “I told you he was going to interrogate me again.”

“I owe you an ice cream,” Diana said gravelly, her eyes never leaving Bruce.

Bruce was not an easy man to intimidate and he did not back down, no matter how he felt. But the look in Diana’s eyes made the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

He didn’t understand how he had never heard of her before finding her in Luthor’s files. How had she managed to escape notice? It seemed impossible. Why she hadn’t come forward before now?

Bruce had a feeling it had a lot to do with protecting the man standing beside her, whose records he couldn't find, whose life seemed a more tightly locked secret than Diana’s.

“I thought we were here to speak of the League?” Diana said. “Not for you to question my husband.”

“I thought you said you weren't married,” Bruce said.

“If we had not, would you have ever stopped searching for a marriage certificate?” Diana asked. “I call Steve my husband because it is something you understand and your people do not respect it the same way when I say he is my beloved. Steve understands what he is to me.”

Bruce glanced at Steve as she spoke, if only because she was too...too...

He glanced at Steve as she spoke, to see how he was reacting.
Steve was looking at Diana as if she lit the sun. And he noticed Bruce's eyes on him at once. He had no trouble at all looking right back at him.

“You wanted us here,” Diana said. “Even if you didn't know exactly what you were getting. In three days, we’re going home. We should not be wasting our time on this. Have you found any new traces of the others or are we here because you have not?”

Bruce hesitated but...they did need to speak of this.

“Just the one,” Bruce said. He turned away to call up the old footage he had from Luthor’s drive. “There's a rumour of a man who can talk to fish, among other things. The name I found was Arthur Curry. There’s not much to go on but apparently there’s a village in Iceland that he visits, in the winter, when food starts to run low.”

“I would not lead with the rumour about speaking to fish when you greet this Atlantean,” Diana warned.

“So it's true,” Bruce said, looking to her.

“Atlantis exists, yes, and that is what the footage suggests him to be;” Diana told him. “Though I cannot tell you how to get there.”

“Why not?” Bruce asked.

“Because I do not know how to get there,” Diana looked very faintly amused again. It was better than her stony expression from before but only just. “Themyscira and Atlantis have not been on speaking terms since before I was born.”

“Iceland is our best bet for initial contact then,” Bruce said. “The stories say he comes on the King Tide.”

“So that's what? Two months from now?” Steve said.

“If you had not arranged this grand but hasty exhibition, we might have been able to join you,” Diana added.

Bruce didn't sigh in frustration at that. His plan had been to have Diana working for him by then. He was too self-controlled and too aware that they were both watching him for the slightest tells.

He turned around in his chair and smiled blandly. “You're not taking the job then?”

“No,” Diana said. “Aside for what it would do to my reputation, I like my job and our life in Paris. I have no desire to leave it.”

“I realize it doesn't have the prestige of the Louvre but Wayne Enterprises would give you considerably more freedom,” Bruce said, trying not the let it rankle him.

Diana looked at him like he was stupid but it was Steve’s expression that caught Bruce’s attention. He was looking at him with something only a step short of contempt.

“It’s...somewhat gauche to try and buy a curator like this,” Steve added slowly. He was no longer smiling. “You would get away with it. You're rich and American. Diana's reputation would take the hit. And it would be a big one.”

Bruce hadn't thought of that. He wasn't even sure he believed it. “It's a generous offer. Anyone
would understand.”

Steve actually laughed at him. Diana smiled and put her hand on his shoulder, caught between grimness and amusement.

“You've made a sizeable donation to the Louvre and given the entire community flashy reminders of your interest with the Wayne exhibition touring around for the foreseeable future,” Diana said. “And the offer is obscenely generous. The museum community is not that large. It looks like you're trying to buy me. You are trying to buy me. No matter my worth as a curator, it will not be seen as that. I would never be seen for only my worth again, there would always be questions.”

“There's a certain etiquette involved in poaching someone like this,” Steve said. His gaze seemed less sharp with Diana’s hand on his shoulder. He had gone back to pretending to be pleasant. “Rules of behaviour like you would not believe. You blew past them miles ago. It just looks like you want to sleep with her now.”

Diana looked at Steve with a hint of surprise in her gaze. “All these years in Europe and you are still so America.”

Steve grinned at her and winked. Diana only seemed amused. She grinned at him, the corners of her eyes crinkling. Bruce resisted the urge to clear his throat.

Diana seemed to hear it anyway. The grin was gone when she looked at him again, all business.

“So you understand why it is impossible to accept any of your previous offers,” Diana’s mouth quirked to the side in a way that Bruce was starting to understand meant she was not saying everything she would like to. “Or any subsequent ones.”

“My intention,” Bruce began carefully, “was not to insult you or imply...anything.”

Bruce would not admit that had been part of his motivation behind the offer but he wouldn't be able to sell it if he said he hadn't entertained the idea of her—her husband Bruce suspected it would have been particularly evident.

“I am not insulted,” Diana said, her face like marble. “As I said, I will also not be accepting.”

Bruce did clear his throat this time. He looked at Steve. “I'll, ah, arrange for a jet to be on standby for you, then. I don't think your rental Cessna is going to cut it if there's an emergency.”

Diana and Steve both looked at him as if he were unbelievable and not in a positive sense. They looked at each other for a moment and something wordless passed between them again. In the end, Diana's hand stroked along Steve's shoulder for a moment as he shook his head and smiled in bemusement.


“You said you had a line on this Arthur Curry,” Diana said. “What about the others?”

Bruce winced. “Nothing yet. I’ve had a few hits on the speedster but he dodges cameras even better than you.”

“And the one with the...augmentations?” Steve asked. There was a strange tone to his voice. Bruce couldn’t tell if it was horror, pity, both or neither.
He needed to get a better read on the other man. He needed more information about him.

Bruce just shook his head. “I’ve found nothing on him.”

“And the rest of Luthor’s papers?” Diana asked.

Bruce looked at her with schooled blankness. Diana raised an eyebrow at him. “We know things went...missing, from when I was watching him. If you did not take them, we have another issue.”

“I might have made sure some things didn’t make it into the police log,” Bruce said.

He had also arranged for anything…new to be collected and brought to him.

Diana waited. Bruce didn’t offer anything more.

Diana tilted her head, considering him. “Steve can help. This is what he’s good at.”

Steve looked at Bruce impassively. Bruce couldn’t read his face. He didn’t trust that. He didn’t trust him.

“I prioritized finding Curry, it seemed time sensitive,” Bruce said. “Most of what I’ve read so far is disjointed rambling. About…Clark.”

It wasn’t a complete lie. That had paralyzed Bruce for more days than he wanted to admit. But it wasn’t the entire truth either.

He knew Diana could tell.

He was betting that she wouldn’t push him on it. Not when he lead with Clark. She could see his guilt more clearly than he was comfortable with; he wasn’t above using it to blind her. For now.

There was a shift between Diana and Steve again. It seemed like nothing. All Bruce caught of it was the drum of her fingers against Steve’s shoulder and a twitch of his mouth, the side that wasn’t scarred. But it was like they had had a whole conversation.

Bruce wasn’t sure he believed them when they said Diana wasn’t telepathic.

“If you decide you need another set of eyes, Steve’s are particularly keen,” Diana told him. She checked her watch, a clunky old fashioned thing that looked out of place on her. “It’s late and we have not eaten. Unless there is anything else you wanted to share.”

Bruce put on his politest, most dismissive smile. “Of course. Alfred can recommend somewhere for you. He’ll arrange to get you back to the city.”

He turned away before she could answer. He saw the look Diana and Steve exchanged in the reflection of the screen. Diana patted Steve’s shoulder and bent to kiss him.

Bruce looked away before he could stop himself.

“I will go speak to Alfred,” Diana said to Steve.

Bruce could see movement behind him. Not enough for Steve to be standing up, but perhaps reaching up and squeezing her hand. “I’ll join you in a minute.”

She was almost at the elevator when Bruce asked, without turning. “Why erase the images?”
“Bruce,” Diana said, disappointment in her tone again. “Think of the man who was searching for them. What did Luther do when he found out who you were?”

Bruce didn’t answer that. He was glad she couldn’t see his face.

“I will not allow myself to be manipulated for another’s purposes,” Diana told him. The elevator came and she stepped inside. “He would not have been the first to learn that.”

Bruce heard the elevator doors close. He did not turn.

Steve had been so quiet and still if Bruce had been anyone else, he imagined he would have forgotten he was still sitting there.

“If you’re wondering what your mistake was,” Steve offered, after a moment. Bruce imagined it had become clear he wasn’t going to speak first. “Diana’s pretty big on respecting and honouring the dead. She’s not keen on you trying to find records of our friends.”

“There are two people alive from that photo,” Bruce began. “It stands to reason–”

“They’re not,” Steve interrupted. “Everyone else in that photo has been gone a long time now.”

“But you still have family,” Bruce said. He turned in his chair to look at Steve. “Their descendants?”

Steve’s face was relaxed, with a hint of a smile. It wasn’t stony. It wasn’t blank. But Bruce got nothing from it except the sense that Steve thought his reasoning was...inadequate. That he was wrong, even though Bruce suspected he was right. It wasn’t a big leap to make.

It was...different, from his expression when Bruce was giving them the tour of the cave.

“Yes, we have family,” Steve said. “We’re not hiding that from you but they’re civilians, for the most part. They’ve got nothing to do with this. It’s...unwise of you to keep trying to find them.”

Bruce ignored that. He smirked instead. “Does Diana know you’re telling me this?”

“Of course,” Steve said, without missing a beat.

“And she doesn’t mind?” Bruce said.

“It was her idea to appeal to your sense of honour,” Steve replied.

“Why are you telling me, then?” Bruce asked. “Why isn’t she?”

“Bruce,” Steve said. “You trying to find our family has made her very, very angry.”

That thought almost made him pause. “And you’re not?”

“Oh, I am,” Steve said, not taking his eyes off Bruce. “But, as you can probably tell, I don’t have quite Diana’s ability to act on it in the moment.”

Bruce had no doubt whatsoever that Steve had his own ways to act.

It surprised him, when Steve smiled. As if they were friends and he was being companionable.

“I’m not trying to give you the impression that I’m helpless. You’re too smart for that. But Diana doesn’t have a weakness like kryptonite,” Steve told him. “I don’t really have to worry about her
getting hurt – though, I still do. But if you had come after her, truly come after her, like you did with Superman? It wouldn't have mattered. My aim is good. I would have shot you in the back.”

“You wouldn’t have made it through the suit,” Bruce said, no less sharp for how automatic the response was.

“You wouldn’t have been in the suit. I’m a spy and we knew who you were,” Steve told him.

“I’m not a fan of threats,” Bruce said. “Or guns.”

He should have known. He should have known that–

Steve’s gaze went flat and hard. “I wouldn’t use poison gas against my worst enemy. Not even the person who used it against me.”

For a moment, all Bruce could see were Steve's scars and the way Clark had wheezed and choked as he breathed in the weaponized kryptonite.

“You can’t imagine how awful it is to die like that. The way you choke. The–” Steve cut himself off. His expression was completely neutral but he couldn't quite keep the tension from his voice. “Diana can walk through it like it’s nothing. I can’t tell you how thankful I am for that.”

Steve learned forward, his expression suddenly different, almost sympathetic. “There’s no reason for me to threaten you, Bruce. You’re not coming after Diana. And besides, she can do a hell of a lot more damage than either of us when she’s angry. We’re only human.”

“Are you?” Bruce asked.

“Yes,” Steve said. He inhaled deeply – his breath seemed to hitch on the edge of it. “Just hard to kill. I’ve got the medical records to prove it. Speaking of, Diana wanted to propose a trade.”

“Of?”

Steve reached into his pocket and pulled out a flash drive. He didn’t offer it to Bruce, not yet, and Bruce wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of asking what was on it.

Steve answered anyway. “It’s what you’ve been looking for. All the files on me.”

Bruce blinked. Steve’s face didn’t change. If Bruce were him, he would have wanted to smile. He had to know Bruce was interested.

“I’m sure there’s things we missed,” Steve said. “I’ve been around awhile. You could always just ask me but if it lets you sleep better at night, you can confirm it independently, where you can. No one will try to scrub it. Some of it is classified and old so you would have to infiltrate British Intelligence but I’m sure you can find a way around that.”

“What do you want in exchange?” Bruce asked.

“Leave our family alone,” Steve said. “No more digging. No more trying to find them. That includes tracking down the origin of the program scrubbing facial matches for us. We won’t interfere with you capturing our images. You don’t interfere with their erasure.”

The repeated vehemence of the request aggravated Bruce. “I wouldn’t hurt your family. I could help protect them.”

Steve snorted. “You keep digital copies of everything. That’s inherently unsecure. We keep any
connections to them as offline as possible to minimize that risk.”

They were sensible words but Bruce knew there were no better security systems than his. They just didn’t trust him.

“How do you know I won’t take that and find them anyway?” Bruce asked. “They must have digital trails if they’re civilians. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be worried about it.”

“Diana would tell you a promise is unbreakable,” Steve said. “We both know that depends on the person making it. I’m not bothered by you having my information and Diana decided you were worth the risk.”

“She trusts me to be honourable but not to know how her family is?” Bruce scoffed at the idea. Steve just looked at him steadily and asked: “Who would you trust with Alfred’s secrets?”

It took everything Bruce had not to recoil from the very idea. He didn't even trust himself with that, often as not.

Steve held up the flash drive. Bruce put his hand out. Steve shook his head.

“She’ll want to know you said the words,” Steve told him. “We’re old fashioned that way.”

Bruce grit his teeth. “I promise I’ll leave your family alone. I won’t try to find any of your associates.”

Steve gave him the drive. He stood as soon as Bruce took it. “Diana will be waiting for me. I suspect we’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I’ll have to check my schedule,” Bruce said. He knew his schedule was entirely clear.

From the way he smiled faintly, so did Steve. “Well. We’ll keep our evening free.”

Bruce didn’t watch him walk to the elevator or if he did, it was only in the reflection of the screen. He seemed slower without Diana beside him.

Then he was gone.

Bruce turned the drive over in his hand.

He had a long night ahead of him.

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“Did he go out on patrol tonight?” Steve asked.

Diana turned her head from where she was gazing out over Gotham to look at him. Steve's face was calm, his eyes sure. She reached over the table and took his hand, rubbing her thumb over his knuckles. He had a nasal cannula in, the portable oxygen tank standing just inside the hotel room door behind him.

They had run into some curators from the MET that Diana knew as they were returning to the hotel and gone to dinner with them. It would have been an enjoyable evening, had she not been so distracted. They had declined meeting up for drinks with them and the San Francisco contingent after. It had not gone unnoticed by Diana that the two who knew Steve best looked at him with pitying concern and whispered to their fellows to explain: “Diana's husband gets tired, you know.”
Steve was fine, just sore from the scar tissue. That happened, sometimes. They were used to it. He had taken an anti-inflammatory and a hot bath when they had gotten back from dinner. He would be fine.

When she had gravitated toward the balcony, he had followed, bringing the portable oxygen canister with him to do his therapy for the night.

Diana loved him very much.

“I have not seen him,” Diana said. “But I do not doubt he is out there. Very little stops him and having lived with you for 100 years, I can say with authority that you are not that interesting.”

Steve huffed at her, eyes bright and amused. “Thanks.”

Diana smiled back but it faltered after a moment and she looked back out into the night. Steve's fingers laced with hers. She sighed.

“I hope it is enough,” Diana said. “I dislike handing your information over to him enough as it is. He has rebuffed any overtures of congeniality, let alone friendship, we have made. If he wants this...idea to go forward, there must be some kind of trust.”

“We’ll find a way. You told me that Mr. Wayne doesn't necessarily play well with others, at first, and we did throw a monkey wrench into his plans,” Steve said.

Diana snorted.

“He had an idea about how this would go and it's not going to go that way,” Steve said. He shrugged. “He might need a minute to regroup.”

“It would not have gone the way he supposed whether you were here or not,” Diana said.

“I'm not sure how used to that Bruce Wayne is,” Steve said. He looked a little uncertain. It was an expression only Diana saw so plainly. “He wears so many masks, it's hard to get a read on him.”

“You pretend to understand him well enough,” Diana said.

“I should hope so,” Steve shrugged. “I know something about it.”

Diana leaned forward to touch his face, tracing her thumb along his skin, just under the oxygen line.

“For such a spy, and a man who has often described himself as cynical.” Diana said. “You sometimes take great leaps of faith. You trusted me very easily.”

“Diana,” Steve said. He swallowed. “I would like to say I'm a good judge of character but you...I don't understand how anyone can meet you and not want to be better.”

“You are a good judge of character,” Diana told him. “Do not do a disservice to yourself.”

“I'm well aware of where my talents lay,” Steve said. He was still smiling as if he knew a secret. “You still changed everything for me.”

He turned his head to kiss her fingertips. “I think you're right, though. I think he'll come around. And he's more than likely hoping the same thing about us.”

Diana exhaled. “I know it bothers me more than you but I am still not sure I should have suggested
giving him those files on you.”

“You know what I think, I’ve wanted to burn those old medical files for a long time now,” Steve said. “But...as peace offerings go, it’s a practical one. If I’m going to be involved, we were going to have to tell him some of the medical stuff anyway and it’s a way to help him understand where we’re coming from. If he's the man you think he is – that I agree he could be. If he's not...we've got bigger problems. Plus...”

Steve grinned. “I know who my money would be on, in a fight.”

Diana rolled her eyes at him. “You are the most impractical, practical man I have ever met.”

“I’m adaptable,” Steve said. “It’s why you love me.”

“There are many reasons why I love you,” Diana replied.

His phone chimed and he turned the alarm off before reaching back to turn off the canister and take the cannula out of his nose. He rubbed it after, like he always did, annoyed, and stretched before getting to his feet.

“I think I’m done for the day,” Steve said and his eyes went soft and shining the way they did sometimes when he looked at her. “Come to bed with me?”

She took his hand and followed him inside. It was the easiest choice she ever had to make, to lean over and kiss him before he could change into his pajamas – he always wore more to bed when they were travelling, he was uncomfortable with other people seeing the extent of the scarring – to pull him down into the fresh hotel sheets. There was nothing easier than bringing their bodies together.

They fit. All their rough edges were worn smooth in each other's arms.

After, Diana pulled Steve into her arms, until his cheek was resting against her collarbone and his body was heavy and welcome on top of hers. She did not hold him like that often to sleep, usually only when he was very ill, when she wanted him to feel safe and warm and loved.

When she wanted to remind herself that he was still breathing, still there with her.

Steve brushed a kiss against the underside of her chin. “‘M not going anywhere, Diana. I love you.”

His hair was damp with sweat, his body loose and sated.

It was easy, loving him so fiercely that sometimes Diana felt it in every inch of herself.

“I know, beloved,” she told him. “I love you too.”

--

Steve Trevor should have died saving the lives of thousands.

It was the last file Bruce read before going out on patrol, the last report from British Intelligence or anywhere else that was about Steve. After that, any mention of him was as a supporting player.

Bruce did not go near the hotel where all the curators were staying except for a cursory scan to make sure all was well. He stayed away.
It was relatively quiet, for Gotham. Petty crooks and thieves abounded but an amateurish attempted bank robbery was the most serious threat of the night.

It left him too much time to think.

Bruce did not think about the difference between being willing – all too willing – to make a sacrifice play and not wanting to, having everything to live for, and doing it anyway.

He thought about Clark with that spear and the look on Lois’ face when they lowered him into her arms.

Maybe he should have done what Alfred told him to do, what the Gotham museum wanted, and spent the night wining and dining the visiting curators.

He hadn't expected Diana to leave so soon.

He hadn't expected Steve Trevor at all.

It was so much easier when the people willing to die for a cause didn't have so much to live for.

Like Clark had.

Like...

The first thing Bruce did when he got back to the cave was pull up the files he had found earlier, the ones on their actor friend, the only other person from the photograph that he had managed to find so far. There had been a photo of him, in a Shakespearean looking costume, that accompanied the review of the play. It was enough to get a hit on the facial recognition software he had developed. Enough to get a name, which led to more articles, mostly theatre reviews. Even the name of a film.

Bruce had stopped early last night, pleased to have found this Sameer. From what he had read the man seemed respected and established in British theatre. A man like that would have had an obituary published, likely in more than one paper, and even if they had pulled down the digital records, there would be paper ones, somewhere.

Obituaries listed all surviving family members.

Bruce went back to the first review he had found. The photo was grainy, the quality poor, but this…Sameer looked directly into the camera as if issuing a challenge.

Bruce stared at it.

There was a challenge. No, it was a dare, Bruce thought, because even in old newsprint, even distorted by age and the digitization process…there was something about his face.

He looked happy. Proud. Like he was right where he was supposed to be and to hell with anyone who disagreed with it.

Bruce closed the files.

He stared at himself in the screen for a moment. He didn't want to think of what he looked like.

He opened the files Steve had handed him again.

Bruce started with the later mission files, he guessed they could be called, starting in the 1950s.
There were largely police reports and memorandums from lawyers and museums even newspaper clippings, mostly detailing the return of stolen paintings, occasionally the arrest of thieves or smugglers. Legal documents from museums regarding the return of stolen or looted works, most of it from WWII but some negotiating the return of remains and artifacts from earlier periods.

In the earliest files, Steve was never listed as working alone. In the few named mentions Bruce could find, Steve Trevor and Diana Prince were both listed. In the files where they remained anonymous, the were consistently listed as “the team.”

It was only later, when Diana’s name disappeared, that Steve became Rockwell or “the source” instead. It matched the time Diana’s name began appearing on its own in academic works and as a curator.

Steve’s work was less attributable. He often went unmentioned. Someone had helpfully highlighted the pertinent sections when his work remained anonymous.

It made Bruce grit his teeth. He verified things independently where he could. There were similarities people used when describing Steve as a source and in the way he worked.

It was enough for Bruce to track down a few instances they hadn't included. He wasn't sure if it was intentional or not but they were all internal communications at the Louvre, most relating to his assistance with some aspect of Diana's work.

If nothing else, it served as a good resume of what Steve was actually capable of. The rumours he had overhead among the curators had been exaggerated, as Bruce had expected, but not as much as he would have assumed.

Alfred was gone for the night so Bruce found himself the remains of a cup of cold coffee and drank that before turning to the medical files that had eluded him the night before.

He was surprised they started before the explosion. Steve had been shot twice and stabbed once during the war, though all were grazes. He had taken shrapnel to his right leg during a forced landing. There were two incomplete medical forms – the pages looked water damaged or torn – that simply stated he had taken medical leave with the cause missing.

When he got to the files after the explosion, Bruce thought about switching to scotch.

There were photographs

They documented the damage and, years later, the attempt at reconstructive surgery. From what Bruce understood, plastic surgery had been in its infancy then, some of its first techniques invented to help men whose faces had been half blown off by weapons that did damage no one had foreseen.

Bruce had looked into it, after Harvey.

The first photo in Steve's file was from early 1919.

The burns were grotesque. As Bruce had guessed, they trailed down his neck, shoulder and torso. Bruce had seen worse but that made them no less gruesome. And this would have been months after the explosion.

Bruce didn’t know why but somehow, in that first photograph, it was the utterly limp curl of Steve’s undamaged hand that bothered him most. There was a vulnerability to it that made Bruce uncomfortable and…Steve’s eyes were open, barely, but he was looking back at the camera. His face was slack and blank but there was something angry in his eyes, as if he knew what was going
on but couldn't stop it.

He wondered where Diana had been when the photo was taken. If she knew about its existence.

The rest of the photographs were from later. Steve looked like he was unconscious in them, all but the last. Bruce was surprised at how relieved he felt to see that.

Diana was in the last photograph. Bruce recognized her immediately, though her face was blurred with motion. She was standing behind Steve in his wheelchair. Steve looked...grim.

It was followed by reams of discharge forms.

Bruce went back to the photo Luther had stolen. Steve bore more resemblance now to the man in that photo than he had in the one taken just before he had been released from the hospital. He could appreciate the reconstructive work that had been done, as rudimentary as it was, having seen the initial injury now. He wondered why Steve had never had it revised in the years since.

Bruce looked at the written files more closely. For all that they had the best visual documentation, the skin grafts were almost an afterthought. Reading between the lines, Bruce thought they may have just been a way to keep Steve in the hospital longer.

The doctors couldn't figure out why he was alive. The first reports regarding his gas burns and the state of his lungs were short and terse.

It was not a pleasant read. They seemed to be waiting for him to die and his treatment reflected that. The amount of morphine they gave him alone probably should have killed him. There was a begrudgingly quality to the files detailing the eventual operations he had on his hip and leg – as if they thought Steve was going to die and what they were doing was pointless.

But he didn't die. The tone changed.

The doctors wanted to know why.

Bruce was surprised they hadn't killed Steve trying to treat him. Steve had been lucky to have Diana – there were quite a few scathing comments on the interference of the wife – and what looked like a very stubborn private nurse interfering on his behalf until he was well enough to demand his own discharge.

That nurse’s name was the only one that had been blacked out on the old files.

There was only a smattering of additional medical records after Steve was released from the hospital through the early 1940s. Then nothing until the early 1980s.

On the later records, all the information about the attending physicians and the hospital had been redacted.

Despite that, the later records appeared more standard. The hip replacement procedure seemed hellish – there was a note explaining the surgery had taken longer than expected due to unexpected debris lodged in the bones, which seemed particularly brutal since it was sixty years after the initial injury – but from the notes on the follow up appointments the outcome was judged a success. They sheer amount of damage meant despite a full hip replacement, Steve still needed a cane and continued to experience chronic pain.

The pulmonologist seemed less pleased. Bruce would not have guessed the amount of lung damage he had. The low numbers surprised him as did the lack of treatment options. There was oxygen
therapy and steroid treatments for emergencies but there was no fix, no cure.

There was only management available for that and for his chronic pain. There had been some treatments tried and discarded for both but other than some adjustments or switches to new medications as it was developed, Steve’s treatment appeared to be stable.

Stable and stagnant. There hadn't been any improvements in it for over fifteen years.

It was wholly unsatisfying to read. Bruce closed the files. He walked away from the screen, just long enough to make himself more coffee. He tried to think of the x-rays in the later files, the successful hip replacement, instead of the photographs from the first.

When he sat back down with his coffee, Bruce reopened and reread the mission report where Steve and Diana must have met. Diana was never explicitly mentioned. The briefing document described it as observe and report only – only was emphasized. The after action report – filled out later in a woman’s hand that was definitely not Diana’s – described how that had gone awry.

It wasn’t the first time Steve had disobeyed mission directives to do something...more. That seemed to be a habit.

Bruce frowned, checking against an earlier file. One of Steve's first missions had deviated not only in a similar way but with a similar subject. What was supposed to be an information gathering mission had turned into the rescue of a defecting German scientist and his family.

The scientist had been defecting from the lab of Dr. Isabel Maru.

Steve had gotten shot on that mission. The medical report was fragmented but from what Bruce could tell the ensuing infection had nearly killed him.

It had not been the only time Steve had crossed paths with Dr. Maru, though it was never directly, not until his last mission.

It took Bruce a bit of digging to find out what happened to her. In the reports that were clearly written by Steve himself, Dr. Poison seemed like a crucial figure, a villain who could determine the course of the war.

Bruce had never heard of her.

After the war, Bruce found, she had been put on trial for the murder of members of the German High command but had been found hanging in her cell before the trial began. Her suicide had been overshadowed at the time by the outraged response to the Leipzig verdicts. Historically, the blame had been given to Ludendorff.

Dr. Isabel Maru had become a historical footnote at most.

Captain Steve Trevor was less than that.

Bruce leaned back in his chair and rubbed the back of his neck. He was supposed to be attending the morning sessions at the Gotham Museum tomorrow--today. He supposed at some point he should sleep.

He had done more on less before but he would grudgingly admit he wasn’t that young anymore.

He went through the last files, mostly miscellanea. Steve's degree was from Harvard but it was from the early 1900s. He had taken over his father's business for a time but sold it before he went
to war, along with a residence in Boston. His last living relative – his mother – died in 1913.

There was nothing about why he had gone to the trouble of getting a degree and then gone back to being a glorified shopkeeper. Nothing indicating when or how or he had first flown a plane, just the service records indicating he had flown before. Nothing on his attestation papers to explain why he had bought a steamer ticket and gone to join the British army in 1914.

Bruce wanted to make sense of Steve Trevor, if only to understand why Diana, who could have been what Superman was to the world for a hundred years, kept herself hidden, a secret.

It didn't make sense.

“‘You have been at it again all night, I see,’” Alfred said suddenly, from behind him.

Bruce didn't jump in surprise – he never did anymore – but he felt his muscles bunch up. He didn't reply.

“You've got four hours before you need to be in meetings. Meetings that you insisted on attending personally,” Alfred told him. “I would suggest sleeping before I make you some very strong coffee.”

Alfred picked up Bruce's mug and sniffed it, looking slightly relieved not to smell any alcohol. He glanced at the screen and Bruce watched him take in the details.

Bruce had the copy of Diana and Steve's fake wedding certificate up.

“No pictures of the happy couple?” Alfred said, a little sourly. Bruce wasn't unaware of the...hopes Alfred still harboured for him.

“They didn't give me those,” Bruce said. He called up the picture of Steve, the first one. “Just these.”

Alfred stared for a moment, his fingers curled over his mouth. After a few minutes, Bruce took it down.

“No personal photos,” Bruce said. “Medical files. Reports of his work. It's probably more information than I have on Diana.”

“But you feel like you know Ms. Prince better,” Alfred said, a statement, not a question. He looked at Bruce. “With Mr. Trevor, they've give you the form of the man but not the heart of him.”

“I'm pretty sure Diana has that,” Bruce told him.

Alfred ignored him. “I suspect that's what happens when you try to know someone from their files alone.”

“Files that have been curated carefully,” Bruce reminded him.

Alfred leaned over and looked more closely at the list of records. “If only for the sake of your eyesight, I'm glad they left it at that.”

Bruce didn't respond.

“What more were you expecting, Master Wayne?” Alfred asked.

“Answers,” Bruce replied.
“To what questions?” Alfred asked.

