Teenage Dream

by Diddle_Riddle

Summary

It started as a school project. They had to team up, none of them being pleased with the idea of working with the other. Or... working with anyone, really. This is not what one could call love at first sight, quite the contrary. And anyway, it's not like Edward had time to waste into anything that could be called even the beginning of a 'relationship'. No thanks.

Aka, this is the typical Riddlebat College AU, with Selina helping these idiots realize they're in love.
The scream woke him up immediately, causing him to jump from his desk chair, his heart pounding in his chest, trying to control the panic already rising, pressing his stomach and turning his legs into jelly.

But the sound currently breaking his eardrums wasn't one of terror coming from someone in pain, neither was it an echo in his mind of the usual nightmares or / and childhood memories. It still took him three full seconds to remember the nature of his present surroundings. In other words, the time needed for the fear to retract from his brain enough to allow him recover control of his body ; so he could focus on the source of this sudden disturbance in the Force.

And a sweet smile appeared on his lips when he quickly made the two steps required to reach the cradle and its very angry inhabitant.

"It's all right Steph..."

The baby, screaming bloody murder, seemed determined to prove him just how much it precisely 'wasn't alright', since she didn't lower the level of her bellowing even when he scooped her and started rocking her gently in his arms.

Nope, the world was unfair and it deserved to hear some more protests against everything living in there.

Eddie's smile grew wider.

"Don't worry, I'm sure the all neighborhood knows just how upset you are right now...", he whispered fondly at the little ball of wrath crying and yelling, whose skin was turning an alarming shade of red as she went on with shouting at the top of her lungs.

But it wasn't the first night, neither would it be the last before at least a couple of weeks, until Stephanie would agree to sleep a little longer than three hours before waking the house up until the next part of the night.

As he exited the bedroom, the baby in his arms, Edward took a quick glance at the alarm clock nearby. 4 : 23 am. So he slept two hours and 13 minutes. That is to say, longer than last night ; so he wasn't going to complain.

Neither will he try to go back to sleep during the night time left, even after Stephanie agreed to finally calm down. He still had things to take care of, yet he fell asleep in the middle of the third paragraph of the essay he was supposed to finish for today morning's class.
But it was fine, everything was under control... wasn't it? It had to be...

Three quarters of an hour later, Stephanie was yet again deeply asleep, and he delicately put her back in her cradle, cautious not to break the precious but fragile recovered calm, to avoid provoking another screaming storm.

He still had now plenty of time to write a conclusion before starting the day as a College student.

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There was one specific data about the all 'going to school' thing that held the unfortunate, strong tendency, to turn a mundane day of classes into a trip to Hell.

This obnoxious variable depended on one thing: the humans. Classmates, teachers, other students in the campus, people working at the institution... They were all awful, noisy, and a potential origin of violent problems and disagreements.

That was a fact, not just an idea or a hasty judgment, and Edward stuck to it since kindergarten. Not that the only people he found stupid and who easily get under his skin were school related of course; he held this judgment towards basically everyone, with just a few exceptions.

However, right now was the last class of his school day, and his hatred was, for the time being, directed at his incompetent computer engineer teacher and her silly ideas about projects.

Not that the project itself was especially foolish, quite the contrary in fact, but the dullness of her request dwelt in the fact that she turned the said task into a 'group project'.

He already survived (and it had been difficult enough, but he managed...) high school and he finally graduated to College, it wasn't to go back now to doing 'group projects'! The sole advantage of being a College student was that he was, at last, supposed to be free from a maximum of social interactions with his peers and could work on his own all the time.

But no, apparently even this was too much to ask!

Well, he wasn't going to just let it go without a fight. If at least the asked task was silly, why not doing it with a mindless classmate of his, but the worst in this is that it was actually interesting! And he was the best at computer programming, he certainly wasn't going to let anyone steal his work and claim that he helped him on something to be awarded the grade he was the only one to deserve.

Why the Hell was he forced to go through more school years again?! Couldn't he just skip this obscenely long part of his life of being taught things he knew since boyhood way better than the teachers, and eventually start working in something at his level?! Oh yeah, that's right... because he was fifteen and he technically couldn't skip more grades than what he already did.

What a pain... And, this being said, let's add he definitely hated the stupid people who wrote this rule somewhere and by doing so, contributed to his everlasting anger towards humanity in general. This charming thought in mind, he headed for the teacher's desk to let her know just how much he disapproved of the idea of teaming up with anyone.

What a wonderful way to end his school day...

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Bruce just looked around as the other students started pairing with each other, unsure of what to do. It was almost the end of the double hour, but since the teacher ended her class earlier than expected, she told them they could start forming groups for the important project she -apparently- explained during the whole hour.

He would probably know more about it if he had listened the said class, instead of thinking of... nothing in particular in fact, he was just disconnected from what was happening around him at the present moment.

What he was even doing in a College was beyond him really, so when the said College starts playing 'let's go back to elementary school' by asking the students to team up for a project... Well, let's just say that he understood even less why he agreed to do this year.

So he hesitated an instant about what to do now.

Two girls on the other side of the classroom waved with envy at him, but he just answered by a polite smile, clearly not interested. Everybody, at least practically everybody, knew him because he was billionaire Bruce Wayne, but except for stealing his money and getting invited to overpriced restaurants, no one was actually 'interested' in him.

Plentiful were the teens around who wanted a pretty generous paycheck and dissipate it in parties and late nights drinking, but none of them was tempted by sitting next to him, not even during an hour of classes. Not that he was blaming them, he never spoke to anyone and he honestly didn't want to be bothered either.

So having to pair with someone in the class for this so-called project was a real inconvenience he would have been glad to avoid.

What was he supposed to do now ? Other than calling Alfred and telling him that school was out of the question, and he wanted to go back to homeschooling, even at his grade ? His butler / mentor / dad / closest friend / guardian really wanted this to work... Wanted him to 'go back in the world' and try socializing.

He said it was the best transition he could benefit of before entering the working world, but it... wasn't especially easy.

A few of the students he shared most classes with tried in fact to involve him in their 'friends group' at first, but he quickly made them all understand just how much he didn't care, wasn't looking for neither a friendship nor a relationship with anyone, and was frankly disapproving of the attempts the young adults made to get into his good graces.

To get into his money wallet being more appropriate, and they were all painfully obvious. So no, he was not motivated by the idea of knowing them any further.

But even if it wasn't to befriend with his classmates or to even try working with them ; he would still give its chance to school itself. He could make the effort for Alfred, after all if it wasn't for him he did something, he failed to see who else it could have been for...

So he stood up from his desk at the back of the classroom and walked toward the front to speak with the teacher, in order to be given the right to do the project on his own... because that was the best compromise he could think of at the moment.

An option which was apparently envied by someone else already.
"I want to do this alone.", a red headed teenager was literally hissing at Mrs Leland.

It was perfectly normal in College to ignore the names of your classmates, and Bruce was also the kind who could barely recognize any of them.

But he saw this student in a few of his classes. Contrary to the others, who were all between his age and a few years older, but not much more most of the time, this one had something different, and easily recognizable: he looked... young.

Like, very young. Too young to be in College.

"Mister Nashton.", the teacher tried, her tone filled with exasperation. "What part of 'group project' did you fail to understand?"

"What I fail to understand is the point of pairing me with anyone really. I work better alone! Anyway it's not like I could form a group with anyone being at my level!"

"That's enough.", she sighed, apparently getting more angry than bothered, and obviously used to argue with this teen. "Why can't you just do as you're told without protests?!"

"I could do so if I was told something smart for once. That would be such a major change..."

Bruce couldn't suppress a tiny chuckle upon hearing this.

Not that he found it especially funny, but mostly because he agreed with the last statement, it was something he was more than used to think daily himself.

He certainly shouldn't have however, because the ginger boy instantly turned his head to his direction and gave him a murderous glare.

"May I help you?!", he spat at his face with so much venon it sounded like they were long time enemies who despised each other.

While Bruce didn't even know his name.

"I...", he started to reply, quite unsure about how to react to his provocative tone.

Luckily the teacher saved him by asking, way more polite than his classmate:

"Mister Wayne?", she inquired. "How can I help you?"

"Hu... I wanted to know if I could work on my project alone as well.", he informed her, and she frowned again with a very displeased expression.

"Same as for your colleague here.", she said, and the glance she quickly gave to the redhead strongly implied that he must be something like the most irritating person to have ever walked on this planet. "It's a group project, you need to be at least two to do it. It's not my decision, it's a reform that applies from this year in my subject area. And it's serious, the grade will count for your final exams. So better not take it as some kind of joke."

"It's gonna be some kind of joke if you ask someone to try working with me.", the smaller one aggressively replied, apparently not decided to give up that easily. "I'm gonna do all the work and the 'someone' supposed to help will just see himself being given an excellent grade without participating at all!"

Wow. This kid needed a reward for showing so much modesty., Bruce couldn't help thinking with
disdain.

He may didn't mind much his classmates or... any other human being except Alfred, but he could tell when he was faced with someone he couldn't like whatsoever.

And it was exactly the feeling this boy was giving him right now.

"Well because none of you want to pair with anyone, why won't you just form a group of two together ?", she infuriated teacher simply asked, in an act of desperation and clearly not wanting to waste any more time on this problem.

"I am not working with him.", the ginger immediately said, as if it was some kind of insult to ask them to team up.

Bruce frowned, this time.

What on Earth could this stranger have against him ?...

"I wasn't asking for your opinion on this, Nashton.", Mrs Leland sternly replied. "Now you may want to add something else, but it won't change anything to the fact that if you refuse to do the project in group, it won't be validated at the end of the semester, so you're gonna have a F. Is that what you want on your school report ?"

If one look could kill, she probably would have ended up dead right away.

"He doesn't deserve that grade, it is mine."

Such a strange way to end a talk with a teacher...

But it was how it been cut nonetheless, because 'Nashton' just walked away after this, and the woman sighed.

"I'll register both of you as in the same group.", she told Bruce, trying to sound a bit less frustrated.

Actually she almost looked sorry for him, now. Easy to tell it was due to the fact she just paired him with the most irritating student he could have worked with...

"If there's no other way.", was all Bruce thought to answer, feeling quite puzzled by the situation.

Then he left the desk as well.

All the other students in the classroom, sitting in groups of friends, were already debating to choose the subject they wanted to work on.

He should probably be doing the same... And at least try to look like he was even the slightest interested in whatever this 'project' actually was.

Yeah... that was certainly the normal thing to do.

So he spotted Nashton sitting on a desk near the window, alone, and headed for his table.

Edward had to physically refrain a sigh when someone sat in the chair next to him.

"Hi...", the guy said a bit awkwardly.
Not used to start a conversation, hu ?, he thought sarcastically.

Well he wasn't going to make it easier for him.

"This is my project.", he told him, more sharply than necessary. "I need all my grades to be perfect, I want to have the best report card possible. So you can watch, since there is no other option, but you better avoid ruining everything. And naturally, you have nothing to say about anything in this."

At least one thing was now clear : Bruce hated this guy.

Nevertheless, Alfred wanted him to at least remain polite if he couldn't act friendly. So he followed this directive, and elected to start by introducing himself :

"My name is Bru..."

"Bruce Wayne, yes.", the other one cut with a dismissive wave of his right hand. "I know who you are."

Usually when people said this, they looked either greedy because they were thinking of all the money behind the name and how it could be... sympathetic, to be friend with him. Or they were midly sorry, condescending even, mainly when it came to adults, because they were thinking of the accident. This second kind being the one Bruce hated the most.

It was... new however, to have someone telling him the 'I know who you are' as if it was something positively disgusting.

He frowned even more.

"I don't think we met before.", he replied so, lowering his voice to his practised 'threatening tone'.

No matter what Alfred told him about politeness, this boy was being openly provocative and contemptuous, so he had more than the right to act a bit cold in return.

"So why are you angry at me like that ?"

The smaller one just raised one orange eyebrow.

"What makes you think I am angry ?", he asked so, the disdain clearly audible in his voice. "You know what, nevermind.", he added immediately before Bruce got the chance to answer anything. "I'm Edward. I would tell you it's a pleasure teaming up with you, but that would mean I'm glad you're going to steal my work and have a grade which only belongs to me because of it. So, as you can -maybe- figure out by yourself, I'm not exactly pleased by this prospect."

"... I'm not a complete idiot, you know.", Bruce replied, his voice colder than intended. "And I am not a thief. So you may not be pleased by the situation, but neither am I ; what you can count on nonetheless is that I won't just let you do everything on your own and then take credit for it. I just... don't do that sort of things, and I feel nothing but scorn towards the ones who are doing them."

The redhead looked at him with slightly more interest upon hearing that, but when he responded, his tone, though less upset, was still openly defiant :

"Well we'll see, won't we ?"

Then he took back :

"But I am not going to lower the level just so you can understand, every grade is important for my
school record."

He was still impressively insufferable, but Bruce saw in his expression that he indeed really wanted the result to be good. So even if he disapproved of his attitude, he could understand. And damn, he should have paid attention when the teacher explained what this project was...

But the hour ended before he get to ask for more, and Edward started packing his things urgently.

"Wait.", Bruce said. "We didn't..."

"We'll talk about it tomorrow.", he answered, in a hurry. "I don't have time right now."

Then he stood up, pulling his sling bag on.

"Have a good evening.", he simply ended before walking to the door and disappearing in the corridors.

Bruce had no idea how he managed to do that, but his 'good evening' sounded like an insult. Or a... challenge maybe? Sort of.

No doubt, whatever partnership he will have to do for a whole semester with this guy won't be something... particularly simple to deal with.

"You have until next week to tell me what subjects you chose. And you can always send me an e-mail during the week if you prefer, that would be easier.", the teacher reminded the students as he was taking his own bag to leave the classroom.

What a wonderful life he had...

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"There's a... a 'group project' going on for computer courses. I know it's weird, that's a... new reform decision or something.", he said during the conversation, after a short moment of debating in his head about if he should tell him or not.

Alfred gave him an encouraging glance.

"That could be a good way to try making friends.", he commented, supportive and obviously pleased by the idea.

"... 'Could' is the key word here.", Bruce sighed. "Don't start thinking it'll help me become sociable, I'm pairing up with someone who seems to be even more terrible than I am to speak to others. Except that in addition, he's the provocative type."

Alfred smiled a little, clearly amused by the younger one's judgment.

"Then you should get along pretty easily, Master Bruce.", he responded, quite glad, and Bruce just glared at him.

"This is far from funny... I swear, the guy hates me as if I actually ruined something in his life... or... I don't know, maybe he is like that with everyone..."

"Then he could use to have a friend as well. It could be a profitable, mutual experience.", Alfred said, caring as always, and Bruce smiled a little.
"I suppose it worths a try..."

Even if honestly, he was only mildly convinced.

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It was very late when Selina came home that night. Without a noise, she reached her bedroom, and closed the door behind her. It was dark, but she instantly noticed the person laying in her bed.

An amused smile grew on her lips, and she slid in the sheets next to him, as silent and graceful as a cat.

"Hi there, Eddie.", she said gently, adjusting the blanket on their bodies and taking in the lovely sight of his peaceful state.

When he was sleeping, his features and whole posture relaxed completely, all the tension of the day vanished, and to tell the truth it made him look... like a child.

He didn't wake up, but she heard the pleased little sigh he let out when he felt her close to him, and she smiled more broadly as he slowly cuddled her.

A child, really.

"Good night, baby.", she whispered tenderly. "I hope you'll only have nice dreams tonight."

She kissed him on the forehead, and wrapped one arm around him. His head came to nest itself against her, and she closed her eyes, breathing the -somewhat funny- scent of his green apple shampoo coming from his hair.

She truly loved the nights she spent in the streets, walking on her own on the city's rooftops.

But she enjoyed these nights even better when she came home and discovered Eddie waiting for her in her bed.

She buried her smile in his orange hair, and listened to his regular breathing to lull her to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

"The world has been made by fools that wise men may live in it."

Chapter Notes

Since it started like this, every chapter will have its own quote by the great master Oscar Wilde.
For the main reason that I'm convinced he must be Edward's ancestor or his favorite philosopher (they think alike!) and if the Riddler ever time-traveled and met him... nobody could stop this beautiful duo of sassy, clever, narcissist, smug geniuses;)
And now I ship them...

"May I know what you think you're doing?!

Bruce wasn't sure what was the most impressive between how fast Edward talked and how much hatred could be heard in his voice even when he used such simple and common words. Probably the second fact...

It was Friday morning, the following day, and it appeared that they were in the same History class as well. So Bruce found it normal to come to his desk at the window and sit next to him.

That is, before his fellow comrade asked this charming question, just when he was about to inquire if the seat belonged to someone yet.

"Good morning to you too.", he replied then, trying his best not to sound too annoyed already.
"Remember yesterday? We were supposed to team up on..."

"Of course I remember yesterday.", he cut off, looking just as exasperated as he would have been if Bruce said some obviousness like 'Earth is round' like it was a revelation. "This is History though, so why do you want to sit here?!

"I wasn't aware you owned the place.", Bruce jeered with a smirk, and the smaller one rolled his eyes.

"Fine. Sit wherever you like, for that matters..."

"So thoughtful."

But his unfortunate partner was obviously bothered by Bruce's company when he started to unpack his things, then sat at his desk next to him.

The teacher entered the classroom, and the hour started.

It was far from captivating, that was at least certain, and Bruce applied this opinion to many other
classes. He just couldn't understand why about half of the students in the classroom were taking notes with vaguely interested eyes, even asking questions for two or three of them. Such a nonsense.

He forced himself to listen Mr Day the first ten minutes, because after all he had nothing better to do right now, then concluded he did his best and the effort was enough.

The sound of typing coming from his left was constant, proving that Edward belonged to the kind who was taking notes, he surely was even interested by Julian Day's babbling about important dates. It... suited him. Bruce didn't know why he thought so exactly, but the teen simply matched with the typical image of the guy at the top of the class.

He sneaked a peak to his left to confirm the thought.

And was kinda surprised to realize that what Edward was typing on his laptop had nothing to do with the current class they were listening.

He was writing an e-mail, his pale fingers dancing rapidly over the keyboard.

Careful not to get noticed, Bruce watched what was written on the screen page. He couldn't tell why he was more interested by his colleague's activities than by the lesson... But that was Day's fault. If he wanted to be given more attention, he should have been a better teacher, instead of being an hysterical caring about every single date linked with their subject. Maybe History was too easy too ?

Must be that., he ended quickly, to spare himself a headache thinking any further about it.

Pleased with the conclusion, he spied on the, quite long, text Nashton was typing.

Was finalizing to type was more accurate, he drafted the end of his message. Bruce read discreetly the last paragraph of the mail, the easiest one to look at from his position :

"As I told you, not only is the experiment working, but its results are beyond our expectations. I finished my report on it, I'm sending it to you right now, but I want to know more about your 'massive project' as you called it. May I remind once again how silly I think this code name is ? There, I reminded it. Just like last week, I'm free on Sunday from 10 pm to 4 am. I would prefer to get invited to your house for once, but I suppose I still can't go any further than the lab yet ? Anyway"

The page disappeared abruptly, Nashton reduced it and the homepage of his desktop -featuring the... starship Enterprise on a space background- replaced his e-mail box.

"What are you doing exactly ?!", Edward spat through gritted teeth, his light green eyes properly burning with rage.

Bruce felt his cheeks turning red with shame upon realizing he noticed him spying.

"I... I just..."

"Who do you think you are, rich kid ?!", he said, appalled. "To give yourself the right to invade other people's privacy like that ?!"

He was obviously way more upset than he let on, so better not provoke him. Bruce chose the safer option, as Alfred strongly recommended him given how easily he got himself in trouble. So he replied, as calmly as he could :

"That was a wrong move from me.", he started, doing his best to look as if he was at least midly sorry. "I didn't mean to..."
"Do not apologize now!", the redhead vividly cut off. "I bet your enjoyed yourself..."

"I didn't...", Bruce objected, only to be quickly interrupted again:

"Unfortunately for you, no matter what you managed to read from this, it's just a mail to a colleague, you have nothing to use against me in here or nothing to track me with. So bad...", he ended with a smirk, but it just caused Bruce to frown.

What was he talking about?

"What does that mean, 'nothing to use against you'?", he couldn't help asking, his curiosity taking over the clear warning coming from his classmate's gaze.

Sure it was going to make Nashton even more upset, but no big deal considering his already high level of anger...

"Get yourself a dictionary.", Edward huffed. "With all your money, I'm sure it won't be too difficult to spend a few dollars in a good one! Then search for the definition of 'blackmail'. See, I'm such a mindful person: I even gave you the word, you brainless kid."

"I know what blackmail is.", Bruce half growled, his fists clenching. "And you don't have to insult me, I simply..."