Bruce didn't reply. He supposed he was trying to figure out how he could use Steve to get what he wanted from Diana – at least in terms of the League. But that was part of the problem, he didn't think he could, not now that Steve was part of the picture.

She certainly wouldn't be moving to Gotham. They had made that clear. And he couldn’t see her wanting to be any more public, not with Steve to protect.

“You might try asking,” Alfred suggested. “But perhaps a power nap first?”

Bruce closed the files. He had been planning to use the meetings to charm Diana.

Diana had never been charmed by him. At least he had someone other than himself to blame that on now.

“And what are we doing with those?” Alfred asked.

He was pointing to the clippings Bruce had saved on their actor friend, the one from the photo.

“As it happens, the name rang a bell for me,” Alfred told Bruce. Bruce looked over, curious, as Alfred produced a paperback novel and opened it to the dedication.

_to my parents, Sameer and Farah, who taught me the value of being behind the scenes, out on stage and when to switch between the two._

“The author only started publishing in her 60s. She was a housewife before that,” Alfred said. Bruce closed his eyes. “This is one of her early works. She's published several since. It's a rather good book, actually.”

Alfred had snapped the book shut. Bruce opened his eyes. Alfred was holding it out for him to take. His thumb was over the author’s name.

“Keep it for now,” Bruce said. He got up and groaned. His back ached.

He looked at the files on the screen and pointed to Sameer's. “Secure them, get them off our servers and bury them. Somewhere safe. For now.”

“As you say, Master Wayne,” Alfred said. Bruce stretched; his back was still sore.

“Wake me in three hours,” Bruce said, over his shoulder, as he headed out of the cave. “I have meetings to attend.”
Steve woke up when Diana did. She never set an alarm, she never needed to, and Steve usually woke when Diana slid out of his arms.

Steve heard her laugh at the face he made when he tried to pull her back into bed without opening his eyes. She leaned over and brushed his bedhead back.

Steve opened his eyes and squinted at her. Diana smiled and kissed him lightly.

“It's early,” Steve complained.

“It is not,” Diana told him.

“I'm on vacation,” Steve tried.

“I am not,” Diana said, laughter in her voice. “And you are only pretending.”

Steve groaned. Diana kissed him again, smiling, then patted his chest once and rolled out of bed.

“Blair will be insufferable if I miss breakfast again,” Diana called as she walked into the bathroom.

Steve watched her go before letting his head flop back onto his pillow for a moment. It had taken him years but he had learned the value of sleeping in.

Diana had never taken to it

He followed her out of bed and into the bathroom – pulling on the pajama bottoms he had never gotten to put on last night as he went. Diana was standing at the sink, brushing her teeth. Steve brushed his hand over her back, against the soft material of her robe. The temptation to rest his cheek against her shoulder and press against the warmth of her body was strong.

But she had to get ready. He dropped a kiss to her shoulder before heading to the toilet.

Diana spat out a mouthful of toothpaste. “Are you going to come for breakfast?”

“No, I think I’m going do a little more poking around into the not-van Gogh,” Steve said.

Diana raised an eyebrow at him in the mirror. Steve shrugged at her and flushed. She passed him his toothbrush after he had rinsed his hands.

“You think you were wrong?” Diana asked.

“I'm definitely not wrong,” Steve said. “We know that. I just want to figure out if it's a Wacker or someone else.”

Diana rolled her eyes at him even as she kissed his temple and attempted, without success, to smooth down his bedhead again. It was a lost cause. “I would tell Blair but she would likely skip this morning’s sessions to join you.”

“You'll just have to let her assume you wore me out last night,” Steve said and grinned around his
Diana flicked his ear. “She will worry about your health if you do not make an appearance at some point. And more than just meeting me with coffee.”

“You've got an hour and a half for lunch today, don't you?” Steve asked. Diana nodded. “I'll come meet you.”

“Good,” Diana said, she turned on the shower and dropped her robe.

Steve stopped brushing all together. It took him a moment to start again. He spat and rinsed quickly. “Am I joining you?”

“Yes,” Diana said, looking over her shoulder before she stepped under the spray. “Unless you need a further invitation?”

Steve did not.

She looked impeccable as always when she left their hotel suite, pausing just long enough to stop by the desk where he had set up to kiss him when he tilted his head back.

“Don't get so absorbed you forget to eat,” Diana told him.

“I already ordered room service,” Steve told her.

“Good,” Diana said and kissed him again lightly. Then she grinned. “Have fun with your forgeries.”

“Have fun with your admin meetings,” Steve replied.

Diana turned and made a face at him before the hotel door closed behind her.

Steve turned back to his work. All the records for the Wayne collection had been re-digitized in the lead up to its full debut in Gotham. It wasn't particularly hard for Steve find out that, yes, the files for the pulled pieces had been digitized and then find those files. They hadn't actually been taken offline, just unlinked from the material curators could sign in to peruse. From there, it was just a matter of figuring out the naming convention and applying it to the pulled pieces.

He was at it for about two hours before his cell rang.

“May I inquire as to why you are poking around in our archive, Captain Trevor?” Alfred asked, tone very level.

“Huh. It's been awhile since anyone called me that,” Steve replied. “I was hoping I would have some good news for you.”

There was a pause. “Do you believe you made a mistake in your identification of the origin of some of Master Wayne’s paintings?”

“No,” Steve said. “No, with Corot it’s inevitable. It feels like there are more jokes about all the forgeries than actual paintings with Corot. But there’s a particularly odious van Gogh forger. I was hoping Mr. Wayne’s forgery would have someone else behind it.”

“Does it?” Alfred asked.

Steve grimaced. “No, it's definitely a Wacker. I'm actually shocked it hasn't been identified before
now.”

Alfred was quiet for a moment. “That painting has never previously been on public display.”

Someone’s personal favourite then. Steve thought he had already put together whose and why. He wondered if Bruce realized it; he would bet the store that Alfred knew.

He cleared his threat. “I do have some good news for you.”

“Oh?” Alfred said, his tone disbelieving.

“There’s a Pissarro that was never listed in the catalogue,” Steve said. He had happened upon it by accident – literally because of a typo. “Probably because the same painting is hanging in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.”

“I am aware of that particular painting,” Alfred said dryly. “Master Thomas Wayne kept it as a reminder for himself after he discovered it was a forgery.”

“Well, whoever digitized your files was either very thorough or an amateur sleuth or both because I'm looking at the bill of sale,” Steve said. “I don't know who made the initial identification but I'm pretty sure it's wrong and you're going to make some people in Boston very annoyed. I would need to see the painting itself to know for sure.”

Again, a pause. “That is unexpected.”

“I can dig into it more, put things together for you, if you want,” Steve offered.

It wouldn't be hard, the line of sale was very clear and led right back to original exhibition, which was fairly rare. From what Steve could tell from poking around where he really shouldn't, Boston’s records were...less impeccable, to put it politely. It wouldn't take more than a look at the paper records and a few phone calls for him to double check that no records had been forged.

“Yes, that would be welcome,” Alfred said. “I will naturally have to run it past Master Wayne but I will give you your own access for now –”

Steve had been using Diana’s.

“– as I am going to have all files the curators do not need to access taken offline properly,” Alfred said. “It was an oversight to leave them active.”

“Happens all the time,” Steve said. He was honestly surprised that the offer was being accepted.

“I am aware,” Alfred said dryly. Steve grinned. He thought he could like Alfred. “We try to avoid such sloppy practices at Wayne Enterprises.”

“I can only imagine,” Steve said. “It would be helpful to have a look at the paper records. And you’ll have to have my work independently verified. As you may have seen, I try to keep my name off things like this.”

“Quite,” Alfred said. “If only we had any world famous curators in town who could take credit.”

Steve snorted. Alfred’s voice did not change. Steve was not surprised but he remained impressed by him.

“I can dig up the relevant papers,” Alfred offered. “I can send a car now, if you’re free.”
Steve had a moment’s regret that he wasn’t.

“I’m meeting Diana for lunch around noon,” Steve said. “I would be happy to come by after that.”

“I will send car to the museum, then,” Alfred replied.

“Great,” Steve said.

He momentarily wondered if Alfred realized the drama this would unleash – he couldn’t imagine that a man like Alfred wouldn’t realize. People usually reacted differently when Steve told them they had a multi-million dollar painting that they had previously thought was worth nothing but he could see how that would not matter as much to Bruce Wayne.

“May I ask what that noise is?” Alfred asked just as Steve thought they were finished.

“What noise?” Steve asked absently. It clicked before Alfred clarified. “Oh. It's my oxygen tank. Guess I’m used to it.”

Maryam had tricked him into admitting as much several years ago. Part of him was still annoyed.

“Do accommodations need to be made?” Alfred ask. “I did not notice one with you yesterday.”

“No. I do my time for a few hours in the morning and at night, Steve said before adding more casually: “It’s in my treatment plan, if Bruce shared my files with you.”

“He did,” Alfred confirmed. “I have not had time to give them more than a cursory glance.”

Steve couldn't tell if Alfred was lying to him or not. They had very specifically not dug into his records. “Ah. Well, it's nothing to worry about.”

“Good to hear,” Alfred said. “I'll have that car waiting when your lunch is finished.”

Steve highly suspected Alfred would be the one driving it too. “Great. I'll see you then.”

Alfred said goodbye and hung up. Steve checked his watch, turned off the tank and stretched before rubbing at his nose. The air in the hotel room was too dry. It was irritating him. They had everything step up at home to make the things he needed to maintain a decent level of health as unobtrusive as possible – including room humidity. It was always just a little harder when they travelled.

He changed into dark slacks, a light blue button down and a dark grey sports coat to meet Diana. Steve was a fan of how casual clothing and loungewear had changed over time but sometimes he missed the sharpness of a full suit. There were days when it provided a certain camouflage in contrast to his scars and his limp. It wasn't quite the image he wanted to project right now, unfortunately, not to Diana's colleagues and not to Bruce Wayne.

He got to the museum early. He had made the effort to charm a couple of the docents and security guards yesterday. Bob pulled him out of line for the metal detectors and bag check when he spotted him and waved him over to the secondary check.

“How's your hip doing today?” he asked, waving the detector wand over Steve.

Steve waited patiently for it to go off. He was used to it – it was what happened when metal and ceramic made up a large chunk of your hip and thigh bone.

It did, predictably. Bob did a cursory pat down. Steve had become accustomed to never putting
anything in that pocket.

“Better than yesterday,” Steve said, gamely. He had spent most of yesterday getting a physical sense of the museum. It had been a little too much time on his feet. “I'm really just here to meet my wife for lunch.”

“Scuttlebust says they're running a bit late,” Bob told him. “Okay, you're good to go.”

“Thanks,” Steve said. He intentionally leaned on his cane a bit more than he needed to for a moment and smiled. “What time is your break? We could bring you back something for lunch.”

“Not for another few hours but that's nice of you,” Bob said.

“Yeah, these meetings always run long but I hope not that long,” Steve said.

It got him a distracted smile – a school group had just arrived. Steve shared a look of commiseration with Bob and said: “Good luck.”

“Thanks man,” Bob said before turning back to his job.

Steve checked his phone. Diana had messaged him to say she would be late with a long string of frowny faces. Steve texted back to let her know he was on site. The school groups seemed to be mainly clustering in antiquities. He texted that to her too. He knew it would make her smile.

Steve headed over to the Modern American Art section. That was harder to find in French museums. It was as good a way to kill time as any.

He stopped just outside the first gallery. He hadn't expected to find Bruce Wayne standing alone just inside. Steve thought about turning around, maybe going to chat with the docents again, but then he realized Bruce was staring blankly at...

Ah.

One of the flower paintings.

--

Bruce was bored.

He had planned on coming to these meetings with the specific intention of...charming Diana.

That wasn't going to happen anymore.

Diana had been unfailingly polite in their extremely limited interactions. Her colleague Blair actually appeared to be taking the lead for the Louvre’s team.

Blair wasn't a fan of Bruce Wayne. Oh, she was entirely professional when she spoke to him or the other curators but Bruce was good at reading between the lines. Her smile was sharp and dismissive.

Bruce answered it with his best bland, dilettante billionaire smile.

Dr. Neil was not oblivious to the subtle snubbing, though, and he was bridling at it more than Bruce thought was necessary. Particularly since his bluster and fussiness did not seem to have any effect on Diana's colleague. Bruce wasn't sure anything much would have an effect on Diana’s colleague.
It surprised Bruce when Diana appeared beside him during one of the coffee breaks. Bruce tried one of his false smiles – his most patronizing smile. He had been wearing it enough throughout the meetings.

She saw through it immediately, of course.

“I do not know if you realize,” she said quietly. “But Dr. Neil is trying to protect you.”

Bruce stared at her for a moment. He couldn't decide whether or not to laugh. “I don't need protection.”

“He only knows you as Bruce Wayne,” Diana said. “He is guarding your interests quite fiercely.”

Diana sounded like she approved. Bruce smiled again, dismissing it. “Dr. Neil doesn’t like that anyone outside of Gotham gets to display any part of Wayne collection. He's been with Gotham museum forever. He thinks of it as his own.”

“He attempts to tend to it as if it were his own,” Diana said. “And he does not trust any of us to take care of it the way the people of Gotham would. He does not believe we value it – and by extension you – the way you should.”

Diana paused. “He is not entirely wrong about that. He is getting more push back than he should be from some of the other curators.”

“Your colleague has been a treat,” Bruce agreed dryly.

“Blair makes her feelings known and they are very clearly about you not the Gotham museum staff. For that reason alone, I trust her more than those who do not,” Diana said. “Dr. Neil has raised more valid concerns than frivolous ones.”

“I'll keep that in mind,” Bruce said.

“Steve knows of him by reputation from several projects he's worked out,” Diana mentioned. “He thought him an honourable man.”

Of course.

“Well, if he has Steve Trevor’s approval,” Bruce said sarcastically.

Diana cut him a look that made Bruce glad he had said that in public where she couldn't react with more than a glare. She threw her paper cup, half empty, into the trash and walked away.

When Bruce looked around, Dr. Neil was deep in an animated conversation with Diana's colleague from the Louvre but there were several people – male curators all – surreptitiously watching them with annoyingly knowing looks.

Bruce left before the next session started.

He wasn't sure why he ended up downstairs in the gallery. It wasn't particularly where he wanted to be, especially standing in front of an unmemorable painting of wildflowers by an American artist who had died young and never achieved any kind of fame.

Bruce couldn't imagine why his parents had purchased it.

At least the gallery was empty.
“Who was the van Gogh fan?” A voice asked behind him.

Bruce turned to see Steve Trevor watching him. He either hadn't heard him come in or he hadn't noticed him when he entered the room.

Bruce didn't like either option.

“How do you know it's not me?” Bruce asked.

Steve looked at him in exasperation but then shook his head and smiled. “The acquisition dates are wrong. Besides, I would know if you were a player in the impressionist market.”

It annoyed Bruce. “All part of your freelancing?”

“Sure,” Steve laughed a little. “There was a lot of work there when I fell into it.”

“None of your files say exactly how you fell into it,” Bruce said. “You just seemed to appear one day.”

“A friend,” Steve said, then he looked at Bruce and seemed to decide something. “Our friend Sameer introduced us to some people who were tracking down looted art after the Second World War. Diana had some experience with it. I was mostly just tagging along.”

“That's not what your files say,” Bruce told him, watching him suspiciously.

“No, I had a lucky break with one forged painting and after that, everyone assumed my expertise just ran to modern art instead of antiquities,” Steve said.

He looked at Bruce, smiled and shrugged. “The truth is, I only knew in that first case because my mother used to drag me and my sister to galleries when we were kids. She would have been an artist, I think, if she had been born in another time. But I knew there was something fishy about that particular painting because my mother took me to see it the day Mrs. Gardner put it on display in her museum. It didn’t make sense for it to be in Germany after the war – Mrs. Gardner was always very picky about where her paintings went.”

He laughed a little and he looked at Bruce as if he was inviting him in on a secret. “She would have had a conniption over that robbery in the 90s.”

“So you were a fraud,” Bruce said, unmoved.

Steve's expression didn't falter. It was maddening. “No, after that, I figured the best way to be useful was to put some effort into it and become knowledgeable enough for the work. I built my reputation from there.”

“Besides, Diana had the Greco-roman stuff covered, Steve said, warmth in his voice. “When she decided she wanted to make a career of it, mine went...more underground, as I assume you found out.”

“It seems like it would have made more sense the other way around,” Bruce said.

“I don't know why. Diana's the one who actually likes this stuff,” Steve said. He gestured to the painting. “I can appreciate it but I don’t love it like she does.”

Bruce kept his eyes off the cane Steve leaned on. Steve seemed to notice anyway.
“Oh, I'm very rarely part of the physical reclaiming,” Steve said. “My caper days are over. And I haven't been shot in years. Diana doesn't like it, much, when that happens. I'm just good at figuring out puzzles.”

“Is that why Alfred tells me you were looking into our files this morning?” Bruce asked.

Steve shrugged, unrepentant. “Yep. I was hoping to determine the source of your van Gogh forgery.”

“And?”

“I found it but, as Alfred may have told you, I found a more interesting lead to pursued,” Steve said.

“He might have mentioned it,” Bruce said. “I would like to know what you found about the forgery, though.”

Steve looked at Bruce for a moment, then back at the painting. He seemed like he was deciding something and he didn't seem to care that Bruce was still watching him.

A group of school children trooped past. Steve face changed, brightened, and he just smiled gently when a few of them stared at him, at his scars. He waited until they were the only ones in the room again.

“I actually figured something out, looking into the forgery. How about I tell you who the van Gogh fan was first? And then you can decide if you want to know,” Steve offered, quietly.

“Fine,” Bruce said, ignoring the impulse to roll his eyes.

“My guess would be,” Steve said very quietly. “That your father bought the van Gogh for your mother.”

Bruce bit down so hard on his tongue he tasted copper. If Steve noticed anything, he didn’t say anything, he just continued.

“And this painting, as well,” Steve said, nodding to it. “They usually did their purchasing together, under both names. The sheer volume and variety of work they purchased tells you they were doing it because they enjoyed it, enjoyed art, not just as an investment.”

“But when I was looking into the fake van Gogh, I realized there was a weird, discrepancy in the dates that was unrelated to the forgery. Then I noticed there were a few discrepancies, mostly impressionist paintings but also more modern ones, even a sculpture or two. They weren’t generally what your parents collected and they were all negotiated and purchased before March but only logged in the collection records after April 21,” Steve looked back at the wildflowers in front of them. “They're all paintings of flowers. Like this one.”

He was quiet again, waiting for Bruce maybe, as if Bruce had any way to respond to that.

“That's your mother’s birthday, isn't it?” Steve said finally. He was still looking at the painting, not at Bruce at all.

“Yes,” Bruce said. He was surprised his voice was so steady.

“So this painting, the fake van Gogh, at least a dozen more from before they were even married...your father bought your mother flowers for her birthday every year,” Steve's smile
was... soft. There was something kind in his eyes. “That's sweet. It's just – it's lovely. They really should be displayed all together.”

Steve sounded... he sounded completely genuine. Bruce did not know what to say. He clung to the silence. He had become so used to silence, if rarely when another person was there.

He was surprised when he spoke first. His mouth felt dry. “Why don't I want to know who the forger is?”

“He's... it's a long story,” Steve said, his expression neutral in a way that Bruce thought meant he was censoring himself greatly. “One that would ruin the painting for me.”

“Just being a forgery wouldn't?” Bruce asked, surprised and a little curious despite himself.

“Not necessarily,” Steve said, he shrugged. “I'm not one to advocate willful ignorance but... your father bought your mother flowers for her birthday. You can treat it as if you had found them pressed in a book – I wouldn't blame you. Put it away again or keep it where you want to remember. Plenty of people have reproduction van Gogh’s now.”

It was kinder than Bruce thought he would be. He didn't know what to do with that. It was safer to ask: “Does Diana know about this?”

Steve blinked. It was like breaking a spell.

“What? Who the forger was or who bought the paintings?” Steve asked.

“Both,” Bruce said.

“Yes, she knows what I think,” Steve said levelly. “Regarding both.”

It gave Bruce a reason to feel angry. He wished she didn't. Her or anyone. Not until he knew what to do with the information.

“Because you tell her everything,” Bruce said. He could not completely keep the snideness from his tone, he didn't even want to. He didn't need anyone's pity. “Even when they're not your secrets to tell.”

Bruce had not realized how open Steve's face had been until it shut down.

“No,” Steve said, unapologetic. “Not even if it hurts. In the long run, keeping things from each other turns into a poison. We're together for too long a haul for that.”

He looked at Bruce steadily with the expression of a man who knew, despite everything, despite all of his frailties, that he would outlast him.

“Why are you here, anyway?” Bruce asked. “I thought you came yesterday.”

“I'm meeting Diana for lunch,” Steve said because of course he was. “Would you like to join us?”

Bruce had not been expecting that. “Does Diana know you're asking me?”

“We aren't telepathic. So, no,” Steve said. He looked faintly amused again. “But I wouldn't ask if I didn't know she would be fine with it.”

It was what Bruce had wanted. He had even planned what restaurant to take her to.
“I thought I was already ruining her reputation,” Bruce said.

“She’s not accepting your offer,” Steve said, absolute surety in his voice. “And you've struck up and unexpected friendship with her husband. Go figure.”

Bruce smiled, well aware it was patronizing. “That seems implausible.”

Steve didn't acknowledge it. He looked at Bruce and said, honestly: “It doesn't have to be untrue. That's your choice to make.”

“Steve?”

They both turned. Bruce wondered how Diana and Steve could have ever gone on a mission together. The way Steve's face lit up when he saw her was ridiculously transparent.

“Hello love,” Steve said. She walked over to join them and he offered her his arm automatically.

She took it, smiling. “I see you have charmed the docents as usual. One of them told me, very enthusiastically, that I could find you here. Are you ready to go? They want us to come back early.”

“Sure,” Steve answered easily. He looked at Bruce; Diana's gaze followed his. “Are you joining us?”

“Mr. Wayne!”

Bruce just managed to suppress a groan.

“Dr. Neil,” Bruce said as he turned and looked at then curator. The man looked like he had run there. He was out of breath.

“Do you have a moment?” Dr. Neil asked. “You were absent from the last session and some of the suggestions from London – I have concerns.”

The man didn't quite look beside himself but it was close.

“The Louvre agrees with you on this matter, Dr. Neil,” Diana said, smiling brightly at him. “Even my colleague. She had...interesting things to say about Dr. Baker's suggestion.”

“Thank you,” Dr. Neil said, genuinely, before looking to Bruce again. “If we could sort this out before the next session, it would be helpful.”

“Of course,” Bruce said. He smiled blandly at Steve and Diana. “I'll take a raincheck.”

Walking away with Dr. Neil, Bruce wasn't sure if he meant it or not.

Chapter End Notes

So, Martha Wayne doesn't appear to have a birthday listed anywhere? I just made one up! If I've missed it somewhere, please let me know.

In case you couldn't tell, I don't actually know much about art or how the art world works today and most of what I know is related to repatriation cases so...take
everything I write about that with a grain (or a whole damn spoonful) of salt.

If you're wondering why this story updates so much faster than Kind Old Sun, it's because this chapter was 12 pages long. The next Kind Old Sun chapter is 40 pages long at this point and I'm only about half finished it. Sorry! It's coming, I swear! I also have a back log of the chapters for this fic and the monster-long Kind Old Sun chapter killed my back log for it.
When Diana arrived at Wayne manor late that afternoon, Steve and Alfred had already become acquaintances. Steve had a great gift of charming people, making friends, wherever he went. It was an asset for a spy.

He would have — and had — said the same thing about her. Diana would not entirely disagree but Steve could charm anyone, regardless of what he actually thought of them. Diana thought herself less adept when it was based on falsehood.

She was surprised at how genuine Steve sounded as she walked down the hallway toward the kitchen. He had not put on his most charming persona, he was as much himself as possible, though somewhat guarded still.

They both knew there would be no intentional charming Alfred. A friendship was impossible while Bruce was still...reluctant to accept them on their own terms. Nor would either of them willing to try — Alfred was too important to Bruce, an attempt at anything more than kindness and civility before things were settled would only hurt everyone involved and sow discord in the long term. Neither Steve nor Diana wanted that.

She imagined Steve was intentionally keeping things light. They were talking about books: more specifically bad detective fiction and spy novels.

Common enough ground, Diana supposed.

“No, I only read post-WWII spy novels,” Steve was saying. “I can’t stand war memoirs in general. *Lord of the Rings* is the only war novel I’ll read.”

Oh no. He was not going to win another convert to his cause by convincing them before Diana could speak.

“It is not a war novel,” Diana said, joining them abruptly in the kitchen. Neither of them even pretended to look surprised.

Steve had the audacity to grin at her. He was sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of tea — in a cup and saucer even, at his elbow. Alfred looked to be preparing dinner.

“It’s a war novel with linguistic in jokes. That’s all I’ll give you,” Steve said. He jerked his chin toward Alfred. “He won’t let me help. I asked already.”

Diana gave him a look. “When was the last time you willingly allowed someone to cook in your kitchen?”
Steve huffed. Alfred glanced at her. She thought he might be almost smiling.

“Exactly, Ms. Prince,” Alfred said. “And I found that book...tedious, either way.”

“Steve recommends ‘skipping to the good bits’ and ignoring Tolkien’s more generous descriptions,” Diana said.

There was that hint of a smile again. “And you disagree?”

“It is a book centred around languages,” Diana said. “The words he chooses are important.”

“Centred around war,” Steve said. “Obsessed with language, maybe.”

“How long has this argument been going on for?” Alfred queried.

Diana and Steve looked at each other. Steve shrugged. “It published in what? The 60s?”

“Thereabouts,” Diana said, nodding.

“I endeavour not to become involved in old grudges,” Alfred said decisively.

Steve laughed. Diana smiled as she came to stand beside him. Her hand slid over his shoulders automatically and for just a moment he rested his head against the side of her hip.

Alfred, she did not doubt, noted every move.

“Bruce left early,” Diana mentioned. “I expected to find him here.”

“Ah. There was an incident he had to deal with,” Alfred said.

Diana tensed immediately and Steve was as suddenly as alert. She was shocked Bruce wouldn't say anything. “Does he need assistance?”

Alfred looked up, looking at them in confusion for a moment before understanding dawned. “No, not that. There was shareholder issue.”

“Nothing too serious I hope?” Steve ventured.

“Nothing that he cannot handle,” Alfred said. “There are always periodic concerns about...distractions. It has never come to anything.”

Diana did not miss the evaluating look he gave them before continuing. When he glanced back at the stove, Steve shifted. His thumb brushed against her leg, seemingly affectionate.

It was a quick burst of morse code: *Fmr actor. Sm time Sofia.*

That raised many questions. Steve’s face had not changed from amused and engaged but they had many silent ways to signal alarm to each other and he had deployed none of them.

If Alfred knew of the possible point of connection between them, he had not betrayed it to Steve yet.

“I believe he should be along shortly,” Alfred said. His gaze turned to Diana. “How were today's meetings?”

“Long and tedious, as they tend to be,” Diana said. She glanced between him and Steve and
smiled. “But productive. As I have heard you were as well.”

“Yes, we have had an unexpectedly...” Alfred began saying but Diana could not help but turn her head, hearing a man’s tread coming down the hall.

“...productive day,” Alfred finished as Bruce entered the kitchen, looking distracted.

For just a moment, there was a faint look of surprise on his face before his smarmy, bland mask descended.

Diana could hardly keep herself from scowling. She hated it.

Not quite as much as she hated the many masks she had seen Steve wear but she still hated it.

“I didn't realize we were having guests for dinner,” Bruce said, smiling condescendingly.

Steve raised his eyebrows at him. Diana fought the urge to roll her eyes.

She had hoped they were making progress away from this. She thought they were.

“It seemed simpler as I believed you would be meeting tonight and Captain Trevor was already here,” Alfred said. “I confess I was unaware Ms. Prince was on her way until she arrived and I'm not sure where she parked.”

“I did not drive,” Diana said simply.

There was a beat as they all realized what she meant. The manor was not in walking distance. For a moment none of them but Steve knew how to react. He grinned at her.

Alfred looked almost amused. Bruce disgruntled.

“Yes, Alfred notified me about that,” Bruce cleared his throat and went to pour himself a generous glass of scotch. There was that smile again. “So, which of my paintings is fake this time?”

“As it happens, it's not one of your paintings. Yours is the real one,” Steve told him. “But you'll need an outside expert to verify it and get the ball rolling. I would recommend Dr. Blair Rosenbaum, since she's already in town.”

Bruce snorted. Alfred looked at Steve a bit askance.

Diana thought about it for a moment.

“That is not a bad suggestion,” she allowed.

Steve inclined his head and said wryly. “Thank you.”

Bruce took a rather large sip of his scotch. “There are other people I can think of.”

Steve was resisting the urge to roll his eyes. Diana could tell. “Blair hasn’t been shy in regards to what she thinks of this exhibition but she is honest to a fault, if only when it comes to art. She's well known and respected in the field and it takes it out of the hands of a New York or Gotham curator.”

“I hardly see how that's an advantage,” Bruce said.

“You're discrediting a painting from MFA Boston,” Steve said with a shrug. “It makes it less
political to keep the American museums out of it. Especially Gotham, since it's from the Wayne collection.”

“Dr. Rosenbaum would be a good choice,” Diana said. “Her work is her greatest accomplishment. Her personal feelings would not factor in to something like this. And the London curators…”

Diana sighed. “They did not bring their best people in this area. Their focus has been the older artifacts. Even if they had, they have caused…issues regarding the exhibition. None of them be my first recommendation.”

“Blair has a history with identification issues too. We’ve worked on the same projects, albeit at much different stages,” Steve said. “Her involvement has always been better publicized than mine. I’m sure you would have no trouble finding enough of a resume online for her.”

“She your go to?” Bruce asked sardonically.

Steve did not rankle, although Diana could tell by the set of his shoulders — just a little too loose and comfortable, as if he thought he was going to have to adjust his posture at a moment’s notice — that he wanted to.

“No, actually,” Steve said. “The Louvre occasionally hires me on contract. I avoid using their people officially otherwise. I usually hand things off well before curators or art historians get involved and…we’re not always on the same side.”

Bruce raised an eyebrow at that. Steve shrugged. “Museums don't always like it when you point out one of their pieces — sometimes many pieces — were gained through looting. Sometimes inadvertently and sometimes very much not. Hell, even when we started, art was returned to countries not individuals. Diana can try to change things from the inside but when she has to maintain a certain level of distance…that's when I find ways to get the right information to the right people.”

“The people I talked to seem to respect you pretty well for a man whose work they don't like,” Bruce commented.

“No one in my profession likes the black market or the smugglers that supply it,” Diana said, watching Bruce carefully. “Enough of Steve's work causes disruptions there that most curators respect him.”

Bruce smiled again. Entirely fake. Diana wanted to throw her hands up in exasperation. “So I read.”

He poured another drink. “So, this is going to piss that Boston museum off? That must sting since you're from there.”

“A least it’s not the Gardner,” Steve said with an easy smile, as if he were inviting Bruce in on a joke. “My mother would be appalled.”

Diana slid her hand over Steve's shoulders. It was not as easy for him to joke about as he made it appear. Boston, his life before the war, before he met her, his family, they were complicated things for him.

And the less said about his war the better.

Diana wondered when Bruce would start jabbing at that topic.
Bruce’s jaw clenched. He took a large sip of his drink.

Diana frowned.

Alfred pulled a dish out of the oven. He wiped his hands on the dish cloth and looked at them all with as blandly pleasant an expression as Steve ever used.

“Dinner will be served in about ten minutes,” he told them all while looked straight at Bruce. “If any of you wanted to wash up first.”

Bruce inclined his head. “Excuse me.”

He left. Diana and Steve looked at each other — Steve’s smile was rueful and a little annoyed and Diana knew he could read the impatience in the small details of her face — as if to say to each other, through their expressions alone: Well. That could have gone better.

Dinner was an awkward, stilted affair. Bruce was not openly hostile but he clearly did not want them there.

Or, at least, he did not want them there the way they were.

Diana was reaching the end of her patience with him.

She understood that they had surprised him and perhaps it had not been the best plan — no matter that they could have introduced him to Steve less abruptly if he hadn’t simply showed up at her hotel room. And Diana doubted things were going exactly as Bruce had planned, particularly since his plans involved convincing her to move to Gotham.

But he had wanted her — them — there. They had come. It was ridiculous to bring them all this way just to stonewall them because he no longer had the upper hand in the situation.

Diana watched Bruce attempt to bait Steve, asking him incredibly patronizing questions about his work as if it were something to be dismissed, as if he thought Steve offered nothing valuable to their partnership. Steve looked vaguely amused — he enjoyed being underestimated, there was no shaking the spy from him — but he glanced at her occasionally, even nudging her foot once under the table.

Diana did not like it when people treated Steve as if he were less than he was.

A team could not be created this way.

Something would have to change.

Perhaps it was time for her to lay out their position plainly.

Diana had left Steve to hand off the flash drive with his information to Bruce. She had been so angry and the idea of handing over Steve’s information like that was anathema to her. She was not sure she would have done it, in the end.

She thought that may have been a mistake.

It was time she had a more direct conversation with Bruce.

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After dinner, Steve excused himself to make a phone call.
Bruce didn’t buy it for a minute.

“Never had someone ditch me in my own manor before,” Bruce said. He swirled the scotch in his glass, looking down at it while watching Diana from the corner of his eye. “I suppose it must have been an important call.”

Diana looked at him in disbelief. She shook her head and looked at him squarely. “I am sick of these games. He was being polite and you are well aware of it. You would prefer he was absent for our conversations, no matter that I will relay it to him later. We have manufactured an excuse for him to be absent and still you decide your best path forward is to insult him.”

Bruce stared at her. Diana stared back.

“You clearly wanted to speak to me without Steve present,” Diana said directly. “Say what you wish.”

Bruce leaned back against the table, his drink in his hand. He tried not to look as thrown for a loop as he felt. “Well, I wasn’t expecting an ambush...”

“This is not an ambush,” Diana said, her eyes sparking. “This is an honest conversation. We have gotten nowhere so far without one and I am sick of mincing words.”

She did not look away from him. “You dislike my beloved. Fine. You are under no obligation to befriend him. But you will have to learn to tolerate him. If I am to be a part of this, he must be as well. Our lives are too entwined for it to be otherwise.”

Annoyance bubbled up in Bruce's throat. It was unnerving how unwavering Diana's gaze was. He hated that it felt like this was the first time she was being honest with him.

Except...maybe that first night. She had done nothing to hide her annoyance with him but she hadn't done anything to hide her feelings for Steve either.

And maybe when she had come up to him at the coffee table earlier that day. He hadn’t been able to think of an ulterior motive to that interaction.

That didn’t mean there wasn’t one.

“I don't...dislike him,” Bruce said, half surprised himself that it was truthful. He did not think he entirely understood Steve Trevor and he was wary of him, what he might mean, but there was more to like about him than dislike, really.

Bruce would have preferred to dislike him.

Diana looked...wary.

“Alfred likes him,” Bruce commented. Then felt like an idiot for offering that as some kind of...consolation.

Diana took a breath. For the first time, Bruce got an impression of just how much she was controlling her temper and forcing herself to rise above it. “I do not understand what the problem is then.”

“He's a liability,” Bruce said. “One I didn't know to plan for.”

He had meant it to bite but instantly saw it was the wrong thing to say. Diana glowered at him and
her shoulders rose as if in anticipation of a battle.

“Whatever you may think of his abilities,” Diana spat, “he has proven himself a better, more capable man than you or any other I have ever known both before and after the injuries he gained saving an entire city from destruction.”

“Not like that,” Bruce corrected himself quickly. “Not because - he already threatened to shoot me, okay? I'm not saying he could but I'm not saying he would do worse than anyone else either.”

Diana did not look mollified. “You are lucky he did not know that you used kryptonian gas against Clark until after we had returned to Paris and I had the space to talk him down. Not even I would have been able to keep him from acting if he had discovered it while you were close by.”

“I understand that he doesn't have the most rational reaction to it,” Bruce said. “I get it.”

Diana crossed her arms. “I convinced him there were extenuating circumstances in your case but you should not forget that I am intimately familiar with the pain and destruction such things leave in their wake, no matter that it cannot harm me. We saw whole villages slaughtered during the war. Steve’s sacrifice was the only thing that kept the death toll from being even more terrible.”

Bruce was fully aware that Diana would have seen the worst of what poison gas could do. Steve's early medical files had been full of reference to the wife refusing to leave even when the doctors deemed the injuries or their treatment too gruesome for a woman to handle. Some even had a grudging respect for it — it meant at least they didn't have to get their hands as dirty.

“But that's my point,” Bruce said, pressing on because that — what he had done to Clark — was not an argument he wanted to get bogged down in. It wasn't one he was going to win. He wasn't even sure he wanted to win it. “He's your liability. Your weakness. He's human, he can obviously be hurt and that can be used against you.”

Diana was looking at him like he was the world’s biggest idiot.

Worse, she was looking at him like she pitied him.

“We gave you all his files, Bruce,” Diana said, trying to be patient when she was so clearly frustrated. “You must know that's not true. We had barely found each other when we both proved we would put our duty to the world above our love for each other.”

Diana huffed, her arms falling to her sides. Her gaze was still sharp, the only thing that tempered it were her obvious feelings for the man she spoke about.

“I have left him when he has been so ill he can hardly take care of himself to stop your people from massacring each other,” Diana said. “I have stepped over his bleeding body to defeat things from worlds you cannot imagine. And he walked away from me and into that plane because he would not allow others to die when it was in his power to stop it, even if it meant certain death.”

“He would still run to that plane, Bruce,” Diana said. She shook her head. “We would not love each other the way we do if our hearts were not the same in this, if we did not know we would choose to save the world over each other over and over again. And you call him a liability?”

“He’s a way to hurt you,” Bruce said. “And you know it. Otherwise, you wouldn’t put so much effort into hiding the rest of your family.”

“They’re civilians. We protect civilians,” Diana said. “Steve has not been a civilian for twice as long as you’ve been alive. We are well aware of the risks. We have been living with them and their
consequences for a hundred years!"

And you’ve been hiding for a hundred years because of it, Bruce thought but didn’t say. Nothing Diana had said was untrue but the fact remained: she had hidden from the world for a hundred years when she could have been a beacon and the only reason Bruce could see for that was sitting upstairs. Why would she bother to hide if not to protect him?

But he needed her as an ally.

“I have never stood aside when I have been needed,” Diana said. “But you are asking for more than that. We have been trying to help you but we cannot if you refuse to accept anything that is not on your terms alone.”

“What exactly do you expect from me?” Bruce asked.

Diana stared at him for a moment, as if she could not believe her ears. Finally, she sighed.

“Stop baiting my beloved. It only succeeds in annoying me,” Diana said.

Bruce withheld a grimace, one of the more annoying things about Steve was how hard Bruce found it to get a reaction from him when he wanted one.

“You were the one who wanted us here,” Diana continued. “But you have stonewalled every overture and offer to help we make. Be honest with us and let us help or stop this charade.”

Bruce snorted at that. Diana’s glare could have cut glass. Bruce didn't back down, he couldn't.

“I found out you had a husband by accident,” Bruce said drily. “Let's not overstate how honest you've been.”

“If you had not arrived uninvited to my hotel room, that introduction may have gone more smoothly,” Diana told him. “You invade my privacy and then call me dishonest?”

“You shared confidential information about my identity and the league with him!” Bruce said.

“You say you tell each other everything. Did it ever cross your mind that maybe you shouldn't share other people's secrets?”

“You looked up my credit card information!” Diana told him. “You were in my work email — do not try to deny it, I know you were. And you complain because I refuse to poison my relationship as you do yours by not telling my beloved things that could have a monumental effect on our life? We willingly shared his files with you for Zeus’ sake.”

“Only the ones you wanted me to see,” Bruce countered.

For a moment, Bruce thought she was going to strike him.

“Do you think,” Diana said, so much banked rage in her voice that it made the hairs on the back of Bruce’s neck stand up, “that either of us like sharing those files? His medical files? Do you think Steve wants anyone seeing those?”

Bruce was glad there was a table behind him. It kept him from taking an involuntary step back.

“As a way to gain sympath-”

“Do not finish your sentence,” Diana practically growled.

Bruce's mouth clicked shut. The way she was looking at him made him feel slightly sick.
“There are only four living people who have seen those files in full,” Diana spat. “And you are one of them because I told him you were honorable.”

Bruce said nothing.

“What do you want from us, truly?” Diana demanded. “Our family photos? The letters he writes to me when I have to leave him behind because your people give into the darkness inside and start slaughtering each other again? Do you need me to tell you what it felt like to hold him when he was in terrible, unimaginable pain and wonder if this was the coughing fit that would kill him? I know what it’s like to have his blood on my hands, to wipe it from his mouth. Is that what you wanted to know?”

“And you, of course, will give nothing in return,” Diana said. “You have thrown away every attempt we have made to share laughter, to forge friendship. What makes you think you have earned the sharing of our sorrows? What right do you have to them?”

She stood straight and tall. Bruce didn't think he had ever seen her stand otherwise. He knew he was taller than her but he didn't feel it, not in that moment.

“We have each other for that,” Diana told him.

We don't need you, Bruce heard as clearly as if she had shouted it, as Diana turned and walked away, any pity gone from her gaze.

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Bruce woke up in the Batcave with a hangover the next morning.

“You're late for the first session this morning,” Alfred told him as he put a coffee down next to his elbow. “Dr. Neil has called three times.”

Bruce looked at the coffee blearily. Alfred had been watching him, it was the only way he could have reacted that quickly. He curled his hand around it and drained half of it at once in appreciation.

It was lukewarm. Yes, Alfred had been watching him.

“We fixed the issue with the issue with the British museum yesterday,” Bruce said hoarsely.

“I believe he was intent on getting your permission to go ahead with the authentication of the Pizarro,” Alfred told him. “He thought Dr. Rosenbaum was an excellent choice of authenticator. I believe he wanted to lord it over her.”

Bruce nearly choked, so mad for a moment he couldn’t see straight.

“They didn’t have any business telling him about this!” Bruce roared. “All the hypocritical bullshit they give me about staying out of their business — no one asked them to stick their noses in mine!”

There was silence in the Batcave for a long moment. Just the sound of Bruce’s own breathing.

“I informed Dr. Neil of the Pissaro yesterday,” Alfred said. “And gave him permission to go ahead with preparations. I mentioned Dr. Rosenbaum as a neutral party when he called this morning.”

Bruce’s jaw hurt, he was grinding his teeth so hard. “On Captain Trevor and Ms. Prince’s suggestion?”
Alfred was silent for another moment.

“No. Sir,” Alfred said. “Though I agree with Captain Trevor’s reasoning, I made the suggestion in the face of Dr. Neil’s enthusiasm. He was quite excited by the news.”

“It’s not his goddamn collection,” Bruce growled.

“No, Master Wayne,” Alfred said. There was a pause. “As it happens, he was involved with the original identification of this painting and, as such, I believe he feels some responsibility towards proving it’s authenticity. As I recall, he was convinced of it at the time as well but not in a position to pursue it.”

Bruce exhaled slowly. He pinched the bridge of his nose. Of course.

“I can call back and tell him we are going to wait a few days,” Alfred said.

“No,” Bruce forced himself to sit up. He rubbed his eyes. “I need a shower. Tell him to set it up for mid-morning. Or afternoon. Whatever works in between the other meetings.”

“Very good, sir,” Alfred said.

“I’m not—” Bruce began. Alfred paused. “I’m not being irresponsible with the Wayne collection. I know what I’m doing.”

Alfred considered his words. “I believe Dr. Neil is trying to ensure the same is true of others, Master Wayne.”

It was nearly the same thing Diana had said to him.

Bruce dearly wanted to put his head back down on the desk. Or have another drink. He forced himself up instead. He stood straight, did up his cuff buttons and retrieved his jacket from where he had tossed it aside after Diana had left last night.

It did not matter that only Alfred was there to watch him. It did not matter that he was only going to shower next.

He stood up straight. He was still a Wayne.

“Have you arranged for the Pissaro to be transferred to Gotham Museum?” Bruce asked.

“Arranged but not confirmed, sir,” Alfred said.

Bruce withheld a wince. It was one thing to know Alfred was disappointed in him for not...dating, settling down, providing another generation of Waynes. That disapproval was rooted in the way Alfred worried about Bruce, like a father would, because he wanted him to be happy.

It was different when Alfred was actively disappointed in his behaviour.

Bruce could always tell.

“You can confirm it,” Bruce told him. “I will be there as soon as I’m...presentable.”

“Everything will be ready when you are, Master Wayne,” Alfred said.

It was not the greatest show of confidence but when Alfred left him alone to go...confirm things, Bruce supposed, he didn't try to subtly take the scotch with him.
Bruce spent a moment entertaining the thought of what he would do if Alfred ever really gave up on him but the answer, as always, was the same and depressing: keep going until he got himself killed.

With that thought in mind, Bruce headed to the shower. He didn't linger but still, somehow, Alfred had his clothing laid out for him when he got out, beside a green smoothie — Alfred's hangover cure, which didn't actually work but made Bruce feel better all the same — and another cup of coffee.

As shows of support went, Bruce thought, it wasn't really so bad.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this is late! I was neglecting it in order to get the last chapter of Kind Old Sun done. We should be back to our regularly scheduled posting now.

Bruce is also just about ready to get his head out of his ass as well so plot things should be moving along in the next chapter too!
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Bruce comes to several realizations.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dr. Neil was waiting for Bruce when he arrived at the museum. He practically ambushed him in the parking lot.

It gave Bruce a moment's pause. He found Dr. Neil...fussy. He was obsessed by details, viewed the Wayne collection as his personal right and responsibility and was generally, an annoyance who care far too much about things Bruce found inane.

But he was not a generally overly enthusiastic man.

Not that Bruce spent much time with him, as little as he could get away with, really. Still, he couldn't remember the last time he had seen him smile like that.

“We missed you this morning,” Dr. Neil said. He was just barely containing his glee. For a moment, Bruce thought he was actually going to reach out and hug him.

“I apologize,” Bruce said with a tight smile. “I had unexpected business to attend to.”

“Of course, of course,” Dr. Neil said and if he could tell Bruce was lying through his teeth he didn't show it. “Mr. Pennyworth said to go ahead but, well, I did want you here for this.”

He looked at Bruce with such genuine emotion in his eyes for a moment that Bruce was taken aback. “Dr. Howard has everything ready and we’ve had Dr. Rosenbaum in with the painting for the past couple hours. This is just to make it official. Everything checks out as far as we can tell. Dr. Rosenbaum has just gone to find Mr. Trevor.”

That soured Bruce's stomach. He wasn't sure if it was the thought of Steve being there or the thought that he would not be there, that they had given up already.

Not that Bruce expected anything less.

“I can't tell you how pleased I am,” Dr. Neil continued as he led Bruce through the back entrance and up the service elevator — Bruce didn't think of all the times he had used it as a shortcut when he was using a museum event to gather information. “It's a miracle your father didn't dispose of it when he was told it was a fake. Good lord, the thought of that.”

Dr. Neil seemed genuinely aghast at the idea. Bruce swallowed and ground out: “My father never threw artwork out.”

He tried to be pleasant. “I suppose the morning sessions were buzzing about this?”

“Oh, no,” Dr. Neil said. “No. It's strictly need to know until everything’s verified. This is only the
initial identification and authentication, you know. I'll have to contact Boston and they'll be more work from there. Everyone is being quite reserved until it's been confirmed.”

That surprised Bruce somewhat. “I expected more gossip.”

“Dr. Rosenbaum understands the politics involved,” Dr. Neil said, almost approvingly. “Everyone else I had to involve so far have been our people.”

“And Ms. Prince,” Bruce added.

“Oh, well, yes I suppose she would know if Mr. Trevor made the discovery. I only spoke to her briefly this morning. She was arguing with those...people from the British Museum,” Dr. Neil made a face. “She didn't mention it. She is more, uh, more, well, more than I expected. I didn't think that was possible, given her reputation was already impeccable. I understand why...well, anyway. Here we are.”

Bruce stared at Dr. Neil hard for a moment but Dr. Neil only opened the door to a restoration room and held it open for him to go through.

One of the assistant directors, who Bruce vaguely recognized and had a bad feeling he had slept with, was fussing with some papers. She came to attention at once when Dr. Neil and Bruce entered the room. The painting in question, one Bruce was vaguely aware used to hang in a dim corner of his father’s study, was on a stand by the table.

The only other person in there was Dr. Rosenbaum who has lounging — that was the only word for it — on a folding chair. She raised an eyebrow at all of them.

“We're all set Jacob,” Dr. Howard said, smiling. She nearly as excited as Dr. Neil was. Bruce realized he had not slept with her — he had propositioned her and been dismissed with more disdain than he would have thought was warranted. “We’re just waiting for St-Mr. Trevor.”

Bruce grit his teeth and asked, with his politest smile. “Is that necessary?”

“Non,” Blair Rosenbaum said from where she was sitting. She swung one leg idly over the other. “But it is polite.”

“You got in touch with him then?” Dr. Neil said. Blair nodded. “Good, good. Did he say how long he would be?”

“Not long. He was just leaving the hotel,” Blair said. “And that was ten minutes ago.”

Dr. Neil nodded. “Good, good.”

There was an awkward pause. Blair was watching Bruce. She wasn't even trying to hide it.

“I can't imagine how excited you must be, Jacob,” Dr. Howard said, she pressed his arm for a moment, looking fond.

“Yes, it is quite the rediscovery just as the exhibition begins,” Blair said, smiling an all too satisfied smile. “If I did not know better, I would believe it was for publicity. I hope the inevitable politicking is over in time for us to host it in Paris.”

“Oh, yes, but I meant—” Dr. Howard began.

“We can only hope your outstanding reputation will speed things along, Dr. Rosenbaum,” Dr. Neil
Blair chuckled, tilting her head and smiling much more genuinely at Dr. Neil. “Who knew there were such advantages to publicly discrediting a painting in my own museum? You know, at the time I was threatened with being fired and blacklisted.”

“From the, uh, whispers I heard, there was quite an internal revolt against that,” Dr. Neil commented.

“Never underestimate Diana Prince’s ability to...dissuade people from what she views as injustice,” Blair said. “I must say, I do hope you say to hell with the exhibit and Gotham gets the honour of this debut.”

“It should,” Dr. Howard said, with the sternness Bruce remembered. “Somehow I doubt we will be given that consideration.”

Dr. Neil laughed a little. Bruce blinked at that. Dr. Neil took off his glasses and polished them on his shirt. “No. The timing is not on our side for that. Not with the, ah, agreement written up for the exhibition.”

“Well, if we are lucky enough to host it at the Louvre first, you must come to Paris, of course,” Blair said. “We would be happy to—”

The door opened and an assistant led Steve inside. He glanced at Bruce for less than a second before smiling at the rest of the room.

“Blair,” he said, grinning in an annoyingly cheerful way. “I imagine I have you to blame for this.”

“Non, I was going to let you sleep in and take all the credit myself,” she replied before nodding in Dr. Neil’s direction. “Jacob insisted.”

Steve looked surprised but...not displeased as they shook hands.

“Dr. Neil,” Steve said. “I appreciate the thought.”

“Jacob, please. I know you don't want credit,” Dr. Neil said. “So, this, at least, seemed fitting.”

“I appreciate that and please, Steve is fine,” Steve said, with a quick, genuine grin before he greeted Dr. Howard as well. By her first name.

He said hello to Bruce too, with a quick handshake, as if they were merely acquaintances.

Bruce supposed even that was a stretch.

“Well, we’re all here now,” Bruce said. He hadn't taken off his coat. Steve had before he had even come upstairs. “Dr. Rosenbaum, I believe we decided this was your show.”

Blair raised an eyebrow at him before she returned her smile to Dr. Neil and Dr. Howard. “Let us begin then, shall we?”

Bruce only half listened as she explained why, having examined the painting, she believed it to be genuine and the additional testing that could be done to further substantiate their claim. It took half an hour and Bruce kept himself from glancing at his watch by watching Steve out of the corner of his eye.

Steve pretended not to notice. Given his pedigree, Bruce did not think for a moment he didn't
But Bruce was surprised by how engaged Steve was on the matter at hand. He commented when necessary but seemed honest in his intention to avoid being credited. He stood to the side with Dr. Howard and tried to stay a secondary player even as Blair seemed to needle him endlessly. Bruce was beginning to think it was just her personality.

“Do you want to explain the evidence in the lines of ownership, Steve?” Blair asked at once point. “That was what tipped you off, yes?”

Steve looked at her, fondly exasperated. “You can explain it as well as I can, I'm sure.”

“Oui, but that is the boring bit,” Blair told him.

Steve didn't budge. “One line of ownership has discrepancies, the other doesn't.”

Blair snorted. Dr. Howard looked like she was a heartbeat away from jumping in herself before Blair expanded on the matter. Steve was...exceptionally good at deflecting it and getting her to carry on.

It nearly startled Bruce when, as Blair was talking about the holes in Boston’s paper trail, Dr. Neil actually clapped his hands together with glee. Dr. Howard didn't look as surprised but she did look curious.

Dr. Neil looked embarrassed by the outburst and shrugged. “I, uh, point that discrepancy out at the time.”

It made Steve smile until the corners of his eyes crinkled.

“I will leave whether you want to include ‘I told you so’ in the press release up to you. But you can add my authentication to the claim,” Blair concluded, with a grin. “And get ready for a shit show.”

Dr. Neil barked a laugh. “It will hardly be as bad as it would have been if we had done this, oh, nearly thirty years ago now.”

“When you wanted to?” Steve said. Bruce guessed, from the curious look on his face, that he was making a leap.

“It was not my decision then,” Dr. Neil said but there was something very satisfied in his face.

“Hmm,” Steve said. “I just...I wondered how it got included in the offline pages of the catalogue, if it was never meant to be included in the exhibit.”

“I’m not sure. I wasn’t involved in the cataloguing efforts past reviewing the final product. I may have, ah, been overzealous in impressing on those involved how important full accuracy was. Michelle can tell you. She was more involved. But I'm surprised that was something you stumbled upon,” Dr. Neil said, giving Steve a look.

Steve smiled winningly but looked just a little abashed. It was quite effective. Bruce understood too well why people would want to tell him their secrets.

“I, uh, might have been poking around where I shouldn't have been,” he said, seemingly chagrined.

“Steve is very thorough,” Blair piped in. “He prefers to know the author behind forgeries. It is not enough to identify them.”
Steve glared at her. Dr. Neil winced. “Yes, that we had a Wacker in the collection was an
unfortunate revelation.”

“But it ended in a fortunate rediscovery,” Steve said, pacifying. “You can't ask for more than that.”

“No, I suppose not,” Dr. Neil was looking at the painting again. He seemed, shockingly, near tears.
“I really can't tell you how pleased I am.”

Steve clapped him on the shoulder. He glanced over at Blair and Bruce was relieved and gratified
to note that, unlike Diana, she just looked confused, not like she was reading his mind. Steve
attempted to discreetly tilt his head in the direction of the door, which was undermined by how
openly Dr. Howard was torn between staring at them and looking at Dr. Neil in concern.

“Blair promised me a coffee,” Steve said, clearly giving up the attempt at subterfuge. “Diana told
me so this morning. Because you've been complaining that you have hardly gotten to see me this
trip.”

“Ah, yes, right,” Blair said, looking at him slightly askance but playing along. She took the arm he
offered with a level of gallantry that played it off pretty well, Bruce thought, allowing himself
some grudging admiration. “Of course. She does always, what is that dreadful expression, the one
with the pigs? Ah! Hog your company.”

Bruce only just kept himself from snorting. Steve glanced at him for just a moment as if he could
...or maybe not. Maybe he was trying to tell Bruce something.

“Cathy,” Steve said, pulling Dr. Howard’s attention away from Dr. Neil. “Would you like to join
us?”

“Oh! I, um...” Dr. Howard said, glancing at Dr. Neil who was still staring at the Pissarro, his back
to them, his shoulders hunched. “Maybe...”

“Yes, do join us, Cathy,” Blair said a bit too loudly. Steve looked right at Bruce this time and
rolled his eyes as if to say: amateurs. “We will, that is to say, ah, oh, would you like to hear about
the time Steve identified a forged artifact by accidentally smashing it to pieces?”

“What,” Steve said, his attention immediately pulled back to Blair. He looked like he was
regretting whatever he was trying to pull off more and more by the instant.

“Yes!” Blair looked quite pleased with herself. Bruce wanted to laugh. She gestured to Dr. Howard
who joined them, looking back apprehensively. “Yes, that’s a great story! So, this was before Jean-
Luc became director...”

Steve ushered them both through the door. Before he disappeared through it himself, he looked
straight at Bruce and jerked his head in Dr. Neil’s direction.

That, Bruce would allow, was clear enough.

Dr. Neil had taken out a handkerchief and was wiping his face. He didn't seem to realize anyone
was left in the room. Bruce wasn't entirely sure what the point of this was, except that Steve
occasionally could be a softer heart than Bruce would have first guessed.

He went to stand beside Dr. Neil. He had always been conscientious when it came to the Wayne
collection but this was something else.

“You'll have to forgive me, Mr. Wayne,” Dr. Neil said, with a watery laugh. “It's just—I can't help
thinking—I would have so loved to see Tom’s reaction.”

Bruce had been about to offer...something. Some trite comfort, he supposed, something about... art? This wasn’t even the kind of art he liked. The name caught him so off guard it took him a moment to figure out who Dr. Neil was talking about.

He froze when he realized it was his father. He so rarely heard his father’s name mentioned casually.

“He would have found it hilarious,” Dr. Neil said. “He would have laughed so hard and...”

Dr. Neil broke off and wiped at his eyes with his handkerchief again. “This was the first piece of art he ever bought, you know. He was so proud of himself and Director Ryan was such a smug—a smug asshole when he told Tom it was fake.”

It had been thirty years, Bruce remembered Dr. Neil had said, and he still looked so offended on his...on Bruce’s father’s behalf. They would have been the same age, Bruce realized, or close enough.

Dr. Neil had to be close to retirement. Bruce knew he had spent his whole career at the Gotham Art Museum, working his way up to director. Bruce never thought of his father as being that old. He had vaguely known that his father and Dr. Neil knew each other — he remembered him coming to the manor, on occasion — but he supposed he always thought it had been a business relationship, revolving around the Wayne collection and it's close relationship with the museum. The same relationship Bruce had with Dr. Neil.

But that didn’t make sense. Dr. Neil wouldn’t have had the same position then. He had just always been Bruce’s main contact, even before he had been director.

Bruce rarely thought of his father having friends, outside of Alfred or the ones who tried to rub it in his nose when they wanted something from him. “You were there.”

“Oh, yes, well,” Dr. Neil shrugged. “We went to the same private school together, you know, when we were boys. I was just starting here when Tom bought the Pissarro, ah, on a bit of a whim. But I checked the paperwork myself, after he called me. He was so excited that he might have found something, you know, and I...I must admit I was too. He offered to let the museum borrow it, of course. We’ve always had such a good relationship with the Waynes. The museum would hardly exist without the collection.”

Dr. Neil’s mouth pinched unhappily. “Director Ryan resented that. He resented being beholden, he said. I think he just resented being here. I never understood why. He was such an insufferable snob.”

Bruce laughed before he could stop himself. Dr. Neil blinked at him, startled. Bruce let himself smile. “I remember. Alfred used to leave him waiting whenever he wanted to see me. Said it was good for him.”

Dr. Neil smiled tentatively. Alfred, Bruce realized, had always scheduled him as soon as possible. “He certainly deserved it. I told him and told him it checked out, that MFA had the fake, but Ryan was more interested in currying favour with more prestigious museums. He didn’t want to upset Boston.”