"Simply tried to learn something about me without my consent with the purpose to use it against me?", he translated, scornful. "I don't know what they call this in the world you're from, but in mine it's something people can actually get insulted for."

Okay. What was wrong with him?!

"I was just bored, and I looked at what you were doing!", Bruce replied, feeling his blood boil in his veins. "It is not a crime! And I didn't do it to... blackmail you or anything!", he added, astounded. "What are you exactly, a follower of the conspiracy theory?!

Nashton huffed once again, but didn't deny the last question either.

"Don't do that again.", he responded instead, sternly but calming down a bit.

"Okay.", Bruce replied on the same dry tone.

Edward nodded sharply, then adjusted the position of his chair, his back closer to the window, and turned his laptop for that it faced him.

With this angle, even if Bruce tried to spy again, he won't be able to see anything on the screen.

The older one sighed slightly, no other choice left but to go back at doing as if he listened the History lesson.

The tensed exchange he just had left him quite puzzled, though. Especially Nashton's reaction: how come the first thing that popped into the mind of a boy his age when discovering he read his text was blackmail?! Was he... in trouble or something? And even if Bruce didn't see much of the said text, what he knew is that it was about an experiment he was doing with a colleague he met during Sunday at night.

That was... a bit weird, to say the least.

And a way more attractive subject to think about than the current class, for sure.
None of them said anything else during the rest of the hour, Edward resumed working on his computer and Bruce according way too much curiosity to their strange interaction.

At the end of the hour, they simply parted way without a word, and Bruce felt kinda relieved to see that they hadn't the next class in common, so they won't have to be in the same room for the following two hours.

Which didn't mean he stopped thinking about him ; because rather than paying attention to the next lecture, he quickly began to wonder what Edward studied at this hour.

And it made him sigh a little. What did Alfred say, again ? That he really needed friends ? Seeing how interested he already was in this odd teen, he could only conclude that the butler was right, as ever. However, he didn't find attractive the prospect of learning more about his other classmates. Edward Nashton on the other hand, was a subject he could get curious about from now on.

It may didn't sound much like 'friendship', even to Bruce's inexperienced ears, but investigating about his comrade was the most thrilling thing he could think of doing at the moment.

And no, it wasn't making him sound like a freak.

He sighed again. Maybe it was true, he effectively stayed apart from the social life and other people's world for too long...

Failing to remember the subject area of the class he was in, he tried to listen to the teacher a short moment. This good resolution lasted for something like three minutes before he gave up.

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Even if Edward hated everything Bruce Wayne represented, he had to admit this was ridiculous.

They had a class together during the middle of the afternoon, but instead of coming to sit with him, Moneybags just stayed alone at a desk in the middle of the large classroom. So he was what now, scared ? Remorseful maybe ? Or he just forgot they were supposed to choose a subject and create a software about it...

Probably something in between.

Not that having company was something he was fond of, far from it ; but well, they couldn't exactly discuss something if they eliminated all process of social exchange.

So not only was the 'group' project stupid, but right now considering how they were dealing with it, they both looked like childish idiots. In other words, normal people. And if there was one thing Edward hated way more than human beings, that was acting like an human being. So feeling like a complete fool wasn't helping.

He was typing an essay during the double hours. Nothing related to the present class, but to another he followed besides this academic career.

What did not mean he had no time to effectuate a little extra research, right ?

Before his 'rational inner voice', the one who often used Mr Spock's tone to scold him, could tell the usual "get back to work!", he opened a search engine.
Bruce Wayne. Of course, typing the name only led to a dozen articles, economic records linked to Wayne Enterprises, concurrence between this company and others, shares the society had all over Gotham in multiple areas... But except for the too popular and well-known articles about the accident, nothing on Bruce himself.

He gave a few more specific keywords.

Bruce had no Facebook account, neither was he in any other social network. Edward smiled a little. They had something in common, then.

Eddie wasn't searching for one precise information. In fact he wasn't sure what he was looking for, or what he wanted to learn via the web.

Of course, he knew Bruce Wayne's history, most people did in Gotham. But no doubt, there was more about him than the fact his parents died shot in an alley one dark night... Yet he wasn't aware of anything else, and apparently neither was anyone else. Quickly checking a few of the articles, he saw that Wayne went to homeschooling two years after the tragedy, and then he pretty much disappeared from the radars. He had been spotted travelling around the world, on his own, during the last years, and the gossip theories affirmed he had a girlfriend in every place he visited. Not... really the kind of information he'd call 'interesting'.

Honestly, all Edward knew about him, and it was enough to make him angry, was that the guy was... rich. The kind of rich everyone dreamt to be, the kind some were ready to kill to become. How pleasant it must be, to always have everything you want when you ask for it...

It was puerile to react that way, and he knew it. But he couldn't overcome the jealousy he felt at the mere idea of how easy Bruce Wayne's life must be. And what had he done to deserve it, hu ? Nothing, he wasn't smart, wasn't skilled, he never worked for it, never designed, built, created, discovered or won anything by himself. Nope, all he had to do was to... be born with the good last name.

He closed his eyes a few seconds.

Calm down., he tried to order himself. What good was it anyway, to get mad over how unfair it was that Bruce had access to everything he dreamt to have yet never did anything with it ?! If their roles were reversed, he knew he would have done... something. He won't waste such a chance, he would become someone, someone whose intellect would have been recognized, someone who...

He bit his lower lip. Hard.

Such thoughts were stupid, foolish, and pointless. Dreaming was a good thing, but unless he managed to fulfill the said dreams, it won't change anything in his life. Still, he was jealous, and hated Wayne for making him experience such a trivial feeling.

Great...

At the end of the hour however, he reached his comrade's desk.

Upon seeing him, Bruce was the first one to speak :

"Are you still mad at me ?"

It was difficult to tell if it bothered him or if he just didn't care, his expression being blank of any emotion and his tone neutral.
"I'm not.", Edward answered calmly.

That was a lie, but since he was angry all day long, all the time, towards life in general... Bruce Wayne was nothing more than just another factor.

And after all, he needed this grade to be just as perfect as his others. So what should it matter, that he had to work with another person? The only important thing was the result. It was an experiment, nothing more, and he was talented at performing them.

So he simply handed him a little sheet of paper.

"There, take this as a peace offering."

Bruce frowned, a bit surprised by the change of mood, but took it wordlessly.

"Send me a mail during the weekend if you think of something you want to work on.", Ed clarified. "I'm quite busy, but I'll answer when I can and let you know my point on it."

This time the taller boy smiled a bit.

"Thanks.", he said, obviously pleased by the truce. "I will mail you."

Wayne hesitated a short moment, as if he tried to remember what was the most normal thing to do in a similar situation, then asked, a bit awkwardly:

"So do you... hu... Do you want us to meet during the weekend?"

What a silly boy. Edward barely refrained the urge to roll his eyes.

"I gave you my mail.", he corrected, annoyed by the stupid question. "And you realize what the advantage of virtual contact is, don't you? Let me enlight you: I won't have to bear interacting with you longer than necessary. So just... write to me if you want, but don't ask me out!"

Bruce's smile vanished immediately.

"That was definitely not my intention.", he replied dryly.

They shared an icy glance.

"Right.", Wayne ended on a cold tone after a few seconds of tensed silence. "I will keep in touch."

No need to add anything else, so they just parted ways afterward.

Friday was always a busy night.

For most students, the end of the school week meant going out with friends and dates, have a drink... then another followed by another again, and spend the evening acting like they were noisy brats. Well, 'brats' who had an impressive tolerance to alcohol and could use a censorship for the themes of a few 'games' they played.

They were abhorrent, all of them. Like every time, the usual rage provoked by the simple thought of a bunch of drunk adults arised in Edward's mind. And all good it did was to make him even more
angry, at himself this time. He shouldn't attribute so much importance to what the brainless people unfortunately breathing the same air as he did were doing in their free time.

Not that this judgment was hasty. One simply can't ask someone who's intellect is so superior to be at ease with the average person.

They just weren't compatible.

He sat outside during his break time, on the sidewalk not far from the lounge he worked at, and opened his laptop.

"Absolutely not.", a velvet voice spoke above him, and he smiled as the slim figure sat beside him.

But then a hand lowered the upper screen of his computer, causing it to fall back on the keyboard part, and he rolled his eyes.

"Selina..."

"Don't turn it on now.", she said, categorical. "You aren't allowed to work on anything before you ate something first."

Their eyes, of very different shades of green, met, then he shook his head.

"You are not my mother... Plus you are not gonna make me eat if I don't want to..."

"Of course I will. Not that it would be the first time."

She winked playfully at him, and he smiled.

"True..."

A burger landed on his lap. Knowing Selina, she won't let go until he finished it, so he put back his laptop in his bag, then opened the parchment paper to examine the food.

"Is the cheese..."

"The cheese portion doesn't exceed the salad one.", she began to list, used to the ritual. "There's only two slices of pickle instead of four, as you prefer, and the rectangular bacon slices don't intersect, I made sure they were strictly parallel."

"Otherwise it changes the taste.", Eddie outlined, actually convinced of it, and she nodded with a smile.

"So you've said. And not taking account of this is a mistake I won't make again.", she added, trying to keep a straight face while saying this.

What, despite her practice, was still a bit difficult since he was meticulously studying the sandwich while she gave its components.

"Fine, but is the meat..."

"I didn't salt the steak, and it's medium cooked.", she ended, as if they were talking about high quality gastronomy.

Edward finally took a bite.
"It's alright.", he validated in appreciation.

"Oh, then I feel so much better...", Selina replied with a smirk, but he didn't take offence of the sarcasm in her comment.

She was Selina.

What meant she had the right to mock his habits and... the rest. Naturally, she was the only one allowed to do so.

"Are you coming home with me after the service ?", she asked a bit later, leaning against the brick wall behind them.

Gotham never slept, thus even less a Friday night in a quarter counting a few nightclubs. So a lot of people were outside, laughing and screaming. Not all of them were intoxicated yet, but it was only a matter of time. In less than two hours, three at most, the streets would be filled with drunk folks flirting and harassing each other.

The usual. And this 'usual' always made Ed so... angry...

"No.", he answered quietly to his friend's request. "Crystal took a night shift beginning at 2 am tonight, so I'll stay with Stephanie."

Selina raised an eyebrow.

"Why did she take a night shift again ?! Arthur is working, so why can't she just stay a little longer with her baby ?!"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"She needs money.", he simply said. "She hadn't been paid for the last four months now, so she tries to take back the service, even if just a few hours a week."

His face tensed with resentment as he added:

"As you know, the maternity leave still isn't voted in our State, and even when it will finally apply, I doubt we could obtain much more than a month of paid leave, seeing how the coverages are working in this beloved town. Among other things..."

Among the many things Eddie hated, politics were a subject he never missed an occasion to complain about. Selina didn't mind much, she was used to hear him whine anyway. But of all the themes he regularly grumbled about, the laws were the one she was the less interested to learn. Neither the legislations in force nor the ones Edward wanted Gotham, America... and the world, to adopt.

She never understood his anger toward Gotham itself, though. Sure, to many the city was Hell on Earth, but it was... home, to her. A home with a lot of problems, she was aware of it. But... home nonetheless.

"I don't care that there's no 'maternity leave' or anything...", she replied, perhaps a bit too aggressively. "Crystal just can't ask you to take care of her baby way more often than both her and Arthur are doing ; you have a life, Ed."

A sad little smile appeared on his lips at this last, very strange mention.
"I know you hate the Browns.", he said slowly, tired of this discussion they had too many times already. "But it's not like..."

"You hate them too.", she reminded him, frustrated.

Technically, it was true. Yet...

"I used to.", he simply replied, gazing at nothing in particular.

No need to explain the reason of his change of opinion, she knew it too well and couldn't even disagree on this point.

She may didn't like Crystal and Arthur Brown, never did. To her, they were both just as silly as they were useless to everything and everyone. However, and even if she considered herself less involved, the -very young- third member of this family had a strong impact on Edward and her.

What could she say ? They both just loved baby Stephanie Brown.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

"Romance should never begin with sentiment. It should begin with science and end with a settlement."

Chapter Notes

Never underestimate the power of emails...

The strong scent of alcohol was always the first thing to hit his nostrils when he pushed the door open.

One would think that after fifteen years of the smell, he would get used to it... But he still wasn't. He worked in a bar though, so it wasn't like he couldn't bear the scent. He didn't like it, but let's say it wasn't too bothering.

However it always felt intoxicating whenever he entered his father's house. Even when the man wasn't here, it's like it stained the walls, filled the air, was running everywhere like million of invisible ants on the dirty floor. Needless to say, he hated it.

At least two or three times every week. That was the nature of his compromise with the old man: the guy signed forms and authorizations for College when Edward needed it, since he was legally a minor, in exchange of what he came back to the house twice a week, left food in the fridge and a bottle on the counter for him, all bought with his personal money of course.

He was aware the agreement wasn't entirely in his favor, but it resulted to the 'best' relationship he ever shared with his dad: he spent only a few hours at the house now, so he wasn't getting beaten up to a pulp daily anymore.

Not that he didn't get a punch here and there from time to time, but this was truly nothing compared to what it used to be. It was almost... peaceful.

For the rest, he was taking care of himself with the money he gained on his own, so he wasn't asking his father for anything else.

Edward went to his bedroom after he stored the food in the kitchen.

The old man mostly kept it as 'his bedroom' because he didn't know what else to do with the tiny space. It was not like he needed to reclaim it, not like he minded it. Not that anyone did.

Are we talking about that shoe box you call 'bedroom' or about you?

He just ignored the insinuation a nasty little voice whispered in his ear, and fell on the mattress on the floor that was his bed here. This slightly depressive thought used to be his reality when he was a child, but it wasn't true anymore. Selina cared. And both of them cared about Stephanie. What else
could he ask for?

His father still wasn't there when he woke up a couple of hours later.

He frowned when checking the hour on his phone. Today was Sunday, so it was one of his longer break times of the week. Which didn't mean he planned on sleeping five hours and... twenty-eight minutes straight right now. He was supposed to close his eyes only a few minutes, take a nap maybe?, and then...

But it just made him smile. Maybe Selina was right, his time schedule was overloaded...

But well, as long as his old man was out doing the Devil knows what -he was rarely seen in the house on Sunday, reason why Ed elected this day as the most appropriate to come by-, the house was quiet. So it wasn't that bad of a place to rest a little.

Sitting on his thin mattress with his back against the wall, Edward opened his laptop.

The Enterprise appeared, rapidly followed by a little pop-up window indicating he had new messages. He clicked on the icon, opening his email box page.

2 new messages: madhattersteaparty@outlook.com (1 message) and... wayne.bruce@gmail.com (1 message)

He arched one eyebrow upon seeing the second one, sent eight hours ago. So Wayne was taking this seriously in the end?

Before looking into it, he clicked on Jervis Tetch's. Since it was sent via his personal mail and not his academic one (as one could guess by reading his address...), it was probably something like...

Yes, definitely something like this:

"It's OK fOR tONIght ! ThE THRee of uS WiLL BE thERE, sO you ARe welCOMED to joIN ! See yOU sooN, cHILd !"

Tetch always wrote like this, on purpose, when he sent these short mails of confirmation. Neither Isley nor Crane knew why, and they just told him to 'drop it', when he asked. The simple fact that it was always Jervis who took the time to answer or invite him for a night in, despite the fact that it was with Jonathan he worked -shared? - the most, was questionable itself. And the answer he got from the professor about this had been more hurtful than he was willing to admit. How was he supposed to react to "even though I tolerate your company, and it's not an unpleasant one in the end, I see no point into according you more of my time and attention"?!

This should have driven him mad with anger. He should have yelled at him, then walk away slamming the laboratory's door shut after him and never return. At the very minimum.

Yet he did none of these things, and went back the following day when Jervis sent an invitation.

They were strange people, the three of them. And they weren't... behaving well with him, they weren't respecting him like he deserved, they weren't... considering him like he wanted to be. But they were... okay, even if he didn't know how this could be the conclusion his brilliant mind came to.

Because not only were they not respectful, but they were also creepy, regarding how they were often looking at him like he was a mouth-watering piece of cake they'd like to cut and share together.
But except all of this -and it was already a lot, was already way too much in Selina's opinion-, the three scientists worked on fascinating projects, and he enjoyed every moment spent in the laboratories being their coworker. The prospect of joining the trio tonight cheered him up.

He still had time for himself and he was in a good mood, so he could deal with whatever dumb idea the billionaire managed to produce. If he actually had one to begin with...

It's in this state of mind that he opened Bruce Wayne's mail.

"Good morning Edward, this is Bruce.

No kidding...

You asked me to send you a mail if I thought of something for our group subject.

"I did.", he answered, desperate upon reading such a silly introduction. "I know what I asked, I don't need a reminder..."

So I wondered if we couldn't create something that would be new for both of us, but draws on areas we master ?

This was getting mildly interesting. He read the rest of the short text, feeling more open to discussion.

I understood you see me as some kind of idiot, but I'm not, and I'm eager to prove you wrong. I'm not bad at programming, I already worked with friends of mine who are in the Army on softwares used to design architecture, vehicles and weapons. So if you think of a project that could use this, I have the required knowledge to meet quality standards. And of course, Wayne Enterprises runs around economic records, so if you prefer studying something around finance, we could use the algorithms already working as an example to create our own ? Although I must say I'd like to work on something more entertaining than the corporation's tax revenues. So, what do you say ?"

That he... somehow liked the first idea.

Well, 'idea' wasn't the most accurate word for this, since Bruce didn't give him a subject, but specialties he was skilled at performing.

It was a good start, though. And if he was honest, a quite surprising one as well. He wouldn't have bet one dollar that Bruce could actually be skilled at doing anything by himself. Seems like he was wrong, after all...

He didn't loose time answering :

"Wayne.

I'm kinda pleased to hear about your prerequisites, so I hope you're not making that up. However I'm not gonna list everything I can do with a computer, it would take too much time. To cut a long story short : I can do anything. Including building the said computer, or any prototype, I'm an engineer as well as a programmer, a physicist, and a scientist in all meanings of the word. But I approve the 'Army' theme. I know how to create geolocalization and guidance systems, along with how to find any hidden information related to secret military interventions."

He sent it right away.

Then realized he incriminated himself as a hacker.
Great job, Genius...

But well, Bruce won't notice. He won't make the link, and even if he did, it wasn't like Edward had done anything that could get him in trouble. Not yet. He just thought about doing things that could get him in trouble if he was caught, but thinking wasn't considered a crime... At least as long as the thoughts are not formulated out loud, that is...

He wasn't expecting a quick answer from Bruce, nevertheless he received a new message just a few mintues later.

"Don't worry, I am not lying. And... you seem to be a lot of things for a what, eighteen years old ? I'd say less, but I don't want to sound intrusive... And I'm not trying to make fun of you about your self-claimed titles, in fact if it's true I'm impressed.

So you really are a follower of the conspiracy theory then ! Of course no, when I told you for the Army I wasn't thinking about hacking the country's secrets of national defence ! And I'd like you to never be tempted by doing so either, project related or not. What about we work on something having no links with the military then, which could still use architecture and localisation but avoid risking us to end up in prison ?"

Well that was incredibly offending !

Edward huffed, disgruntled by this blatant lack of confidence in his capacities, and furiously typed a reply.

"My age is none of your business, I'm a bit younger than you are but I'm smarter than you'll ever be, so don't start joking about that ! And I'm not just some fool who believes in Reptilians, all my opinions about the Government are absolutely serious and legitimate ! Anyway, here again it's NONE of your business ! AND I could learn whatever secret I want without getting caught !

Architecture and localisation ? What do you want us to do, build a city ?!"

Bruce being on his electronic mailbox as well, the answer was fast to come :

"Alright, I think we misunderstood each other somewhere. I meant no disrespect whatsoever, neither about your age, your opinions nor your capacities. Can we leave this aside ? It started well, so let's not get mad, shall we ?

I wasn't thinking of the virtual city, but it's a good idea ! The theme of the project being up to choose, all we have to do is create a software what works... It can be a virtual reality with a social functioning, an economy, but going by other laws than the ones in force here, we could create a different Penal Code and show how things are working. It could be great !"

Wayne was right, no need to take offense...

And it was both weird and... exciting, how talking via their computers seemed to allow both of them to talk more openly than what they'd do in face-to-face discussion. Hooray for the cyber social life.

"Fine, I'll go for it.

But building the perfect city is something that exists already, a lot of video games are based on this concept."

Bruce answered rapidly :
"That's right... Have you played some of these games? I admit I never played any video game..."

Oh. So they had more in common than meets the eye.

That was... maybe interesting. A little.