“And it was Tom’s first purchase. I think he felt like a bit of a dilettante. He took it cheerfully enough but...I always thought he had gotten rid of it and then, after the fire...” Dr. Neil shuddered.
Most of the Wayne collection had been on display or housed in museum storage when Wayne Manor burned to the ground. Bruce supposed it would have been the Gotham Art Museum director’s worst nightmare. Worse, since it was apparently his friend’s collection.

“He hung it in his study,” Bruce said. “In a corner. He said it was to remind himself...”

*To be prudent.* Thomas Wayne had told his son and added, smiling. *And to check with your friends before you act, not after the fact.*

“As a reminder,” Bruce finished because Dr. Neil looked like he was about to cry again.

“In the left corner,” Dr. Neil said. “Near the portrait of his mother.”

Bruce wasn’t actually sure of that but he thought it sounded right. The portrait of his grandmother had been lost in the fire. “I think so.”

Dr. Neil laughed and wiped at his eyes. “I told him for years he needed to find a painting for that spot. I think I even gave him something my partner painted once as a joke. He must have taken it down when I came over.”

Bruce remembered that happening. He had never asked why. His mother...His mother had rearranged paintings all the time. It wasn’t unusual except: “My,” he coughed, his throat felt dry, “My mother used to tell him he was being a fool, when he did that.”

“Martha would have,” Dr. Neil snorted. “He hadn’t met your mother yet, when all this happened. Martha would have told Ryan to go fuck himself, if you’ll excuse my French. They had a, ah, a rather adversarial relationship. She wouldn’t have let him get away with that.”

Bruce had to force out the question that wanted to get stuck in his throat. “St—Mr. Trevor mentioned—he had a theory about some of the art my father bought. As birthday presents for my mother.”

Dr. Neil was nodding. He was smiling. His entire bearing seemed to brighten at the memory. “Oh yes, Tom went to a great deal of trouble to keep those a surprise every year — Martha always adored it. I’ve never been as nervous as when he asked me to hide a Monet in my apartment for two months. I’m still not sure whether he asked because thought my reaction would be funny.”

“I...a few years after they—they died, I wrote up a proposal to have them all displayed together, as a tribute, I suppose,” Dr. Neil said. “But I never submitted it. It was still too personal and I felt, well, it didn’t seem very fair to you. You were still so young then. I didn’t want to do anything that might upset you.”

Bruce didn’t...completely know what to do with having that knowledge confirmed. Bruce had thought of his parents as his parents or heard others talk about them as the Waynes, societal figureheads, philanthropists, employers. He had rarely, maybe never thought of them as Thomas — Tom, Dr. Neil called him, a young man’s nickname? something from when they were children? — and Martha. A couple, a young couple in love, with friends and...and lives he would never get to know about.

“I didn’t realize you were that close,” Bruce said. He hated the plaintive note in his voice. He hadn’t meant for it to be there.

Dr. Neil folded his arms over his chest. He was quiet for a long time. Finally, he cleared his throat. He didn’t look at Bruce when he spoke.
“I’ve always been terrible with children,” he said, quietly. “I don’t like them before they can hold a decent conversation and they don’t like me much either. You cried yourself sick the one time I held you as a baby and you never seemed to like me much as a boy. You liked my partner better. Everyone does. Tom was a bit embarrassed about it and Martha thought it was hilarious but I always thought, you know, even children have the right to their own choices, if they don’t like someone.”

“Alfred seemed to be what you needed...afterwards,” Dr. Neil said and he lifted his chin, just a little. “But...but I thought I could look after the collection, you know? I could look after that for Tom and Martha and then for you because you seemed to have other things to worry about. I know how to do that. I’m good at that.”

Bruce didn’t know what to say. Dr. Neil glanced at him. “I know I’m, ah, my partner calls me a fusspot so I can’t imagine I am always the easiest person to work with but...I’ve tried. It’s been my life’s work.”

“I appreciate it,” Bruce said. Dr. Neil looked surprised. “I know planning this exhibition hasn’t been the easiest.”

“I’ve been waiting to show off the Wayne collection like this for years. It’s my life’s work and it was... Tom and Martha had all these plans for it that I could never hope to fulfill. At least I could do this,” Dr. Neil told him but then he took off his glasses again and rubbed his forehead. “I will admit dealing with some of my colleagues has been more trying than I expected.”

“We’ll skip the National Gallery and the British Museum next time,” Bruce said. Dr. Neil grinned a little. “Why are they being...”

“Argumentative?”

“I was going to go with such assholes but, yeah, we’ll go with that,” Bruce said.

“I, er, try not to listen to rumours,” Dr. Neil said, looking more awkward than Bruce had ever seen him. “But there were several about, ah, the job offer you made to Ms. Prince.”

Bruce refused to wince. Dr. Neil carried on whether or not he had noticed. “The British curators, or at least some of them, choose to believe that if the Wayne Enterprises needed a curator of the...standard your proposed salary suggested, not looking to Gotham Museum first said something. About us. Me.”

Fuck.

“That’s not—” Bruce began. Fuck. Fuck! “Of course I didn’t—I’ll have a word with them, I can’t believe they would -”

“Bruce,” Dr. Neil said, looking faintly bemused at how offended Bruce was on his behalf. “Diana Prince is a Director of Antiquities at the Louvre. I specialize in American painters before 1950. Most of my senior staff has a focus in more modern painting or American artifacts. It’s what our inventory calls for. If you needed an antiquities expert, I would have told you to hire Diana Prince if you somehow managed to get her to agree to it. I doubt you would be interested in employing Blair Rosenbaum over Dr. Howard or myself, in a pinch.”

Bruce made a face at the thought. Dr. Neil laughed. “Dr. Rosenbaum isn’t so bad, really. She’s used to being ignored or having her opinion marginalized so you just have to pay attention to what she’s saying. She’s not unreasonable.”
“The curators from London,” Dr. Neil sighed and looked back at the Pissarro for a minute. “They're just seeing how much they can push. You've sided with me when there are conflicts. It is working itself out. I'm just sorry I've had to bother you with it so much.”

“It’s fine,” Bruce said at once. “I could have been more involved with the collection before.”

Dr. Neil looked at him closely, almost sharply. “You can't do everything, Mr. Wayne. And I'm always happy — you must know, I'm always happy to help with the collection — to help you however you need. Tom liked paintings and finding new artists to support most of all. But...based on your purchases, I believe your interests do run mostly to antiquities?”

Bruce nodded and added. “Ms. Prince won't be taking the job.”

“No, I imagined not. You’re not the first that’s tried to pry her out of the Louvre and been turned down,” Dr. Neil said. “But...We finally persuaded Gary to retire and our new antiquities curator is young but has already proven much less susceptible to, ah, flights of fancy? the way Gary was. I would be happy to arrange a meeting.”

Bruce was fairly sure the world was in danger of ending and he was coming to the conclusion that he had spent the last few days burning bridges with one—two of the people who could help.

Having that meeting would be...nice, though, Bruce thought. A part of him wanted that.

He just wasn't sure it was strong enough.

“Sure, that sounds good,” Bruce said. Dr. Neil looked so pleased it made some small part of Bruce ache. He would try. He could find time for a meeting, amongst all his other obligations. He would.

“And we should have a drink, once the other curators go home,” Bruce said, and more importantly, truly meant. He wanted it. “I imagine I owe you a few of those.”

“That would be lovely,” Dr. Neil said, completely sincerely, his voice rough. He wiped at his eyes again. He looked between the painting and Bruce and smiled. “I look forward to it.”

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If Bruce had engineered the little stunt to get Dr. Rosenbaum and Dr. Howard out of the restoration room, as Steve so clearly had, he would have ditched them about five seconds after he got them into the hallway.

Steve had actually taken them out for coffee.

Bruce had to wait for them to get back.

Bruce did not want to talk to anyone in the building; just about everyone in the building wanted to talk to him. Finding somewhere to lurk — Alfred would have called it perching — without the Batsuit was not best idea.

Bruce Wayne did not hide in the first available closet. He handed the security guard a wad of cash to go get him “lunch,” told him to keep the change and hid in the control room with all the security camera feeds.

Dr. Neil was in his office, making phone calls. Bruce had tried not to watch when Dr. Neil had first locked himself in, the way he had sat with his head in his hands for a long time, shoulders shaking. He had pulled himself together...not quickly but quickly enough that Bruce...Bruce wasn’t sure
what he would have done if it had gone on much longer. Something.

Diana was in a meeting, looking more and more annoyed as the minutes wore on. The target of her ire was a middle-aged, balding man who had caught on that he was being glared at about ten minutes ago. It made Bruce want to laugh, the way he was starting to sweat.

Steve, Blair and Dr. Howard had gotten coffee in the cafeteria, which was filled with people Bruce wanted to avoid. Steve was leaning back in his chair, smirking, and occasionally interrupting whatever story Blair was telling — she spoke with her hands and big open expressions. Dr. Howard was alternating between looking shocked and surreptitiously checking her watch — Bruce had a full schedule, even if he hadn’t stuck to it himself, he knew she was supposed to be in another meeting in five minutes.

Luckily for him, Dr. Howard was, apparently, remained a responsible person. She said her goodbyes and, as soon as she was in an empty hallway, actually ran so that she would make her next meeting on time. Bruce was unsurprised when Blair lingered a little longer before kissing Steve on both cheeks, gathering her things and heading back to where she was scheduled to be.

Bruce bolted as soon as he was sure which exit Steve was using. He was waiting, just around the corner, when Steve left the museum.

He couldn’t tell if Steve looked amused or wary when he saw Bruce.

He was starting to think he had a less accurate read on Steve than he thought. The man was a spy. He was shockingly transparent when it came to Diana but otherwise, Bruce was going to have to work to learn his tells.

That was fine, Bruce hadn't planned on using finesse this time.

“Did you know he was my father’s friend?” Bruce asked.

Steve didn't pretend to be confused. He shook his head. “No. That was a guess but with that kind of reaction, it was pretty clear there was a connection to you there.”

“People have emotional reactions to paintings, sometimes. Curators do, I would imagine,” Bruce said.

“Curators do less than you might think. But he wasn't reacting to the painting, he was reacting to his history with it,” Steve said. “It wasn't much of a leap based on what I know about him.”

“What you know about him,” Bruce echoed.

Steve shrugged. “He's stayed in Gotham his whole career. He's had other offers — I think MoMA and Chicago tried to poach him a couple times but the Smithsonian really wanted him. They tried hard about…maybe ten years ago? And then just after he was named director here. I think they thought that was his goal and after he achieved that he might be more amenable to moving on.”

Bruce stiffened, a cold pit forming in his stomach. “You have a file on him?”

Steve stared at Bruce — surprised or like he thought Bruce was an idiot, Bruce wanted to know which. “No. I live with Diana, another curator. She doesn't carry a lot of tales but the rest of them? They're terrible. Blair might be the worst gossip of the bunch and we see her socially. Jacob Neil is one of the experts on American painters, enough that they’ve heard of him in Europe. The Smithsonian would have made him director of the American Art Museum a decade ago and he chose to stay in a lesser position in Gotham. It's a small community, something like that creates
chatter.”

The pit in his stomach didn't go away. Bruce wanted to close his eyes and take a breath. He didn't.

Something about Steve’s face softened. He sighed. “His partner is an artist. Winston, I think his name is. He does glass work and ceramics, mostly for the craft circuit, though I think he might've dabbled in painting when he was younger. No kids. One of them, I don't remember which, has a really soft spot for dogs. They had six or something at one point.”

Bruce only knew Dr. Neil professionally. He had known he had a partner but not known his name. It left a sour taste in his mouth.

“That's everything I know about him,” Steve said. “Diana might know a little more. We've been here more than a day so Blair definitely will.”

Bruce cleared his throat. “Dr. Rosenbaum has been interesting.”

“She's definitely one of a kind,” Steve said.

There was an awkward pause. Neither of them were inclined to blink first. But Steve, it seemed, was more willing to force things forward.

“Did you want something, Bruce?” He asked without looking away.

Nothing that Bruce wanted was going to work, in the end. It was time to adapt his plans.

“How angry is Diana?” Bruce asked finally.

“At you? She's frustrated. That never helps so, yeah, she's pretty pissed,” Steve said.

“And you?”

“I don't like it when people upset Diana,” Steve said. “I'm trying to keep anything else I'm angry about separate right now because she asked me to.”

That was going to be a sticking point for a long time, Bruce imagined, remembering the way Steve stared back at the camera in the early hospital photos. The way Clark had gasped for breath. The way he had weakened.

That was okay. Bruce could work with that.

“If I ask you what I should be doing differently, would you tell me?” Bruce asked.

Steve huffed and shook his head — obviously amused this time. “That is the most roundabout way to ask for help I've ever heard.”

Bruce bite his tongue to keep from responding sharply. Steve was watching him closely, gauging his sincerity, Bruce thought.

But he also answered.

“Diana doesn't like being manipulated, any more than you do, I suspect,” Steve said. “Stop making decisions and expecting her to fall in line. And just tell her what you want instead of trying to obfuscate. Diane cuts through bullshit better than anyone I've ever met. As you might have noticed.”
Bruce had. In their short acquaintance, Steve had provided her with numerous outs in any number of discussions. Diana was always the one who chose to cut through his disassembling or let it stand.

“I noticed,” Bruce said.

Steve paused. The look he gave Bruce was not complimentary. “She told you all this last night. If you're listening to me instead of her, you've got bigger problems.”

Bruce hadn't been listening at all last night. It wouldn't have mattered who was speaking. And he still had questions about why Diana had disappeared for a hundred years. But he could set that aside for them moment.

“She's in meetings right now. I thought it was imprudent to pull her out of them to speak to me. Otherwise, I would be having this conversation with her,” Bruce told him.

He wasn't sure if it would have been better or so much worse to have this conversation with Diana. Steve had been alone and Diana had been surrounded by people. Bruce didn't want to deal with any more people.

“Aren't you supposed to be in those meetings?” Steve said.

“I'm sure that Dr. Neil has things well in hand,” Bruce said. He was going to announce their Pissarro claim later that afternoon. Bruce had to tried to give Dr. Neil the honour but apparently he was going to have to say something.

“Hm, well, we’re in agreement on that,” Steve said. He tilted his head, considering. “You know, from what Ca—Dr. Howard was telling me, the temporary exhibits they've got planned for while the Wayne collection is touring around sound pretty ambitious. You should think of stopping by.”

Bruce frowned. He didn't understand what angle they kept trying to play here. And Steve looked so guileless.

“I might,” Bruce said, non-committedly.

Steve didn't look like he believed it any more than Bruce had.

Chapter End Notes

This was supposed to go up last week but it is marking season so everything has been delayed. Sorry!

Dr. Neil was supposed to be a background character who existed solely to bother Bruce when I needed him out of the room. I legit have no idea where all of this backstory came from but now I love him.

That said this should wrap up the art parts of this story. We are progressing to a new plot point next time!
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Diana and Steve spend some time together. Super heroing gets in the way.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Diana let her purse drop the moment she was through the door of their hotel room. It had not been the most challenging day but it had been annoying tedious. Then Dr. Neil and Bruce Wayne had made the announcement about the Pissarro and everything had devolved into chaos, insufferable gossip and Blair’s smug grin.

Diana was happy to leave Blair as the centre of attention but the announcement had sucked all the oxygen out of the room. No one would talk about anything else, which meant Diana had nothing to do.

She left Blair to hold court at the impromptu dinner meeting that had called. The table had gotten rather overcrowded and Diana was sure Blair would text Steve the highlights later.

“Diana?” Steve called. “Is that you? Or is the room being broken into again?”

Diana’s lips twitched. Steve knew full well it was her. Diana pulled off her shoes and then decided to lose her nylons too before she went to find him.

Steve was sitting in the armchair, reading. The hotel armchairs looked much more comfortable than they actually were but Steve had clearly decided he was comfortable enough and would not be moving.

Diana leaned against the wall and smiled at him. “And if I had been breaking in?”

“I wouldn’t have been nearly as happy to see Bruce Wayne,” Steve said, glancing up at her. He was trying, unsuccessfully, to pretend he wasn’t amused.

The chair was not nearly big enough for two — not like the one they had at home — but Steve had clearly decided he was comfortable enough and would not be moving.

Diana leaned again and smiled at him. “And if I had been breaking in?”

They were pressed very close. But that was the point.

His sweater was as soft as she expected it to be.

“Long day?” Steve asked. He put his other hand on her thigh, his thumb rubbing small circles.
“Annoying day,” Diana replied. She stretched her arms out, then dropped one back around Steve’s shoulders and let the other hand rest on top of his. “I hear you and Blair had a more interesting one.”

“Interesting isn’t the word I would use,” Steve replied. “Blair would make a terrible spy, by the way.”

“But an excellent source, I imagine,” Diana said grinning. She curled her wrist so her hand brushed against his hair. “What word would you use?”

“Awkward,” Steve replied and told her about the meeting about the Pissarro and his conversation with Bruce.

Diana digested that. Finally, she sighed.

“I suppose we could consider that progress,” she said, trying to be generous.

It felt like a harder feat than it should have been.

“Great, at this rate, you’ll have a good working relationship by the time he’s my age,” Steve groused.

“I do not think it will take so long,” Diana said but...She was so sick of this. “I do not want to talk about this any longer.”

Steve tilted his head back to look at her. “What do you want to talk about then?”

Diana raised her hand and trailed her fingers over his cheek. She tightened her hold on his hair with her other hand.

Steve’s eyes sharpened in a way that she knew very well. He licked his lips and his hand slid further up her thigh, more possessive if no less gentle.

“So not at all then,” Steve said, grinning very smugly.

“I have another task for your mouth,” Diana told him before she kissed him.

Diana could time her watch to Steve’s kisses. She liked the way he kissed. There was a rhythm to them, the pauses he had to take to breath, the way he tried to make up for it after.

Diana liked the way he touched her. He had never lacked in confidence and his long familiarity with her body meant he could make it last an hour or an instant, whatever she preferred. But...there was still something sweet in the way he touched her, like he was surprised he could, like he was still struck by the wonder of it.

Steve liked it when she tugged on his hair, never to hurt, just to feel, and always wanted to go down on her — she had to pull him away so he wouldn’t pass out, sometimes, though he always seemed to know when she was getting over sensitive.

He did not like her hands near his throat at all, did not like her to dwell on his scars. He could not stand to be held down, not even in jest, not even for a moment.

She liked the way his hand felt just where it was just then, warm and sure under her skirt. She liked the way he smelled and the way his hair looked when it was damp with sweat. She liked that she could kiss him for hours and that he still reacted like it was the first time she had. She liked the
way his breath felt on her skin and how alive he always felt in her arms. She liked the way he felt inside of her.

Steve groaned as she shifted to straddle him, running her nails against the back of his head. He grinned as she tugged his sweater off, his hair mussed, his lips pink and wet, and his eyes very, very blue. She kissed him against as he untucked her shirt and his hand slid up her back, trying to pull her closer as if they were not wedged so tightly together it was nearly uncomfortable.

A sudden noise interrupted them.

Diana pulled away frowning, ignoring, for a moment the annoyed sound Steve made.

It was her phone. It was in her blazer pocket, which had slide off the side of the chair at some point, probably when Steve was trying to get her shirt off, ringing away.

Diana growled at it.

Steve laughed so hard he nearly choked. He pressed his forehead against Diana’s shoulder, out of breath.

“If that’s Blair,” he said. “Tell her she’s achieved one of her lifetime goals.”

“If it’s Blair, I will tell her to fuck off and hang up,” Diana groaned as she pulled the discarded blazer up and fished the phone out of the pocket.

“Same thing,” Steve said. He kissed her shoulder and smoothed his fingers over her shirt sleeve before his hands wandered back to try and undo her bra.

“It’s Alfred,” Diana told him, a warning in her voice.

“Of course it is,” Steve sighed as he stopped, hands falling away from her back. He caught hold of her other hand instead. They both knew it could mean trouble in Gotham.

Diana answered. “Hello, Alfred.”

“Good evening, Ms. Prince,” Alfred greeted. He sounded far too cheerful for it to be a catastrophe.

Some tension must have slipped from Diana’s posture. Steve smirked, his eyes sparkling mischievously as he brought Diana’s wrist to her lips and kissed it slowly.

“I was wondering,” Alfred continued, “if you and Captain Trevor are free to come by the house.”

“We are occupied at the moment,” Diana told him, ignoring the way it made Steve smirk. “We can be there in an hour...”

Steve’s teeth scraped against her wrist gently.

“Actually, I believe it will be closer to two,” Diana said. She pulled her hand away from Steve’s mouth but only so she could run her nails through his hair and tug in the way that made his lips part and his pupils dilate.

“I can send a car,” Alfred offered.

It had been a mistake to leave Steve’s hand unoccupied. He went back to her bra. He always looked so inordinately pleased when he undid it one-handed, as if he had not had nearly a hundred years to practice, and the desire to kiss the self-satisfied look off his mouth was strong.
“Thank you but that will not be necessary,” Diana told him. “I prefer to drive.”

“Very well,” Alfred said. He only sounded a little disappointed. Steve’s mouth was against her collarbone. He hummed against her skin, opened mouthed but too quiet for the phone to pick up. “We will see you then.”

“See you then,” Diana said and hung up the phone. She dropped it to the side and looked at Steve. Diana knew enough by now to know another type of man might have made a boastful comment or perhaps a witty one. Steve was smiling at her, lips parted just so, his eyes hungry as he looked back at her. He knew she was going to want to kiss him breathless and so, he waited for her.

Diana was not one to deny herself what was so willingly, eagerly offered.

Diana kissed him, slow and eager and hard. There was a rhythm to the way Steve kissed and Diana knew it better than he did. Steve would have let her kiss him until he was woozy, until he was actually breathless.

He looked dazed enough as it was when she drew back to let him breath, kissed along the line of his jaw instead and he panted against her cheek.

“Two hours, huh?” he said, hoarsely, when he could speak again. He had unzipped her skirt in the meantime. She had divested him of his undershirt and undone his pants.

“Mmm,” Diana said. She was fairly sure she had left a mark just under his collarbone.

“I supposed we can make do with that,” Steve said and kissed her again and again.

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Steve sighed as they pulled up to the lake house. He turned to Diana and opened his mouth to say...

“If you say once more unto the breach or any variation of it, I will make you walk from here,” Diana said.

Steve huffed. They were practically at the front door and Diana was smiling so it wasn't much of a threat.

“I was going to say, I'm glad we're getting a vacation after this,” Steve told her.

“I thought you were already on vacation,” Diana said innocently.

Steve waited for her to park and then caught her hand and kissed it. “I thought you said I was only pretending.”

Diana smiled at him, caressing his cheek for a moment, and, oh, that smile still made his heart thump and his chest go warm. He had stopped marvelling at its lasting effect fifty years in and learned to simply enjoy it.

Two hours — less, they had had to get ready — was not nearly enough time. He could have spent all night worshipping her.

Instead he was looking at Bruce Wayne's house.

Poor trade.
Beside him, Diana sighed. Steve's lips quirked up. “You want to say it, don't you?”

Diana gave him an annoyed look, which definitely wasn't a denial, and got out of the car. “Clearly, I spend too much time with you.”

Steve was grinning as he got out of the car. He took Diana's arm without thinking as they fell into step together.

“We’re only here two more days,” Steve reminded her.

“Is that a promise or a warning?” Diana asked.

“I'm not sure,” Steve said, considering it.

Before he could come to a conclusion, Alfred opened the door. Steve blinked. Alfred seemed to be trying to hide it but he was considerably more cheerful than he had been yesterday.

“I hope you haven't eaten,” he said. “Dinner will be ready in another twenty minutes.”

He took their coats. “Master Wayne is in his study. I'll show you the way.”

Diana looked at Steve, bemused. Between the two of them, they had cobbled together a working knowledge of the layout of Bruce's home after their first visit.

Bruce looked up when Alfred opened the study door for them. There were files spread out in front of him on the desk.

Bruce looked tired, Steve thought. Diana's hand brushed against Steve’s side briefly — she had noticed too.

“Thank you for coming,” Bruce said, straightening awkwardly — too fast and too formal, as if they were meeting him for the first time and he wanted to make a good impression. “Alfred is—Did he tell you he was making dinner? I hope you haven’t eaten.”

For just a moment, Steve thought of what he had been doing an hour ago and the way he would have — the way he actually had in the past — flushed if it had been Sameer asking him that question and the way Sameer would have laughed at his reaction. He still missed him, and Etta and Charlie, fiercely sometimes.

But Bruce didn’t know him and strangers could rarely guess what he was thinking.

“We haven’t, no,” Diana said.

“Good,” Bruce replied. “Good.”

There was an awkward pause. Diana was starting to frown.

Steve cleared his throat. “Are these the files you took from Luthor?”

Bruce frowned slightly. Steve shrugged. They couldn’t keep dancing around each other like this. They had to start going forward. They were all going to have to give a little for that to happen.

Steve could be the one to show his hand this time since he would be giving very little away.

“You labelled folders,” Steve told. “Or Alfred did, judging by the writing. I wouldn’t be a very good spy if I couldn’t get that much from an upside-down glance.”
“Some of them are from Luthor,” Bruce said, relaxing just enough to keep from hesitating. “I acquired more from a source that I would prefer not to reveal yet.”

Steve looked at Diana, pointedly deferring to her. She didn’t look entirely happy but said: “All right.”

For a moment, Bruce looked like he was going to say something more but then nodded to the slim one labelled with WW. “Those are yours. You probably have the information already but that’s a copy, in case there’s anything your people have missed.”

Steve and Diana glanced at each other for a second before Diana reached out and took it. It contained copies of a few handwritten notebook pages, Steve was beginning to recognize Luthor’s writing, and a few government forms. There was also a flash drive attached to the top of the folder.

“This, uh,” Bruce had picked up another folder. This one was considerably thicker. “This is Clark’s. Superman’s.”

Bruce extended it between them. Steve took it. His hands were free.

“I’ve memorized it,” Bruce said.

Steve very carefully did not look at Diana. He could tell she was doing the same, looking at Bruce instead. That was a stunning admission, given all the obfuscation so far.

“A second set of eyes can be illuminating,” Diana said.

Neither of them mentioned how clouded Bruce’s perception was likely to be in this case — the guilt alone would make it hard to see with an unbiased eye.

Bruce smiled. It was not one of the smarmy smiles they had seen too much of over the last days. It wasn’t a nice smile either — there was too much self-loathing beneath it.

“I realize I may have become too narrowly focussed when it comes to Superman,” Bruce said. “There may be hints of Luthor’s grand plans that I overlooked because of that.”

Steve knew that he only needed to glance at Diana to confirm she was thinking the same thing as him about how to proceed. His first impulse was to not look at her, not with Bruce still watching their every movement. It gave away too much.

But this was a show of good faith. They couldn’t work together if they were still trying to out maneuver each other.

Steve looked at Diana. She was already looking at him. He shrugged — I can take this; she nodded — You’re the best for it.

Steve opened the file just for a glance to get a sense of it.

“You’re really not telepathic?” Bruce asked, watching them.

Steve didn’t stop himself from smiling and glancing at Diana for a moment. She huffed.

“No,” she said. The way she looked at Steve was exasperated as if to say: This again.

“We’ve learned how to read each other’s body language really well. It didn’t happen overnight,” Steve told him.
Diana had started it, in the early days of his recovery, when Steve’s body had been liable to fail him in a myriad of ways with no warning. It hadn’t always been possible for him to tell her what was wrong when it did. He had simply returned the favour of learning her that well when his health had improved. They had intentionally worked out codes later.

Steve flicked through a few pages of copies from, he would guess, Luthor’s handwritten notebook. They were the most destructive type of man’s madness, in Steve’s opinion, the kind with enough skewed logic to them to convince other people of his goals and, in the worst case, garner followers.

“How did no one notice Luthor was...going the megalomaniac route?” Steve asked.

It was mostly rhetorical. Bruce answered anyway.

“He was rich. People practically expect it. And if you throw enough money at them, most people look the other way,” Bruce said. He poured himself a small glass of scotch, turned back to them and paused, looking at Steve. “Would you like...?”

“No,” Steve said. “Thank you.”

Diana glanced at him, just checking to make sure he wasn’t turning it down because he was planning to have a painkiller later, which would have meant he was in pain and concealing it. Steve squeezed her arm as he passed her Luthor’s folder to let her know he was fine.

“Diana?” Bruce asked.

Diana had already flicked the folder open and was frowning at the contents. She looked surprised to be offered.

“Man’s alcohol is weak and tastes terrible,” she told him. “I only drink it when to not do so would call too much attention to myself.”

Steve loved her so much it was ridiculous. Bruce choked a little but he recovered quickly and tried to change the subject.

“Your, uh,” Bruce cleared his throat. “Your...adversaries, I couldn’t find much information on them, but have they been...very different?”

“No,” Steve said at the same time Diana said: “Yes.”

They looked at each other, both of their eyebrows raised in question. Bruce didn’t seem to know whether to look delighted or concerned.

“How was my last intervention any different?” Diana asked.

“What? When you stopped that massacre a few weeks ago?” Steve clarified.

“Yes. I do not see how state sanctioned slaughter is anything but the same problem magnified and somehow too-often justified in the eyes of your people,” Diana said, crossing her arms.

“I don’t disagree with you,” Steve said. “But I don’t think that what Bruce meant by an adversary. The motivation behind that attempt had nothing to do with you and the perpetrators aren’t going to target you now since they have no idea who you are. Bruce meant nemesis. Man’s inhumanity towards man isn’t a nemesis.”
Diana narrowed her eyes at him briefly before looking at Bruce. Steve turned his head too. Judging from the look on Bruce’s face, their timing had been identical.

“Is that you meant?” Diana asked.

“Uh, I...” Bruce began.

“No, even if that was the meaning, the answer remains yes,” Diana said, looking back at Steve.

Steve raised an eyebrow. “The cyclops.”

Diana snorted. “If we are not counting the evil men do as an adversary, we cannot count that creature either. His ill will was no more geared toward me than the rest of the world even after he recognized who I was.”

“Ares then,” Steve said.

“How was Ares any different in his motivations than Luthor?” Diana asked.

“He was a god,” Steve replied.

“So? In the end, he sought to sow destruction and wanted power,” Diana said. “They tried to use the turmoil around them to impose their vision on the world. It is no different.”

“It matters that Ares was a god,” Steve argued. “It makes his means and his methods different.”

“You think so because you think of his powers as otherworldly,” Diana said.

“Yes,” Steve said. “That makes it different. It makes his influence on the world different.”

“It makes no difference to me,” Diana said. “And if it makes his influence so different, he felt strangely compelled to accumulate a great deal of wealth. Is using money to seek influence for ill reasons so different than using magic?”

“Yes and no,” Steve said. “There are people who can resist any kind of bribery. People can’t resist the influence of gods the same way.”

“And when they do, powerful men find other ways to sideline them. We have seen that play out often enough,” Diana said. "I never quite believed him but Ares did claim he was only fuelling the desire people already possessed. I am not sure it is so different.”

“Ares the Greek god of war?” Bruce clarified.

Diana frowned at him. "Yes.

“That’s what you meant when you said you had fought things from other worlds before?” Bruce asked.

“No,” Diana said. “Though men like to think of their powers otherworldly, the gods were as much of this world as you or I. Hades may claim otherwise for himself. I have not asked him.”

“Ah. Hades,” Bruce said. He rubbed his forehead. “Who won that argument?”

Diana looked affronted. Steve took pity on Bruce.

“No one. We don’t always agree,” Steve told him. “Diana’s the one on the front lines. I defer to her
Diana hand brushed his, letting him know how much she disagreed with his characterization of himself even if she wasn’t going to say it in front of Bruce. Steve wanted to make sure Bruce didn’t get the wrong idea. Steve didn’t entirely trust him yet, and even if they were going to be working together, Bruce was going to be fighting with Diana.

It was still very much a guess but Steve thought Bruce looked like he didn’t know what to say.

Diana evidently thought so too. She gestured to the desk and asked: “What is in the other folders?”

“The hard copy data I have on the other meta humans,” Bruce said. “I took your point about securing data so I haven’t made copies when the files are electronic. Alfred and I are working on the encryption we’ll use going forward to make secure sharing a possibility. In the meantime, if the Batcave can be hacked, we’re already in trouble. I thought, after dinner, we could...”

All three of them turned at the sound of footsteps coming quickly done the hall. Bruce’s phone went off at the same moment. At the sound of the tone, his expression completely shut down. He picked it up, frowning.

Alfred came into the room in the next moment. “Master Wayne...”

“Send it to the Batmobile,” Bruce said. “There’s been an incident. I have to go.”

“Where?” Diana asked.

“First National,” Alfred answered absently. Bruce was already moving toward the door.

“My sword and shield are in the car,” Diana told them. “I will meet you at yours.”

She was gone in the next moment. Bruce didn’t stop but he slowed for just a second, looking at Steve. “I can handle it. She doesn’t have to...”

“You won’t stop her,” Steve said bluntly.

Bruce gave a short nod and left, Alfred following. Steve followed as well. He just moved a little slower.

The Batmobile was primed and ready to go when he got there. Diana was planted on top of it, unmoving. Their eyes met for a moment. Steve touched his fingers to his lips and Diana smiled at him. Then the Batmobile roared to life and sped out of sight.

Steve sat down next to Alfred, who glanced at him and handed him a headset.

“Old tech, I’m afraid,” Alfred said apologetically. “We didn’t have an earbud prepared.”

“It’s fine,” Steve said, taking it in the spirit it was given.

“TA ten minutes,” Bruce was saying in his Batman voice. Diana was not on the coms. “How many hostages?”

Steve counted ten on the camera feeds Alfred had brought up on screen. He kept quiet for now. Alfred and Bruce had a long history of this. He did not want to prove a distraction.

“Ten I can confirm,” Alfred said a moment later. “They’re taking out the cameras. They haven’t found our plants.”
He glanced at Steve and explained: “Gotham banks are frequent targets.”

Steve nodded even as Alfred’s attention snapped back to Bruce as he asked: “Do we know who it is yet?”

“No,” Alfred said. He adjusted the camera feeds. “They’re in masks but I...wait.”

A man was coming forward on screen. He was holding some sort of scanner and his mask was different from the others. It looked like it was made out of burlap.

“It’s Crane,” Alfred said.

There was a pause. “He was released from Arkham early?”

Alfred checked quickly. “No.”

Bruce growled in frustration. Steve could hear him pushing the Batmobile faster. “Check to make sure there were no other breakouts.”

“If you could—” Alfred began, gesturing at the monitor.

“I got it,” Steve said, focussing on the feeds. Crane was running it over the walls, getting closer. “He’s looking for your cameras.”

In another moment the first feed went out. “Got one. The hostages still appear unharmed. There are two men at the front door with ARs. Three at the back. Four in the room. Crane is the only one without an AR but I would consider him armed.”

“He’s definitely armed,” Bruce said. “Alfred?”

“Arkham is aware of Crane’s breakout. I’ve informed Commissioner Gordon,” Alfred said. “No other reports of prisoner break outs.”

“We will have to check once this has been handled,” Bruce said. “Two minutes.”

“The camera on the back door is out. Hostages remain unharmed at this point. Positions the same,” Steve reiterated.

“One minute,” Bruce said.

He crashed through the ceiling fifty-five later. The guards looked as spooked as Steve would have expected anyone to look when a man in a giant bat costume dropped on top of them.

Steve couldn’t see Crane’s face but his body language was strange — a cross between terrified and...pleased?

Steve looked as Alfred, still watching on the screen. “History?”

“Yes,” Alfred said, he glanced at Steve for a moment. “It’s a long story.”

Crane tried to shoot some kind of gas in Bruce’s face. Bruce deflected it easily. It still made Steve involuntarily tense up. Alfred noticed but didn’t say anything.

Diana crashed through a hallway into the front atrium of the bank. The two men guarding the front door opened fire. Diana blocked the bullets and then charged.
She was as seamless a meeting of brute force and grace as Steve had ever seen.

Alfred whistled, impressed.

Steve grinned. Two men with guns and no hostages in the room was nothing for Diana. She made quick work of them.

One she grabbed for questioning, the lasso glowing as it wrapped around him.

They could not hear his response but whatever it was made Diana drop him abruptly and race for Bruce.

Inside the bank, Bruce had managed to free the hostages. Crane attempted to release a gas again but Bruce managed to grab him and damage the release mechanism in between fending off his goons.

“Something’s wrong,” Alfred said. Steve looked at him. Alfred explained: “Bruce is inoculated against Crane’s fear gas. Crane knows that.”

And gas masks had protected them until they didn’t. Steve’s expression went flat. “What if the formula was changed?”

Alfred looked stricken.

Diana burst into the room. She went straight for Crane, pulling him off Bruce.

Crane flailed, caught off guard, but he sprayed the gas directly in Diana’s face.

Diana punched him. He went down hard.

Alfred was on his feet. “That was a full dose.”

Everything about Bruce’s body language signalled his alarm. He put his hands up placating.

“Diana,” Bruce said. His voice was still in Batman mode. “It’s me. It’s—”

“What is wrong with you?” Diana asked, momentarily distracted. Her voice was tinny, caught on Bruce’s com. Steve noticed she had something in her hand. “Are you all right? Did he do something to you?”

Bruce looked concerned. Alfred looked downright scared.

“Chemical agents generally have no effect on Diana,” Steve said, over the com.

“This one could be different,” Alfred said, still standing tense beside him.

“She walked through a cloud of modified mustard gas like it wasn’t even there,” Steve told him. “Anything that affects her would almost certainly kill any person exposed to it.”

“Were any of the hostages exposed?” Alfred asked.

“No,” Bruce answered. He had been watching Diana warily but now he turned.

Crane was gone.

“Where’s the rewind button on this thing?” Steve asked. He found the scroll function as Alfred was opening his mouth to tell him.
One of the screens started to speed backwards. It only took a second to catch one of Crane’s goons grab him by the shoulders and pull him away as Bruce was checking on Diana.

“Back door, just a minute ago,” Steve said.

Diana either heard it through Bruce’s com or figured it out herself because she took off in that direction before Bruce did.

Bruce followed behind quickly and they lost sight of them where the cameras had been knocked out.

Steve pinched the bridge of his nose and tried to force his body to relax. “Fear gas huh? Which incident in Gotham was this?”

He could feel Alfred looking at him. “It was quite a few years ago now.”

Steve sighed. “That doesn’t really narrow it down.”

“Some of the population was inoculated against it during the initial attack,” Alfred said. “But if the formula has been changed...”

“Yeah,” Steve said. “Fuck.”

“Quite,” Alfred said.

“He’s gone,” Bruce reported. “We lost him.”

“And any chance of a sample to isolate the new formula,” Alfred said. “Some may have gotten on the suit when you blocked him. It’s likely disappeared but if you come back quickly...”

“What?” Bruce said, distracted.

“Master Wayne?” Alfred asked.

“Hold on Alfred,” Bruce said. There was a pause. “Diana has a canister. It’s not full but there’s a better chance we’ll get a sample from that.”

“I grabbed it when I punched him,” Steve heard Diana say, as if from a distance. He couldn’t help but grin.

“We need to get it back to the Batcave as quickly as possible,” Bruce said. “But we still need to check Arkham for any other breakouts.”

Diana said something that Steve couldn’t make out. Bruce answered: “That’s not a good idea. We don’t know that you won’t just have a delayed reaction.”

“Commissioner Gordon is on his way to Arkham to check personally,” Alfred said. At the front of the building, the police had just found the burglars Diana had left for them. “And the police have just arrived.”

“That gives us some breathing room,” Bruce said. “We’ll be back soon.”

Diana said said something to him. Steve still couldn’t make out the words but she sounded annoyed. On the screen, the program that monitored the Batmobile sprang to life again.

Steve managed to relax. Just a little.
Alfred glanced at him. “We’re on coms if you require assistance.”

Then he deliberately muted their microphones, leaning back in his seat. He didn't say anything for a moment.

“There has been something I’ve been meaning to ask you,” Alfred said, finally. “And I thought it best to do so without Master Wayne present.”

Steve raised an eyebrow at him. “Shoot.”

“Did Sofia and Louis ever get back together?” Alfred asked, mildly, as if he was inquiring about an old friend.

Steve exhaled. That was fair. Apparently he was.

They had known Alfred and Sofia had moved in similar circles, once. Sameer had been so proud when his youngest daughter followed him on to the stage. Proud and terrified. Like her father, Sofia had never quite made the leap to film, though she had done a good deal of television for the BBC — but the stage had been first love for both of them. Sameer would have been so proud of what she became.

It had only been last night that they had called Sofia and found out they had actually been in a play together before Alfred had moved to the United States. It had taken Sofia a moment to place the name. Alfred would have been a very young man in a very small part, then. Sofia had already been a star.

“Yes,” Steve said. He supposed he could have pretended he didn't know what Alfred was talking about but the lie would be discovered before long. It would only poison the attempt they were making at moving things along.

“Ah, good. Their relationship always seemed tempestuous but they also seemed very much in love, when I knew them,” Alfred said. “I'm glad to hear they worked it out.”

Steve entertained the idea of telling Alfred they had only worked things out when the relationship shifted to include Sofia, Louis and Sarah but decided against it. Alfred would definitely have already been in the States when Sarah came into the picture.

“I was wondering if you would make the connection,” Steve said.

“I was never the star that Sofia was but a young man does not forget the thrill of being on the stage with her,” Alfred said. “Even if it was only for twelve lines.”

“No one is a star like Sofia,” Steve said. “And there was also a kiss on the cheek, if I remember correctly.”

Alfred looked surprised.

“Stands to reason we would have seen you. We've never missed a show,” Steve said. “Even the one that was only open for three days.”

Steve was very proud of Sofia, like, he thought, a father would have been. He knew from the way Alfred was looking at him that some of that must have been reflected on his face. He wasn't trying to hide it.

“I must have missed that,” Alfred said.
“Mm. Not by much, if I have my dates right. It wasn’t her best work, as you can imagine,” Steve said. “When did you make the connection?”

“Only last night,” Alfred said. “I was perusing the books of an author I enjoy — Nadia Malik. I think I must have them all. I revisited them when the name of your friend Sameer rang a bell. The dedications proved illuminating. I hadn’t realized they were sisters.”

Steve nearly laughed. He should have known. It wouldn't have done for Sameer’s children to have anything but brilliant, flashy, public lives.

“When did you know?” Alfred asked, his voice curious.

“You mentioned a theatre you worked at when I was over to verify the Pissarro,” Steve said. “Sofia’s been in a number of productions there so I checked with her. She remembers you, asked me how that darling boy was doing.”

Steve could tell it took Alfred a moment to realize the darling boy she was referring to was him not Bruce. Sofia had that effect on people. “Did she really teach you how to pick a lock?”

“And throw a proper punch,” Alfred said. “I hadn't the heart to tell her I already knew.”

“She teaches everyone how to throw a punch,” Steve said. Diana had taught her that; Sameer to pick locks and read a crowd. “Are you planning to tell Bruce?”

“And you planning to tell Ms. Prince?” Alfred countered.

“Yes,” Steve said. It wasn't a question.

Alfred studied him for a moment. “I told Master Wayne that I had rediscovered the dedication to your friend. I am going to tell him that I’ve remembered another connection. If he asks for the information, I will tell him. But I suspect he will respect your wishes.”

Steve nodded. “Sofia thinks it’s charming but I haven't spoken to Nadia.”

“And it's not just her you're protecting, I suspect,” Alfred said.

“No,” Steve said. Sameer had had three daughters. Between them, they had had six children and, so far, ten grandchildren.

And Sameer’s family was the smallest of his and Etta’s and Charlie's. He had come to it late — Charlie had a whole generation of relatives more than him.

Napi was a different story altogether.

“I don’t know that we’ll be this cautious forever but right now, I would bet if we divulge any names to Bruce, he will take that as permission to find out every detail of their lives. And we’re not talking publicly available information; we both know that. He doesn’t have that right,” Steve said.

Alfred did not answer. Steve didn’t expect him to. He understood loyalty.

“And, frankly, we don’t have the right to grant it,” Steve continued.

“I have not checked,” Alfred said, “But I would be surprised if you did not already have people running similar interference for your family members as they were for you.”

“We have someone monitoring it. They would like to be able to scrub everything but most of our
family has a presence online. Just like everyone else does these days. Most of them wouldn’t want everything scrubbed, it’s part of how people live,” Steve said. He thought of what their teenage nieces and nephews would have done if they had tried to keep them off Snapchat — probably laugh and make secret accounts. “But we’ve had those conversations with them. We haven’t had this one. Ultimately, it’s not up to us.”

“Indeed,” Alfred said. He was silent for a moment. “For a spy, you’re being remarkably honest.”

“I keep telling people I’m retired. I can’t help it if they don’t believe me,” Steve said and smiled when Alfred huffed a short laugh. “Diana thinks the only way this will work is if we’re honest with each other.”

“And you don’t agree?” Alfred asked.

“I don’t disagree,” Steve said. “And I’m following her lead here but...sometimes we don’t completely agree on what being honest means.”

Alfred looked shocked. Steve almost laughed. “We don’t always agree. That’s surprised you and Bruce more than it should.”

“That seems fundamental,” Alfred said. “And you have made it quite clear that you don’t lie to each other.”

“We don’t,” Steve shrugged. “I believe there are layers to honesty. Like trust. Diana takes a more black and white approach. Between us...”

Steve paused. It was hard to describe and he couldn’t say he put much thought into it. They just were. “Everything that I have, that I know, that I am open to Diana. We don’t...separate our lives anymore. Not for a long time now. But I don’t give that to everyone.”

He didn’t give it to anyone except Diana. Not in the same way. “I don’t think that means I’m not honest with other people. There are just some things I prefer to keep private. Diana’s generally more open.”

“Hm,” Alfred made a non-committal noise, before saying, dryly. “I suppose, in the interest of honesty, I should tell you that if you ever came after Master Wayne you would, of course, have to go through me.”

Steve paused but nodded. Alfred was no more a civilian than he was. “I understand. I don’t actually expect it to come to that.”

“Nor I. But I find it...particularly egregious when anyone threatens to shot Master Wayne. His aversion to guns is not trivial.” Alfred told him.

His voice had gone short and sharp at the end. Steve tried to keep his level. He thought he probably shouldn’t have introduced that particular fight but not saying anything...He couldn’t not say anything.

He had been dealing with it by not thinking about it. He could theoretically understand Bruce’s reasoning but he couldn’t...if you had to kill someone, it was better to do it quickly. Gas was torture. It was only ever torture. That knowledge was with him every time he took a breath.

And now they were dealing with another villain who used it as a weapon.

“I can’t abide by poison gas,” Steve said. “It’s a crime all by itself. I can't abide by it. If Bruce
hadn’t resorted to that...I can’t say I wouldn’t have threatened to shoot him because that’s what I have and I would protect Diana with my dying breath but I would have been more...mindful of it.”

“I understand,” Alfred said, giving him his own words back. “I would have been less civil if I did not.”

“This man, Crane,” Steve said. “You called what he used a fear gas. What does it do exactly?”

“It’s a neurotoxin,” Alfred explained. “Victims hallucinate their worst fears and the gas amplifies the response. Prolonged exposure causes insanity and in extreme cases can kill them, either by over exposure or by the...actions they commit while under its influence. We had an antidote to it but if Crane’s changed the configuration—”

The Batmobile roared back into the cave, interrupting him. Steve was on his feet and heading towards it even as Diana leapt off and met him more than half way.

They both reached for each other unconsciously before Diana abruptly seemed to remember herself and pulled away.

“Bruce told me something of what this gas can do,” Diana said. “It should be gone. If it is Crane's old gas, it will be but...”

“No sense risking contamination,” Steve said, nodding even as he jammed his hands in his pockets to keep himself from reaching for her.

They listed toward each other for a moment. Every part of him wanted to touch her, make sure she was all right, even though she was always all right. He always checked. They always checked in with each other.

Diana looked as if she was having the same struggle. Her hand clenched into a fist and she turned to demand of Bruce: “Where is your shower?”

Bruce was climbing out of the Batmobile, something held carefully in his hand. He pointed down the hallway. “Decontamination shower is that way, first door on the left.”

Diana nodded. She looked at Steve with so much yearning that he had to clench his hands in his pockets to keep from reaching out and touching her face. It felt so wrong not to touch her, to hold himself back.

“I will not be long,” Diana promised and then marched off.

Steve felt off kilter as she walked away. He kept his hands in his pockets as he went to join Alfred and Bruce. Bruce had stripped out of the outer layer of the Batman suit and was handing Alfred a small capsule with a few fibres attached to it. Alfred was wearing gloves.

“It was a trap for me. All of it,” Bruce said. He looked guilty at the idea of that. “But Scarecrow wasn’t expecting Diana. Or the way she...reacted after he tried to dose her.”

If it had not been so grim, Steve would have smiled. Diana packed one hell of a punch.

“She managed grab this from his arm as he went down,” Bruce continued.

“There does appear to be something left in the canister,” Alfred confirmed.

“That’s something to go off then,” Steve said, looking between them. “What do you need us to
This is a long one! The next one will be a short one. Also, I've upped the rating a bit!

There's a bit of discussion about Sameer's daughters in here. Their characters are more developed in The Kind Old Sun but as a reminder, Sameer (and his wife Farah) had three daughters, Nadia, Yasmine and Sofia. Sofia became an actor. Nadia became an author later in life after her children had left home.
Steve and Diana had been going over security footage for hours already. They were trying to track Crane’s movements prior to the robbery, following his movements from the breakout at Arkham. Bruce’s facial recognition software was put to work trying to get a hit on where he had disappeared since. The mask made things more difficult.

But around 2 a.m., Steve started to fade. Bruce watched as Steve started to slump and his eyes drifted inexorably closed. The first time it happened, Diana nudged him awake and they had a quick, hushed conversation. The second time it happened, they wrapped up what they were working on and went back to their hotel.

They had put together a fairly complete timeline already when they left. There was nothing to do be wait for a hit on the facial recognition. Neither of them had the right skills to help with the antidote.

Bruce did not offer to have Alfred make up a bed for them at the house — it seemed like an awkward thing to offer when they all knew they could not accept. Steve’s medication and his oxygen were at the hotel, after all.

Bruce waited until they had left to say to Alfred: “We’ll need to start keeping a supply of oxygen here.”

“I’ve already made the arrangements,” Alfred said. “And for the jet you’re sending to Paris.”

“I was just going to modify the filter design for that,” Bruce said, without looking away from the readout on the screen. They were waiting for the results of the analysis of new toxin. “Increase the oxygen concentration and how often the cockpit air is renewed.”

“Oxygen tanks for now,” Alfred said. “Improving aeronautics later.”

“The tech is already available. It just costs more,” Bruce said, absently. “Too much for commercial airlines.”

He wanted to growl — this was taking too long. This version of the toxin evaporated even more quickly than the last had. That was good. Few, if any, people could be affected through secondary contact. Exposure had to be direct through the spray Crane used or gas bombs —and the gas the bombs released would disparate relatively quickly.

Crane seemed to be losing his touch, though the evaporation rate meant it had been difficult to stabilize the small sample they had to get any analysis done.

It was taking longer than Bruce liked to decipher the chemical composition of the gas. Too long. They had not even started on an antidote yet. If Crane decided to launch another attack immediately, they would be screwed.

“Do we have anyone on hand at Wayne Enterprises who can work on an antidote if this is beyond me?” Bruce asked. “Anyone we trust?”

He rued the day they lost Fox.
“I have some ideas,” Alfred said.

“Make sure they’re lined up fast,” Bruce said. “I doubt Crane will lay low for long.”

“We may get a few days’ reprieve,” Alfred said. “Ms. Prince did punch him rather hard.”

Bruce almost let himself smile at that. Just as he was about to give in to the moment of amusement, the results popped up on the computer. He leaned forward, frustration and worry increasing as he read the formula.

Bruce hoped he had been right, that Crane was losing his touch, because if he knew what he was doing when he created this particular gas…

“Fuck.”

—

Diana was back at the museum by 9 a.m. to keep up appearances but Steve headed back to Bruce’s lake house as early as he could. Alfred answered the door, looking like he hadn’t slept at all and wordlessly stepped back to let him in.

“Master Wayne is still downstairs,” Alfred said.

Steve raised an eyebrow and resisted the temptation to roll his oxygen canister back and forth just for something to do with his hands. He didn’t need it right now but if it was all hands on deck until they managed to stop this Crane guy, he thought it wasn’t a bad idea to have it on hand in case of another late night.

“Has he eaten?” Steve asked, then added: “Have you?”

Steve had some experience with heroes, after all.

“I’m attending to that now,” Alfred told him. “Have you had...”

Alfred paused and glanced at his watch.

“Breakfast still,” Steve supplied. “And I’m good, thanks.”

“I’m sure Master Wayne could use a fresh pair of eyes, whether he acknowledges it or not,” he gestured to the canister. “I can find a place for that, if you don’t need it at the moment.”

Steve passed it over. “Given all you get up to downstairs, I’m assuming you already know to keep it away from open flames.”

“Yes, we have managed to keep the majority of our explosions planned and controlled,” Alfred said.

Steve grinned. He liked Alfred. “I would hate to be the reason you break that streak.”

“If I were a betting man, I would still put my money on Master Wayne,” Alfred said.

With a very select few people, Steve would have made a joke about how Diana certainly preferred it when he didn’t blow himself up, though never in Diana’s hearing. It was not a joke she appreciated. He wasn’t there yet with Alfred, though, and certainly not with Bruce. He wondered if they ever would be.
“I’ll take your word for it,” Steve said before Alfred headed to the kitchen and he descended into the Batcave.

Steve would never have admitted it to anyone but himself and Diana but as he took the lift down, he couldn’t help but picture Bruce in a lab coat and rubber apron, bent over a notebook of his own. He knew it was completely irrational — Bruce was looking for an antidote, Steve already knew what the Batcave looked like and he was well aware from about a million lectures from Maryam that science didn’t really work like that anymore — but dealing with gas unsettled Steve. It always would.

It was a relief to find Bruce sitting in front of a computer, looking haggard and intent. He glanced up, frowning, after Steve had taken two steps into the room. Steve wasn’t sure Bruce had the sound of his gait memorized — it was distinct, what with three points of sound because of his cane, but they hadn’t known each other long — or if he just recognized it as not Alfred.

“Oh. Where’s—” Bruce stopped and rubbed his face. “Diana’s at the museum?”

“Yes,” Steve replied. “She’s going to see if she can leave Blair to handle things this afternoon. She’s better than me at this kind of thing. But...”

He dug a flash drive out of his pocket and handed it to Bruce. Bruce blinked, confused, but took it.

“Schematics for the latest upgrades on gas masks,” Steve said. “I’ve kept tabs on developments over the years. Some of it is proprietary information that I’m not supposed to have so I’m trusting that it won’t show up in a Wayne design anytime soon.”

Bruce stared at him. It was a stupid joke and didn’t come across right but it was the best Steve could do. It was only through sheer force of will and training that he wasn’t flushing in embarrassment. He had never acquired any gas masks. It wasn’t like he kept them around. He had just...kept tabs on any new developments.

“You can’t do anyone any good if you get taken down by this stuff,” Steve said. “I figured you would be focused on finding an antidote. I wasn’t sure if you would have thought about making modifications to your suit yet.”

“I hadn’t,” Bruce said. “Thanks.”

Steve nodded. “How’s it coming?”

“Not well,” Bruce admitted. “We’ve pulled several people from Wayne Industries. They don’t know exactly what they’re working on but we’ve come up against three major issues. The previous antidote inoculated against future exposure — that protection appears to be gone. We think we have a rudimentary antidote for the new toxin but it won’t protect against future exposure, in fact, it looks like it gets less effective each time it’s used.”

“And we think the fatality rate will be higher — much higher — than the last formulation,” Bruce said. “Overdoses of the last formulation could kill people. Or they would kill themselves or each other under its influence. This one, though...It looks like there is a percentage of the population this will just kill.”

“How high are your estimates?” Steve asked.

“It will be fatal to at least ten per cent of the population that’s exposed,” Bruce said. “Twenty-five per cent on the high end.”
“Hell,” Steve said. He wanted to sit down and sit with his hands pressed against his face for a while, until he felt steadier with this. But there wasn’t time for that and he knew how to keep up a good front, he always had.

He sat down beside Bruce, who looked grim and exhausted, and asked: “Do we have any sightings of the man - Crane?”

“No,” Bruce answered.

Steve nodded. “You said you’ve come up with an antidote?”

“A temporary one,” Bruce said.

“It’s better than nothing,” Steve told him.

“We’re synthesizing it now,” Bruce said. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “It takes time and if we can find a better fix before Crane uses it against anyone...”

“Or find Crane before he can use it against anyone,” Steve said, his voice flat.

Bruce looked at him, frowning. Steve returned his gaze directly. Diana had told Steve that Bruce had a stricter moral code against killing that he had returned to after his deviation with Superman. He had evidently just remembered that Steve did not.

It was never Steve’s first choice and he had always avoided it where he could. He didn’t like having to kill anyone.

But Steve had always done what was necessary.

“I don’t go into the field anymore,” Steve reminded him. “I’m retired.”

“You’re not really,” Bruce said, his voice mild.

“There’s not much call for operatives with bum legs who start wheezing if someone lights a cigarette,” Steve said. “Last time I shot to kill was forty years ago. And it wasn’t at a human.”

He kept it to himself that he hadn’t succeeded nor that he didn’t think Bruce had much room to talk, given his recent history. Bruce had to square that with himself and now was not the time to get into that.

Steve truly couldn’t imagine Bruce was going to have to deal with him in the field — he would have to deal with Diana.

Her first choice was never to kill. She avoided it whenever possible. But she didn’t avoid it entirely.

“If we can detain Crane before he gets a chance to use the new toxin that would be for the best, of course,” Bruce said.

“And it’s always good to have an antidote handy,” Steve said. “I’m not going to be very much use on that front. Chemicals aren’t my area of expertise. What can I help with?”

Bruce paused for a moment to think about it. Steve didn’t ask if Bruce had been up all night with this — he didn’t have to — and he didn’t know Bruce well enough to suggest he take a power nap before lack of sleep started effecting his work. He had to hope Alfred had that covered.
After a moment, Bruce handed him back the USB. “Figure out which one is best and we’ll make it an option on the suit.”

“The best option would be a mix of two designs,” Steve said, almost automatically. He realized how revealing it was but he had already threatened to shoot Bruce. He didn’t think his vulnerabilities in this area could get much more exposed.

Bruce just nodded. “You already know how to make the design elements compatible?”

“Roughly,” Steve replied. He had always made a point of not spending too much time dwelling on it.

“Alfred will help with the rest,” Bruce said. “I’ll leave that to the two of you.”

It was a show of trust, though Steve suspected Bruce wouldn’t hesitate to run into a cloud of this stuff whether he was wearing a gas mask or not.

By early afternoon, when Diana arrived, they had a prototype gas mask ready. By nightfall, Alfred had tested it and integrated it with Batsuit. They all pretended not to notice that Alfred had surreptitiously made four more — though Steve doubted Diana even realized one was for her.

Bruce was having less luck with the antidote. The first one they had come up with, which theoretically should have worked, which all the models said should have worked, didn’t. From what Steve could understand, it didn’t counteract the toxin fast enough and the toxin was neutralizing it somehow, which made Bruce look very grim. One of the scientists from Wayne Enterprises — who still didn’t know what they were working on — came up with another solution — from what Steve could boil down to making the drug faster acting. It worked when they tested it but only seventy-five per cent of the time.

It was getting late. Bruce’s body language grew progressively rigid, though he tried to hide it. Diana did not such thing, pacing the Batcave as Steve watched, sitting, doing his oxygen therapy, and just barely keeping himself from joining her.

The clock ticked on. Steve kept his oxygen on to try to stave off the tiredness that liked to creep up on him at the end of the day. Alfred got word that they had a successful batch — only twelve doses of the antidote and it took six hours to make each batch — ready to go.

Nothing happened.

Bruce gave the go ahead to make more of the antidote, as much as they could manage given how slow the process was. He went out to patrol around midnight. Diana insisted on going with him. Steve and Alfred could do nothing but wait, listening in as the checked the worst parts of Gotham and found nothing.