"I never either. I may love everything cyber-related, I never tried a... game. That's not my area, though I don't doubt I would excel in this field too."

The same idea crossed Bruce's mind when he read the text, because the next reply was what Edward just thought about after he sent it:

"We could create our own game then! That would be new for both of us, but we could use our knowledge to design it."

Here they were, talking business.

A grin appeared on his lips.

"I'm certain it can be a good subject. We can't go for the building city thing, though, I want something more original."

"Awarded for the video game, then. ", Bruce responded. "Rather than how to build a city, we could show how life would be in an utopian world?"

Hum... Not really. Thankfully he was there to correct this wrong suggestion.

"That sounds relatively the same to me. I think we can keep the 'city' thing, but let's forget about utopia. We could do the contrary, an ordinary city and show just how much things aren't alright in what is called 'normal'?"

"Not as entertaining.", Bruce sent back. "Except if you want to turn this into some sort of superhero story... That could be nice."

"How so?"

He was actually curious. And wasn't disappointed when the reply came a few minutes later:

"I like the dystopia idea. We could design a town run by the mob, with criminals doing whatever they want in the streets and without the police there to stop them. And we'll create a main character who would do justice by himself. The concept is an old one, but our protagonist, with possibly other characters around him, and the plot behind the game, would be our own."

No, his brain didn't activate the 'completely focused' mode upon reading this.

No, his whole posture wasn't betraying his excitement, neither did his pupils dilated a bit, like everytime he started working on something he found captivating and he knew he wasn't going to let go until the result was perfect.

And no, he wasn't typing hysterically a response, litteraly thrilled by this new prospect.

Or... was he?

"Not only would it indeed be a personal project, but it sounds great! Is it the first time you think about it, or have you thought of doing something with this idea before? A novel maybe? Anyway I love it! And in addition to the hero, we could create its main antagonists, then the game would turn
into an investigation, something like a Sherlock Holmes case but in modern days, and with not only the main protagonist who would be a complex character, the kind one would love to meet in real life."

"I'm glad you like it! Actually, this is more of a personal figment I have since a while, of a lone crusader punishing people who abuse the system. But I never thought of doing anything of it... let alone a video game! Yet I'm sure we could have a good time working on this. You're right, there's no Sherlock Holmes without a James Moriarty, I'd love to see what dynamics we could imagine between interesting characters!"

This time he let out a little pleased noise which sounded strangely like a mouse squeak.

Thank God no one was around to hear, otherwise his dignity would have been severely bruised...

"That would be perfect.", he typed back, aware that he needed to stop sounding like an excited child over their project. "But programming all of this will require time, so we need to decide everything about the plot and who the characters are gonna be before starting the computer design."

"True. What about we think of story arcs for tomorrow, and discuss this during the week before computer science courses? We have our project either ways, the rest would depend on what we can and cannot do with these ideas."

Hell no, he wasn't going to doubt his skills again!

"We can do ANYTHING. With the softwares used by Wayne Enterprises, we have access to the best resolution in matter of everything; so don't banish any idea, we can afford anything we plan!"

"Alright, alright! We'll do... 'anything'. And to this permission you apparently forgot to ask for, the answer is yes: you can have access to my society's softwares for our project."

Oh, he wanted to play bratty now?

Too bad mister billionaire, he was the best at 'bratty'.

"I didn't realize I needed your permission...", he replied so, smirking. "But because you mention it, I feel like I should tell you something important... You realize how much of a good person I am, I'm warning you about one of your society's problems. So you'll be happy to know that an actual security system would be a good idea for all these so-called 'private projects' this charming corporation of yours is planning."

Too much time passed without a reply after he sent this, to the point he began to worry he pushed it a bit too far. Not that he feared anything about Bruce's reaction, of course not! But... he was enjoying this exchange now, so he didn't mean to say something that could be misinterpreted... again.

He was about to turn off his computer and get ready for the next part of his afternoon when a new mail appeared. And he pretended he didn't rush to open it.

"You're kidding, right?"

Well that was quite underwhelming.

So he had to respond:

"Wanna bet?"
He couldn't help himself. He just *could not* pass the need to take up a challenge or to answer to a provocation.

"... *Nevermind.*", Bruce answered, and Edward imagined he either shook his head out of despair or grumbled angrily. "*I like our game idea, and we have to think about it for the school week. See you tomorrow.*"

This last text was bit harsh, but he won't complain.

Neither will he add anything, so the talk ended here.

______________

"*I talked with a guy about something very interesting today.*", Edward proudly announced while they were cooking the orders their colleagues waiters just brought.

Like the rest of the small team working in the bar restaurant, they were all both cooks and waiters, then barmen later on the evening, and switched the roles.

Selina raised an eyebrow as she returned the meat on the hot plate.

"*I didn't know you 'talked' to people, other than these psychopaths you hang out with. Be careful, kitten, otherwise Stephanie and I are gonna get jealous...*"

He brushed aside the cynical comment, leaning forward to put a lasagne dish in the oven nearby.

"*No need for that.*", he countered while regulating the cooking time on the machine. "*I have a school project to do with someone.*", he explained softly. "*And today we agreed to work on a subject I think will be... a good one.*"

Well that was new. Selina frowned slightly.

"*So, how is this newcomer ? Since you seem to like him, I suppose he's another freak who wants to turn you into his lab rat ?*"

This time he glared at her. Couldn't she just *stop* bringing that up ?!

"*They never experimented anything on me. I help them with their work, that's it ! And you know it.*"

"*Eddie, I didn't forget the drug injection episode.*"

Touché. He lowered his eyes. The memory was still a very unpleasant one.

"*It was an accident.*", he argued weakly, incapable of even convincing *himself* of this. "*They didn't...*"

"*Crane took notes while you were having a breakdown, and they waited four hours before Tetch finally called me !*, she belligerently replied. "*If it had really been an accident, they wouldn't have been so pleased with themselves and their little... experiments..."

He didn't respond.

Crane and Isley *were* psychopaths, he knew it since he met them, since the first time they spoke to him. And Tetch was almost as bad as them, simply more... wacky.
But except for that night when they took it too far, nothing wrong happened in their company. Selina said it was just a matter of time and he needed to stop going back to their lab. She never denied how absolute her hatred toward them was and her worry every time Edward stayed alone with them. Yet he went back every time, and she couldn't prevent him from doing so.

Not that she gave up this battle, and she warned the three weirdos that they better never lay a hand on her kitten again if they wanted the said hand not to be chopped off. They didn't seem to take the threat seriously at the moment, but they never did anything afterwards. So the 'agreement' was valid so far.

"Tell me more about this 'project'.", she offered as they were still cooking dishes.

He smiled, grateful she didn't insist longer on the Isley-Crane-Tetch fight.

"You're gonna love it.", he started so with enthusiasm. "And you know what, it's Wayne who came up with the idea at first, but..."

"Wayne ?", she repeated, frowning again. "Like... Bruce Wayne ?!"

"Yup.", he approved, back at being all proud of himself. "I'm teaming up with him."

This time it was her turn to glare at him.

"How come you never told me that Bruce Wayne is a classmate of yours ?!"

He shrugged his shoulders, adding bell peppers rings in a rice saucepan.

"What should it matter ? It's not like I ever spoke to him before."

"... Sadly, that suits you.", she deplored. "You sit next to the richest guy in town, yet you never tried to befriend even with him to get closer to his money, or to steal something from him ! That's unbelievable..."

Well, it was not like he was opposed to stealing from him. But he was positively sure he couldn't do anything without getting caught, he wasn't... Selina Kyle.

"I bet his watch costs more than six months of our salary here.", she took back, an expression of extasy on her face. "That there's hundreds dollars in his wallet and..."

"There's innocent people around, Selina.", he grinned, interrupting her fantasy. "So stop looking like a fan having an orgasm..."

A spiritual comment which resulted in him getting a light slap on the back of his head, and he chuckled at the very predictable reaction.

"What have I done so terrible to deserve such a brat...", she muttered.

"Oh, c'mon.", he replied with a bright smile. "I know you love me."

"Pffft, now that's a nonsense...", she huffed, rolling her eyes.

Then she suddenly put an arm around his shoulders to block him from escaping, and ruffled his perfectly combed hair with her other hand.

"No ! Stop this !", he protested, immediately trying to pull away from the embrace. "Leave my hair out of it ! It's not funny... Selina, no !"
"I disagree, li'l bro.", she answered very seriously. "In fact I find this incredibly entertaining."

She laughed even more when she released him and he pitifully pouted, fixing his now tousled ginger hair.

"But you're right...", she had to concede. "Maybe I love you... just a little."

They were smiling for the rest of their service.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

"There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all."
- Oscar Wilde

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"Good morning, Edward."

"Wayne."

Bruce was kinda proud of himself because he managed not to comment how weird he found the formal greeting when coming from such a young guy. No doubt his opinion on that would cause a fight... However it was true: Edward really looked like a child trying to seem older by giving himself an important appearance.

It was almost... cute.

"I like our project idea.", the ginger lost no time to tell him as soon as Bruce sat next to him. "So you'll be pleased to know that I'm going to make something brilliant out of it. This is my only standard when I'm working on something: I want the result to be at the very least of an exceptional quality."

And here they were, back with mister Modesty...

Hearing this, Bruce severely instructed himself to banish a few gestures for the following three hours. Including: rolling his eyes, huffing, looking skeptical or making sarcastic remarks about this kid's ego. He didn't want them to argue right away, so better avoid these reactions. Even if it was a resolution that could be hard to keep considering how the dialog started...

"Hu, I'm... happy to hear that?"

According to the little nod of approbation he received as an answer, it had been the right thing to say. He blocked the sigh he felt rising.

"Nevertheless.", Edward took back as the class started. "I found no time to write for the plot story last night, I've been very busy. But I'll make up for it, I will submit something concrete via your mail today."

Despite his confident outlook and smug tone, Bruce heard the slight worry in his voice when he admitted he didn't elaborate anything yet.

"Don't worry.", he assured, trying not to show how strange and... troubling, he found that last reaction. "We have more than enough time, I wasn't expecting you to come today with everything done... And as for me, I just thought of a few things, I didn't write a script or anything..."
Edward felt visibly relieved to hear this response, and Bruce took note in his head to learn more about his 'night activities', even if as a second step. He may knew him for only a few days, a lot of his attitudes were curious enough to spark interest.

The fact that he was also bored helped his desire to investigate...

"Do you plan on listening the class, or should we get to work ?", Ed asked a bit later with a quite content expression, and Bruce smiled faintly.

"I'd like work better."

"Good answer.", he validated.

Then improvised himself project manager, and opened his laptop on the desk.

"We need to start by the city itself.", he laid out, and Bruce found... funny, how much of a little businessman he looked, with his formal tone and focused expression. "Because the surroundings are gonna be the trigger event that turned our protagonist into what he is, and it can be the same for the other characters as well."

"Shouldn't we try to know who our 'protagonist' will be before ?"

Edward shot him an unamused glance.

"This is my project, and we're just starting the plot concept. So don't start disagreeing with me now, otherwise we'll never have anything done before the next years."

"Funny.", Bruce scoffed. "I don't remember when did 'our' subject based on my idea became 'your project'..."

"I didn't need your idea to do something great.", he immediately replied, his voice sharp. "I simply agreed to work on what you proposed. If your suggestion had been idiotic, we'll be working on something else."

"... Well right now we aren't working on anything, we're bickering like children..."

A pout formed on Nashton's lips at this.

"True...", he acknowledged, apparently very displeased with himself. "So, for the city..."

Bruce didn't protest, and they started talking seriously about it.

Edward was taking notes of both what they said and what he thought, having no problem to lead the conversation while typing on his keyboard without necessarily watching the screen.

And as for what he said, well... he knew a lot.

Penal Code ? Check, he apparently memorized all of the law code, paragraph numbers included and everything, and could tell precisely which laws weren't 'followed like they should be by everyone', which ones were 'too permissive', all in his personal opinion of course ; and which laws it won't be a problem for their protagonist to break yet still be considered a 'hero'.

But he was also impressively aware of... everything else.

It was all so very interesting, Bruce didn't see the time passing when talking with him.
To design a functioning city needed to be based on reality, it was the point in their game. But a long list -Bruce wasn't even aware of its existence until now- applied about copyright linked to names, places, adresses, shops... Even some references to things existing in the real world needed to be excluded.

"I don't get it...", he said at some point after learning this. "A lot of artworks, stories or even games evoke names of famous alive persons, and I don't think they inevitably asked for permission first or..."

"It's not about permission.", he simply clarified. "It's about doing homework for an academic institution."

He smiled seeing Bruce's evident confusion, and patiently pursued :

"You are Bruce Wayne, I'm sure you're familiar with the all 'watch your tongue' thing. Although you probably can do and speak about whatever you want in here, no one is going to blame you or say anything against you at school."

"That's not true, I...", he argued, but Edward shook his head and went on :

"I'm not saying there are no people around who wait for you to make a mistake. I imagine it would be jackpot if a journalist catches you saying something insulting towards national principles someday. But there is something else important going on when you're doing a school work."

"What is it ?"

"Approbation.", he firmly responded. "You can produce the most constructive, detailed and argumentative essay, if you gave your political opinion or if it looks like you gave it ; and if it is not the one shared by your corrector, you're gonna have a bad grade, and you can even get in trouble. So we won't give our own point in the game, and to prove it we show which laws our characters follow and which ones they choose to ignore. Our vision needs to be the legal one, meaning not only will the antagonists be outlaws, but so will be our hero, and we have to demonstrate that it is how we, as creators, are treating him as well : as a 'monster', in the etymological sense of the word, meaning someone who 'can't behave in society' and is 'incapable of following the rules'."

Bruce considered it for a moment.

Explained like this, it seemed to be a solid argument.

But what he said was in fact... a bit troubling, when paid close attention.

"... What does that mean, exactly ?"

"What does what mean ?"

Ed was sincerely curious, and the older teen frowned.

"Did you... already get in trouble because you gave your opinion on something ?! Because if it's the case, you know you can ask for..."

"It doesn't matter.", he quickly cut him off, raising a hand as if to ask him to stop talking, and Bruce saw a tiny bit of anxiety flashing in his green eyes. "I simply said this because I don't want our game to be misinterpreted in case we were corrected by engineers who are just too... dumb, and will think we're anarchists or something. It may sounds unlikely to you, but trust me on that : sometimes people can see crazy meanings out of even very simple things. And then it's too late to stop the process, it's
the Inception concept: once the idea is implanted, it's very hard to get rid of it."

Bruce wasn't absolutely convinced, but his coworker seemed to take this for granted, so it wasn't up for debate.

"I thought I should precise this right away.", Edward took back, looking at his computer screen rather than at him. "Before we... get fully into the subject. It needs to be our legal safeguard, we can't apply a moral to a story in the one everyone is breaking the law."

He turned back to face him.

"But we won't do the contrary either.", and his smug grin was back on his face. "There's nothing more terrible than a story, would it be a novel, an article or a game, which ends by 'oh no, everything in there was immoral so all the characters need to be punished at the end !'."

Bruce laughed.

"I couldn't agree more !", he replied with enthusiasm. "So we are not judging our characters, simply showing why they can be called 'immoral' according to the Penal Code."

"Exactly.", he acquiesced. "That's why we'll have antagonists who can be considered the same as the hero, just following different rules. We don't have to... I don't know, make our protagonist fight a maniac clown who laughs when it rips people's faces off ! No one would sympathize with that; no, I want bad guys who are way deeper and have reasons to do what they're doing, would it be because they're trying to prove something, because it has something to do with their work at first or to follow a more personal goal... but something real ! And not just a bunch of nut jobs who peel the skin off their faces with a razor under the moonlight..."

Bruce chuckled despite the quite disturbing last picture.

"Aren't you listening to Melanie Martinez's songs, by any chance... ?", he asked with a smile because he identified a lyric from 'Mad Hatter' behind his last sentence, and Ed laughed in return.

"Guilty... I like a few of her songs, and so does a colleague of mine. He has some sort of... sick obsession with everything related to Alice in Wonderland, so 'Mad Hatter' is his favorite, and it's often playing at our... place of work."

However he looked a bit... embarrassed as soon as he said this. Probably because he realized he talked of something belonging to the personal area, and didn't mean to reveal anything about his private life.

His confused expression vanished rapidly though, and he asked, reestablishing confidence in both his tone and attitude:

"What about you ?"

"I love her songs !", Bruce sincerely answered, not commenting his reaction but storing it in his mind for later, for... his little investigation. "I don't have a... type, when it comes to music, I like everything as long as there is powerful lyrics and a good soundtrack."

"Like everyone...", Eddie smiled, but it wasn't mocking.

Well not too much, so Bruce didn't take offence. And... talking about one's favorite bands is something teenagers love to do, right ? It is a subject always broached when making friends, it's basically a rule in the social code...
And as surprising as it may sounds, it wasn't unpleasant either, quite the contrary in fact!

So Bruce surprised himself when he went on, on the same subject:

"I... hu, I don't like all the tunes by this band, but I think my favorite song is 'I Am My Own Worst Enemy' by Robert Pettersson."

Edward seemed just as startled to hear the confidence as Bruce was to make it.

Then he had to play his... usual self, by letting out a snarky comment:

"Having some self esteem issues, rich kid?"

"... Like everyone.", the blue-eyed boy answered on the same tone his partner used to say these words a minute ago, and choosing not to complain about the 'rich kid'.

The ginger approved with a smile, apparently quite... proud of him for ending it this way.

He thought the 'music' subject was over and they'll go back to their game, since Edward typed something on his computer. But then he stopped, as if he decided against it, and he leaned a bit closer to him:

"My favorite song is 'Englishman in New York' by Sting.", he told him, and Bruce noticed the light blush on his freckled cheeks, as if he wasn't sure he should reveal something personal.

Or was it because he was excited he got to reveal something personal? He may rarely had the occasion to do so, or wasn't used to it...

"I'm not familiar...", Bruce felt almost sorry to answer.

Seeing the way his comrade told him, he honestly would have loved to comment the said song.

"But I'll listen to it when I'm back home.", he added so, causing the blush on Ed's cheeks to grow a bit darker.

"You... will?"

"Sure, if I tell you so."

He knew too well this expression, the 'person A can't believe person B is actually interested enough in A to take the time to look at something A likes, even when the said something is as simple as a song'. He knew it too well because he was usually playing person A's role.

"Spoiler Alert, then.", Edward specified, a delighted expression on his face. "The reason why I identify to the song is because I changed a few of the lyrics, including the main one. It says 'I'm an English man in New York'; but I'm 100% American myself, so it's not about cultural habits. But when singing it, I replace the sentence with 'I'm a way too smart man in this World'. Naturally, it matches perfectly with the rhythm, and it's way more..."

Bruce couldn't help, he bursted into laughter upon hearing this. Two students at a desk not far scowled at their table. Not because they were disturbing the class, but because they were a bit too noisy for their own chatter... about the show Walking Dead. Ed and Bruce were on the last row of the large classroom, and like most students nearby, were chatting without fearing to get a comment from the teacher.

"What?!", Ed protested, vexed, and slightly backing off. "Why are you laughing, it's not funny!"
"Oh, but it is!", he replied, smiling widely. "This is really how you see yourself, then!", he pursued. "As a... misunderstood genius?"

It almost made him laugh again, but he stopped himself from doing so when he saw the hurt flashing in Edward's eyes, before he masked it into a frustrated huff. It had been a small, easy to miss moment of weakness, but Bruce was a good observer.

At this moment he understood that any kind of joke referring to his skills belonged to a slippery slope. From what he saw, sure thing Edward had an oversensitive temperament and a few... let's call them 'narcissistic personality traits'. But contrary to what he thought, it wasn't an act or something he conscientiously exaggerated. No, him as a genius was a very serious image he had of himself, a very important one too. So mocking him about it could only hurt him, maybe even deeply, more than he let on.

Bruce felt bad he didn't realize sooner... Or maybe he felt bad precisely because he realized, he couldn't tell. But he wanted to make up for offending him.

"... I'll listen to this song with your lyrics.", he said gently, as if to apologize. "It has a personal meaning for you, so I'm very touched you told me."

Right thing to say once again, because Ed smiled a little, obviously appreciative, and it was a stronger feeling than the frustration for being jeered, so he could go back at being relatively friendly.

And it was better that way. Their conversation had been a very pleasant one, it would be a shame to end it poorly.

They went back to the game, and finished to talk about all the main things they had to take in consideration for the city. Bruce was truly impressed by Edward's absolute knowledge of what was requiered, which softwares would be useful to do what precise thing, what were the algorithms they needed to program to show the character's movements in the city. He understood now why it was necessary to have the surroundings first: it was what will take the most time to design, and even more time to adapt to the hero's view as if his eyes were the camera, for a better result.