Both of them were having trouble staying awake by the time Diana and Bruce returned. Steve forced himself up and went to Diana, like he always did. She smiled, the one she always managed for him, and touched his face as he slid his hands along her arms. Nothing had happened, there hadn’t even been petty theft to stop, but they leaned together for a moment, checking in with each other as they always did.

Diana kept her arm around him when she turned to acknowledge Bruce and Alfred again, saying: “I do not think we will accomplish anything more tonight. Our search has been frustratingly fruitless.”

Bruce had taken his cowl off. There were bags under his eyes. He hesitated for a moment. “We can
make up a room, if you would like to stay here.”

It wasn’t a completely surprising offer and it felt like a step forward. Steve was almost regretful when Diana shook her head, as Steve had expected her to, and said: “Thank you but we have to pack.”

She tilted her head as Bruce absorbed that — Steve thought he might have forgotten they were leaving. Steve recognized the question in her posture and squeezed her hip to let her know he was with her.

“Unless you would like us to stay until Crane is captured?” Diana asked.

Bruce looked surprised. Alfred cleared his throat, looking kindly. “That may take time. I don’t think Crane was expecting...quite the reaction you gave him. He may lay low for a while to regroup, if we’re lucky.”

“Or decide to change the formula again,” Bruce said, sourly. The tone made Steve bristle for a moment — it had been directed snidely at them too often recently — but he knew it wasn’t this time, was forcing himself not to react even as Diana squeezed his arm against it.

Bruce didn’t notice. His shoulders slumped, barely perceptible in the armour he was still wearing. He rubbed a hand over his face. “If you want to delay for a couple of days, I won’t say no to the assistance but there’s no telling when Crane will surface again. You’re in Calgary for the rest of the week, right?”

“Yes,” Diana answered, still slightly wary.

“I don’t know exactly how fast you can travel but I’m guessing getting back to Gotham wouldn’t be that onerous a trip for you,” Bruce said. “In a worst case scenario.”

“Let’s hope it does not come to that,” Diana said.

Steve shuddered, he couldn’t have said why just...a bad feeling. Diana looked at him in concern but Steve shook his head. Diana knew the idea of a gas attack was effecting him more than he liked. Diana was having a similar reaction — she was thinking of Veld, he could tell by the way she had held herself when she had been pacing, by the look in her eyes when she glanced at him, she didn’t want to be too late again — but at least she could channel that into doing something useful.

There was nothing Steve could do except worry. He felt no relief at the thought they would be leaving Gotham tomorrow. He had never been good at standing to the side when other people were in danger.

—

“How on earth did I end up with two transfers?” Blair complained, scowling at her phone and the travel itinerary on it.

“Because you let Michel book your tickets. You know he always books the cheapest flight,” Diana told her, keeping her tone light. It had been hard, the past two days, pretending that she was not waiting for an attack.

Alfred seemed to think Crane had gotten more than he bargained for in facing her and had gone to ground. Bruce’s suspicious nature did not allow him to have such hopes and Steve...Steve was going to be tense until they were sure there would be no attack.
Diana could only hope Alfred’s optimism proved true.

“I was being conscientious,” Blair claimed. “Saving the Louvre on costs.”

Diana smiled thinly. She hadn’t looked up from her own phone. It had been a useful barrier for disguising her worries the past few days. “You were being lazy.”

Blair sniffed. “That is why one has live in lovers.”

“We’re going to be late,” Andre fretted. “The car is waiting.”

Blair sighed, rolled her eyes and jammed her phone into her purse. Diana could not help but smile as she put her own phone away. Blair extended her arms grandly to hug her and kiss both her cheeks.

“Enjoy your time in the wilds of Canada,” Blair said, her face aptly expressing just how little the idea appealed to her.

“Have a good trip home,” Diana said.

Blair huffed but consented to get into the taxi. “Oh yes, transferring through Toronto and Frankfurt. Such endlessly charming cities.”

Andre closed the door and looked at Diana with huge worried eyes. Diana squeezed his shoulders. “She is going to complain all the way to the airport, immediately fall asleep on the plane and spend the transfer on the phone with Michel. Do not look so worried. It will be fine.”

“If you say so Mlle Prince,” Andre said, long-suffering, before joining his boss in the cab.

Diana was distracted by the buzz of her phone and did not wave as the cab pulled away. It was Steve confirming he was on his way to the museum. Dr. Neil had inquired just after the last meeting whether he was planning to stop by — he wanted to thank him again and nothing Diana had said had convinced him more thanks were unnecessary.

Steve had not had the heart to say no to that, particularly since the hubbub around the identification had calmed down. Boston was cooperating and the last meetings for the Wayne exhibition had been yesterday. Most of the outside curators had left last night or early that morning. Blair’s partner had rescheduled her flight because of the painting identification and Diana had allowed for the possibility she would still be arguing with Bruce when Steve had originally booked their tickets.

After this, they would be going to their hotel to finish packing. If there was no sign of Crane by their evening flight, they would continue on to Calgary.

“Oh, Ms Prince!” Dr. Neil called. He was huffing down the museum stairs. Diana strode up them quickly so he would have to go down fewer.

He smiled wryly; he knew exactly what she was doing. “I wondered. Our new antiquities curator, he has a theory about a pattern on some Grecian pottery that slightly contradicts the accepted scholarship. The identification of the Pissarro seems to have emboldened him enough to speak to me about it but, well, it’s hardly my area. We have a general dearth of knowledge in that area, though I am attempting to remedy that. He’s young and he’s been too shy to bring it up with any of the visiting experts but I wondered, if you have a moment while you’re waiting, would you be willing to have a word with him?”

Diana smiled. It was a welcome distraction. “Of course.”
Dr. Neil smiled back. “Thank you, he’s in the gallery. I’ll walk with you.”

They went back inside.

Diana did not see Steve when he pulled up five minutes later. He squinted and pulled his phone out to text Diana when he didn’t see her waiting, just to see where she was before he went to meet with Dr. Neil.

Steve fumbled with his phone, dropped it and swore. He ducked to pick it up. It had skidded to the farthest corner of the passenger side.

He was vaguely away of the sound of multiple vehicles pulling into the parking lot and doors sliding open. There was the scuffling of many feet and then — Steve froze, grasping his phone, all senses suddenly on high alert — the distinct sound of guns being loaded and cocked.

Steve slid further down in his seat, keeping out of sight. After another moment, he risked hitting the digital control in the arm rest, repositioning the side mirrors so when he slid up just a little more, he could get a glimpse of what was going on.

He edged up in the seat until he could see. His heart was in his throat.

Crane had arrived.

Chapter End Notes

Quick note: this story won't be updated again until after June 7. I'm still writing it, not to worry, I'm just going to be travelling for few weeks and will exclusively be on mobile. Updating chapters on mobile on ao3 + me = disaster.

I am TRYING REALLY HARD to get the next chapter of Kind Old Sun updated before I leave. I should be able to.

Sorry this chapter is shorter! That's just how it worked out.

Oh, and I've tried to leave things ambiguous with Lucius Fox. He could have just moved away! But he wasn't mentioned in Justice League and I don't think he was mentioned in BvS, though I have tried to block that movie out in large point, so...Dunno.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Crane's attack.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve stayed down. He tried to call Diana but she didn’t pick up. He texted a warning but it went unread.

Crane’s men were fanning out around the building. Crane looked like he was going to go right in through the front door.

They had no time to waste. This was going to get bad fast.

Steve found the Bluetooth earbud that he hated and Diana made him use and dialled Alfred.

“Good afternoon, Captain Trevor,” Alfred said pleasantly.

“Crane’s at the museum,” Steve told him. “I count 20 guys but my sight line isn’t good. Diana’s inside but I can’t get a hold of her. I don’t think she has her phone at hand.”

Alfred’s voice immediately became serious. Steve could hear him walking swiftly in the direction of the Batcave, he imagined. “Where are you?”

“In the car. They’re not checking the parking lot,” Steve said. It was a sloppy mistake. Steve was thankful for it but… he swallowed, looking up at the vehicle he had parked beside. “Alfred, I am looking at an empty school bus right now.”

Alfred sounded like he was running. “Master Wayne!”

Steve could hear Bruce in the background, tinny over the phone. His words faded in and out.

“-picked it up,” Bruce was saying. “Keep trying Diana.”

Steve heard the roar of the Batmobile leaving.

Crane was just walking up the steps of the museum. Bruce wouldn’t get here in time – not to stop him completely.

“Alfred,” Steve said, still staring at the school bus. “How many guys does he have with him?”

“More than twenty,” Alfred said. He sounded distracted. That was good. There was less chance he would try to stop Steve that way.

“How many did he leave outside?” Steve asked.

“Five,” Alfred answered.
There were more than five entrances. Steve had memorized the layout because that was what he did. It was near the end of the school day – Steve had seen other classes end their school trips at the learning centre would be nearest to a door on the North West corner. It would take Crane time to get there.

“I need to know if there’s anyone guarding the service door on the West side of the building. The one next to the cafeteria that’s not open to the public,” Steve told him.

It caught Alfred off guard. “Captain Trevor...”

Steve was already out of the car. He left the door slightly ajar so it wouldn’t make a sound and stayed low to the ground. His hip protested immediately. That was no surprise. He knew at best he would come out of this with an ache in his hip so bad it would be painful to walk for days.

At best.

“Just tell me. It’ll be faster than arguing,” Steve told Alfred.

There was a beat of silence as Steve made it to the side of the building. Steve spoke again before Alfred did: “If you haven’t already done it, can you cut the feeds to the internal control room?”

“Yes,” Alfred said finally. “They haven’t made it there yet. Doing so now. There are no guards at the door you’re interested in but there’s one between you and it and two near the back service entrance. They will hear you if you go through that door.”

“Okay,” Steve said. That was actually better than he had hoped. “Any luck reaching Diana?”

“No,” Alfred said. “And they haven’t reached her yet. The entrance staff were exposed to the toxin before they could sound the alarm. He’s using small bombs to disperse it.”

Steve swallowed but kept going. He could hear the guard Crane had dispersed to the side entrance, the one for groups and school children. He seemed as bad at his job as the rest of Crane's goons, standing inside the recess of the door instead and looking towards the building.

They were guarding against people getting out, not getting in.

Steve crept as close as he dared and hefted his cane like a baton, automatically calculating where a blow would cause the most damage. They had reinforced it for just this purpose. He didn’t carry a gun anymore, it was too much of a hassle in Britain and France, but he spent too much time with Diana to leave himself completely defenseless.

He waited a beat. Crane’s thug shifted his weight and took half a step backwards, a half step out of the overhang above the door. It was more than enough of an opportunity.

Steve hit him with as much force as he could muster in the back of the head, aiming for the base of his skull.

The man went down hard.

Steve didn’t stop to check if he was still breathing. He didn’t want to know, not now. He removed the clip from his gun and did a quick check for more weapons, finding two hand guns and another clip for the AR-15.

And canisters of the fear gas.
Steve couldn't leave them either, even if it made things difficult. He took both guns and the clips. If he just chucked them away, someone could find them. He stashed everything but the hand guns in the first garbage can he found.

He carried on.

“Master Wayne will arrive soon,” Alfred told him, his tone flat and neutral.

“Not soon enough,” Steve said. “Are they anywhere near the learning centre? Is there a class in there?”

“Yes, there appears to be a school group in the learning centre,” Alfred said. “Crane and his men appear to be heading to the main gallery.”

“All of them? They’re not branching out?” Steve said. That didn’t make tactical sense. Steve forced himself to stop thinking of the attack as a battle. If Crane was using this as a trap for Batman, it made more sense for him to concentrate his fire power with him.

“No,” Alfred answered before adding: “Diana is in one of the smaller galleries off of the main gallery.”

Steve wished Alfred hadn’t mentioned that. He was annoyed that Alfred had mentioned that. Diana could more than take care of herself. Diana would absolutely agree with Steve that he should be trying to get the school children out of the building. That didn’t mean it was any easier to be going in the opposite direction of helping her.

“Diana can take care of herself,” Steve said shortly. “We need to evacuate as much of the building as we can. Will Crane start shooting people if an alarm is pulled or will he try to consolidate the prisoners he has?”

“I...don’t know,” Alfred said.

Steve had an instinct about it but Alfred had more experience with Crane. So did Bruce. “Ask Bruce.”

“Master Wayne would not risk it,” Alfred said too quickly to have actually asked him.

Steve was at the back entrance. The thugs Crane had left to guard the door weren’t alone. There was one man, a cafeteria worker, Steve thought, twitching on the ground. A security guard was huddled against the wall, clawing at his face and moaning.

Crane’s men were using the gas on the people they encountered. They weren’t shooting them.

Steve incapacitated the nearest guard the same way he had the first. He had to be faster this time, there were two people to take out. For a moment as he was striking the first guard, his hip hurt in a sharp, abrupt way that viscerally reminded him of how it felt before it dislocated.

It didn’t. It couldn’t. It hadn’t since his hip replacement. But he could taste the fear of that happening on the back of his tongue.

Steve shot the second of Crane’s men as the first one fell to the ground.

Neither tried to get up.

His aim had never been as good as Charlie’s but his hands never shook. Not when he needed them
to be steady.

“Paramedics are needed at the rear entrance,” Steve told Alfred as he slipped inside.

He didn’t even have to search for a fire alarm. There was one in the wall of the first hallway he walked down.

Steve did not hesitate. He knew what the risks were. If he was wrong, a lot of people could die. But he had taken down three of the five guards stationed outside and Crane’s other men were with him. They weren’t shooting people, they were dosing them with the gas, either because Crane was a sadistic bastard or because he wanted to make an impression on Bruce or both.

And Bruce estimated the toxin could have a 25% fatality rate just on exposure. That didn’t include what people did to themselves or others after they were exposed.

Steve pulled the alarm and kept going.

He knew had memorized the fire evacuation plan when he learned the museum’s layout. He headed to the exit marked for the museum’s learning centre. He reached it about the same time the school group did. They were other people streaming out as well but the class was obvious, two teachers bracketing them to keep the children together. They looked like they were Grade 3 or 4. Just 8 or 9 years old.

Steve held the door open for them. One teacher led them out, the other did a headcount as they passed.

Steve was out of breath – he was starting to feel a pang and a hitch at the end of each breath. Still, he leaned over and whispered to her: “The museum is under attack. Don’t go to the parking lot. Get as far away as you can as fast as you.”

She looked at him and whatever she saw in his face made her go pale and hustle the kids out even faster. It didn’t take them long. Nobody tried to stop them.

“What’s going on at the other guarded exits?” Steve asked Alfred as he pulled himself away from the door and headed further into the museum. If he needed to take out Crane’s other guards himself, he would.

“The two at the front entrance are making their way to Crane, I believe,” Alfred said. He paused. “Due to Crane’s…path there aren’t many people using that exit.”

“Any chance you can ping every cell phone in the museum’s radius with a message to run?” Steve asked. He should have thought of that before. At the beginning. But there was no time to dwell on it now.

“That will take time,” Alfred said. “However, the Batmobile comes with external speakers.”

Steve’s shoulders slumped in relief. “Bruce is arriving then?”

“His ETA is one minute,” Alfred said. “I suggest you…”

He stopped abruptly just as Steve suspected he was going to be politely ordered out of the scene. Steve tensed immediately. “What?”

“Crane reached the main gallery,” Alfred said. “He let off several bombs as the fire alarm went off. They’re holed up there now but…”
He sounded shaken. Steve was already moving in that direction. “But what? What floor are they on?”

“Second. He...” Alfred swallowed audibly. “Ms Prince entered and intervened. He sprayed her with something, a concentrated dose, I’m not sure but it...it seems to have had an effect.”

Steve had not seen what Diana had done on the airfield after his plane exploded. Charlie and Sameer has refused to discuss it with him but Napi had. About what happened when she lost control after she thought he had died.

Much, much later Steve had seen the aftermath of what happened when she had had to release a fuller extent of her power.

“Tell Bruce to run if he sees lightening,” Steve warned as he made for the stairs. Sharp shards of pain lanced from his hip with every step and he was already feeling lightheaded. He knew it would be worse by the time he made it to the second floor from the basement.

Steve went anyway.

—

Dr. Neil’s new antiquities expert – Dr. Clive Thuong – was young and, once he got over his initial awe, impossibly eager. He stammered when he first began explaining his theory to her – he wasn’t entirely wrong, though not as new as he supposed and focused to narrowly on one small element without considering the context of the larger piece.

It made Diana smile even as she poked holes in it. After the many days of tedious meetings, it was fun speaking to someone so enthusiastic and she gave him her full attention. Dr. Neil looked as pleased and relaxed as he had all week – Diana was aware that, while the introduction was mainly about allowing Dr. Thuong to network, it was also Dr. Neil showing her how Gotham museum was changing. Diana had met their previous antiquities expert who was...an interesting man, more given to following whims until he had convinced himself they were true than doing rigorous academic work.

Diana understood that. It was unlikely they would be able to keep Dr. Thuong in Gotham long, if he continued developing as he was, and Dr. Neil wanted credit for recognizing his potential after the long years of having such a...unique antiquities expert on staff.

She was in the middle of explaining how she believed certain markings had been made – it was the same technique they still used on Themyscira, which gave her a somewhat unfair advantage though frustratingly no proof – when she heard the gun shots.

There were two in quick succession and it was obvious that the others didn’t hear them. When her head snapped in that direction at the sound Dr. Thuong just looked confused.

“Ms. Prince?” he asked, confused.

The fire alarm went off in the next moment.

There was movement in the main gallery – heavy footsteps and a scream. Diana started forward at once.

Several gas bombs, already spewing, came sailing through the entrance way to the side gallery.

Dr. Neil made a valiant but fruitless attempt to pull her back and get in front of her an Dr. Thuong
as the canisters came through. Diana pushed by him to meet the threat head on. She could hear them – her fellow curators and the few museum guests who had been in the room – succumbing to the toxin.

They did not scream for long, too lost to their own horrors. Bruce had told her something of this gas. Rage rose in her throat.

Crane’s men came through first. One of them attempted to shoot her, another lobbed more of the gas bombs at her. She deflected both bullets and bombs as if they were nothing. The men were equally easy to disperse. Crane had not picked them for their quality.

Then Crane came through, his thugs spreading out behind him and trying to block off the exits.

Diana thought it was a poor strategy. She did not understand why Crane, even beneath his burlap mask, seemed so gleeful at the sight of her.

Diana did not hesitate. She could hear wailing behind her. She would take him alive but this needed to end and quickly.

She charged him.

Crane did not move. He lifted his arm and released another cloud of gas. Diana barely registered that it was different from the gas bombs were spewing as Crane blurred and changed form.

Ares stood before her, laughing maniacally.

It made sense. Of course it made sense that a man who used such a weapon was not a man at all, was her oldest, cruellest enemy come back to taunt her.

It did not matter that Diana felt fear squeezing her heart. She was an Amazon and a goddess. She did not cower at her greatest fear made manifest before her.

She had started her approach aiming for a man, intending to take him alive, if at all possible. She could not give the God of War such quarter.

She could not pick up enough speed and power to smite him with the first blow but she could do damage still.

Diana funneled all the might she could muster into striking him.

--

Bruce arrived to chaos. There were too many people in the parking lot. They had, at least, realized something was wrong and were fleeing instead of milling about in front of museum. Bruce’s first fear when Alfred had told Steve was going to pull the museum fire alarm is that all it would do was give Crane’s goons a change to take pot shots at them.

Bruce’s first reaction to that…plan had been negative. Extremely negative. Some small, analytical part of his mind had immediately started cataloging the pros and cons of the move and even as he roared up to the parking lot he hadn’t decided whether it was a smart move or dangerously risky.

But the worst case scenario had not occurred. Steve had taken out three of the outside guards beforehand; Alfred had assured him that what was left of museum security had taken care of one more while the other retreating inside to join Crane.
Still. Steve didn’t go into the field anymore Bruce’s left foot. He gritted his teeth. Now was not the time.

The Batmobile stayed in the parking lot, broadcasting a message to evacuate the area was quickly as possible. Bruce ejected himself from it and used the momentum to hook on to the museum’s roof, going in through a second floor window.

Getting to Crane was imperative.

“We have a problem,” Alfred said urgently as Bruce landed inside the museum. “Diana has been exposed to a gas that has…affected her.”

Bruce swore. That was more than a problem.

“Where?” he demanded.

“Crane, er, attempted to hole up in the South East corner of the building,” Alfred said. He paused. “Diana has…Crane is down now. She is…making short work of his men.”

Bruce was already running in that direction. She was affected but fighting.

The problem would be when she ran out of bad guys.

Bruce remembered what it was like under the influence of the toxin. That Diana was up He…didn’t know what would happen then.

He doubted it would be pleasant.

“Captain Trevor says to run if you see lightning,” Alfred said, his voice almost faltering at that. “He is on his way.”

Bruce was at the blockaded gallery doors. If Crane had left any of his thugs guarding them, they had fled. He wasn’t sure what good Steve would do and now he had to factor in making sure he didn’t get himself killed.

“How soon?” Bruce asked.

“Unclear. I lost him when he took the emergency staircase,” Alfred told him. “He was in the basement.”

Then Bruce was in the gallery and there was no time for speech.

Crane was on the floor. Blood was starting to pool underneath him. Several of his men were on the floor nearby. Diana was cutting through the rest of them like a hot knife through butter.

She was terrifying.

And Bruce’s entrance has drawn her attention to him.

One of Crane’s goons took the opportunity to try to shoot her. One blow sent him flying into the wall. No, through the wall.

She hadn’t even looked at him. Bruce wasn’t even sure she had physically connected with him.

She was staring straight at him.
“Ares!” She shouted, pointing at him as if she had her sword. “You will not escape me this time!”

She launched herself at Bruce. Bruce threw himself out of her path. There was nothing he could do but dodge. It wasn’t enough for to get away but he didn’t take the full force of the blow.

He still hit the wall with enough force to dent it. His suit was cracked where her fist had connected with his shoulder. His ears rang and he had to shake his head, trying to clear it.

“Your suit has been critically damaged,” Alfred said. There was a note of panic in it that Bruce rarely heard. “You can’t take another hit like that.”

Bruce had had a guess about what kind of strength Diana had based on the fight with Doomsday. This was different and he hadn’t even taken a direct hit or seen any of the lightning Steve had warned of.

He wouldn’t be able to dodge her for long.

He had to find a way to give Diana the antidote – as many doses as he could manage to stab her with – and hope to hell that worked. He wouldn’t be able to dodge her for long, he knew that. He fought back a groan as he peeled himself off the wall, ignoring all the sudden aches. He stood, squaring his shoulders.

He could probably take one more hit before she managed to kill him. He was just going to have to make sure he got her the antidote before that.

Bruce wasn’t entirely sure why she hadn’t already. It had taken a couple minutes to extract himself from the wall. But as soon as he was on his feet again, her stance shifted, preparing to charge again. Bruce fumbled to get the darts loaded with the antidote in his hand and braced himself as best he could.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Steve stagger into the gallery through the broken museum doors.

“Diana!”

—

Diana knew something was wrong.

It initially surprised her when Crane shifted into Ares but it made sense. Of course it made sense. Hadn’t Ares proven himself well suited to hiding in plain sight when he wished to sow discord?

But a single hit caused him to crumple, had his armour bleeding away into Crane again, unmoving and bloodied on the museum floor. Diana didn’t have time to ponder it, his men were on her in the next moment, falling away from her wrath as swiftly as the soldiers who had taken arms under his influence before.

But there was something wrong. It was as if there was a filter over her senses, making them shift and change between Crane’s men and the German soldiers who had defended the airfield.

The thought of that night made fear rise up in her throat. There was still a threat. She would eliminate it.

She was dealing with the last of her enemies - and at some point the German uniforms had melted away and they had become Crane’s men again - when the barricaded gallery doors crashed open.
And...Ares? No. No, it was...It was Ares. Ares in his armour. Ares with his tricks, bringing his discord.

Diana should have known it had been too easy to deal with him.

“Ares!” She shouted. “You will not escape me this time!”

She charged him. It was not a direct hit - Ares had been a slippery, dishonest, unhonourable fighter from the first - but the blow sent him reeling. He hit the wall and stayed there, stunned, for long minutes.

That wasn’t right. It took more than that to harm a god.

Diana shook her head, trying to clear it. She wasn’t on the airfield. She knew that. She did not know why it kept intruding on her thoughts.

The new intruder - Ares? It looked like Ares but she had killed Ares but...who knew what tricks the god of war had used to save himself? To hide from her all these years - picked himself out of the wall. His stance was not steady, which gave her a moment’s pause, but it was determined, aggressive.

If this was Ares, she had to eliminate him. She had to. She could not take the chance of allowing him to escape. There could be no quarter given.

She would finish this. It was her duty.

“Diana!”

No. No, Steve...!

Diana turned and he was there, turning and running away from her-

No, that wasn’t right!

They were not at the airfield. The war was long over. There was no plane. Steve was not running towards it. He was limping forward to her.

The thought still made her choke, even as she reached for him: “Steve?”

He was close enough to touch when there was a sharp, but minor, pain in her neck.

Diana lashed out instinctively. Steve attempted to stop her, gasping out: “Diana, don’t!”

She pulled back her full strength, though her fist still connected solidly with someone. There was a grunt and the sound of someone’s knees hitting the floor.

Diana weaved. She felt...ill?

Steve’s hands grasped her arms. One touched her face for a moment, moving away before coming back. His voice sounded unsure: “Diana?”

Diana fixed her eyes on his, bright blue and concerned, as the room spun around her for a moment. When that did not work to stop it, she dropped her head to his shoulder and closed her eyes. Her mouth watered unpleasantly. Steve’s arms wrapped around her immediately.

“What the fuck is going on?” Steve demanded harshly.
But the spinning was already stopping. And her stomach felt less like it might empty itself.

“The antidote isn’t pleasant,” Bruce said. That was Bruce. “Most people pass out from one and I gave her six. We need to get her out of here.”

“No,” Diana said, her voice firm. Her fingers tightened on Steve’s shoulders. He squeezed back. “It’s passing.”

She pulled back. The room had stopped spinning. The nausea was gone. She still felt...more unsteady than she had in a long time. But that, too, was passing.

Steve’s hands cupped her face. Diana met his gaze evenly.

Her heart lurched for an entirely different reason. Now that she was actually seeing him, as he was, Steve looked worse than she felt.

“Steve,” Diana said, a warning in her voice.

“I know,” Steve said, quietly. “We need to get this done.”

Diana heard the other half of his answer: I can force myself to keep going until then.

She touched his cheek lightly. It was clammy with sweat. She felt stronger with every passing moment. Steve was going to get worse with every step he took.

“First responders will be here in ten minutes,” Bruce said and Diana frowned when his voice came from further away than she expected it to. He was kneeling over Dr. Neil, who was shivering, his eyes closed, but not wailing anymore. Bruce looked up and Diana saw that his mask was cracked. “It’s best if we get everyone the antidote before they arrive.”

“We should get started,” Diana said even as Steve squeezed her arm in support. She was fine, steady again, and he would not be left behind. Not while there was still work to do.

Chapter End Notes

Back from vacation! Sorry I’ve been away so long. I promise I’ll reply to all the comments on this and Kind Old Sun tomorrow!

I really, really hate writing action so I hope everyone likes this. You can thank Nadin for talking me out of making this another cliffhanger.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

After the attack.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Once Diana was recovered – faster than Bruce could have imagined, he had been trying to figure out how he was going to get her out of there and administer the antidote to everyone else – they had to work fast. The longer someone spent exposed to the fear toxin, the less likely they were to make a full recovery.

Bruce went to Dr. Neil first. He had been one of the last people exposed, he didn’t seem to be having a more adverse reaction than was to be expected, and most people, normal, non-demi gods, were out for at least a couple hours after being given the antidote, if not more.

Part of Bruce, a small part that he had year’s of practice ignoring, still wanted to stay and make sure he was all right.

But he – they, if Diana was all right – had work to do.

It was relatively easy to administer the antidote to the curators, and the few guests, in the smaller gallery. There was a single dicey moment when the new antiquities curator lunged at Steve but Diana intervened quickly.

There was no question that Steve was...beginning to lag. And it was likely the other people had been exposed would be more hostile, not less. The people in that gallery were the last people who had been exposed.

“Sir, some of victims have scattered,” Alfred said, strangely muffled in his ear. The receiver had probably been damaged. His suit wasn’t functioning at full capacity. “None have left the museum but they are not all in the location they were exposed.”

Bruce grit his teeth. It wasn’t unusual for people exposed to Crane’s toxins to try to hide or to fight whatever they were seeing, as Diana had. It would have been difficult enough if they could have simply followed Crane’s path back to the entrance to get everyone inoculated.

“We’re going to have to split up,” Bruce said. Neither Diana nor Steve looked thrilled by the prospect but they did not protest. “I’ve got communication with Alfred. He’s got access to the cameras. I’ll follow the people who have moved.”

“There were a few people outside who were exposed,” Steve told them.

“I will see to them and any others I meet along the way,” Diana said.

“Crane’s path in is fairly obvious,” Bruce said. The people who had stayed where they were when they were gassed were less likely to be violent. Or so Bruce hoped. Still. He unclipped the tranquilizer gun from his belt and handed it to Steve as they divided up the antidote darts Bruce
“It’s better if you don’t go through clothing. They’ll need the full dose.”

Steve nodded. “Got it.”

The way to the main, grand staircase didn’t require them to split up. Not many people had been exposed between there and the gallery. Bruce was surprised that Diana hadn’t gone ahead until they hit the stairs and Steve stopped.

Bruce bit his tongue against all the things he wanted to say – they didn’t have time for this! – until he looked, really looked at Steve’s face. He was pale, almost waxy, with sweat beading at his temples. His breathing, now that Bruce was noticing it, was audibly raspy.

Bruce opened his mouth and shut it again gave him a short, sharp look. Steve didn’t seem to react. Bruce wasn’t even sure he noticed.

Diana carried him down the stairs without another word. They exchanged a look and she touched his face, gently, before she sprinted off with her allotment of the antidotes in hand.