So they imagined a few places the protagonist (man or woman, they will decide its personal story later) will visit. They'll have to concept everything inside each place, plus in the city itself, before starting the programming. Bruce had worked on complex things before, but this was an entirely different, higher level.

He wasn't worried, though. It was hard to doubt when listening to Edward, the ginger was so... confident, and seemed to have a detailed answer to everything. The subject looked perfectly under control, when he was the one explaining it.

Ed concluded by saying he was 'satisfied', and that they evoked more points he thought they would this morning.

It had been, by far, Bruce's favorite hours in a school class ever.

"Our game is gonna be... really nice.", he commented, only to have Edward vividly correcting him:

"Not just 'really nice'. Awesome would be more appropriate; modesty has never been my thing when it comes to my works... When something is breathtaking and everybody recognize it, it's very silly and hypocritical from the creators to be humble about it."

"Modesty is not your thing?", he asked, faking a shocked expression. "No kidding?... "
Ed just huffed again at the sarcasm, but he was smiling.

It's not about his ego he takes offence,, Bruce took note seeing how his joke was just taken as a... joke, and nothing hurtful. It's about his capacities, about his intellect that he's susceptible.

"So, what are we doing next ?", the dark-haired teen asked then. "Thinking about the main character ?"

"Not yet.", he answered, still supervising the operation. "I mean... think about it all you want ; but we have the main spots to design, so what we need now is the plot. We have to think of a case, and doing so we could need more locations. So... The story arcs first, the characters come at the end."

"'Kay..."

He was so persuasive, it seemed like his approach was the only way to proceed.

Bruce smiled. He will make one Hell of a businessman if he worked in economy later... or a very good politician, maybe...

"Besides.", Ed took back. "I think the antagonists are more important to think of first. How many are they going to be to begin with, what are their motives... They can take longer than the hero to concept. As you got it, I want them to be convincing and not just 'bad guys'. It's something quite easy to do when writing a story, at least I suppose it is : you can add a lot of elements, a complete back story, you can change the point of view... But we can't do all of that in a video game, it could only slow down the action and won't be as interesting as it is in a novel. We have to show a bit of it without this becoming the main focus, since we aren't doing a game about psychological diagnosis... In short, there is a lot to think about."

Bruce confirmed quietly. Edward was so... involved already, and talking as if their project was the most important and enticing thing in the world, it was almost flattering to be working on it with him.

"Let me guess...", he said, inquisitive. "You, are the kind who always falls for the villain when you read a story."

Edward laughed softly.

"True, I must have a thing for bad boys... Smart bad boys, that is.", he rectified, sounding now deadly serious. "Stories when there's just a 'good guy' and a 'villain', and zero interaction between them are the blatant proof of a total lack of imagination..."

Bruce nodded.

"Agree, once again. Personally, I even love when at the end the hero and the villain end up in a relationship together."

And he had to admit, the smile Edward had when hearing this was very... cute.

Then he realized that he just said could leave room for doubt and cause a negative reaction. So he quickly precised, feeling afraid as ever when the 'area' was evoked, even very vaguely :

"I mean, when I say a 'romantic relationship', it's only if the hero is a man and the villain a woman, or the other way around ; of course !"

Edward's sweet smile faded abruptly, replaced by a distant expression.
"... 'Of course'.", he repeated on a cold tone, turning back to his laptop. "Thank you for this... useful clarification.", he ended with caustic irony.

Bruce failed to identify the reason of this sudden change, but it was clear that he was now back at being mad at him. And it made him feel terrible already. They were having a good time... it almost looked like they were 'friends' ! What did he say that could have been hurtful and ruin the mood... ?

An idea to answer this question crossed his mind, but he brushed it aside immediately. It... it was probably something else. Had to be something else.

"I just sent you what we decided today.", Edward said at the end of the class, his expression neutral and a slight anger audible in his voice, still refusing to look at him. "You should read it, it's for you I took notes after all ; I don't need to write things to remember them. But I didn't want you to get lost later during our project, so every time, I'll send you a report of everything we decided."

Then he turned his computer off.

"Well... Thank you. I suppose...", Bruce responded casually.

He got the light insult at his memory capacities, but chose to ignore it. After all, as it seemed Edward was actually doing this... for him ; and he had been the one to apparently disrespect him, so he wasn't going to argue right now.

"And hu...", he added so, feeling guilty for the way the conversation was ending. "I'm sorry if I said something that..."

"Don't say you're 'sorry' !"

The sharp reply surprised him a bit, and he was certainly not expecting the hatred in his classmate's gaze when he furiously met his blue eyes.

"You didn't even realize why you were offensive, so do not apologize for something you have no idea of, it's even worse !"

Then he stood up, and scurried to the classroom's door before the triple hour was properly finished, causing a few incredulous glances to follow his movements, and Bruce just stared at where he disappeared with a shocked expression.

The class finished not long after, and he didn't see him again for the rest of the school day. That it was because they had no more classes in common on Monday or because he avoided him on purpose, Bruce couldn't tell.

The only thing he was sure of, is that he felt really bad for being the cause of this change of mood. And as his partner outlined, it was even worse because he couldn't tell what was it he said that had been interpreted -maybe too strongly ?-, as something hurtful.

Considering how Edward conspicuously took everything as a personal reproach, he needed to be more careful when choosing his words during their partnership. Even if as it seemed, it was going to be harder than planned...

And the second thing he was sure of, in fact, was that he was already fond of that little smile Edward had when he was talking openly about things he liked and met a positive answer, from someone genuinely interested by what he was saying.

Yes, he could say he liked this smile... very much.
Chapter End Notes

Bruce didn't mean anything insulting here, he's simply... awkward, and he has a few issues of his own that will be explained later. And yes, Edward has the tendency to take everything as a personal reproach...
As for the songs, they are pretty popular ones, but if you don't know them I strongly recommend you listen, they have beautiful lyrics.
;
Thank you for reading!
And an extra thanks to everyone who leaves kudos!!
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

"The consciousness of loving and being loved brings a warmth and richness to life that nothing else can bring."
- Oscar Wilde

Chapter Notes

In some way this is a late update, at least by my standards. I have been very busy those last two weeks... But to compensate, this chapter is longer than the previous ones !
Enjoy : )

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I just sent a mail to Mrs Leland to tell her we are working on a video game that will be a brilliant alliance of detective investigation and superhero story. I didn't give more details, so do not write to her and spoil all our plans, otherwise I'm warning you I will take it very bad.

I just thought I should tell you."

He hesitated one second, then added :

"Good night, Wayne."

And blushed at the last three words. He could not mail something like this, why had he written it ?!

Edward quickly deleted the last sentence, angry at himself, and sent the message without it.

There, it looked a bit more professional.

He sighed. It wasn't notably late, but he had a sleepless night on Sunday, a very active one moreover, so he started to feel the usual exhaustion after spending more than twenty-four hours awake. He did far worse, of course, and was used to push the boundaries of physical resistance as far as possible.

But despite his great intellect and overactive brain, his body was a fifteen years old's. Meaning it needed its time to recover, like any other child who didn't fully finish their growth yet. It was another injustice he heavily complained about. His brain was active on a 24 hours / 7 day basis, and could live without sleep or food, but his body, this traitor, needed to rest and shut down the system for hours every week. That was so unfair for his gray cells...

A movement on his right captured his attention, and he smiled fondly.

Stephanie was still asleep, but as she moved in her bed she pulled once again her blanket off to her feet, her unconscious decided to protest with having to cover up to avoid getting a cold. He leaned to the cradle he placed where it was the most appropriate tonight, so just next to his desk chair. Cautious not to wake her up, he delicately repositioned the comfy throw on the little body. The pale
green footed pajamas disappeared under the pastel purple blanket, and he adjusted it carefully at her shoulder level. One minuscule clenched fist wiggled a bit, until it landed close to her left cheek, but that was the only reaction he got, she didn't open her eyes.

Eddie was now smiling like an idiot, he was aware of it, watching her sleep with an amazed expression.

He could spend hours watching her sleep. He spent hours watching her sleep. Not that it was the only moment when Stephanie looked sweet, but given her age she rarely stayed peaceful for long, other than during the moments she rested. Most of the time, she quickly became an angry and hungry storm of cries and screams who didn't lower the volume until it was fed, changed or rocked in the appropriate manner. And sometimes it was not enough...

So well, a sleeping Stephanie was an adorable Stephanie.

For the rest, she was a complete rebel never satisfied. But a very cute and pretty little rebel never satisfied.

It was about half an hour later when something suddenly changing on his computer screen's display caught his attention again. He was still contemplating the baby girl with adoration, that kind of affection only new parents know about and which goad them to lose count of time when they watch their little angel; when he noticed it out of the corner of his eye.

He turned back to his laptop on the desk, feeling already frustrated he had to take his eyes off his baby while he wasn't planning to yet.

No, not 'his' baby! Stephanie. Stephanie Brown. He was currently in her parents' house, where he was babysitting for Crystal and Arthur Brown.

That was a simple fact, a simple truth, but one he had a hard time remembering lately, and always needed a firm self reminder when he tended to forget it.

He closed his eyes a few seconds, forcing his heartbeat to slow down and the ire to retreat from his mind. It always made him furious, although he wasn't sure who this wrath was directed to. Stephanie's parents? They certainly had the greater share of it, they were never here for their one month old daughter! If he didn't take care of her, she would have just died of neglect because they weren't even capable of...

He firmly locked these thoughts away.

Thinking like that was unnecessary, foolish, and it wasn't even truthful. He spent his days at school, his evenings until sometimes early morning at his job, a few hours at his father's and at least one night per week at the laboratory of his sociopath scientists. He wasn't here all days and nights long.

Meaning he was not the only one who looked after the infant.

He took a deep breath. Calm down, you freak., he severely scolded himself.

The sight of Stephanie's beautiful, adorable round face always had the power to calm him, and looking at her he soon was back at being relaxed, smiling softly.

So he turned again to his computer, and opened the pop-up window.

Apparently Bruce was a night owl, because he returned an e-mail.
"Telling me you sent our project subject to the teacher is thoughtful indeed, but you know what would have been even better?! Asking me first!"

Humpf. So maybe staying awake late wasn't one of Moneybag's best ideas in the end, if it made him so grouchy...

"Leland wanted to receive a mail giving the subjects so she won't have to loose time collecting them during class. She sent a message via the University's internet page, but I suppose billionaire Bruce Wayne has better things to do than to stay informed of such mundane things? Yes, I imagine it's definitely better to go out partying all evening or playing in casinos or... whatever hobbies of this kind you must have."

He sent it, perfectly aware of the bitterness in his words.

But well it was true, and it was not going to be his fault if Wayne was incapable of connecting himself to his session and check on news!

A bit of time passed, so mister Credit Card was probably vexed and won't answer.

Not that Edward minded much. It was late and he should go to sleep, he was not exactly tempted by arguing all night with his so-called coworker right now.

A response arrived just when he decided to turn his computer off.

That was becoming a habit...

"I looked at my session, you're right she sent a mail."

"I told you so.", he couldn't help retorting on a cocky tone, before reading the rest of the text.

"Sorry, I should have seen this first before getting angry. Nevertheless, I would have liked to be informed before you sent something, do I need to remind you this is our project? I don't want you to work on it on your own. And I assure you I'm not partying or playing in casinos or anything like that. I hated all that stuff when I was a kid, and I never tried any of this afterwards."

Reading the last sentence, Edward found it strangely... sad.

Because 'when I was a kid' meant 'when my parents were alive', right?

He never gave much thought about Bruce Wayne's backstory, he read about it a long time ago, like everyone, simply because it was normal in Gotham to know it. But he never managed to truly feel sorry for the nine years old orphan whose perfect life had been destroyed one night in an alley.

Hell, at the time of the murder, he was six and would have given anything to see this happen to him! Being freed from his parents, by whatever means, was something he used to dream about as a child.

So no, he never felt empathy for the tragedy in Bruce's life before. But now... maybe he was feeling it. A little bit. Though he was certainly not letting this show in his writing.

"It's okay, no problem.", he typed casually. "But it was just a mail with the subject, it wasn't important. However you're right, I'll tell you next time I'm doing something. And I believe you for the... 'no casino thing'. Though I can't relate to say if it's awful or not, I never went to one."

The reply arrived fastly:

"Thanks, it's better if we're really doing this as a team. Believe me, casinos are awful."
"You know what your problem is, Wayne? You are already way too addicted to me: you can’t stand the idea that I’m doing anything behind your back! And... if you say so."

He was smirking now, and the next mail just confirmed him in his saucy attitude:

"Must be that..."

"Don't worry.", Ed typed back. "I am not cheating on you."

And Bruce's last message made him laugh:

"... Good night, Edward."

He couldn't tell if his fellow associate was amused, midly desperate or essentially angry at his behaviour.

In his opinion, it must be a mix between amused and midly desperate. So he answered, his smirk not leaving:

"'Night, honey."

No feedback comment to this, but it was to be expected.

He just hoped the little provocation was taken by Bruce on the same tone as it echoed in his mind: as a very innocent, quite funny game, and not an insult or anything disrespecting.

Edward had turned off his computer, and was asleep on the folding bed for more than an hour when Stephanie cried loudly.

He woke up as soon as the baby's screams started, and hurried over to her side, then scooped her up.

"Definitely not decided to have a calm night yet, hu?", he said lovingly, and placed her against him, shushing her to try appeasing her.

It didn't work at all, as ever when she was in this 'little storm mood'.

But well, he was used to these nights. The cause of her present protests came from the fact she needed to be changed. Then maybe she'll agree to sleep a few more hours. Her awake night sessions never lasted long, just the required time to try having him going deaf, being either fed or changed, then he'll rock her gently, talking or singing to her the all time, until she went back to sleep.

His little angel.

"Hello!"

Edward smiled at the enthusiasm Bruce showed when he arrived and sat next to him.

"You seem way too joyful, what happened?", he asked tranquilly, and the other boy returned his smile.
"Well I'm glad we have a class in common this morning.", he answered, obviously pleased by the fact. "And that you aren't mad at me anymore for yesterday. I think these are two good reasons to feel a bit joyful, as you say."

"Probably...", Ed stated, as his classmate took paper and pen out of his bag.

Then he felt like he should clarify:

"But I was not mad. Just..."

Bruce gave him a curious glance, and he realized he had no proper answer to formulate.

"Okay, maybe a bit mad.", he conceded so, and the other one smiled slightly as if to apologize. "It wasn't your fault, though, not entirely. I simply..."

"Thought I was insulting you while I wasn't ?", Bruce tried to fulfill in an attempt to sound friendly, but Ed knew it wasn't sincere.

Wayne may not tried to be disrespectful directly, he had been, and Edward had no doubt he won't at all feel sorry or anything close if he told him how exactly.

But it happened yesterday morning.

So better not stay stuck to this, otherwise they won't progress in their project.

"It doesn't matter.", he told him so, trying to act as if it really didn't. "You are not the first one, won't be the last, and usually it's way more violent when people make remarks. Should we get to work ?"

Bruce frowned at the words, as if he candidly wasn't getting what he referred to. It almost caused Edward to sigh of frustration. This guy's memory capacities were dramatically low, if he couldn't even recall something that happened the day before... Luckily he didn't ask for a reminder, instead approved:

"We should, sure thing."

Edward nodded, and opened his laptop on the desk. Work. That was what he was the best at performing, and the only kind of interaction he wanted to share with Bruce Wayne right now.

But apparently, planning on not listening the class to talk about their subject in a focused and relatively amicable atmosphere was a request that won't be answered.

Two students had an oral exam in class today, individually, they were supposed to analyse a scientific thesis and its theory. Depending on what they presented, they'll also speak about the calculations, advancements and the success or failure of the experimentations.

This theoretical course was a reduced staff one, including only about thirty students. The classroom they currently were in belonged to the small ones in the University.

And here they were, about to be forced to listen to two presentations lasting between twenty and thirty minutes each, condensing something anyone could just read about in an article and do their own researches if they wanted to learn more. It was a waste of time.

Edward grumbled, and closed his laptop.

Bruce raised an eyebrow, to what he responded by explaining with outrage:
"This silly teacher hates me, always had. I already had dozen of warnings from him because I wasn't 'paying attention' to a presentation, among other things. So now, when someone is speaking I'm not supposed to do anything else than to listen to them..."

Bruce chuckled seeing his exaggerated despair.

"This is not I'd call a terrible punishment.", he taunted. "Don't be so overwhelmed!"

"Easy for you to say!", he vehemently rejected. "I'm sure you actually learn things when those goons are talking, while I just find it incredibly boring and way below the acceptable level for a basic conversation!"

A few students nearby turned and glared at him for the 'goons', one of them murmured something in the ear of her table companion, still looking at him, and the other girl's answer was a contemptuous sneer.

Edward crossed his arms on his chest, leaning back into his chair, and scowling at the ones who were still eying him with open disdain. It was not a real confrontation though, so it wasn't long before the other young adults shifted away from it. The only comment Bruce and him heard was a reflection coming from a man at the row just before theirs:

"Freakshow still thinks he's better than anyone, no wonder why he has no friends!"

A remark which made the ones around him laugh, as if they were naughty brats instead of adults. The teacher, Mr Mockridge, called for them to be quiet as a rather stressed student sat at the front of the classroom to start his presentation.

"Don't listen to them.", Bruce whispered as the dude introduced his topic on a not assured voice.

Ed gave him a questioning gaze, and his associate went on:

"They're just jealous of you because you are smart, and they're not."

A very pleasant warmth bloomed in his chest upon hearing someone else than him saying this. It was the first time he felt this very specific feeling when talking to a human being who wasn't Selina. Wayne didn't look like he was making fun of him, instead he was smiling friendly and seemed truly... convinced by what he said.

"I know.", Eddie grinned confidently, mostly to hide the fact that such simple words meant so much to him, way more than he was comfortable admitting.

And he did not want Bruce to realize it.

"It's like that since kindergarten.", he added in his boastful tone. "I'm kinda used to it by now."

"I bet you are..."

They shared a smile, then payed attention to the student talking.

The string theory.

Edward knew it by heart for years. But he was now in a good mood, thanks to Credit Card's nice smile. So he could bear losing half an hour of his life listening to something he already knew and made his own researches and thesis about when he was... eight years old. And precisely because he felt cheerful, he won't shut up when the guy will finish his mediocre analysis of the subject. Instead,
he was going to prove once again just how smart he was indeed.

So once Mockridge will be done commenting the boy's presentation -whatever his name was-, he will play his favorite act, the one he performed naturally. In other words, 'the smug young genius who corrects every single little mistake both his classmates and teachers make', and 'always takes the opportunity to vastly display his own vision, knowledge and personal opinion about the theory'.

No wonder he had no friends here, or never had any at school. But having none because you are too brilliant and is considered 'insufferable' or just 'weird' because of your intellect and how proudly you wear your label of genius is a good reason enough to don't want spending your time with anyone. Not that it was bothering him, not anymore : it was like that since forever, and he wasn't expecting this to change.

He didn't meet Selina in a school grade, so it was not the same.

And, though relatively sympathetic when he wanted to, Bruce wasn't a friend. Right ? At least not yet, not that fast. Even if, that's right, he didn't know the definition of 'having a friend'. There again, his only example was Selina, and he was aware she wasn't exactly a conventional model.

He smiled.

Freakshows they definitively were, and he was certain Wayne easily fitted in the box.

But it was irrevocably better than being another ordinary, brainless sheep with no convictions or willpower whatsoever.

Bruce couldn't help but to smile. A broad smile.

Which was totally inappropriate given the fact that the looks coming from a majority of occupants in the classroom, including Mockridge, were ones of hatred directed at his comrade.

But he couldn't help it. It was just too funny !

Edward was taking it in a surprisingly professional manner, since he didn't get distracted by Bruce who bursted out laughing at his left when he asked Mockridge if he "had any idea of what a reasoning was supposed to look like" and "actually ever took the time to read about the string theory". He didn't seem bothered either by the few mean whispers here and there when he started correcting what the teacher said to "make it interesting" and "avoid the poor students retaining lessons that became flawed because too popularized". Neither did he noticed Mockridge's alarmingly uptight expression. The teacher looked like he was about to strangle him as he kept talking.

But for as comic or scary, it could be seen either way, as the scene was, nothing 'happened' afterward. Bruce honestly thought Mockridge's rage will explode when Edward ended his speech with a satisfied "No need to thank me, I enjoyed doing your job for you". But he didn't, he just glared at the young boy, who defiantly stared back.

Then a cruel rictus formed on the man's lips, and he jeered :

"What you said here is of absolutely no use, Nashton, as ever. It is useless to know... all of this, to follow this class, and if you can't behave like a student then what are you doing here, again ?"

Edward's eyes immediately burnt with rage, but he sounded more collected than Bruce would have counted on when he sarcastically riposted :
"So you acknowledge that I'm too smart to follow your class. You may don't know much about anything, let me tell you that for once you made a valid and undoubtedly true comment."

Then he crossed his arms on his chest again, leaning provocatively on his chair in an attitude that was clearly daring the man to respond to the provocation.

"Out.", was all Mockridge managed to command, his features distorted with a rage that couldn't be explained by Edward's interfering alone.

The only way to justify their present clash was that there must have a whole history of conflicts between them.

"Wow, a one word sentence !", Ed ironically congratulated. "Here comes something definitely more at your level, you should keep it that way, maybe one day you'll learn how to conjugate verbs !"

He was pushing it too far now, even Bruce could get that. Whatever common past applied between them, he had no rights to talk like that to an official in an Academic Institution. And Mockridge looked like he wanted to kill him. Fortunately however, in place of making a gesture to come closer to their desk, he yelled :

"You get out right now ! Before I call your daddy and ask him to come get you !"

It was imperceptible, but Bruce saw the flinch on Edward's body at the mention of his father.

"Don't you hear me, Nashton ?! I said get OUT !"

From the hatred in Ed's eyes, it was clear he wanted to argue, probably thought about getting to his feet and yell back.

But he didn't, instead he furiously grabbed his bag and laptop and headed for the door, under the very disagreeable laughs of most of the students.

"So maybe you aren't good at respecting your elders, but respecting daddy still works, doesn't it ?", Mockridge said just when he was about to leave the class.

The wrath that could be seen in the last glance Ed adressed the man was fierce, but he didn't say anything and just walked out.

One second, two...

"One good thing done.", the teacher sneered. "Now, where were we ?"

"You were at doing a feedback about a theory you simplified so much it wasn't making sense anymore and became faulty, when Edward took the time to correct you."

A few seconds of absolute silence followed Bruce's declaration on a low and powerful, threating tone.

It was the first time he spoke out loud in a classroom in many, many years.

Then he stood up, took his bag and walked to the door as if it was the most natural thing to do now.

"So I don't see why I'd stay here listening to your explanations, since they can only be suitable for an impressively dumb audience."

Thereupon he exited the room.
Doing so, he noticed the shocked looks following him and it made him feel so proud and thrilled he acted that way.

It had been the right thing to do.

And it had been incredibly entertaining.

Now he just hoped he won't have difficulties finding Edward. Because indeed, he was content and wanted to share this odd victory with his comrade. But most of all, because he had questions about what just happened, and he knew he won't be able to sleep before he got his answers.

No need to worry though, as it seemed today was his lucky day. Ed was descending the stairs at the end of the corridor, and all he had to do was to call him:

"Eh, Edward ! Wait a second !"

The redhead turned around on his step, surprised, as Bruce quickly walked to the stairs.

"What are you doing... ?"

And he looked simply adorable when he was clueless about what to say or do.

Bruce had to restrain a laugh.

"I just thought we could hang out a bit.", he answered with a large smile. "Because as if that was not enough that Mockridge is utterly stupid, he also disrupted our business talk. So I thought we could do it now."

Describing it, Edward's expression was analogous to a fish in open air's.

"You... left the class ?", he finally voiced, astounded.

"I did.", Bruce nodded, smiling at this unanticipated stupefaction. "But before doing so, I told the guy he was a moron. Does it make you feel better ?"

He expected Ed to smile, laugh even, at that. Maybe to stay at this shocked state. But he couldn't predict this reaction:

"... Why did you do that ?"

His eyes were suspicious, his tone defensive and his body language explicitly indicated he was tensed.

"I..."

"What do you want from me now ?!"

And here he was, angry again. Angry at him!

The dark-haired teen frowned.

"I don't 'want anything from you' !", he countered, his smile replaced by a a stern expression. "I stood up for you and wanted to spend time with you, is that a crime ?!"
"You didn't stand up for anything!", the smaller one aggressively stated. "All you did was leave this stupid class to follow me! You shouldn't have done that!"

Bruce was taken aback by the fury in his words. And as if it was not enough, Ed ended up insulting him:

"What were you thinking, you idiotic spoiled brat?! Oh that's right... you weren't thinking at all!"

The last statement seemed to echo in the empty stairs. They stayed like that a few seconds, just staring at each other as if to defy the other to move; then Bruce broke the silence in a deep, low tone:

"...I obviously shouldn't have done anything, that at least is for sure. I made the mistake to think we were friends, or... something close to that. So I thought I could keep you company because you're upset. That we could go somewhere, maybe have coffee and resume working on our project. And I thought I could ask why Mockridge talked to you like you were a primary school pupil whose parents can be called when you have a fight with a teacher. It sounded so... wrong, I just wanted to know more. And... to see if you were okay.", he admitted on a softer tone, looking away when he said the last sentence.

Then he simply went down a few steps, before pausing to end coolly, giving him a last icy glance:

"But you seem definitely incapable of taking things normally or behaving politely, so it's clear I shouldn't even have thought of trying to be a bit nicer with you."

Then he turned around and ended to walk down the stairs. He had nothing to do here, he shouldn't have left that class, and at the moment he especially didn't want to talk with this insufferable kid anymore.

"Wayne!", a little voice called him back, and he heard the pleading sound behind what clearly wanted to sound assured.

But he didn't turn around and just shouted back:

"Just so you know for next time you'll meet someone who wants to be around you: friends don't call each other by their last name, Nashton!"

They weren't friends. They knew nothing about each other, and they spoke together since barely a week. So why was Bruce so angry at his coworker for not behaving better towards him?

He shouldn't care. He shouldn't even notice.

Yet here he was, mad at him as he walked in the campus to reach the parking, and headed for his car. It was solely morning, but he felt like he had spent enough time at college for today.

"I am sorry"

No, he wasn't. Edward deleted the three words on the e-mail page.

"I shouldn't have gotten upset with you, there was no reason for this. Sorr"
He still wasn't sorry. He hadn't done anything wrong, why would he apologize?! Although, he somehow felt guilty. He had no idea why. Hearing Bruce calling him a 'friend' had been just as weird and unexpected as it had been... pleasant.

But he still had no idea why. Therefore he erased the whole sentence he just typed.

"I wasn't expecting you to follow me. It surprised me, and I don't know how to react to things I can't plan, so I get defensive."

That was indeed better. A clear, almost scientific explanation was always more valuable than a pathetic apology, right? So he went on this way:

"I didn't mean to offend you, though. It's just that I am not... very good with all that stuff. I have a friend, but it's not the same. Interacting with her is easy, natural even, because I know her for long enough. But you? You are a stranger who wants to play my friend. I don't have this kind of experience yet, and I still don't understand why you left class to follow me. I need a bit more time and data to analyse the nature of our partnership and deduce the appropriate manner to behave in your company."

It was practically an apology.

To what he added two last sentences:

"But don't worry. I'm a quick study."

Then sent it.

He wasn't sure what to expect. Certainly not an answer right now. Maybe no answer at all.

His phone buzzed next to him, almost causing him a heart attack, and he angrily picked up.

"What?!", he curtly asked, upset with whoever just surprised him again.

Apparently it was today's habit...

"Jeez Eddie, why so grumpy?", a velvet, amused voice answered, and he relaxed immediately.

"Hi Selina.", he smiled. "I would have called you, I just took care of something first."

"Where are you?"

As ever she sounded confident, in control of everything. But he recognized the slight worry, this feeling she admitted she didn't know about before their paths crossed. This feeling she never felt for any other human being before she met him.

It wasn't breaking news anymore, far from it; but the thought always made him feel warm inside.

"At the Browns house.", he answered, reassuring. "I had to go to my old man's, and we... had an argument."

He heard her hiss on the phone.

"Stay where you are, I'm coming right now!", she vividly retorted.

"No need for that, you..."
"How badly are you hurt ?!"

Saying this, she was now properly furious. Edward sighed.

"It's okay, 'Lina. It truly is. I simply won't show up to the job tonight because our dear boss expressively enjoined me to stop coming when I 'look like a street fight survivor' or when my face reminds her of 'a chopped steak', because it is 'bad for the image'. But I'll be there tomorrow normally, don't loose one night of salary just for this, it's unnecessary really."

"... Are you sure you don't need anything ?!"

She was still annoyed by the situation, but she also knew he was right.

"I don't, and I have everything here anyway. Arthur was at the house when I arrived, he took the time to check on the first aid kit to make sure I had all the medicine I could use at disposition. I'm fine, I just planned on waiting your break time to tell you so. Sorry I made you worry."

There was a pause in the communication, then Selina said, almost tenderly :

"You make me worry all the time."

And he felt the pinch in his heart hearing this.

"I'm sorry..."

"Don't be. If you're okay, it is all that matters.", she ended, her well-known predatory smile returning, and it was noticeable in her tone.

Then she added :

"I'll come by at the end of the service. Ask Steph to keep an eye on you in the meantime."

He smiled, radiant.

"I'll tell her."

Understanding they were talking about her, the baby, safely settled into the pillows on the couch just at his left, opened one eye and let out an adorable chirping that sounded like a bird's.

Eddie giggled, feeling so happy, proud, elated, jubilant... an outburst of delighted sentiments mixed together blooming all at once in his mind and heart every time his baby was doing... anything. The feeling was so strong, so pure and wonderful it would make anyone dizzy.

"Look who's awake...", he said lovingly, smiling brightly at the petite, warbling creature. "Stephanie dearest, say hi to auntie Selina."

"I don't want to be her 'auntie', I am not an old chap !!", she protested once again, and Edward laughed.

Then he approached the phone, and Steph tried to grasp it with one tiny hand, her chubby fingers clenching the side of the object. His smile grew wider. She babbled happily again, and both Ed and Selina let out a very audible, amazed fond sigh.

"Hello, little bird...", Selina purred affectionately. "Can I count on you to take care of my kitten until tonight ? Poor thing can't survive on his own..."
Ed shook his head, smiling, and Steph answered by a louder boo, then raised her small arms in the air.

"I'll take that as a yes. Kisses my babies."

"See you later, 'Lina.", he said softly, and they ended the communication.

Then he scooped Stephanie up, nesting her gently on the crook of his left arm. She let out a pleased little sound, and offered him a big, toothless smile.

"Aww... aren't you the prettiest, most adorable little girl ever? Yes you are!"

Which made her giggle, of these typical sounds only newborns can produce, and Edward knew that right here, right now, he was the happiest person on the planet.

The perfect image got stained though, when drops of blood fell on Stephanie's forehead. It practically made him jump out of panic, but he managed to fight his instinctive reaction, and quickly wiped off the crimson red bloodstains with his sleeve, aware of how his heartbeat had dangerously increased and his breathing became laborious.

Stephanie stopped to gurgle, perceiving the change of mood and the way the arms holding her trembled. She looked up at him with big, questioning blue eyes, and he gently stroked the blond fuzz that was her hair for now.

"It's okay...", he promised, aware of the dim shaking in his voice. "I'm sorry... it's alright... I'm sorry... I..."

He closed his eyes one second, took a deep breath.

Then gazed back at her, forcing his movements to be more steady.

"See? Nothing to worry about..."

To prove his saying, he started singing a lullaby on a soft, quiet tone, and a joyful smile instantly returned on her round face. He had the occasion to note just how much she loved hearing Selina and him sing to her.

He smiled as well, singing nicely.

But this time he kept his smile a small one. Because smiling broadly like he had just done put too much pressure on his split lip, causing the fresh wound to bleed again.

Chapter End Notes

The socializing process is complicated... these boys definitely don't know how to behave.

And yes, 'Mockridge' is the guy from Batman: The Animated Series, the episode "If You're So Smart, Why Aren't You Rich?", aka the first one featuring Edward. As Bruce guessed it here, Ed and him indeed have a history together.
Also, what do you think of mama!Eddie ? : )

I'll try to post the next chapter faster.
Thank you for reading !
Leaving kudos = receiving a happy smile from baby Steph ; )
And of course, any kind of comment is welcomed, so feel free to let me know what you think.
Have a good day !
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

"The smallest act of kindness is worth more than the grandest intention."
- Oscar Wilde

Chapter Notes

Here comes a rather long (but necessary) dialogue...
Things will move more afterward, I promise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Edward wanted to apologize.

He still wasn't convinced he had done anything wrong, but he didn't see an other way to start the next talk with Bruce, since his e-mail remained unanswered.

So he will apologize, pretty much like the other boy had done the day before as an introduction, his coworker will think it was sincere, he will accept without complaining and then they could move on and resume working. It was a good plan, a simple one, easy to apply.

At least it would have been if Bruce had showed up this Wednesday.

What he did not.

It was incredibly frustrating, although not too surprising. Edward only had two hours of courses today, from 10 AM to noon break, so it was a possibility that his sole daily class won't match with Wayne's time schedule. Nevertheless it left him quite disappointed. And slightly angry, but this feeling followed him like his shadow or a permanant companion whenever he was outside, so no big deal there.

And as it went, no Bruce Wayne today.

Such a shame, since he was decided to make an effort... And could not certify he will feel so generous tomorrow.

______________

On Thursday, along with the computer courses, they also had the class just before in common. Meaning they'll spend the all afternoon together.

Edward was currently working on his laptop. It was just after noon break and he spent the said time inside the classroom of the lesson about to begin. Most rooms in the College stayed at the disposal of the students all day long, except the ones storing the computer hardware, for obvious reasons.
And since eating in the university library was forbidden, settling in a class during the break times was the best solution. Given that yes, he actually ate something today! Besides the coffee and pills, that is. The main reason behind this was Selina, who forced him to take that large bowl of pasta salad with him this morning, and threatened him in anticipation that even thinking about not eating it wasn't an option. The scene had been a funny one a few hours ago, and at noon the presence of the dish in his bag had effectively been welcomed.

Mommy Selina : 1, mister 'too smart for sleep or food' Eddie : 0. And in the end, they both knew it was better that way.

When Bruce arrived, he headed straight to his desk as soon as he spotted him.

What was it Ed wanted to do yesterday, again? Oh that's right: apologize. It still sounded surreal, but he was willing to make the effort. For science. Or... not really, but it was the only motto that came to his mind at the moment.

So he was the first one to talk:

"Before you say anything..."

"What da Hell happened to your face?!", Bruce shouted bluntly, causing a few people entering the class to glare at them before returning to their occupations.

Ouch. Of course Wayne was going to point that out... How could he have not figure out it would be the first thing he'll say?! It was painfully obvious...

Edward sighed. The damages weren't even that visible, he knew by now how to do his makeup to thoroughly cover bruises. Even if, this being college, no high school or elementary school; he was not supposed to risk a reflection from anyone anymore. Meaning that he didn't put as much effort into the cover as he used to, it was more out of habit than real necessity. He will do it more meticulously for the job tonight, he didn't waste too much product for the day itself.

In any case, the cut on his lip needed a few more days to heal and the flesh around his right eye remained swollen, makeup or not he couldn't iron out the distinctive curve left by this injury. All he could do was try to make it adopt the closest shape to the normal light color of his skin instead of dark purple.

"Nothing either alarming or justifying an explanation.", he finally responded after a few seconds of tensed silence, coercing his voice to be as detached as if he was doing an analysis of a basic subject instead of talking about his own injuries.

"Who did..."

"I had a row with someone.", he kept telling as if it wasn't important at all. "And it's nothing, you shouldn't even notice."

Despite his composed attitude, inside he was worrying a little. Bruce's reaction was not the one he usually received, he wasn't in his comfort zone. Customarily when people noticed the wounds, they didn't comment. He only knew they saw them because of the way they frowned, followed most of the time by a shrug of their shoulders, or by just looking away. And his makeup was good enough to fool anybody, or at least sufficient to convince them not to ask. Not that anyone cared enough to do so.

But Bruce Wayne wasn't just 'anyone', right?
"Whoever did..."

"Wayne, stop it!", he immediately cut off when he felt his calm mask cracking a bit, and he raised a hand to shut him up. "I told you it's nothing, it's not a problem, even if it was it certainly won't be yours; anyway it doesn't hurt and will heal within the next days. So just... there's no need to say anything, okay?!"

Bruce’s jaw clenched, and Edward found awfully unsettling the way his blue-grey eyes scanned his face like a laser beam would, clearly not fooled by the foundation application on his cheekbones, around both his eyes (the right one may was the only one who deserved the label of 'black eye', it didn't mean the left one hadn't had his punch as well) and on his chin. It made him feel exposed, made him feel weak, right now all he wanted to do was to disappear, to hide and run away and...

Eventually, the taller one stopped checking him over and sat in the chair next to his own.

They stayed like that, not looking at each other, in an awkward silence that extended for a too long time period. The teacher arrived, the class started. And they still weren't looking at each other.

Edward felt terrible, way more than he should in the situation.

And contrary to Bruce who apparently had no difficulty staying as motionless as a statue, that was something he simply lacked the capacity to do. He couldn't help it, just like his brain was always thinking of a million things at the same time when he wasn't focusing on a precise task, his body couldn't stay still. He was always wriggling, would it be by swinging legs, stamping feet, chewing his lip, tapping the closest surface with his digits or just wiggling them in the air... He was always doing these ridiculous small movements whenever he wasn't working with his full concentration on something.

And why was he not focused on anything right now ? He needed something to occupy his hands, he should be... typing on his keyboard. Whatever subject, typing will do, it always did. So why wasn't he typing... He should be typing. Typing was great, no matter the subject, he just needed to be distracted from... No, don't stress, go type something. Anything. What about that new formula Isley proposed to use on the test subjects ?... No, too creepy. He should write something. Something else. He should type and then he could clear his thoughts and then...

Oh God, he really needed to calm down.

Curse you, Bruce Wayne and your silly, steady posture... How come it was so stressful to be sitting next to that guy right now...

"I won't ask for more."

Bruce's dense, tranquil voice was the most welcomed thing Ed could use to hear right now. Their gazes met, and he forced himself to focus back on reality. It wasn't his first rodeo, was very far from being the worst, so it wasn't long before the mild panic invading his mind started to vanish. It hadn't been a strong one, it won't require more.

"Not until you allow it.", he went on, and even though he looked resigned, a sparkle of determination was still visible in his blue eyes. "However, if you are in trouble or if you..."

"I'm not in..."

"Let me finish, please."

Ed couldn't suppress a frustrated huff at this. He was back at being in control of himself, at least as 'in
control' as he standardly was, which had never been an absolute guarantee that he won't have a breakdown the next minute. But it was enough, anyways it was the best he managed.

As a result, it meant that he was also back at feeling the never ending frustration provoked by everything and everyone. And for sure, he didn't like being talked to like that. He didn't like it at all!

"If you are in trouble.", Bruce pursued, unaware of the anger slowly boiling in his classmate's system. "You have to ask for help, would it be from me or others ; and if you need to talk.", he added on a much softer tone. "I may not look like the most open person, I know how to listen, and I have my own... experience, with a great deal of problems. Maybe I can help with yours."

That was the least expected thing ever.

Edward's ire withdrew as if it had suddenly been swept away, and he just stared, unable to correctly process the information.

It was... was...

And then he understood. His expression hardened.

"Quit making fun of me.", he growled. "Are you done here ?! What was that exactly, you thought of a good joke to share, and now you are all proud because I believed it for two seconds ?!"

"I am not..."

"Yes you are.", he corrected as if it was a well-known, unassaible truth. "But... it doesn't matter."

It wasn't even the rage he felt anymore. In fact he was more aggrieved by such offensive words than angry at the man voicing them. So he looked away, trying to hide how his pride had been hurt by the behaviour.

"I am used to it.", he concluded, while being aware of how sad it sounded, way more than intened.

"Edward."

A strong hand squeezed his right shoulder, and he fought the urge to recoil from it.

"I am not making fun of you."

Bruce actually looked... concerned. Worried maybe ?

It was strange, and he didn't know how he should take this act. Because it was an act, wasn't it ? It would be stupid to think Wayne was actually meaning any of this, but the idea of him not lying was... a pleasing thought.

Because well, he really seemed serious about it. And it was very unlikely that this guy who was so obviously in difficulties when it came to socialize whilst he was a rich man, -meaning every teen would love to hang out with him and invite him to a party-, could be a skilled actor.

"... Okay.", he heard himself answering then, his tone coming out weaker than planned. "I... think I believe you."

" ‘Think’ ?", he outlined.

"Yes. In a way."
Then a small smile formed on his split lips, and he added on a quieter tone:

"It's not a feeling I'm familiar with. So... don't feel like it's your fault or that I'm blaming you or anything, it's just me who... struggle with having faith in people."