Steve met Bruce’s eyes for just a moment, his jaw tight as he said: “Go. We’ll rendezvous at the side door nearest to the parking lot.”

He limped away without waiting for Bruce to reply.

“The fire department will arrive in eight minutes, Master Wayne,” Alfred told him. “They will be first on scene.”

Not that they had time to argue.

As Bruce suspected, the victims who had moved from where they had first been exposed to the toxin were the most violent or, as he hadn’t anticipated, the best hidden. He wouldn’t have found them all in time if Diana joined him two minutes in and taken care of the fighters so Bruce could locate the victims who had wedged themselves into places that were difficult to find even with Alfred’s help.

They made it to the side door with a minute to spare. Steve appeared at the end of the hallway thirty seconds later. Diana didn’t hesitate, going to him and slinging his arm over her shoulder to help him down the hall.

“Did we get them all, Alfred?” Bruce asked.

“All clear, Master Wayne,” Alfred said.

“Seven fatalities,” Steve reported as soon as he and Diana got close. “Two security guards, a docent and one of the women at the front desk. The rest were museum guests. I didn’t have time to check for names.”

It gave Bruce a moment’s pause. He hadn’t factored in that in leaving Steve to follow Crane’s direct path, they would be leaving him with the dead.

“The first fire truck has arrived out front,” Alfred said. “Paramedics will be there in forty-five seconds.”

“We have to go,” Bruce told them. “Leave your rental. I’ll deal with it–”

“We have to grab the gas Crane used on Diana,” Steve interrupted. “If it works on Diana...We can’t
risk it falling into anyone else’s hands. It’ll be lethal for humans."

“We should not leave any of the gas behind for others to use,” Diana said.

“I stashed what I could in garbage cans,” Steve said. “So it wouldn’t be scattered so anyone could find it.”

“We don’t have time for all of it,” Bruce said. Neither of them were wrong but...dammit. Diana shouldn’t have recovered so quickly. Bruce didn’t completely trust it.

He was going to have to. “I’ll get the gas Crane used on Diana for now. You get Steve out of here. If you get to the end of the road, away from the first responders, I can pick you up with the Batmobile.”

“There is no need for that. I can get us both back to the lake house,” Diana told him, picking up Steve like it was nothing again. “We will meet back there. Good luck.”

Bruce felt the impulse to object and let it slide. There was no reason to think Diana wouldn’t be fine and Steve was right. The idea of Crane’s regular toxin in the hands of Gotham’s police force was risky enough; one that could affect meta-humans would likely kill anyone else it came into contact with.

Bruce vaulted up the side staircase, through the restoration room he had visited just days ago. He could hear firefighters and paramedics moving through the museum slowly – everyone there required medical attention.

“There are more paramedics on the way,” Alfred told him. “And the police.”

“Commissioner Gordon?” Bruce asked.

“He should be among the first to arrive,” Alfred answered.

“Get word to him to check the garbage cans,” Bruce said, making his way back into the gallery and keeping out of sight.

“Beg pardon?” Alfred said.

“Steve took canisters off Crane’s men and stashed them in the garbage cans,” Bruce said.

The gallery was nearly silent. Dr. Neil was unconscious. All of the victims were. That wasn’t an unusual reaction to the antidote. They would likely be hospitalized for a few days.

Dr. Howard was shivering convulsively. That wasn’t a good sign.

Bruce forced himself on. One of Crane’s thugs groaned on the floor but didn’t move.

Two were missing.

“Two of Crane’s men are at large,” Bruce reported, crossing the room to where Crane was.

Crane’s head looked sticky with blood. It was hard to tell with the mask on but Crane was still breathing. Barely but he was still breathing.

Bruce wasn’t sure which canisters contained the gas Crane had used on Diana. He took all of them. He would have to find a way to dispose of the canisters the police collected later. He could hear voices on the second floor of the museum. It was time to go.
Bruce left through the restoration room. Alfred had the Batmobile waiting against the side of the building.

He could hear police sirens racing closer as he sped away.

—

Alfred was waiting when Bruce got out of the Batmobile.

“How many ribs do you think you broke this time?” Alfred asked.

“They’re just bruised,” Bruce said. He was pretty sure he wasn’t lying. He handed Alfred the containment unit he had put Crane’s gas canisters in. “We need to figure out which one he used on Diana, see what the difference is and destroy it.”

“And reinforce your suit,” Alfred grumbled but took the containment unit.

“I’m fine,” Bruce told him.

Bruce pulled off his cowl. Alfred set the containment unit down and began to help him peel off the suit. Normally Bruce could do it himself but it had been…compromised in ways that made it even more difficult to wriggle out of.

At least neither Diana or Steve were there to see him being extracted from it like an overgrown toddler stuck in last year’s snow suit.

That they weren’t was slightly concerning.

“How’s Diana?” Bruce asked.

“You wouldn’t know she had been exposed to anything,” Alfred told him. “It was necessary for Captain Trevor to sit down. They’re in the control centre.”

Bruce frowned at that and at the way Alfred had to tug to get one of the clasps open. “She shouldn’t have recovered that quickly.”

“I took a blood sample to make sure it cleared her system – I promised I would destroy it, after the test. We’re just waiting on the results. You’re going to have to sit down or bend over,” Alfred said.

Bruce bent reluctantly. Alfred managed to free Bruce’s left leg. He stopped to wipe his forehead and added: “I believe her main concern is that she reacted at all.”

Bruce could finally get the rest of the way out if he sat down and Alfred pulled. They were going to have to scrap that suit. It was a good thing he had backups.

“Getting the analysis done on those canisters is a priority,” Bruce said, getting back to his feet. “Anything with just the regular gas goes to Wayne industries. We need to find a better antidote. What’s happening at the museum?”

“The authorities have started to transport the victims to the hospital,” Alfred said.

“Let’s keep track of their status,” Bruce said. He couldn’t bring himself to ask after Dr. Neil. Not from Alfred. Not yet. He hadn’t even told him about the conversation they had had.

He started walking toward the command centre instead. Alfred followed as he always did.
“Any word on Crane?” Bruce asked.

“Also being transported to hospital,” Alfred told him. “He’s in critical condition.”

Bruce wasn’t surprised. If anything, he was surprised he was still alive.

“Did she kill anyone?” Bruce asked, quietly. She wouldn’t have been the first to kill under the influence of Crane’s gas.

“None of Crane’s men have succumbed to their injuries yet,” Alfred paused. “At least, not the ones who were with him in the gallery.”

Bruce nearly stopped in his tracks. He looked at Alfred. “What?”

“Captain Trevor incapacitated three guards as he made his way into the building,” Alfred told him. “An autopsy has not been performed yet but the first likely died of a blow to the back of the head. The second bled out from a gunshot wound before the paramedics arrived. Captain Trevor did notify me they would be needed.”

“And the third?” Bruce asked.

“Master Wayne?”

“You said he incapacitated three security guards,” Bruce said.

“Ah, the third is being transferred to hospital with a head injury,” Alfred replied. “He did not seem to be in immediate danger.”

Bruce rubbed a hand over his face. It wasn’t the way he did things. The way he tried to do things. They had only talked around that so far.

And Steve Trevor had said he didn’t go into the field anymore.

So much for that.

“We’ll have to keep track of that as well,” Bruce said, his voice pitched low as they turned around a bank of equipment.

Bruce nearly stopped in surprise again. Diana looked fine. She had been pacing but looked up Bruce and Alfred arrived and...mostly she just looked pissed off. Bruce had expected her to look – he wasn’t entirely sure. Ill or worried or upset. But she just looked annoyed and angry.

And fine.

Steve, on the other hand, looked terrible.

He was sitting in a chair with his leg stretched out in front of him. His head was tilted back and he had his oxygen on. He didn’t lift his head or open his eyes when Bruce and Alfred got there.

It surprised Bruce how much older he looked, his face pale and lined. Even sitting in a chair his body was tense and he was holding himself very, very carefully.

Diana noticed the way Bruce stopped and stared for a second too long. She put a hand on the back of the chair, looking fierce and sad and exasperated at once.

“Did you recover the canisters from Crane?” Diana asked.
“Yes,” Bruce said. He wasn’t sure what to say. He hadn’t expected this.

Diana’s hand tightened on the back of the chair and she looked down at Steve. “You see?”

“You want any kind of debrief from me the painkillers are still going to have to wait,” Steve said without opening his eyes.

Diana sighed. Her hand fell to his shoulder.

“Perhaps we could wait until tomorrow,” Alfred suggested.

Steve tilted his head slightly in Alfred’s direction. His expression didn’t change. His voice was tense and flat. “I’ll be out of commission longer than that. Best to get it over with now.”

“You will not convince him otherwise,” Diana said, her other hand coming to rest on his other shoulder. Bracing him, Bruce thought. “He is as stubborn as he ever was.”

Steve’s expression still didn’t change. It was frustratingly blank, for all that it was lined with...

Oh.

Lined with tension. And pain.

Bruce made the rest of the connections. Steve was putting every ounce of energy he still had into staying focused on the task at hand because he didn’t think he would be able to get it back if he stopped, if he let himself dwell on the pain even for a moment.

Bruce guessed – because of the way he held himself, because of the blankness of his face, because of the sweat at his temple – Steve knew he wouldn’t be able to stave it off for long, either.

“I collected all the canisters Crane had. We’ll analyze them to figure out what Crane used on Diana,” Bruce said. He nodded to Alfred. “If you want to get started?”

Alfred didn’t look entirely happy but he agreed. “Of course, Master Wayne.”

He went to get set up in the lab. Bruce noticed he left the door open so he could still hear what was being said but didn’t say anything.

“If it’s just a concentrated dose, we’ll destroy it,” Bruce said. “If it’s something new, we’ll have to start work on another antidote. Given that a larger dose of the antidote seemed to work, I suspect it was concentrated dose.”

“Diana was already fighting it when you gave her the antidote,” Steve said. “I think it helped but don’t count on that.”

Bruce stared. He looked up at Diana for confirmation.

“By the time you arrived, I could tell something was not right. What—who—I saw was beginning to...blur with what was real. But I could not take the risk of Ares escaping, even if I had begun to doubt,” Diana shrugged. “The antidote made me feel ill briefly so it had some effect.”

That made Steve frown. Diana touched his cheek, just for a moment, as if to reassure him.

“Could you tell that at the museum or did you discuss it when you got back?” Bruce asked.
“We have not had time to discuss it yet,” Diana said. She looked at Bruce pointedly but he didn’t quite understand what she was trying to convey.

Steve opened his eyes just enough to look at Bruce for a moment. They were heavy lidded, as if he were struggling with even that, and it made him look more exhausted.

“Diana put me down when we got back here and I fainted,” Steve told him bluntly. “Ran out of adrenaline. Dunno if I could stand right now.”

“You’re not going to try it,” Diana told him.

“Not before I have a painkiller,” Steve confirmed. “My hip is going to stiffen up now that I’ve stopped moving.”

Diana looked grim but unsurprised. Bruce still wasn’t sure what to do with that. He thought the best thing might be to get the debriefing, as Steve called it, over as quickly as possible.

“How could you tell it was wearing off?” Bruce asked.

“The way she reacted to me,” Steve said. “But even before that, she was hesitating. I’d have to see the security feed to know when it started. I just saw that she had you down and didn’t go in for the kill immediately. She didn’t try to, you know, smite you.”

“Is that the lightening you warned Alfred about?” Bruce asked.

Diana snorted and squeezed Steve’s shoulder affectionately.

“Mostly,” Steve said with a ghost of a smile.

“If it happens again you might not be available to distract her,” Bruce said. He looked pointedly at Diana, as if to say, they would do everything to avoid this, Steve’s condition, in the future.

Her jaw went tight but she nodded once at him before speaking. “I think if you had not appeared in armour and a mask, I might have shaken it off sooner. Crane’s men were fading back into themselves when you arrived. The best course of action may have been to not engage.”

That made sense. Bruce was still going to try to make an antidote strong enough to work immediately on Diana but that was a good Plan B.

“If I’m not on site, you can always arrange to have me delivered,” Steve said. He did not look happy about the idea, so much so that it made it through his blank expression, as his voice was tense. “But avoiding future exposure would be better.”

Diana’s grip on his shoulder tightened. “I’m fine, Steve.”

Steve’s jaw clenched. “You might not have been.”

“Nothing man-made has affected me in a hundred years. This did only briefly.” Diana said in a way Bruce thought was meant to be reassuring. Judging by the way the lines on Steve’s face tightened, it wasn’t.

Steve took a ragged breath. He had closed his eyes again. “How many fatalities?”

“Nine civilians, out of fifty-two exposed,” Alfred said, coming back to join them. Bruce raised an eyebrow. That was faster than he expected.
“I counted seven,” Steve said.

“One died en route to the hospital,” Alfred said grimly. “And one was allergic to the antidote.”

Alfred’s head tilted as if he were going to glance at Bruce and then he stopped himself abruptly. Bruce swallowed. It was one of the people he had given the antidote to then.

“Bob Washington, one of the security guards, has–had–two kids under the age of ten,” Steve said. He looked very tired. “Edith Paige’s dog needs some kind of twice daily medication. She only adopted seniors. To match, she said.”

Bruce stared at him. Alfred blinked in surprise. Diana looked sad.

Steve’s expression had gone blank again. “I try to get know people while Diana’s working. Habit.”

“We’ll make sure they’re taken care of,” Bruce said, nodding to Alfred. “Did you find something?”

“One of the canisters was slightly larger than the others. It seemed prudent to start with that one,” Alfred said. “It’s larger because it needed to be reinforced. The gas inside is approximately a thousand times more concentrated than the earlier sample. It’s eating through the container. I’ve had to isolate it.”

Diana scowled, looking annoyed. Steve looked very slightly relieved.

“And the blood sample?” Diana asked.

“Ah, from what I can tell given that there are a number of...differences in Ms. Prince’s blood,” Alfred said, looking disquieted. “There are no traces of the toxin in her blood. Nor any trace of the antidote.”

Bruce was so stunned by that his arms fell to his sides and he stared, flummoxed for a moment. “That’s not–Are you sure?”

“Quite sure, Master Wayne, though you are always welcome to go over the results yourself,” Alfred said.

“Let me guess,” Steve said, voice dry. “There should be indicators that she was exposed.”

“You would still find traces of Crane’s original formula in Master Wayne’s blood,” Alfred said. “If anything, the new antidote leaves more of a mark. It’s a factor in why it become less effective with each use.”

“Supports the idea that you were already recovering. The antidote might have given you a jolt but...” Steve said, reaching up to put his hand over Diana’s. He went to lean back in the chair and...he didn’t flinch but he went rigidly still. Bruce thought that might be as close as he would come in front of him and Alfred. Diana looked at him worriedly.

There was a lot Bruce wanted to go over but it was obvious Steve was reaching his limits. And if the concentrated gas was unstable they would only have so much time to investigate it.

There was one more aspect in particular Bruce felt compelled to bring up.

“Pulling the fire alarm was a risk,” Bruce said gruffly. It was not a risk he would have taken.

“I know,” Steve said. “So was leaving those kids, and everyone else in the building as sitting ducks.”
“Crane’s thugs could have shot them all as they tried to escape,” Bruce said.

“He took the majority of his men with him. The force left to guard the doors was paltry and they were using gas to incapacitate people not shooting them. Crane was trying to lure you out. His collateral was the people he exposed. He lost that if he started killing people,” Steve said, his voice tight. “Your people estimated the gas had fatality rate of twenty-five per cent just from exposure. Crane’s actions suggested he wouldn’t start shooting indiscriminately. I eliminated as many guards as I could. I couldn’t get in touch with Diana. Getting people out in an uncontrolled manner was lower risk than leaving them to be exposed.”

Bruce couldn’t disagree with that but he still didn’t like it. He had been on his way. He had arrived minutes after the alarm had been pulled. He wasn’t sure the number of people Crane would have exposed in that time was worth the risk of the guards opening fire. Particularly since Crane had run into Diana about the same time Steve had pulled the alarm.

Steve, Bruce would admit, had no way of knowing that. He had only seen Bruce’s response time once and Diana had been with him then. It would have been better if Steve had been able to warn Diana directly.

“We need a backup warning system in case cell phones aren’t an option,” Bruce decided. “Something simple. So we don’t have to worry about putting you in this situation again.”

Bruce realized the way that sounded after he said it. He didn’t even chance a look at Diana. “Not that you’re weren’t–aren’t–capable but...”

Steve laughed harshly. “Bruce. I’m really not.”

His shoulders hunched forward. Diana looked alarmed. Steve just looked haggard and in pain. “Do you need anything else? I need to lie down.”

“Right,” Bruce said. “There’s–any of the guest bedrooms should be made up.”

“Thank you. Alfred told us,” Diana said.

She was already moving to crouch in front of Steve, cupping his face in her hands. Their eyes met for a moment and Bruce couldn’t have begun to guess what passed between them. Then Steve closed his eyes and let his head rest on Diana’s shoulder.

“Master Wayne,” Alfred said. “I’m unsure how long we have before the concentrated gas explodes. I’ve contained it but if you want to do your own analysis...”

“Right, yes,” Bruce said because he could recognize when Alfred was trying to get him to be tactful. He started to say something more but neither Diana or Steve even glanced at him so it seemed superfluous.

He caught a glimpse of Diana helping Steve take a drink of water in a monitor as he followed Alfred into the lab. Steve’s hands were shaking.

Alfred cleared his throat quietly. Bruce shut the lab door behind him.

The concentrated gas really was going to blow up before long. Alfred had it in a container that would neutralize it as soon as it degraded too far. It would still explode but it would be a controlled explosion.

“As much as I thought it best to give our guests some privacy, this is actually time sensitive,”
Alfred told him.

“Crane’s lucky it didn’t blow up on him,” Bruce said. “It has the same chemical composition as the other gas?”

“Just more concentrated,” Alfred said. “I tested one of the other canisters against the first sample. It matches. And Captain Trevor is right. A dose this high would be instantly lethal for a regular human. Based on the museum’s security feed, it effected Ms. Prince for under ten minutes, though, we don’t know how much of an effect to multiple doses of antidote had.”

“I was out for over twenty-four hours with the first antidote we developed. This one is nastier,” Bruce said. “She felt ill for maybe a minute. There was nothing in the blood test?”

“No trace whatsoever of the toxin or the antidote,” Alfred was quiet for a moment. “And, I am no expert but the variation from a human blood sample is...profound. Despite Waller’s best efforts, we have never had very much baseline information about any of the meta-humans. We have significantly more information about Captain Trevor’s medical history than Ms. Prince’s physiology or even a full idea of her powers.”

“She doesn’t have any medical history,” Bruce said and he was fairly sure he was right about that. “I think today was the first time she felt ill in her life.”

Alfred blinked. Bruce clasped him on the shoulder. There was a whole world they had only scratched the surface of. “Let’s get what we can from this sample before it explodes.”

Chapter End Notes

Will definitely respond to all the comments on the last chapter tomorrow but wanted to get this chapter posted ASAP because it’s late! Sorry about that!
Bruce was surprised when Diana came back down to the Batcave just under an hour later.

“Is Captain Trevor well, Ms. Prince?” Alfred inquired.

Diana raised an eyebrow at him. “He’s resting.”

“But he’s all right?” Bruce repeated.

Diana looked at him. There was a look of controlled patience on her face. It didn’t quite mask her underlying frustration. “He is as well as can be expected.”

Bruce bit his tongue. He didn’t know what that meant, except that Steve wasn’t in immediate danger of dying — if he could even die, Bruce wasn’t actually sure he could — but pushing Diana on it right now seemed like a bad idea.

And frankly, they had enough to deal with at the moment.

“You’ve arrived just in time for the explosion,” Alfred told her.

Diana’s eyebrow climbed higher. Bruce cleared his throat. “Controlled explosion. We’ve got as much as we think we can from the concentrated dose and it’s degrading fast.”

“So you are going to blow it up,” Diana concluded.

“It sounds more impressive than it is,” Bruce said and then mentally kicked himself because Diana had made no indication that she thought explosions were cool and he sounded like a tool. “It’s better if we do it in a controlled fashion than have it degrade on its own.”

Blowing it up consisted of introducing heat to the containment box, watching it go a blindingly bright white for a moment, and then a sludgy black soot filling the box. Really not that impressive and Bruce hadn’t looked away, of course, so now he had a temporary spot in his eye as if he had looked at the sun too long.

“Will you do the same with the regular canisters?” Diana was asking.

“If there are extras, yes,” Alfred answered. “We’re hoping to modify the antidote to be more effective and less taxing on the victims. We’ve retained a few so Master Wayne can study them. The rest will go to a select few scientists we’ve identified at Wayne Enterprises.”

“I’ll track down Crane’s lab and destroy the rest,” Bruce said, correctly guessing what Diana was really worried about — making sure the rest of the gas was destroyed before it could do any more harm. “Crane’s men aren’t talking yet but they will.”

Diana looked grim but satisfied. She nodded once. “Have we heard from the hospital?”

“Another museum guest died about half an hour ago,” Alfred said. “There are a few more in critical.”

“Dr. Neil and Dr. Thuong are recovering well. They’ll be in the hospital a few more days as a
precaution,” Bruce said. Because Diana had been with those curators at the time of the attack, not because he had felt trapped in his own skin waiting to find out. He swallowed and continued: “Dr. Howard is one of the people in critical.”

Diana sighed, her shoulders slumping slightly as she looked at the chemical breakdown of the toxin on one of the monitors. She would have dealt with a hundred years of loss already, Bruce realized. He hadn’t really thought about what that meant before, how many friends and family members it might mean.

And he had no idea how much of the science she was looking at she understood. Alfred was right. He had no real idea of who she was or what she could do. Just assumptions.

“And Crane?” Diana asked.

“In surgery,” Bruce said.

When Alfred inquired, they found out that no one had inquired about the likelihood of his survival before he asked. Bruce didn’t doubt there were more than a few people rooting against it.

“Two of Crane’s men died on scene,” Bruce told her.

She frowned at him. “From the gallery?”

“No, you didn’t kill anyone,” Bruce said. Several of Crane’s men from the gallery in critical but he held back the yet that sat on his tongue. “These were the guards outside. Steve would have been the one to…deal with them.”

Diana looked nonplussed.

Bruce was aware he had very little ground to stand on given everything that had happened with Clark and his behaviour leading up to that...confrontation. But he was trying. He didn’t want to be that man. He had been stopped from going down that path.

He supposed he had Clark to thank for that.

“I don’t operate that way,” Bruce said.

Diana considered him for a moment. He couldn’t read her expression. Finally, she said. “I avoid killing whenever possible. That does not mean I have not nor that I will not if it is necessary to save another. It is never my first act. Steve feels similarly but his calculations are more complicated than mine.”

“It shouldn’t be,” Bruce said.

Diana gave him a hard look. “You are passing judgement very freely for someone who takes justice into his own hands. You have not stood where Steve has — his introduction to all this was as a soldier in a more brutal war than you can imagine.”

“We’re not at war anymore. Not that way,” Bruce said.

“I am not always so sure of that sometimes. But that is beside the point. Steve still carries those burdens with him,” Diana raised an eyebrow at him.

Unless they had concealed a whole whack of medical files from him, Bruce doubted PTSD was the issue here. He was missing something.
“Bruce,” Diana said, kind and maybe even pityingly. “Steve’s manages his disabilities — the ones he gained sacrificing himself because it wasn’t acceptable to him to simply ground the plane and leave the enemy soldiers at the airfield to their fate — well enough that most people, even our closest friends, often forget just how they affect his life.”

“You have seen his medical files,” she reminded him, a sudden hardness in her voice. “You are a tactician yourself. Often, the only way for Steve to win a fight is if he has surprise on his side and the enemy goes down on the first blow.”

Bruce hadn’t thought of it that way. He still didn’t agree but it wasn’t something he had considered.

Keeping Steve off the battlefield as it were seemed like the best option going forward. Bruce thought, maybe, it was a tactic Diana had already been employing.

“Is that why he doesn’t,” Bruce gestures vaguely, “do stuff like this anymore?”

Diana sighed. “No. You still do not understand.”

She looked exasperated but...also almost like she was used to the question. “You asked before if Steve was all right.”

Bruce blinked. “Yes? Is he...not?”

“You need to change the way you think of all right when it comes to Steve,” Diana told him. “Think of your day as an incline. Each subsequent task raises the grade but when you start on flat ground you only notice the abrupt, steep changes. You don’t notice the slow accumulation and the next day, you start on flat ground again. But Steve doesn’t start on flat ground — he starts in a hole. Each inch of incline from the day before, each task, digs a hole that he has to climb out of the next day, before that day’s incline even begins.”

“You take something like this, something that would be like scaling a mountain for a normal person, and include all the ways it aggravates his specific disabilities and it is going to be weeks before Steve is even able to get out of the hole and go about his day,” Diana said. “Steve has chronic pain and the equivalent of COPD. It will take weeks for that to get back to manageable levels. It will be weeks before he regains his equilibrium.”

“Whatever the outcome of a physical confrontation is, Steve is going to suffer for engaging in it,” Diana said. “That is why he avoids ‘doing stuff like this’ when he can. He has honed his talents elsewhere instead.”

“Research,” Bruce said.

“Among other things,” Diana replied but didn’t elaborate. She frowned at the screen with the chemical breakdown of the gas on it briefly before checking her watch, a clunky, old-fashioned thing that Bruce had noticed before. He was opening his mouth to ask about it when Diana spoke again: “I have to cancel our flight.”

“I hope you’ll forgive me, Ms. Prince, but I took the liberty,” Alfred said. “I rescheduled for tomorrow afternoon and extended your hotel booking another night.”

Diana looked surprised but pleasantly so. She smiled at Alfred. “Thank you but I do not think Steve will be able to fly tomorrow.”

“When I say I rescheduled, I meant I have one of Master Wayne’s private jets being readied,”
Alfred said. “In case not having to navigate commercial airports makes a difference.”

Diana looked momentarily intrigued. “It might. I will have to go back to the hotel to pack our things but if the offer is still open, we will stay here tonight. I would prefer not to make Steve move now that he’s settled.”

“Of course,” Bruce said, immediately.

“I should go get our things from the hotel,” Diana repeated but she didn’t move and after a moment she pointed at something on the screen. “This is the formula for the regular gas, correct?”

“Yes,” Bruce said, moving over to see what she was looking at.

“Doesn’t this chemical combination mean it too will continue to degrade? Over a longer period, yes, but eventually it will become unstable,” Diana said. She paused. “Are we sure that he only had one canister of the concentrated version? If that became unstable and exploded among batches of the regular gas it could ignite it all.”

Bruce stared. Then he swore. “Alfred, our priority is now finding Crane’s hideout. He shouldn’t have had time to make that much but...”

Alfred was already moving. “I will divert more resources into the search. Your backup suit...”

“I’ve got it,” Bruce said.

Diana was already moving ahead of him towards the Batmobile. Bruce hesitated for just a moment but said to Alfred: “We need something to keep Diana in the loop.”

Alfred looked towards her. “I’ll find something.”

Bruce walked over to Diana and realized she was gathering containment boxes together, already ready to go. Still, he felt compelled to say: “I can handle it if you want to stay here.”

“Two people can cover more ground than one,” Diana said. She gave him an even look. “Steve would make the same choice.”

Bruce couldn’t argue with that.

—

It was evening when they got back to the lake house.

It had taken them hours to find Crane’s laboratory but they had found it. Crane had stockpiled a terrifying amount of the gas in the short time he had been out of Arkham. Even Bruce seemed taken aback by the sheer volume of it. There was too much to transport back to the Batcave. They had called in Commissioner Gordon and the bomb squad for it instead.

There had been three canisters of the concentrated gas. They had had to deal with one on site, it had become so unstable. The other two they had disposed of when they got back to the Batcave.

Bruce was still in the Batcave. That the gas had an expiry date seemed to propel him onward even faster. There was no telling whether Crane would make more at a future date — he was out of surgery but still listed as critical — and Bruce did not seem able to rest until the antidote was perfected. Diana doubted he would be moved before morning.

Diana could not help with that and so she went to check on Steve.
Alfred caught her as she was leaving, looking distracted by Bruce’s all too apparent fixation. Bruce would always be his charge — Diana did not envy him that.

“Your things are in the guest room next door to the one Steve is in,” Alfred said. “I apologize for overstepping but...someone thought it best to maintain the illusion that you had flown out tonight and it seemed best to go along with that.”

That gave Diana pause. She was going to have to have a conversation with Jenny. She was not entirely comfortable with the idea of strangers handling their things but understood how Alfred would have felt it was for the best.

“It probably was,” Diana told him. She smiled at him, a bit weary but genuine. “I appreciate the effort you have gone to on our behalf.”

“It was nothing, Ms. Prince,” Alfred said and seemed to mean it. “I will be forcing supper on Master Wayne sometime soon. May I bring some by for you and Captain Trevor as well?”

“That would be lovely, thank you,” Diana said. “I should warn you, Steve will likely not eat much.”

He never did when he was like this.

“If Captain Trevor has any comfort foods that he is more likely to eat, I can assure you Master Wayne will not pay any attention to what he’s eating at the moment,” Alfred offered.

It made Diana smile at him again. Steve’s palate for comfort food had formed in the late 1800s and even he couldn’t muster much enthusiasm for trying to replicate the recipes. Farah had been the only person who ever successfully made one of his grandmother’s recipes the way Steve remembered it. Steve had loved her for the gesture but it wasn’t a loss that bothered him much.

He had admitted, quietly to Diana, in the dead of night, that after the trenches and his years away from home, he wasn’t even sure he remembered the tastes right.

“As long as it’s easy to eat and not too rich, Steve won’t notice much,” Diana told him. “Not right now.”

Alfred looked a bit disappointed but also like he understood. “I’ll bring it by when it’s ready.”

“Thank you,” Diana told him, pressing his arm.

Upstairs, the lake house was quiet. Diana already knew that Steve disliked the sheer volume of windows — he had basically turned their private office at home into a vault, the building could burn down and Diana was convinced the office would remain unscathed — but Diana thought she did not mind being able to see her surroundings this clearly, even if it meant she could be seen as well.