Bruce removed his hand, a somewhat compassionate shine now glowing in his eyes.

"Trust me, this is something I am more than able to understand. Something I can truly relate to."

They remained silent afterward, both processing what they learnt and what it implied about the other. Maybe they were not so different, after all?

"By the way.", Edward initiated later during the same hour. "I hu... I'm sorry about how things ended last time. It was..."

"No need for that.", Bruce cut him off, firmly but not sternly, a tiny smile on his face. "You're sorry, I'm sorry, it became an established fact we should stop to phrase. Because if we stay that way, we'll spend all our time apologizing, then fighting, then apologizing again... and I don't find tempting keeping this never-ending circle. So why won't we just leave this aside? We are not friends, we don't need to be to elaborate a school project together. Which doesn't mean I can't help if you need a..."

"I don't.", he categorically said before his comrade had the time to end his sentence.

Bruce didn't object, and simply took back:

"But it would be profitable for both of us if we stopped jumping on each other's throat every time we talk. Sounds acceptable to you?"

"... Acceptable indeed."

Nevertheless, he felt vaguely disappointed. He wasn't sure what it was due to.

"So...", the dark-haired teen went on, slightly more hesitant. "Maybe we could benefit from setting up a few rules about subjects we need to avoid and slippery slopes we don't want to talk about."

The offer was surprising, although quite amusing.

Edward smiled wickedly, back at his normal self.

"Is it a relationship agreement you are asking for?"

Bruce frowned at the term used, but shrugged his shoulders.

"Why not? I wasn't thinking of an agreement, but something like that could definitely be useful for the time our partnership will last. After all, we are supposed to work on our project for the next months, it's a rather long time to spend together. So I'd like us to try being in good terms."

"This is a very reasonable thought.", Edward complimented, pleased in the end with the way things turned.

A few minutes passed, throughout the ones they listened to the class, then Ed informed him:

"I want this to be an actual contract."
"What am I supposed to understand? That you want to... write it down or something? Like a legislation we should observe?", he inquired, amusement audible in his tone.

"Sure.", he claimed, using his 'project manager' voice. "It will be a lot easier: we ascertain the subject areas we don't want the other to refer to, the ones we can conjure up ourselves freely but won't have to justify to the other, and the more delicate topics that are susceptible to start a fight. Once they'll be listed, it will be simpler for us to know how to behave towards each other and quit doing misinterpreted mistakes. Considering how our week of social interactions went, I totally agree with your idea of setting up rules. So it's normal I take it seriously."

He wavered a few seconds, then kindly added:

"Because I must admit it is pleasant to talk with you most of the time, so I'd like it better if we could keep this dynamic instead of... the other way around."

Bruce nodded.

"... It is pleasant to talk with you too."

And he looked away after saying this, unable to decipher the nature of the feeling induced by how pretty the sweet smile Edward gave him as an answer was. It left him... confused, and he didn't want his associate to find out. It was probably linked to the rage he felt at the sight of the red cut on his lower lip and the obvious spots of bruises on his pale, freckled complexion.

Though this new feeling puzzling him at the moment wasn't one of anger, that at least he could determine.

Minutes passed, during the ones he managed to take notes of what the teacher said, and Edward typed on his computer. Bruce won't make the mistake to spy on what he was doing again, even if the sound of the speedily pressed keys was intriguing enough to be compared to an attractive riddle he wanted to solve.

"I loved your 'Englishman in New York'.", he said later, and Eddie smiled instantly. "I listened to it for Tuesday, but didn't find the right time to tell you, between Mockridge and... the rest."

Ed looked mildly sorry hearing this, but Bruce just waved of his hand to show it didn't matter, and went on commenting:

"It's a very nice song. A strangely relaxing one, too... And you're right, it's easy to relate to it, since anyone can adapt the nationalistic lyrics to turn it into something more personal, while keeping the 'I'm an Alien' of the refrain."

Edward's smile grew wider.

"This is precisely why I love this song. I even sing it as a lullaby, because of its 'relaxing' rhythm as you rightly pointed out."

Bruce discerned the way his smile went from friendly to filled with fondness when he uttered the word 'lullaby'. It was different than the other smiles Bruce had seen from him before. It obviously referred to something important to him, in his private life.

He knew he shouldn't ask, it could be taken poorly. But although it was manageable for him to be moderately careful in his choice of words, that was a compromise he agreed on, it won't mean
however that he was going to walk on eggshells from now on. So he inquired casually:

"You sing lullabies?"

Luckily, Edward didn't get mad at the intrusive question. He simply hesitated, doubtlessly wondering if he should answer or not.

"I do.", he simply ended up saying on a neutral tone, not letting any sentiment reflecting neither in his voice nor facial expression.

Then he turned again to his computer and resumed working on... whatever he was working on.

Bruce held back a sigh. It may had lasted shorter than intended, it wasn't that bad of an interaction. They didn't start insulting each other, so it could even be called *satisfactory*.

He didn't know how much time passed afterward, but what he was sure of is that he was now bored to death listening to the class, when Edward finally looked up from his screen and adressed to him again:

"Look at this.", he commanded, proud of himself, approaching his laptop closer to Bruce.

Whom blinked when he eyed the text document.

"... You actually wrote a relationship agreement.", he stated, while knowing he shouldn't feel so startled, but at the same time...

This was so odd!

"For now it's only a skeleton.", the ginger explained smugly. "I will need your clauses to fully finish it, so I'd appreciate if you sent them to me during the week-end at last, thus we could have a proper contract for next week. And of course, if one of us thinks of something he wants to see added to the list, we'll complete it."

"... What do you want to be?"

His question was met by a surprised green gaze.

"You mean... in general?"

"In the professional life.", Bruce clarified with a gentle smile. "From what I've seen, you are impressively skilled with computers, legislations, you also said you're a scientist, and now you draft contracts as if you were a lawyer or something. So did you ever... think of what job you want to work on?"

Edward looked back at the screen, lost in thought.

Bruce honestly anticipated a precise answer revealing in details what he rigorously wanted to do, and to be after school. Maybe to even hear about what exact research laboratory or economic district he wanted his place in. But it seemed that he was clueless about what his future would look like. And that was... another unforeseen reaction.

This boy was an enigma...

"I love computer science.", he answered at one moment, the sweet smile of 'I'm talking about something I enjoy, thank you for asking and letting me broach the subject' returning.
It was for now, by far, Bruce's favorite expression.

"I guessed that.", he laughed a little. "Wanna be an engineer or a programmer, then?"

"...I don't know.", Eddie responded, flattered to see his comrade was so obviously interested by his life.

Even if he picked up one of the rare subjects he had no answers to offer or hints to solve.

"I just love computers.", he went on, wondering. "So I suppose I should work in something related to them, but I never... I never really thought of what I want to do next. Hell, I'm not even..."

He blushed slightly, realizing a bit too late it was an area he wasn't supposed to extend in, so quickly corrected:

"Nevermind. It's not important, I..."

"No, I want to know!"

They both heard how desperate that sounded. Now it was Bruce's turn to blush, and Edward smirked.

"I mean...", the taller one tried, only to be immediately interrupted:

"That addicted to me ?!", the redhead asked mischievously, then placed one hand on his heart and added sarcastically: "I'm touched."

"Oh, shut up...", he blushed even harder, and this time Edward laughed.

It was a nice sound.

But thinking of how pretty it was only caused Bruce to feel more self-conscious.

"I am younger than you.", Ed pursued quietly afterward, still smiling, having decided in the end that there was no need to turn this 'area' into a secret. "Not much, and it's not supposed to make any difference, but officially it... does. Unfortunately."

A faint frustration could be perceived as he went on:

"Meaning I can't find a job in something I like yet, even in parallel of my studies. I tried though, I left CVs in various companies, even at the university itself, in the research programs. But they all told me to 'come back when I'll be older' because they are not supposed to hire..."

He bit his lip.

"...children ?", Bruce filled the gap, putting as much delicacy as he could in the word. "Because you are a minor ?"

Edward gazed back at him, and approved with a quiet nod.

"I'm fifteen.", he said a bit harshly, as if it was something shameful. "According to my age I shouldn't even be in College, but in truth I left school records since years, and if everything went as planned, I would be done with studies by now. It took more time because I had... complications with the teachers and the other adults in charge. They didn't let me graduate. They were waiting for me to snap to justify I had nothing to do here, but I didn't, I did everything that was asked and obtained the best results at the final exams. But then..."
He bit harder on his already damaged lip, a very legitimate anger radiating from his posture. Bruce felt his own wrath rising at the simple mention of that kind of injustice, even if he was aware he had not the full picture yet, there was probably a lot more behind the surface.

"This is incredibly vicious from them!", he commented nonetheless, his voice steady but showing he was just as upset as his table companion. "I'm sorry you had to deal with such idiots."

It made him smile, almost shyly, and Bruce's breath caught in his throat at the sight. He failed to get what the younger one was thinking of right now, but the result it had on him was to make him feel like...

"... Thank you."

Thanking Bruce wasn't the most appropriate manner to reply, it didn't match with his previous sentences, and Ed realized so after the words left his mouth. But hearing the other teen sort of teaming up with him by acknowledging how stupid and mean these adults were, made him feel somewhat grateful.

And one should thank when one feels grateful, right?

Proposed like this, it sounded like a logical solution; even if it wasn't very adequate for the present situation.

Wayne didn't seem to notice, though, or at least he wisely chose not to highlight it.

"What about you?", he relaunched then, both to avoid a question he won't feel at ease answering and out of interest. "I assume you will take back the lead of Wayne Enterprises with the Executive Board, but..."

But, he realized how foolish it was to ask.

Bruce had enough money to do whatever he wanted all his life without ever working, not even in his own society. So he will most likely do something else than working.

"I sincerely have no idea.", the billionaire responded, and something sounded... off, in this simple sentence.

Edward couldn't point out what, and even less what was the cause of it. But he felt genuinely concerned. How strange.

"Wayne Enterprises is run by the Council for... almost ten years now.", Bruce kept telling, nonchalant. "And I never really... looked into it. I don't think I have what it takes to work in the business like my family used to do."

Something tightened his chest when he heard Bruce say this.

It was a very unpleasant feeling, it was like someone tried to squeeze around the edges of his heart and it caused a small lump to form in his throat. He didn't like it, he didn't like it at all. It made him feel... bad.

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Bruce.", he said with his comforting / shushing voice, the one he didn't know he possessed until Stephanie's birth and never used for anyone else before. "If you don't work at Wayne Enterprises later, that won't be because you can't, but because you choose not to, and therefore are doing something else. Not because you don't have what it takes. Never think something like that."
For a moment, they just looked at each other. If someone asked, none of them would have been able to put a word on what they felt right now.

But it was... nice. It could be likened to a mutual understanding.

It was even very nice.

"... Thank you.", Bruce ended up saying too, truly meaning it.

Edward answered by a hearty smile, not seeing what to add and feeling slightly confused, though he wasn't sure why.

So he turned back to his computer, and Bruce followed the movement.

"I hu... I'll take care of a few things.", Ed said, shunting his laptop again, to have it closer to him. "A few things not related to our project.", he specified, his eyes glued to the screen to avoid looking at him. "Since the next class will be computer courses, I'll just..."

"... Sure.", Bruce replied.

He was a little bit disappointed, but he tried not to let it show.

"Do as you wish, I'll listen to the end of this class. It's... interesting."

"Liar.", he jeered, looking back at him. "You don't even know what we are working on here, admit it."

Bruce chuckled.

"I admit.", he conceded, and they both laughed lightly. "But you don't take notes either, so I don't think I am the only one."

Eddie shook his head, smiling.

"I may not be taking notes, it doesn't mean I can't remember what happens in a course. It's very rare that I write what a teacher says.", he told him then, and given how he voiced it, it could be taken as a confidence. "I simply... don't need to, never had. I always can be doing something else entirely during class, having the lesson evolving as a background noise like this is enough for me to register everything that is said during the hours. It's kinda useful."

"And impressive.", Bruce confirmed.

Edward smiled proudly.

"What can I say, I'm a genius.", he smugly retorted.

"That you definitely seem to be."

They were smiling, the ambiance was mellow, it could even be called friendly again.

And the feeling truly was a nice one, for both of them.
The computer course coming next turned out to be very productive.

Since the students' subjects are going to be practically the only important thing in this class, most of the weeks will be dedicated to it uniquely, with the teacher helping the ones too incapables of dealing with their stuff by themselves.

Needless to say, no way Edward belonged to that kind. Bruce was smiling, way too pleased by the way the class went and how his associate and him managed to keep the atmosphere a sympathetic one, while seriously progressing in their project elaboration. The part when Ed aggressively told Mrs Leland who sneaked a peek at their table that "of course not, they didn't need help!" had been funny too, and the teacher sighed, obviously expecting a reaction like this one from him, so she didn't insist.

Even if it won't be for right now, Bruce was now certain he wanted the tale of what happened between him and the teachers. Plus the tale of... everything about him, and his all life story.

But they had time, he wasn't going to rush his investigation.

The end of the two hours arrived too fast for his liking. He would have like to prolong their talking further, whereas the students around them started packing their things, and Edward turned his computer off.

"I had a good time.", Bruce said happily, while closing the zipper of his bag. "We should keep our interactions that way. It's enjoyable."

"... It is.", Ed conceded, apparently wondering over something.

Then he smirked, and Bruce instantly knew he was going to add something sassy.

"We should definitely hump like that next time too, it's easier since we agreed on our preferences."

Bruce sighed, and the ginger laughed.

"You can't help yourself, can't you ? You really have to say things like this here and there ?", he asked, but his tone was somehow fond.

Midly desperate, for sure, but also fondly amused. That was new...

"I can't.", Ed confirmed.

But his boastful expression turned to something less assured as he pursued :

"I know it doesn't... match with the rest. But I'm like that, and I'm afraid I'm not gonna change."

It was hard to determine what he thought of himself while telling this.

"I wasn't asking you to.", Bruce said softly, and he knew from the luminous look on Edward's face that it had been the best thing to say.

Even if once again, Bruce noted how everything the teenager said when alluding to himself seemed to hold a deeper meaning. In this case, it was a bit strange indeed to think that the same boy who was always on his guards, took everything as a personal insult and was ready to jump on anyone's throat if they dared to talk to him could also be the flirty type making very suggestive and embarassing comments. And it was all even weirder when you thought that this boy was a fifteen years old.

Wasn't that a bit young to be convinced everyone hates you and wants to take advantage of you ; or to make naughty remarks ? So doing both... was quite special.
But not necessarily a problem.

Bruce was about to ask if they could spend a bit of time together after class, but Edward quickly took his sling bag when the course was over.

"See you tomorrow.", he saluted, grinning.

"Have a good evening...", he smiled back, and Ed lost no time disappearing in the college's corridors.

So whatever his non-school timetable was on Thursday, he had no time to waste after class to take up the next part of his day.

Maybe he had activities... What about something related to music? Since he seemed to like this area too, and as Bruce understood in their conversation, even though he 'loved computers', he wasn't working as a programmer anywhere yet.

He caught himself blushing at the thought of Edward... singing. Because he sang, he said it himself. Was he in a club? That didn't seem to fit him... Maybe he just meant he liked to do so in his house? Though it was unlikely he sang lullabies to himself, plus the way he said it implied he had an audience... And what if he played of an instrument? Piano could be the most appropriate, seeing how handy he was when typing on his laptop, it almost seemed logical these same fingers dancing so rapidly over the keyboard knew how to travel down piano keys as well...

Maybe he sang and played piano in a bar or...

Bruce felt the heat burning inside his cheeks, and shook his head.

Two days ago he was convinced they were friends, sort of; then felt nearly betrayed by his hurtful attitude, and today they managed to come to terms by accepting that no, they weren't friends, but yes, they were going to act as such. It was a good progress, but there was no reason it went any further between them. Which meant: no reason for him to start wondering what he was doing after school.

Not that it was the only thing he wanted to know...

Starting by what he saw today. The main question he had about Edward Nashton after this was who beat him up and why did his first reaction to genuine concern had been to think Bruce was mocking him.

No doubt, that was the first thing he needed to figure out, before anything else.

As for the rest... Well, he had more than enough time to learn more. And because learning more about him was the most thrilling thing he dedicated himself to do since quite a long time, it was an aim he will seriously work to achieve.

Maybe Edward was right after all: maybe he was a little too addicted to him already.
fanfiction to The Big Bang Theory, with a few distinctive words from the show you can't miss if you're watching it, along with some of Edward's habits.

Thank you for reading !!
Have a nice day !!
;

(;
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

"Be yourself. Everyone else is already taken."
- Oscar Wilde

Chapter Notes

Updates are a bit slow, I'm aware of it... but I'm very busy for now.
So well, even if I don't manage to post every week like I wished at first, it does not
mean I'm giving up on that story. On the contrary, it will be completed as regularly as
possible.
And for now, I give you a long chapter about bats.
Enjoy ; )

The next two weeks turned out to be quite... calm, between them at least. Because they elaborated a
great part of their investigation, but they also had a few exams in other classes during the second
week. The direct consequence being they didn't progress much in their game, neither about the plot
nor the conception. But it was fine, they had time, good ideas, and the requiered skills to create
something 'perfect', as Edward often repeated.

And he *indeed* constructed a relationship agreement. As odd as it may seem, from the moment they
started following those new rules, they... didn't argue again. Sure, they had not much time to work
together, so it still was experimental, but for now the situation was a surprisingly stable one between
them.

Even though it was a bit *frustrating* for Bruce's personal investigation, since the main clause was
"No questions about family, friends, and activities outside the University allowed ; but one of the
protagonist can refer to *his* by himself. In this case, if he gives informations or broaches the topic
AND seems willing to talk, the other can ask for a *limited* conversation related to one of the
mentioned themes *AS LONG* as he doesn't meet a negative answer. If it's the case, he has to ditch it
and change the subject".

This being said so clearly, they didn't talk about anything else than their school project during the
following days.

But they had been very busy, so even if he kept his weird 'learning more about Edward Nashton's
life' objective written in his head, he had a very good time working on the plot story and now the
characters of their game.

At the end of the school days, Bruce had even less idea of what happened in class than usual, but
what he was sure of is that he actually *learnt* things way more interesting than whatever the teachers
rambled about. And he could gladly add he had a lot of fun interacting with his partner, whom was
so very enthusiastic and dedicated to meet the *best* result.
They were so into the action that something very rare happened: at one moment, on Friday the second week, a teacher called for them to lower a bit the volume, because they were really talking too loudly out of excitement over their story. It resulted in Edward fiercely glaring at the man, but nothing else happened and they simply went back to talking more quietly; after the young genius acknowledged that maybe a classroom was not the most appropriate place to work on their subject, and they could see each other in other locations as well.

It was another point of their contract what really bothered Bruce: "Asking to spend time dedicated to the project out of the school, and general work invitations allowed; but the requiring protagonist cannot insist with his proposition if the other one declined. A negative response does not suffer any justification. If the one giving it doesn't want to explain why he refused, the one inviting cannot ask for more and has to dump it."

Which restricted a lot of possibilities, since when Bruce actually asked if they could see each other outside the courses, Edward just retorted:

"I'm very busy the evenings, so I can't after the school days. But we can keep working by sending mails during the week-ends. Feel free to write anytime, I'll answer. I just can't tell you when, it will depend on my schedule."

Clear, neat, no way to protest against this answer. After all, even if he didn't know what he was doing, Bruce understood at some point that he had a job during the week. Not one he was very proud of apparently, since he never boasted about it and explained it was "only to pay the rent" when Bruce found the courage to ask. Then the redhead changed the subject, and they went back to their project.

So he was working during the evenings, but since he had difficulties to find something in the areas he liked because of his age, it was probably the only kind of jobs hiring teenagers / young adults along with older workers, like helping in a library, a restaurant, or a supermarket. Not that Bruce knew much about what jobs allowed minors to work. He never did any of those. Though he supposed the mentioned ones were the most obvious, along with babysitting or helping children for homeworks... Though thinking of it was quite funny, and absolutely surreal. Given Edward's strong temper, evident disdain towards human kind, and very limited patience, he was about the last person Bruce would think could be great with kids, of any age. So no, it could just not be something involving children. The library seemed the most suitable for him, but a job requiring his presence only during the evenings had more chance to be related to restoration than anything else.

So even if his investigation wasn't evolving as fast as he'd wish, by now Bruce could tell he was working during the evenings. It wasn't that bad of a progress, and anyways he needed to start by somewhere, so... Still, it did not explain why he disappeared rapidly at the end of the days and always declined all invitation to spend more time together. But well, Bruce could understand he also had other things to do before going to his job, so he didn't insist.

Although he wasn't expecting to meet the same refusal during the school days.

"I'm afraid I can't have coffee with you right now, I have things I need to take care of. See you next class.", was he more likely to answer, would it be in the morning or the afternoon.

And he declined the same way the lunch invitations: "No, I can't come at noon today. Maybe another time."; "I need to go somewhere during break time. See you later."; "I won't join for noon, don't wait for me"...

After what he ended up stating: "You can stop asking. When I'll want us to hang out, I'll just propose it myself". 
At least that was clear.

So why was Bruce persisting in asking for more from him, while he so expressly told he wasn't tempted by anything else than the hours they had in common and a few e-mails exchanged during the weekend ? He was not quite sure. And he had even less idea for why Edward so categorically refused that they saw each other outside the school. Because even if he never expressively voiced his disagreement, neither had he been provocative or contemptuous about it, he always ended up by saying no.

It wasn't even as if Bruce ever proposed anything bold ! He just asked for them to go at one of the Cafés the closest to the campus, those places all the students from the college invaded daily and could stay at to work, sometimes for hours.

Why was such a simple offer, a quite normal one too, between two students working together, something so difficult for Edward to agree on ?

Be that as it may, even tough it bothered Bruce a bit, it was not the main thing he focused on either.

"Hey there Wayne. Just wanted to tell you : I like your idea in the end. I really do, I swear I'm not joking ! I want this flying rat, whatever you choose to call it, to be our main character."

Bruce was kinda surprised to see the e-mail popping up, at night, on his computer while he was watching a movie without really paying attention to the story. He just needed a distraction to help forget the nightmares what woke him up a bit under an hour ago. So he was searching solace in... moving pictures.

It actually worked.

Until the next night.

He checked the hour on the bottom right corner of the screen. 3 : 48 am. What on Earth was Edward doing awake at this late hour a Tuesday ?!

"Are you sure ?", he typed back nonetheless, trying to impose to the questions forming inside his skull to stay quiet. "Back in class, you said it was 'the most ridiculous thing you ever saw' and that you 'don't want to turn our game into some Halloween parade for freakshows', otherwise you think it won't be a detective story anymore, but an 'exhibition for lunatics, if our characters start wearing costumes'."

He sent it.

He wasn't even vexed, after all he knew while trying a few designs that it was a bit... risky, and could be perceived as something disrespectful by his little project manager.

Whom the reaction had been more funny than hurtful, so his refusal didn't cause a problem or an argument.

"I admit.", the younger one lost no time answering. "But something made me change my mind, then I thought of a few... changes of my own we could make for the characters and I kinda like the result. I know I said I didn't want to have villains who are just nutjobs looking like they escaped from a circus ; but if our hero is just like them and hang out dressed as a... bat, then why the Hell not ?!
This isn't what I planned... at all; but it's a great idea and I think it would be more entertaining to have something closer to a superhero universe than just an investigation. I don't want superpowers, though. If our man is a bat, that would be just because he has some serious self-esteem issues and because he likes to... pretend he impersonates the night or something. Not because he had been bitten by a bat when he was a baby and it gave him powers."

Bruce's smile was way too large already.

"Agree with no superpowers. So since you validate the hero, what about the villains?"

Because well, as Ed rightly pointed out, their main protagonist couldn't be the only one to play lunatic in costume.

Villains had the right to have fun too.

"I have a few ideas for the villains.", came a quick answer, and Bruce pictured the usual smug smile his coworker must be wearing at the moment. "I'll show you everything, but I'm afraid I don't want the... weird, creepy clown you produced and his crazy associate. I thought you didn't like clowns!

Where does this... 'Joker' and 'Harlequin' come from?! I mean seriously, they're scary as Hell."

Bruce laughed recalling his shocked expression when he showed him the drawings of the mad clowns during the day.

"Never said I didn't like clowns.", he retorted, still smiling. "You said it was too cliché to have an antagonist looking like a mix between Jigsaw and Jeff the Killer. Personally, I find it quite interesting. Besides, what about this challenge: we break the clichés and offer a dark superhero whose mental health is just as damaged as the villains's; but contrary to them he has a form of 'moral' he wants to play by. And we give him the perfect mirror of what he could be if he was just a little more messed up, or just a bit more willing to have fun breaking the law."

"... Okay, but why clowns?!"

Bruce chuckled again.

Apparently that was a touchy subject.

"Aren't you afraid of clowns by any chance?"

He was grinning now. After all, what else than a phobia could explain such a refusal to the antagonists's costumes and not the hero's?

"I'm not! I simply think they're... creepy, disturbing creatures. And not the way I like."

The first two sentences could be read as a legitimate confirmation of the 'phobia' theory, which kept Bruce's satisfied smile on, but he arched an eyebrow at the third one. What was that supposed to mean, 'not the way he liked' when talking about 'creepy' and 'disturbing'?!

If he had a type and these were on his list of criteria...

Well, then maybe Bruce had a chance.

And he refused to acknowledge he blushed at the thought.

Such an idiot he was. Dirty, awkward, scary and stupid idiot! He was aware that severely blaming himself like this, alone in his bedroom in the middle of the night, was... not exactly the smartest thing
he had ever done.
Yet he... didn't stop, and kept on scolding himself as if he did something atrocious or shameful.
He shouldn't feel a certain number of... things, about a certain number of people. What would his parents say?! What would they... if they knew...
The palm of his right hand was now bleeding from the small crevices left by his nails digging into the skin; because of how strongly he clenched his fists. Then he received a new mail.
He slackened his fingers, only to see the left hand was marked as well from the gesture, but didn't bleed since he put a bit less pressure on it.
"Is everything alright?"
Unexpected question.
But... welcomed, in a way, considering it distracted him from his current dark thoughts.
"Sure.", he typed back. "Why won't it be?"
"Because you didn't answer. I thought maybe you went to bed, but it was a bit weird not to let me know. I didn't... say anything wrong, did I?"
Of course you didn't!, Bruce wanted to answer.
But that would be -sort of- admitting he indeed wasn't 'alright', and Edward had no reason to know this.
After all, it wasn't the ginger's fault if Bruce really, truly loved their interactions and the adorable smile he always...
Before letting himself think like a dirty sinner again, he rather wrote a reply:
"No, don't worry. I'm just a bit tired. Why won't we talk about the designs tomorrow? Or... today, given it's past 4 on the morning. We could see each other at the library during morning?"
He was anything but tired, especially not after sending an invitation.
What was going to be Edward's excuse for this one? That he had obligations Wednesday morning and had no other choice but to politely say no?
Because they saw each other all days during their classes in common. Therefore, except for Wednesday. Ed told him he only had one course that day, and it wasn't one they shared. So they never met during the said day before.
They probably won't today either, given the fact...
"I have class from 10 am to lunch break. I suppose we could see each other before at the library?"
Surprising.
What made him suddenly change his mind...?
"How about we have lunch together instead, then? And we can always go to the library afterwards if we need more time to work."
Edward said yes to the suggestion, check.

But since he validated the library, why won't he agree for more?

"I much prefer the library. What about we meet each other there at 2 pm?"

Okay, still no to the Cafés then.

Bruce smiled a little. His refusal to hang out outside the course hours was weird, that was a fact. But going to the library together was a step forward in itself, so he wasn't going to complain or ask for more. Not right now at least.

"Sounds good to me. We wait for each other on the first floor then we find a table to settle at?"

"Good plan. Don't be late, then."

Bruce shook his head.

Always so directive, aren't you Edward?

"I won't. See you tomorrow."

"Good night, Wayne. Whatever what little 'night time' we still have."

"Same for you."

Just after sending the closure text, he started to wonder again why was Edward awake.

Insomnia? Nightmares?

Not because these were Bruce's usual night companions meant his coworker had to deal with the same... Though he failed to think of anything else that could suit Nashton. He definitely was not the kind to be at a party, especially not in the middle of the week, or to...

Bruce blushed harder.

However it was very unlikely Ed had an... active night in good company.

He was fifteen, he was a huge jerk to everyone (even if he could be friendly when he tried, and Bruce truly enjoyed this part of him), and he certainly didn't look like someone who could be seen at a nightclub. He would simply hate it, Bruce had no doubt. So why couldn't he get rid of the thought of Edward, drinking at the bar of a crowded place full of music and sweating teenagers dancing and screaming together in the ambiance under the agressive neon lights... Maybe he could dance too, after a few drinks... and then he would kiss some pretty girl whom would have come close to him and ran a hand through his ginger hair, ruffling them while he would put his hands on her hips before...

Shameful.

Dirty, disgusting boy with a perverted imagination.

What would his parents say?!

What would... Edward himself say, if he knew even half the things Bruce had been thinking about him for the last two weeks and a half. He was a fifteen years-old very good student with antisocial behaviours and obvious problems about anger management, mixed with some trust issues and
apparently an impressive list of people *hating* him.

He was not hanging out in a nightclub, he was not dating either... or at least Bruce *hoped* he was not, even if he wasn't sure why it would bother him so much if Edward had a girlfriend. Better bet on the fact he had none, then.

Bruce went back to bed, trying to think of... something else.

Their project ? The man looking like a bat, this strange vision he had once in a dream a long time ago, which always somehow stayed by his side since then, and never left his mind. Plus now, what Edward wanted to turn the Joker into to make him less... creepy. Was he thinking of... What could he be thinking of... ?

He ended up finally going back to sleep, more than an hour later.

He still had time, before the alarm clock cruelly reminded him it was time to wake up and start a brave new day.

As for him, Edward was smiling when they ended their communication.

"We are keeping the bat, then. Happy ?", he asked fondly to the toddler nested on his lap.

Stephanie answered by something sounding like "Yuliiiiiou", and let out a content giggle.

Edward's smile grew wider.

"I couldn't agree more."

Then she started to move again, and she clicked on the keypad of his laptop with her small fist.

Eddie chuckled, absolutely delighted as ever when she was doing... anything.

"Wanna see the bats again ?", he proposed, while closing the opened e-mail page.

The YouTube one he was on previously appeared, it still was at the last video they watched.

"What about this one..."

He clicked on another, a few minutes long video, and soon other bats were on the screen, flying above a forest. Then the camera did a close-up shot on a few individuuals, who were doing strange noises, gripped by their feet to the branch of a tall tree.

Stephanie made louder pleased noises as she watched the creatures moving. She truly enjoyed it, stretching her little arms to the screen while giggling happily.

Edward stroked lovingly the blond fuzz on her head, which was already longer than it had been her first month, but not properly 'hair' for now, keeping her safely in his arms as they watched the screen. That is to say, *she* watched the screen and he watched *her*.

He was sitting on his folding bed, his back against the pillows and his laptop on his knees, the baby nested between him and the computer.

Another joyous little scream when she saw a black bat snorting its bald head, then opening its wings to fly in the night.
Really, what could she like about these disturbing vampires with leather wings ?...

But she enjoyed the sight of them, no doubt about it. He never saw her so excited while looking at moving pictures before.

So here he was, he must note that both Bruce Wayne and Stephanie Brown loved *bats*.

It was more than enough to convince him to make the required effort to try liking these horrible creatures too. Not that he especially disliked these animals, but... They looked like nothing ! And they weren't cute, or pretty, or even the slightest elegant ! They were not even...

Stephanie happily wriggled, her little hands imitating the movement of flapping wings at her sides, as a group of bats suddenly left a tree and flew together, and she started to *laugh*, of this adorable, high pitched sound that metled his heart and turned him into something lacking of any willpower of any sort.

He hugged fondly his beautiful baby, the smile on his face wider than ever, as she kept voicing her enthusiasm over the flying rats on the video.

From now on, bats were welcomed in his little world, since Steph liked them so much. And welcoming them in his world started by turning the main character of his detective game into a sort of... 'Bat-man' himself.

Such weird things he was willing to do, sometimes...

Because well, he couldn't predict his coworker will arrive all proud of himself at their classes this Tuesday, and will show him a few drawings he did of their characters.

A few drawings exhibiting a giant bat with huge wings and a couple of two mad clowns coming straight from an asylum.

They were still setting up the main plot for an investigation and knew what softwares they needed to use to create the surroundings in the ones the story will take place. Nothing involving strange people, well not *apprently* strange people. In Edward's head, they were just going to be a bit messed up, psychotic and mentally ill, but not... dressed like they found their clothes in a circus.

Just... no !

And he had tried his best to be friendly, not hurtful or scornful, when he refused the hideous designs.

To be honest, the *drawings* themselves were impressively well executed. Bruce was a very talented artist, and he told him so without having to lie. Although, even well drawn, the *subjects* these sketched portrayed were spooky, crazy, and didn't fit for their game. Such both edgy and dark characters could *never* interest anyone.

Who would want of a 'Bat-man' as a hero for a story ?!

*Not* Edward.

Bruce didn't take it wrong, just answered it 'would be a shame' not to use his designs at some point in their game, so he gave him the drawings and told him to 'think about it'. Not wanting to ruin the mood, Edward responded he will, and shoved the papers in his sling bag. With no intention at all to even *look* at these things again.

He almost forgot about the pages during the day and evening, until tonight when he arrived at the
Browns house and took his computer out of his bag. Without knowing why, when he saw the
drawings, he put them on his closed laptop on the desk. Before going to bed, kinda early by his
standards, since Arthur came to put a sleeping Stephanie in her cradle, then wished them good night.

He had long hours of peaceful sleep tonight, before Steph started crying. He took care of her bottle,
rocked her and talked to her softly, singing a little here and there, for over half an hour, then went
back to her bedroom.

However, she was perfectly awake, so no way she'll go back to sleep right now, and she wanted
company. So he turned on the bedside lamp, and thought of what he was going to do to amuse her,
when she saw the drawings on the desk.

And it had literaly been love at first sight.

"You want to see these... things ?", he had asked, quite confused when she started moving in his
arms to get closer to the desk.

So he sat into his wheleed desk chair, securing her in his arms, and he held the first picture, of the
man dressed as a bat, in front of her.

She had been so cheery looking at it, and immediately started to slide her chubby fingers all over the
charcoal drawing, what left black marks on her minuscule phalanges. Edward laughed, then he
cleaned her hands, causing her to giggle too because it tickled and soon he was holding a very
happy, laughing baby whom the bat pictures had made in a truly joyful mood.

These times were his favorites. When she was so sincerely happy about something, it could last long
with her expressing just how pleased she was and how the world was wonderful.

It may wasn't in reality, but Edward's little universe turned into a shining rainbow full of joyous
colors and light-hearted noises every time she was laughing like this and had her moments of pure
enjoyment.

It had been a delight, it always was.

Therefore he knew he had to do something of those bats. So when he nested himself with the very
awake and content baby on his bed, he took the bat drawings and his laptop, then turned it on.

Just to verify if it was truly linked to the creatures, Ed showed her a few -kinda cute, he had to admit-
videos of the animals.

Which could confirm it : she had a crush on bats. It was absolutely adorable, and no way Edward
would ever look at the flying rats the same way again after having witnessed the love his baby felt
towards them.

If Bruce wanted their character to be a Bat-man... then maybe they could have a Bat-baby too ? That
definitely sounded great.

Anyway he knew what little symbols he was going to sew on Steph's next pajamas (because she was
growing up so fast, she will need a new on soon...). Her new one will have little black bats on a
purple background. Good decision.

When she yawned in his arms and became apparently less thrilled by the pictures, Edward opened a
new e-mail page and wrote to Bruce to tell him he wanted to adopt his Batman.

It was not very long after the end of their dialogue before Steph started to get tired again, and he
turned his computer off when he saw she was about to fall asleep.

She had been very active tonight, and for longer than usual, no wonder she was tired now.

He carefully placed her in her cradle next to his bed, and made sure the blankets were well adjusted over her little shape. December was almost there, the temperatures started to be a bit too cold for his liking already, and he could not risk his baby to catch a cold.

And... Very active at night, hu ?

The thought made him smile as he went back inside his own blankets.

Maybe they were all bats, in the end. Stephanie, Selina, Bruce, him, Jonathan, Pamela and Jervis. All the people in his life were... nocturnal creatures, him included, when he thought about it. Even Arthur and Crystal were in their way.

"Good night... again, my little Batgirl...", he whispered tenderly to the toddler, asleep in her cradle.

Batgirl. What a very odd, yet strangely appropriate nickname for his precious daughter.

He was still smiling when he fell asleep, for the second time of the night.

"Are you aware that you look nervous ?", Ed teased him when he spotted Bruce in the library's first floor, sitting into an old armchair.

The older teen glared at him.

"Good afternoon to you too.", he muttered, apparently not in the best of mood. "And I don't look 'nervous'. I was starting to think you forgot about today."

Edward arched an eyebrow.

"It's twenty minutes earlier than the hour we agreed on.", he retorted, checking the time on his phone. "I wasn't expecting you to be there already..."

Then he frowned slightly.

"Since how long are you waiting here, exactly ?"

"... Nevermind.", he answered, a bit embarrassed now. "Should we get to work ?"

"Sure..."

But even if he found his attitude very strange, Edward didn't comment as they climbed the stairs and went to a less frequented story, before heading for a free table in the bookshelves.

"No one ever comes to this politic department.", Ed thought useful to explain with a smile as they sat on their chairs. "And even the few students who do never venture in the marital legislations shelf. What means it's the best place to enjoy a bit of quiet."

Bruce smiled faintly, looking at the heavy volumes surrounding them. Most of them were covered by a thin layer of dust, proof that indeed, they didn't travel much lately.
"Yes, I can get why no one read those..."

Then he turned to the redhead at his right, wondering.

"Don't tell me you read about marital legislations?"

Ed chuckled.

"I don't. Well... not anymore, I can't learn anything in these old codex that I don't already know."

"... about marital legislations.", Bruce repeated, feeling quite puzzled by the thought of Edward interested by the subject.

But the young genius nodded.

"It's not the only thing I read about, far from it, but it's on the list, yes. I always loved to learn the legislations. Not that I agree with everything, Hell no, but I like the idea of rules directing life. It's... very reassuring, to see the world as something irrational and chaotic..."

"What is there 'reassuring' in that?!"

"The second part of my sentence if you let me finish.", Ed huffed before he went on: "The world being something messy, then, because of people living in it. But if you have rules what need to be followed, then no matter how dumb and evil humanity is, things can still run. And we can still live instead of letting disorder taking over."

"... You aren't an anarchist, then."

It may wasn't the smartest deduction ever, Bruce had to voice it. Because really, he still had no idea what political body Edward supported, or what philosophy he agreed on.

"I am not.", he quietly confirmed. "Which doesn't mean I agree with the way some laws are applied, and the way some aren't. Especially in Gotham. But I don't support anarchy, and never will. Because I disagree entirely with the principle of its idea. What has nothing to do with a bunch of crazy screaming revolution all over the country, this is just the idea TV shows want us to believe nowadays. No, at the origin, anarchy meant to have faith in people and trust them to live by themselves in peace without laws or a Government watching over them. It's more of an utopia than an actual political view, of people who would be civilized enough to not need laws anymore. And I'm the opposite of an optimist when it comes to trust humans."

Bruce wasn't expecting a lesson in sociology, but all he could do was to nod slowly.

"I knew what 'anarchy' meant, unlike most people who think it's only about chaos. I studied about it a while ago."

"So I played teacher for nothing, right?", Ed guessed and the other one smiled.

"I'm afraid that for once, I may know just as much as you on the area."

Oh, that was a challenge then?

"Wanna bet? The word 'anarchy' comes from the ancient greek term 'anarkhia', formed with 'arkhé', meaning 'the one who rules', 'the chief who has the power'; and the negation 'an' being the prefix meaning 'without'. Litteraly, it was 'rulling without the head' at first.", Edward started to list, talking very fast. "Lao Zi wrote about it in his Dao de jing, the 'book of the path and virtue' litteraly, around
500 before Jesus.-Christ, the date still isn't certain. He theorized a peaceful society which could only be constructed by anarchy with autonomous people working individually without any rules or Government."

"Interesting.", Bruce stated, his smile still on.

"You already knew ?!"

"I learnt it once.", he answered, somehow proudly. "Even though I admit I didn't remember the tittle of Lao Zi's book."

Edward huffed dismissively.

"What good is a reference if it isn't complete ?"

"... That's the kind of comment a student fears to see written on his homeworks."

"Well, this is something I can't relate to. It never happened to me."

This time the both of them laughed lightly.

"That I believe.", Bruce approved short afterwards. "But if you aren't an anarchist yet you know all of this about the philosophy, then what do..."

"I don't support a thesis.", Ed answered, shrugging his shoulders. "I can't agree with the concept of anarchy, but it's far from being the most terrible politic opinion..."

Then he pursued, his disgust about the point of view clearly audible in his tone :

"For example, there is nothing worse than communism."