There was nothing to see in that night’s dim light except the faint ripple of the wind on the lake. Diana did not pause to watch it as she made her way to the guest bedroom.

Steve was in bed where she had left him. The lamp was on and she could tell he had used his phone at some point but his back was turned to both of them. He wasn’t asleep but he was not completely awake either.

He stirred a little when she closed the door behind her. He tried to turn onto his back but then stopped, flinching.
“Diana?” he murmured, his voice slurred.

Diana sat beside him on the bed and smoothed his hair back before fixing the heating pad so it was more squarely on his hip. Steve looked exhausted and faintly confused. Some of the lines that only pain or sorrow brought out on his face were deepening again. Diana knew he was due for another painkiller soon.

“Hey,” she said, smiling gently at him. “Alfred is making dinner. Do you think you can eat something before you take another painkiller?”

“Probably,” Steve said. He was forcing himself to focus on her now, frowning slightly. His hand brushed against her side. “You went out again.”

Diana nodded. She took his hand in both of hers. He rubbed his thumb against her skin soothingly. “The gas Crane used was unstable. Particularly the formula he used against me. We had to find it and destroy it before it exploded.”

“You’re all right?” Steve asked, shifting, as if he was going to try to sit up. Diana put a hand on his shoulder to keep him from it. His eyes were intent on her face and Diana leaned closer so he only needed to lift his arm to touch her face, cup her cheek with his palm.

“I’m fine,” she said, and kissed his palm. “It was uneventful. We found the warehouse, blew up the canisters of the concentrated gas, and called the bomb squad to deal with the rest.”

“How many were there?” Steve asked.

“Three with the concentrated gas,” Diana told him. “There were crates of the regular gas.”

Steve exhaled slowly, closing his eyes. Diana squeezed his hand. This day had been all his worst fears come together at once.

Diana understood that too well. Amidst everything else tonight, when they had discovered Crane’s stores of gas canisters, Diana had felt such relief that Steve had not been there. He had not been at risk.

“Bruce trusts the cops who’re dealing with it?” Steve asked.

“He trusts Commissioner Gordon,” Diana told him.

Steve hummed, not entirely happy but not able to do anything about it, either.

Diana hated how familiar that felt some days.

“Hey,” Steve said and Diana had not even realized she was looking away from his face until she turned back and he was studying her. “You doing okay?”

Diana frowned. “I told you I was fine.”

Steve shook his head. “I mean with what happened before. At the museum.”

“It was...disconcerting,” Diana said slowly. She had not thought of it much. There had been no time.

But now that she did she did not feel particularly troubled. She was not happy, obviously. She was angry. Angry at Crane for making such weapons in the first place, whether they were made for use against her or against others. Annoyed that she had reacted to it, if only for a short time.
But not anymore troubled than she was by any of the villains she had thwarted. Less, than many. Crane held no candle to the destruction Ares had wrought, after all. She had been more troubled by how much of her true nature her mother had kept from her, though she had come to understand it better with time.

She was not particularly pleased with the danger Steve had put himself in or the price he would pay for it. She was not surprised by it, thought. She would expect no less of him. Of course he had acted.

But there were shadows lurking in his eyes that she did not remember seeing before.

“It does not trouble me so much,” Diana told him gently. “It was disconcerting and I was not happy to be affected but it did not last long.”

“About five minutes, I think,” Steve said. Diana raised an eyebrow at him. “I didn’t want to look at my phone anymore but I couldn’t sleep so...”

So he had laid there and worried about her. Diana did not like that. She hated when he was left feeling so helpless.

“My math might be off,” Steve said. He rubbed a hand over his eyes and smiled at her. “You know what it’s like when I have to take that high a dose. Kept losing my train of thought.”

And now the pain was bleeding through, Diana could tell by the way Steve kept starting to shift, restless, like no position was comfortable, and then stopping himself. She squeezed his hand and hoped Alfred would arrive with dinner soon. She did not like to see the new shadows she saw in his eyes.

“What are you all right?” Diana asked.

Steve looked at her, his eyes intent, and knew she was not asking how he was physically. She knew that all too well.

He had to look away from her and was quiet for a long moment. It would have bothered Diana if she could not tell he was gathering the strength to speak.

He sighed and laced their fingers together. And then he looked at her, unwavering, because Steve had never been a coward or taken the easy way out of anything.

“You know, on the worst days when I was still in hospital, I took a strange kind of comfort in knowing that...this could never happen to you,” Steve said, his voice thick, as he gestured to himself. “That you would never have to...feel what I was feeling then. And to think that maybe it could...Diana, I wouldn’t wish it on anyone, the thought that it could happen to you...”

Diana rested her forehead against his and framed his face in her hands. He flinched, just slightly, as her fingers made contact with the scarring on his face and she knew if she had drawn attention to his scars, or only touched that side of his face, he wouldn’t have been able to stand it. Sometimes that happened. Sometimes when he was in pain being touched at all was difficult for him.

But she could feel something about him relax at their closeness. And something inside her did too, no matter how much her heart ached at his words.

Diana kissed him lightly and Steve laughed shakily. He rubbed clumsily at his eyes when she pulled back enough to allow it.
“The concentration of the gas that affected me was so high it’s not possible to keep it stable for more than a day,” Diana said, reassuringly. “And it lasted five minutes.”

“I know,” Steve said. “I know it’s still mostly impossible. I’m so fucking glad of that. I just...you know I’m always going to be…uncomfortable. About things like this.”

It was not how Diana would have described it. If anything she thought Steve, laying there with his faulty lungs and the scars on his body and pain that could only be managed but never went away, was more clear headed about weaponizing gas than most people would be. Than she could be, when she thought too long about what it had done to him.

“That is not how I would describe it,” Diana said, stroking her fingers over his unmarred cheek. “If I could change what was done to you or go back in time to prevent it...”

Diana’s voice faltered as well. She would spare him pain at any cost except the expense of others. If it had been a choice between keeping Steve from that plane or allowing Ares to escape...Diana knew her duty and she knew what Steve would have chosen as well.

Steve smiled sadly and kissed her hand. Their hearts had always echoed each other’s.

“I love you,” he murmured. “I just might need a couple days to come to grips with it. And not being able to think straight half the time doesn’t help.”

“I love you too,” Diana told him. “I wish...”

There were so many things she wished. Steve smiled again.

“Better me than someone else,” Steve said, even as he shifted restlessly again as if it were possible to move away from the ache of his hip and the wheeze of his lungs.

There was knock on the door. Steve looked momentarily confused before Diana reminded him: “Alfred. With dinner.”

Steve made a face. Diana tapped his nose but then kissed his forehead. “You still need to eat.”

Alfred had brought them dinner on what looked like an antique serving cart and a silver dish with a lid. Diana had not expected that but didn’t so much as blink.

“Ah, I thought soup might be easiest,” Alfred said, taking the lip off to reveal large mugs of soup and thick slices of buttered bread.

Diana smiled at the incongruity of the gesture. “Thank you.”

“Is there anything else I can do for you or for Captain Trevor?” Alfred asked gently.

“No, thank you. Steve will likely sleep for a while after this,” Diana told him. “If Bruce needs any help...”

Alfred nodded. “I’ll come fetch you. I will attempt to convince him that he requires rest himself at some point tonight.”

Diana raised an eyebrow. “Good luck with that.”

Alfred smiled wryly. “I assure you, Ms. Prince, I have accomplished greater impossible feats than that when it comes to Master Wayne.”
Diana smiled at him. “I am sure you have.”

Steve was not enthused by the food but he never wanted to eat much when he was in pain like this. Diana did not know if that stemmed from the pain itself or a remnant from the years when his only option for controlling it was morphine, which had always made him nauseous. She doubted Steve knew himself.

Neither of them commented on it when Diana pressed her fingers against the bottom of Steve’s mug of soup to help keep it balanced in Steve’s unsteady hands. He hardly managed half of it before he shook his head and leaned back against the pillows, looking drawn and exhausted.

Diana got him his pills and tidied up the leftover food before finding a pair of her pajama bottoms and one of his t-shirts and sliding into bed beside him. There was nothing more comforting to Diana than being able to curl around Steve, her arm tucked around his chest so she could feel it rising and falling.

Steve’s eyes were closed but he wasn’t asleep yet. Just drifting. The lines on his forehead were starting to ease.

Diana kissed his shoulder. “Bruce has offered us his jet.”

“What?” Steve murmured.

“We missed our flight to Calgary,” Diana reminded him because the drugs tended to make him foggy.


His phone was on the bedside table. Diana would look at it later, after Steve drifted off. He had curled into her touch, seeking comfort. Diana would never deny him that.

“If you’re feeling up to it, we’ll see about taking Bruce up on his offer tomorrow,” Diana said. If they didn’t have to navigate Gotham International Airport, if they could just go from the car to a jet, it might be possible.

Steve was silent for a moment before saying, plaintively: “I don’t think I can fly a plane right now.”

Diana nearly laughed. Steve sounded so muddled. “Bruce would provide a pilot as well.”

Even without being able to see it, Diana knew Steve was making a face at that. Diana patted his hand.

“You can’t fly a plane right now,” Diana reminded him.

“Ugh,” Steve said. When he moved his head to rest more firmly against her shoulder, the movement was loose and heavy. His eyes were half-lidded already.

Diana could feel his body starting to relax. She threaded her fingers through his hair, rubbing gently to encourage it. Steve sighed and mumbled: “Make sure they destroy your blood sample.”

Diana was used to non sequiturs when the painkillers first kicked in. She barely blinked. “What?”

The majority of Steve’s medical information was kept offline. Maryam only shared what was necessary to get him the accommodations he needed and Jenny policed those with the same zeal she did for all their private information. Diana’s medical record was all forged and kept to the absolutely minimum required to build a life in modern society.

Because Steve was right. Having that information stored somewhere could be dangerous. It designated her as different when she was trying to go unnoticed and, frankly, Diana didn’t know if it could be used for nefarious means. Living with Steve, with the consequences of Dr. Maru’s terrible inventions, it was hard not to always be mindful of what could develop from seemingly innocuous sources.

But...Diana had also spent enough time with Steve to know the importance of having a baseline to test against. How important those tests had been for Maryam’s work with him. If she was exposed to something that affected her again, if they didn’t have the chemical composition isolated already...that could be troublesome.

She would make sure Bruce kept the information secure and offline, either way. She would talk to him about it tomorrow and talk to Steve...

Steve had nodded off in her arms. His breathing had settled in to almost his usual stutter, though it was still a bit uneven. There were still lines around his mouth but the ones on his forehead had smoothed away for now.

Diana brushed her hand over the rough skin of his scarred cheek. Steve didn’t stir except to press into her touch ever so slightly.

She would talk to Steve about it later, after he had time to rest.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this update is coming late, you guys! I had this chapter done and just needed to edit it and then my work exploded with busyness and I literally have not had the time to sit down and finish editing it for like two weeks!

The next chapter also just need editing. It will be posted faster, promise!
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Diana and Steve leave. Bruce make another discovery.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They left before noon the next day. Bruce, a rather Alfred, arranged it without being asked. Diana thanked him for it but there was a wary look to her face that Bruce didn’t understand at first.

Bruce only had a haphazard gauge on how Steve was effectively out of commission. There were a hundred little hurdles that Bruce didn’t know to think of and hadn’t controlled for because he had just gone ahead and done it without asking.

Steve took it in stride for the most part. Bruce was fairly sure it was because he was still on a fairly high dose of painkillers. There was a tightness at the corners of Diana’s eyes and Steve kept saying things to make her smile wanly.

Otherwise, he stayed very quiet.

Bruce took them to the airport personally just in case he needed to smooth out any last minute issues. A few phone calls let Alfred drive right up to his private jet. Bruce thought they were home free.

Then he saw Steve squinting at the jet as if he were trying to figure something out. It surprised Bruce when he laughed.

Diana seemed to have half expected it. She looked at Steve for a moment before pushing her fingers through his hair. He rested his head against her hip.

“Going to have to be a princess carry again,” Steve mumbled. “Can’t manage those stairs.”

Bruce suppressed a wince. There were maybe five steps up to the jet door. He glanced at Steve expecting him to look defensive or annoyed but his head was still pressed against Diana’s side and he just looked tired and foggy.

Diana’s fingers had curled around the back of his head, gentle and protective.

“Can you distract the pilot for a few minutes?” Diana asked, glancing at Bruce. “I’ll get Steve inside and get him settled.”

Bruce turned on the charm and went to say hello to the pilot. The man was surprised enough to be flattered by it — Bruce had said hello to him in passing before but never really chatted with him.

Steve was in one of the plush seats when Bruce stepped out of the cockpit. He looked like he was asleep. He didn’t move or open his eyes when Diana moved from his side to come speak to Bruce.

Bruce had another jet with a bed in it. He hadn’t turned that one over for their use because of what
he had...used it for before. What Diana and Steve would definitely assume he used it for. He regretted that now.

“Thank you for this,” Diana told him. “We would have had to cancel this part of our trip entirely otherwise.”

Bruce glanced at Steve, who still had not moved. “Is he going to be all right?”

“He never likes it when he is not flying the plane. It annoys him,” Diana said.

It wasn’t a straight answer. Bruce was surprised by how much that stung. Something must have shown on his face because Diana rolled her eyes.

“That’s why he’s sulking,” Diana explained.

“I’m not sulking,” Steve said, louder than Bruce had heard him since the museum.

Diana ignored him. “As for the rest of it— “

“I’ve had worse,” Steve chimed in.

Diana frowned. “He is not wrong about that.”

It wasn’t particularly comforting but Bruce didn’t doubt it was true.

“I’ll call you when I’ve got more information about...” it never felt less ridiculous, no matter how much he said it. “Aquaman.”

Diana smirked at his hesitation. “And I believe you were planning to come to Paris when the Wayne collection is displayed?”

Bruce hesitated. That had been part of a plan he had abandoned and couldn’t believe he had undertaken in the first place.

He would much rather pretend the whole thing hadn’t happened now. Maybe Dr. Neil would be willing to go in this place. It might be nice for him, after everything.

He tried to play it off casually. “Unless something comes up.”

Diana raised an eyebrow at him. Bruce cleared his throat. He attempted to smile blandly. Diana’s expression didn’t change but it felt worse than if she was scowling at him so he stopped.

“I will,” Bruce said, though he still had no intention to. “Unless something comes up and we get another lead on the metahumans.”

“We are willing to help with that,” Diana told him. “Remember that.”

“Steve’s got a better chance of...finding something useful in Luthor’s rambling about Clark than I do,” Bruce smiled, genuinely, and admittedly much more bitterly. His voice dropped, because however much Steve looked like he could have nodded off, Bruce couldn’t trust that he wasn’t listening. “Could you...let me know, when he’s recovered?”

Diana squinted at him for a moment but seemed to realize he was asking...he wasn’t asking because of the work Steve might do, he was asking because...he wasn’t sure why he was asking.

“He will be in touch himself,” Diana said so firmly that it was comforting.
Bruce would take it. He stuck his hand out. Diana looked amused as she shook it.

“Twill be in touch as well,” she told him. Bruce just nodded.

He and Alfred leaned against the car and watched as the jet took off. Alfred didn’t speak until it wasn’t even a speck in the sky any longer.

“Back to the lab, Master Wayne?” Alfred asked.

They were still trying to figure out a better antidote. It wasn’t going well.

The gas had had a 17% fatality rate in the end. Dr. Howard and a museum security guard had just been taken off the critical list that morning. They were expected to survive.

Crane was still in critical. He might still die. Even if he survived, the doctors thought it was likely he would have extensive brain damage.

“No,” Bruce said. “I thought I might stop by the hospital.”

Alfred looks at him, questioning. Bruce shrugged and cleared his throat. “Dr. Neil, uh, before the attack. He mentioned he and my father, that they had been friends.”

Alfred looked taken aback for a moment. Then he smiled.

“Well,” he said. “I had given up hope of that.”

“Is there a reason you never said anything?” Bruce asked.

“I didn’t feel it was my place,” Alfred replied. “I never knew Jacob well. From my understanding, your mother was determined to befriend him and Jacob put a great deal of effort into returning that friendship. He was not an easy man to get to know. He didn’t have your father’s charm. They weren’t very alike. But your father loved him.”

Alfred sighed. “I believe their deaths were harder on him than he tried to let on and for a while he stopped socializing with anyone who had moved more in your father’s circles than his. It seemed a cruel thing to do, to someone your father loved. And it would not have been fair to you if he had had to be forced into it.”

Alfred glanced at Bruce. “The only time we ever spoke of it was when you disappeared. He was beside himself.”

Bruce nodded. He was going to have to sit with that. And how vulnerable a man who struck Bruce more and more as intensely private had made himself when he decided to tell Bruce.

“From what I understand he is quite well respected within the Gotham art community,” Alfred said. “And much beloved by the museum staff.”

Bruce raised an eyebrow at that. Alfred had been keeping tabs on him then.

“I thought I would go visit him,” Bruce said. “He won’t be released for at least another day.”

“I’m sure he would appreciate it,” Alfred said. “I’ll call ahead. See if we can avoid any press.”

Bruce tried not to groan. “Yes, let’s avoid that.”

Survivor accounts were the bread and butter of Gotham media and they would only be more eager
for the stories since Crane had been inactive for some time. Bruce’s presence would only make things worse and he didn’t want to do that to Dr. Neil or any of the survivors. If he was going to visit, it would have to be done very carefully.

—

The victims of Crane’s attack were being kept in a private wing in the hospital. Wayne Enterprises was paying for it. The doctors weren’t expecting long term complications, though they couldn’t be sure of that in the worst cases. It hadn’t been the worst case scenario, all things considered.

Ten people were still dead. They had just brought Dr. Howard out of her medically induced coma that morning.

Bruce had looked in on her. He didn’t know her well but he made a point of looking twice at people who were so clearly unimpressed by him.

But her family had been with her. Bruce hadn’t wanted to disturb them. She was doing better, everyone who had survived so far seemed to be recovering.

It wasn’t enough. It would have to do.

They wouldn’t be releasing any of the victims for several more days. From Bruce’s understanding, none of them were complaining about that — even those who were recovering well apparently still felt terrible, the gas and the antidote both came with a set of nasty side effects. Wayne Industries was footing the bill for all of the hospital stays.

Bruce still wanted to verify for himself that Dr. Neil was doing as well as the doctors’ report said. He had probably been exposed for the least amount of time of any of the victims. Bruce had been selfish in that. He felt guilty about it but he couldn’t bring himself to regret it.

The door to Dr. Neil’s room was shut when Bruce arrived, the curtain drawn over the window in the door, and a man standing just to the side, with his hands in his pockets, looking exhausted and worried. Bruce glanced around looking for a nurse, someone, his heart squeezing tight with worry.

“They’re running tests about every four hours,” the man said. Bruce looked up to find him watching him. “To try and avoid complications. I kept getting in the way so I figured it would be a good chance for a cup of coffee.”

Bruce stared. He remembered this man. He was sure of it. He opened his mouth but for a moment he couldn’t think of a thing to say.

It stretched into an awkward silence. The man glanced away, fiddling with the coffee in his hands, then looked back at Bruce.

Bruce had to say something. He couldn’t...he had to say something and all he could think of was:

“You had a dog in your pocket.”

Just as the man said:

“Jacob said he finally told you.”

Bruce felt like he was eight years old again. It felt like he was only just resisting the desire to clamp his hands over his mouth in embarrassment. He had enough self control to keep from doing that at least.
The man laughed. His eyes squinted as he grinned, wagging his finger at Bruce in clear remembrance.

“That would have been...ah, Kingston when he was,” he whistled, “Must have been only a few months old. When he decided he had enough of a walk, well, that was that. Never met a dog with that much attitude before or since but then, Welshies are like that.”

Bruce couldn’t help but smile. He only remembered it vaguely, it had been just a few weeks before the...before his parents died and so much of that felt like it was another life all together.

To be honest, he only vaguely remembered the man. What had stayed with him the most was the startled wonder of having a tiny, fuzzy, puppy face pop out of the deep pockets of a grown-ups’ winter coat and yip at him excitedly. He had been eight, without a pet of his own — a dog was much more exciting than an adult, grown-ups had mostly been *boring* to him then.

He remembered bugging his parents about getting a dog for Christmas after that.

But he had never had another Christmas with his parents.

Bruce swallowed and said: “I’m sorry. I think the dog’s what I remember most.”

The man laughed again. “I’m the last person who is going to blame you for that.”

He held out his hand. His gaze was very direct and his eyes were kind. “You can call me Winston. You wouldn’t remember that. Your parents used to make you call me Mr. Washington.”

Bruce shook it. He hadn’t remembered that name either but he appreciated Winston trying to make it easy for him.

“Bruce,” he said. Introducing himself was, at least, an awkwardness he was used to. “Which seems...”

“Superfluous?” Winston said, grinning. “But not for the reasons you would think. Changed a few of your diapers, kiddo.”

Bruce didn’t think anyone had ever said that to him before.

“That isn’t the usual reason, no,” Bruce admitted. He couldn’t decide whether he felt more immediately comfortable with Winston than...he wasn’t sure, maybe Fox, or if he felt even more awkward than usual.

He didn’t go into a charm offensive, his usual reaction to being caught off guard. It felt wrong to the point he wasn’t sure he would have been able to pull it off.

“I doubt there were many occasions when your mother or nanny wasn’t with you but there were at least a couple of times it just your father, Jake and me and, well, I have three sisters and two brothers and they were both only children,” Winston shook his head. “I love Jake but the man is better at holding a football than a baby and I don’t think he’s ever held a football in his life. Your father learned at least.”

Bruce didn’t know how to respond to that. It was a wealth of information that he didn’t know how to process. People didn’t speak about his parents that way. Not even Alfred.

Like they were just...people.
Not even Bruce remembered them like that.

He was being silent for too long again. Winston’s smile was falling at the edges. He was worrying the plastic edge of his coffee cup lid. Bruce was trying to think of something, some platitude he could give, when Winston looked at him again, his smile almost a grimace.

“They tell me Jake’s going to be okay. He seems like he’s getting better,” Winston said. “It’s been a long, ah, going on 48 hours now, I think? Developed a distaste for hospitals in the 80s, you know. Actually you might be too young to know. We had a lot of friends that weren’t as lucky as we were.”

He kept going before Bruce could say anything. “But they tell me he’s going to be fine. It was tough before they could give him anything for the nausea but he seems like he’s getting better now. They tell me I have you to thank for that, actually.”

Bruce realized that Winston was rambling, that he was more worried than Bruce could imagine and probably hadn’t really slept in those 48 hours. His gaze felt uncomfortably direct and Bruce found it harder to shrug off than most people’s but...it wasn’t really about him.

“Wayne Enterprises assisted in discovering the last antidote,” Bruce told him. “We still have the data. It wouldn’t make sense for us to ignore that.”

Winston raised an eyebrow. “I would say you’d be surprised how many corporations would but I imagine you know that even better than I do.”

Bruce did but if anything his experience with Luthor made it clear he had not paid as much attention to it as he should.

“I’m just glad it helped,” Bruce said.

Winston looked like he was going to say more — he was shredding the coffee cup lid, Bruce hoped it was empty — but the door opened and the doctor came out, followed by a couple of nurses. The doctor smiled tiredly at Winston and put her hand on his arm before he could say anything.

“He’s doing fine. Better than most of the others,” she told him. “If the nausea and light sensitivity keep lessening the way they have over the past twenty-four hours; I would normally release him tomorrow. But we’re keeping everyone who was exposed to the toxins just as a safety precaution.”

Winston grimaced even as his shoulders slumped in relief. “Good. No, that makes sense. Are we, uh, expecting complications?”

The doctor shrugged. “It’s hard to say. We’ve already discussed the risks of further exposure but we’re not sure if what we know of the previous toxin can be applied to this one. The psychological after effects may be the same. Not everyone experienced those last time and your husband’s exposure time was relatively short but the most common ones to look out for are nightmares, insomnia or increased levels of anxiety. PTSD wasn’t uncommon among victims during the last mass exposure. But we don’t know what the physical effects might be. We will be giving you a list of symptoms to look out for and I’ll warn you now it’s going to be quite long. With something like this, we err on the side of caution.”

Bruce watched as Winston’s face fell and then became resolute. He came across as affable but watching him as the doctor spoke, Bruce got the impression that he could become an immovable object if necessary, particularly when it came to his partner’s wellbeing.

“I would like someone to go over that with us before Jacob is discharged,” Winston said, with a
pleasant smile and a firm tone of voice. “So we have a better idea of what to expect.”

“Of course,” the doctor said. “He really is doing well.”

She glanced at Bruce. “And I would say additional visitors are fine as long as you don’t tire him out.”

Bruce took a step back. “I should...”

“You should come in,” Winston said firmly, looking at Bruce again. “Jake will appreciate it.”

The doctor patted Winston’s arm again and left. Winston didn’t hesitate before going in to the hospital room. Bruce...did. The lights were very low in the room, he could just make out Dr. Neil on the bed and there was still a nurse in there and this really wasn’t his place, was it?

Winston had already sat down at Dr. Neil’s bedside. He had taken his hand in one of his and was stroking Dr. Neil’s thinning hair with the other but he glanced back at Bruce, hesitating in the doorway and raised an expectant eyebrow at him.

Bruce shuffled forward just as Dr. Neil turned into his partner’s touch without opening his eyes.

“Uh, god,” he muttered. “I gave up drinking to avoid this.”

Winston huffed, relieved and indulgent. He rubbed Dr. Neil’s head gently. “Jake, honey...”

Dr. Neil didn’t open his eyes, saying, even as he tried to curl closer to Winston: “I think I’m going to throw up again. This is awful.”

“Bruce is here,” Winston told him.

Dr. Neil froze. Winston looked between them. He looked as if he was trying not to laugh.

“Bruce isn’t eight anymore,” Bruce said, stepping a little further into the room.

Dr. Neil — Jacob — blinked rapidly a few times and rubbed the hand Winston wasn’t holding over his eyes. After a moment he managed to peer at Bruce.

“Oh,” Jacob said. “Well.”

He rubbed at his eyes again and moved as if he was trying to sit up. “Sorry. The light still bothers me.”

“Keep your eyes closed and I’ll help you sit up,” Winston told him. “The doctor said to avoid straining your eyes.”

“And then shone a pen light in them as one of the tests. I was doing better. I was fine with the sunglasses,” Jacob grumbled but he closed his eyes and let Winston adjust his bed and help him sit up. There was utter trust in the way they touched each other, even though these specific movements were new and a little fumbling.

It made Bruce feel like he should look away. This was a vulnerability he wasn’t sure he should be seeing.

It only took a moment to get Jacob settled. As soon as he was, Winston produced a pair of sunglasses from his pocket. They were possibly the ugliest pair Bruce had ever seen. They looked like kind that were meant to go over a regular pair of glasses, with very dark lenses and thick sides
that blocked out your peripheral vision.

“Hit the gift shop when I was getting coffee,” Winston told him. He slipped them on Jacob’s face and Jacob brought his hands up quickly to adjust them. “I think these are darker than the last ones I picked up.”

He caught Jacob’s hands. Bruce got the impression he would have wagged his finger at Jacob if he hadn’t been holding them. “Don’t try to open your eyes until they stop stinging. You know what the doctor said.”

“Hmph,” Jacob muttered but Bruce could see how tightly he was holding on to his partner. “They’re better than yesterday.”

“And they’ll be better again tomorrow if you don’t push yourself too much. Like you always do,” Winston told him but leaned forward and kissed the side of Jacob’s head to take the sting out of it.

It sounded like it wasn’t the first time they were having the conversation.

“Uh,” Jacob said, sounding apprehensive. “Is Bruce still here?”

“Yes,” Bruce said before Winston could. He was being too silent. He wasn’t doing this right.

He should probably go. He couldn’t imagine that they wanted him here. He opened his mouth to say as much.

“Good,” Jacob said and he smiled, small and hesitant but genuine. “I’m glad.”

Winston gave Bruce a look and jerked his head toward the other chair in the room even as he squeezed Jacob’s hand. “Bruce remembers Kingston.”

Jacob groaned. “Oh god. Of course he does.”

“You can’t blame him. Kingston was a memorable dog,” Winston grinned even as he pointed at the chair more directly.

Bruce kept his coat on but he edged further into the room and perched on it. That seemed to be good enough.

“He peed on an antique rug that cost more than our house,” Jacob said dryly. He rubbed his forehead. “I thought Tom was going to have a conniption.”

“Nah,” Winston said, his grin widening. He winked at Bruce. “Martha always hated that rug. She was looking for an excuse to get rid of it.”

“She was. Tom wasn’t,” Jacob insisted. Winston laughed.

Bruce sat back in the chair as something inside him relaxed, just a little.

He hadn’t lost this person, this chance. There was still time.

Chapter End Notes
Just in case anyone was wondering what happened to Dr. Neil, who absolutely stole my heart.

I promise the next chapter has more Steve and Diana.

Also, this doesn't happen frequently, but I have a very strong face canon for Winston. *It's Keith David!* If you pictured someone else, that's fine too! : )

End Notes

I hope no one is too confused. I don't *think* that you need to read *The kind old sun will know* to understand this but I may admittedly be too close to it at this point to know anymore.

This takes place between Bruce sending the photo to Diana in Wonder Woman and Justice League. I'm assuming a good chunk of time occurs between them because I feel like it.

Steve's hip was badly injured in the explosion and his lungs/airways were compromised due to the gas exposure and the fire. He shouldn't have survived. The reasons why he did survive will be revealed eventually in both fics (less explicitly in this one). Both he and Diana are pretty used to the accommodations he uses for these injuries at this point because he's been living with them for almost 100 years.

OCs from *The kind old sun will know* are mentioned but don't act as actual characters in this.

Eventually the rest of the gang from the Justice League will show up and tags will be amended as they do.

I started writing this fix-it before Justice League came out so I have some chapters ready to go. Should be updated every two to three weeks. They're shorter and the style is a different too.

Title is from the poem *I Will Wade Out* by e.e. cummings. At some point I'll stop stealing my titles from poems. Haha no.

Please *drop by the archive and comment* to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!