The same disgusted expression appeared on Bruce's face at the mention, and he vividly approved :

"I completely agree on that !"

They shared a somehow accomplice glance. It was always easier to be friends, or even simply colleagues, with someone having a similar vision about politics.

Or, no vision at all, in Selina's case. At least she couldn't disagree and debate with him about his ideas, since it just bored her to hear about that stuff. So no risk to break a friendship because of divergent opinions.

"I didn't find a faction which matches with what I believe in yet.", Edward kept telling. "So for now... I am my own political party. And when I'll be in age to vote, all I know is that I don't support everything in an actual caucus' program for now. To have something I agree on, I need to do a patchwork of various parties from the ones I only keep what I find interesting and let the rest aside."

"... That is to say, you'll never vote.", Bruce translated, and his coworker sighed a little.

"Precisely."

They shared a smile.

"I agree on this point, though. It's very hard to find something that completely matches with our thoughts.", the dark-haired teen concluded, and it sounded like a good closure for this unplanned political digression.
So, his laptop on, Edward placed the drawings on the table in front of Bruce before opening a software on his computer.

"I still don't like the clowns.", he started with his formal tone. "I'm sure we can find a better picture for our antagonists. The main quality our hero is gonna benefit of is his cleverness, he's a detective before anything else. So I was more tempted by giving him an evil mastermind as his opponent, instead of a mad couple of laughing acrobats."

"An evil mastermind... ?", Bruce repeated, pondering.

Then he smirked.

"You mean, you want to draw a portrait of yourself ?"

Edward blushed slightly. The sight was adorable, and it provoked the usual reaction in Bruce's head, what is to severely order himself to think about something else.

"I am not... 'evil'.", he protested, but not putting much force into the argument. "I just hate 99, 99% of people, because they are stupid, mean, brutes and bullies. But I don't want them killed or anything either, I mean... I hate them, I really do, but even if I could one day, in a situation, I know I won't take advantage of anything and try to destroy them. None of them. Not even the ones who hurt me personally. I am not evil.", he stated again, this time more determined. "I just feel like I'm... a stranger, who doesn't fit in the system. It does not mean I want to blow it up. Only that I will need a bit more time than the average people to... find my place."

Bruce hadn't been expecting the previous anarchy class, but he was even less expecting this. My God, it sounded like a confidence or a... very personal thing to reveal. And it coincided so much with his own feelings, it was almost disturbing.

"... That's how I feel too.", he ended up admitting, in a low voice. "About... being an 'alien' and not understanding why would I be the one having a problem and why it won't be... the other 99,99% of people."

Eddie smiled.

"The traditional... 'what if you're right and they're wrong ?' picture, with a fish going one way while all the others are going the other way."

Then he winked at him, and as ever ruined the moment:

"Luckily for you, little bat-fish, we are married until the end of this project, so we're gonna be two swimming the same way side by side. Even if of course we'll keep fighting a little, after all what would be the point of being together and agreeing on everything? It would be boring! So well, we keep going the two of us until our game-baby is a full grown-up what can deal with its life on its own. Then I can ask for a divorce."

Bruce shook his head.

"Fine, you aren't 'evil'. But you are a terrible person..."

"I know, right ?"

But they were still smiling.

"All right for the mastermind.", Bruce took back afterwards. "So, what is it going to be? Him
elaborating a web across the city to try catch our hero and make him play along ?"

Edward frowned a bit.

"You already thought of it, didn't you ? The way you just said it, it looked like you have been
nurturing the idea since way back."

"In fact... that was sort of what I wanted to do with that Joker-character. But I think it's more accurate
with a genius who isn't... as weird as my clown was."

This time Ed arched a suspicious orange eyebrow.

"What is it, Wayne ?", he asked bluntly. "You had a crush on a clown one day you went to a circus
and since then you can't get him out of your head ?"

"What ?! No ! Absolutely not !"

From the sensation of his burning cheeks, he was positively sure they were more red than a rotten
tomato.

"I..."

"It's okay.", Edward laughed seeing his distress. "If... green hair and wide, creepy bloody smile are
your thing, I'm not here to judge. It's even worse than my tastes, but after all... A bat and a clown,
what a..."

"I said no !", he almost yelled then, and violently slammed his fist on the table just a few inches apart
from his keyboard.

Bruce was mad, he really was at the moment. But he didn't miss the way Edward jumped out of his
skin at the loud, aggressive movement and instinctively backed off into his chair, as to try escaping
from something. As if he thought he was about to... To get hit, Bruce realized, and he felt horrible
inside.

"I... sorry..."

He removed his arm, awkwardly, as his anger vanished.

"I... it's not like..."

"... It's okay.", the younger one slowly repeated, trying his best to sound casual and assured.

But the hint of fear remained visible in his gaze, even as he forced himself to relax and adopt a mask
of confidence.

"It's... my fault.", he pursued, his tone not steady enough. "I was just teasing you, though. I didn't
mean to... provoke you or give you the impression I was disrespecting anything."

"... I know.", the other one answered, feeling so bad he let his temper take over him like this. "Sorry
for... the very inappropriate reaction."

An awkward silence started after his last sentence, none of them knowing how to break it. Should
they do as if nothing happened ? That was certainly the wisest move, yet how to propose it ? Would
it look... weird, to be the first one to talk after this quite disagreeable episode ?

Silence was definitely more Bruce's thing.
Even if he was obviously ashamed, he won't break and could keep acting stupidly still like a statue for the next hours because he wasn't seeing a better way to interact right now. Edward held back a sigh as he understood it. And well... once again, that was something he just couldn't do.

"Should I..."

He cleared his throat, hating the too weak sound of his voice, before talking again, his tone finally back to normal:

"Should I add a section about 'clowns' in our relationship agreement? Is it a... sensitive topic for you?"

For a moment, he honestly thought his comrade didn't hear him, given how he kept staring at nothing, his face blank of any emotion and his lips closed in a thin line.

Then he spoke at last, just when Ed's patience gave up and he was about to ask again.

"It's not... 'sensitive'.", he responded, even though the strange husky tone his voice adopted proved there was more behind the surface. "It's just... The man dressed as a bat is a bit of self-projection, I admit. And the... Joker is..."

"The projection of someone you met?", Eddie guessed, asking as delicately as he could.

Bruce nodded quietly.

"He was just a... friend. It was a long time ago, it doesn't matter and he certainly does not remember me. It was months since I last thought of him, but... drawing the bat-guy, I just thought I could resurrect him too, in a way. That it could... match, maybe."

Edward blinked slowly.

Okay, as he saw it, it meant Wayne had a first love when he was a teen. Although, who did not? Except for him, but he was an antisocial nerd who spent all his school time being bullied and hating the company of everyone, pupils and teachers alike. So, Wayne had a first love, maybe a first one night stand, with someone -and this 'someone' was a guy then?!- whom his imaginary portrayed as a mad clown.

Now that was something he never saw on the gossip theories...

"I didn't know.", he said cautiously, not wanting to cause another ire. "And if you... really want to see your 'Joker' in our game, I can't actually say no. You have your word in it, after all. I'll just... appreciate if he was not the main antagonist. But we can think of a role he can play nonetheless. And... given how things are evolving, we're gonna change all the plot we started to elaborate the past two weeks and a half; and focus on the characters and their interactions rather than the investigation itself."

"You think so?"

"I do.", he nodded. "I wanted to do an Agatha Christie story while erasing the importance of the characters to have players focused only on the case. But a Hercule Poirot story... without Hercule Poirot, would never be as great, not even close. So.", he took back on his manager voice. "Let's create solid, weird as Hell but somehow sympathetic characters and an investigation around them, not the other way around. With a flying rat looking for clues, a genius leaving... I don't know, question marks on his way to lead him to a trap, and your couple of crazy clowns in love dancing somewhere."
He was already thrilled by the idea.

"But I want other characters as well. If we are going to do a circus of mentally ill freaks who just wanna have fun but are still intelligent people who have a sort of moral... we will need an all Gallery of rogues."

Bruce started to feel the excitement as well.

"You seem way too pleased by the idea of having multiple villains in costumes.", he couldn't help but tease a bit in return, to what Ed answered by a smug grin.

"What can I say ? I may not consider myself an evil person, it doesn't mean I can't have fun with freakshows like everyone."

"The 'like everyone' just includes the two of us, you do realize it, right ?"

His smirk just grew wider as he answered :

"Then it's just you and me against the world, honey."

Bruce laughed.

But will certainly not admit he liked the idea very much.

"May I know what changed your mind ?", he asked later, as they were talking about the kind of characters they could add in their project.

"I... thought of it.", came the prudent answer. "And decided that maybe..."

"Why can't I have the truth ?", he cut off, but softly.

The ginger looked at him, faking a surprised expression.

"What are you..."

"Quit lying, Edward..."

And Bruce immediately knew it hadn't been a wise move. But now that he was at it, he pursued :

"Why can't you just answer by telling the truth, for once ? I'm not even asking for something personal or anything, only to have an answer about why you went from 'this all bat-deal is a nonsense and an insult to my investigation game' to 'it's great, let's keep it and we'll even add other little friends for him' !"

"... I never presented it like that. Nor for the Bat neither for the others."

"You are not sincerely gonna tell me I imagined your expression yesterday ? I thought I was some sort of brat showing you the most stupid thing you ever saw..."

This time Edward frowned, and he crossed his arms on his chest.

"So what ?!", he retorted, his patience already snapping. "I didn't criticize, I politely told you I didn't want these designs for my characters, and you didn't take offence at the moment. So why now, while we are working on your idea in the end, are you trying to create a problem ?! It doesn't make sense !"

"They are our characters, in our story for our project.", he corrected. "Stop trying to bring everything
to yourself. And I'm curious, yes, now that you seem so interested by all this. Why do you validate my Man-Bat today whilst you thought it was appalling yesterday ?"

Edward forced the anger to retract. It had never been easy for him, but even if Wayne suddenly wanted to ruin the mood for no reason, that was something he didn't want to do. Then he thought of something. So he smirked, and said smugly :

"I don't validate your 'Man-Bat'. Not yesterday, not today, not tomorrow. But what I do want to see in our project, is a Batman."
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

"Friendship is far more tragic than love. It lasts longer."
- Guess who said that ? Oscar Wilde !
All hail the king ; )

Chapter Notes

I'm back at having strong Scriddler feels lately... and I thought it could be interesting to see how Edward would react to a few changes occurring in the relationships between his friends in this story.
Feel free to let me know what you think : )

See the end of the chapter for more notes

December arrived, with its cold weathers, its grey skies and its nights falling before 6 pm.

But it also brought the usual bustle of the end of the year, with the Christmas lights starting to get settled up everywhere in town, the supermarkets providing all the celebration items, and of course the traditional Christmas market opening.

Edward had never been a big fan of how people turned hysterical around the end of December, for Thanksgiving, Halloween, or the 4th of July. Because hysterical meant more humans outside, more strangers talking loudly everywhere he went, more musics coming from the houses and the streets until later in the night, more drunk folks spreading over the sidewalks, more groups screaming insults to the police, more bullies yelling provocative suggestions to young men and women who walked a bit too close to where they were... All of this meant even less quiet than what already saturated his mind, and made his blood boil with anger during the rest of the year every single day.

He didn't like the way people seemed to be far more numerous everywhere outside ; neither did he appreciated how the collective hysteria could be felt in the air.

But he enjoyed the celebrations themselves !

As a child, around Christmas he always managed to find free food, more or less stolen at the Christmas markets or given by adults when he asked politely, since charity was 'the mood of this holiday' and he was a skinny, starving kid plainly freezing in his too thin coat, most of the time with a few visible bruises on his body and face. He never begged in the streets, that was something he just never could bring himself to do. But during the days before the 25th, it... was different. It didn't feel like begging, and it was the only time of the year when people actually gave something not out of pity, but simply because they were happier and more lighthearted than at any other moment of the year.

So well, it was an irreversible fact : he loathed people and how they behaved in the everyday life.
But he was just like anyone else when December came: feeling so sincerely cheered by the prospect of the incoming Christmas day.

It was going to be the third one he'll spent in Selina's company, they will start decorating her flat during the week-end.

Moreover, this Christmas had something... extra special.

For the reason that it will be Stephanie's first Christmas.

And Edward was so very both excited and proud to be there with her to live this experience. Everyone was, actually. Selina for sure, but so were the infant's parents.

They were making efforts, the two of them. He never especially held Arthur and Crystal in his heart, but it wasn't as if they were bad persons. In truth they were... the average kind, and this was the only reason why Selina and him had a few difficulties considering them as 'friends'.

Because the Browns could not be thoroughly called 'outsiders' or 'freakshows'. So it was a bit harder for Eddie and Selina to recognize the couple as belonging to the same specie as theirs.

However, Christmas had this little... magical influence on everybody. Just before the beginning of the month, Ed noted with a certain pleasure that Arthur was doing his best to behave as a good parent. He had been, from time to time, ever since Stephanie's birth; but to be honest she was not born neither in the best situation nor in due course for her family. Crystal didn't want of a child in the first place, getting pregnant had been more of an accident than anything else. And Art was faced with other kind of complications: after he get fired because of a quarrel with his boss last year, he had a hard time finding a job he managed to keep.

He wanted to host his own television show, that was his dream for years now, but fulfilling it was way more complicated than he thought it would be. After he get fired, he worked a little here and there, but had to change jobs a lot and was not, of course, assured to find a new one. So even though Crystal still had her nurse profession, it was only a part-time work, with not many hours of service and a low profitable time schedule. She wasn't working at the operating theatres, only the security interventions towards the injured people who arrived at the hospital, she didn't have the required skills to participate in all kind of procedures. She worked at the reception desk rather than at assisting surgeons. That is to say, her salary, although very decent when Art had himself a revenue and they could cumulate theirs, was not as worthwhile now that her husband was working low-paid jobs. And well, with her pregnancy her salary had been cut off for the last months.

The incomes varied from one month to another these times, and rarely at their advantage. For now they managed to keep the house, but for how much longer was an unsolved problem what could cause complications in the incoming months.

Consequently, it had not been the best time to welcome the arrival of a child.

But... they were finally making it right.

He wouldn't have bet on him, but strangely it was Arthur whom showed the more parental affection since a few weeks, whilst Crystal was still at her cold attitude and this, sad but real, distance she imposed between her and her daughter. Edward had read about it, he knew the symptoms. It occured that a mother... didn't like her newborn. Especially in the cases when the said mother had not been wowed by a pregnancy.

Seeing your baby for the first time is something stressful for parents who had in mind this diagnosis.
Because it happened, even for parents who were decided to have a child, that the mother had this... recoil, during her first meeting with her newborn. Usually followed by a form of depression, more or less severe depending on the person, when having to take care of the baby. Combined with the feeling that the said baby didn't 'love' its birther, or that it is not... as it was supposed to be, and the proximity between a mother and her child felt alien to the parent whom will then fail to establish a bond.

And if she couldn't bring herself to try creating it almost at first sight, it was infrequent she managed to come back to this initial, almost instinctive refusal and overcome it in order to change her vision of her infant.

It was a sociological fact, something recorded since forever all over the world.

Nevertheless, Edward couldn't help but think Stephanie had been truly unlucky her mother fell within this category.

Crystal still failed to be comfortable around her child, and couldn't hold her in her arms more than a few minutes without having to put her back somewhere then leave the room to calm down. He hoped this issue will improve, and that she'll succeed establishing soon a healthier relationship with Stephanie. May this will ameliorate when she won't be a 'baby' anymore?

Right now it was fine with him, though. He could play mother when he was with her daughter.

And Arthur started to enhance his behaviour at acting like a father. It was a wonderful change and a huge effort from him, as well as one Edward was openly appreciative and supportive of, and he never missed an occasion to let him know. The man was truly intent on keeping it that way.

It was delightful, honestly.

Therefore, everything felt lighter now that the end of the year was coming, bringing its light, warm ambiance and traditional celebrations.

Even his three scientists almost acted friendly towards him.

He suggested they decorated the laboratory for the holiday, and met a strict refusal from Pamela, who advanced towards him and yelled:

"Are you kidding me, child ?!", she vividly exclaimed, pointing an accusative finger to his chest and forcing him to take a few steps backwards. "No way we'll ever support this mad campaign of botanical genocide that happens at this awful time of the year!"

"... Okay, no need to get angry!", he tried to defend himself.

But truth is, she was scary as Hell, her green eyes shinning wildly and her face tensed.

The fact that her voice sounded like a sharp, merciless blade cutting through the air didn't help, neither did the fact she was taller than him -who was not, though ?...- and so looked down to him.

"What about... a plastic Christmas tree then ?!", he tried, while noticing from the corner of his eye the amused -creepy but somehow nice- smile Jonathan was wearing as he witnessed the scene, while Jervis stared wide-eyed.

The two men were not going to interfere, they had too much fun just observing how he was going to survive Pamela on his own.
Thanks for the support...

"Or... an alive tree !", he took back, eventually thinking of the better option. "I saw they sell a few small potted firs ! About this height.", he indicated, gesturing a bit under forty centimeters tall with his hands. "We'll buy a living one then, and you could take it to your garden after Christmas. Consider it's a present !", he emphasized, now quite pleased by his solution. "And it's a dwarf specie, so it won't grow much more.", he insisted when he saw the idea was slowly making its way in her mind. "We could decorate it as a normal Christmas tree, while giving it water and having a... real little creature with us, rather than a dead body wrapped up in tinsel and baubles."

Saying this sentence, he realized he just ruined Christmas for everyone planning to buy a cut tree and put it in their living-room.

But he reconciled Isley with the spirit !

"That... could work.", she admitted, astonished she considered saying 'yes' to something related to the holiday.

Because for the rest, as she expressly told him, she hated Christmas, always had.

Why had he not even been surprised... ?

In the end, to everyone's great disbelief, Pamela agreed to have a few celebration items in their lab, as long as it was in a reasonable amount and not... looking 'too much'. To quote her, "not too disgustingly sweet and filled with warm sentiments". And the plants had to be alive, of course.

Crane reacted to the abnormal behaviour by inquiring if she was not sick, and Tetch started laughing then happily yelled "It's a Christmas Miracle !".

It had been a very funny night.

Thus the next one, so at the end of the first December week, Edward brought, as promised, an alive small fir in a red pot, along with some decorations Jervis and him enjoyed placing all over the lab.

Pamela and Jonathan's exaggerated comments about how this holiday was a terrible celebration just added to the light mood, as Jervis and Ed had a lot of fun wrapping tinsels on the scientific equipments.

Even the two 'reluctant to any kind of fun of any sort' doctors had a good time in the end. They didn't work much that night, instead interacted as if they were actual friends, just enjoying each other's company. Jervis had brought tea (he always brought tea...), but this time along with gingerbread and pastries in the shape of various typical Christmas items. He baked these himself, and was a great cook ; it wasn't the first time Ed had the pleasure to taste his recipies. Since they all enjoyed their interactions that night, they agreed to institute they'll do a little celebration in the laboratory during the hours they spent together, from today until Christmas. While trying to work a little as well.

It was early in the month, but they decided they'll have their own holidays for the following weekends.

It really felt like they were friends.

And it was beautiful.

Wayne and their common project went from 'thrilling prospect' to 'background thought' in his mind, since they had a lot of homeworaks in other classes anyway, so it didn't progress much the next week.
But most of all, because it seemed that all the people in his life were happy this month, and he loved sharing time with each of them... However Bruce Wayne was not one of them. Not really.

He was not that important to him, was not at the same place the others were in his little world. In his heart.

And it was not like Bruce would ever want to held this kind of importance to him, so Edward won't waste sentiments caring for someone who only saw him as a mean to an end, moreover for a school purpose. Ed was a scientist, he could control these chemical reactions called 'feelings' and choose towards whom he expressed them. At least that was what Jonathan theorized once, and he truly wanted to believe it was possible. While being perfectly aware of just how much it was never that easy, not even close.

__________________

Only two weeks of class left before the Christmas holidays now. Wayne remained quite friendly but not very present, and they advanced slowly in their elaboration. They had other things to take care of; even though their game was more motivating than the other courses, it wasn't a priority for the moment.

It currently was Sunday night, he just arrived at his friend's apartment floor, his fists still clenched and wheezing a bit, both from having climbed the stairs too fast -won't that damn elevator ever be back in working order?!- and because in spite of the cold temperature outside, his brain still gave him the sensation of being on fire. Not the intellect kind of fire, the one occurring when he was working on complex themes and performing calculations. The other one, the blinding one, which provoked a strong ringing in his ears and kept him from having any kind of logical or reasonable thought.

Saying Edward was in a 'bad mood' was an euphemism.

A fact really, really far from reality and from how he felt right now.

He violently opened the door, with way more force than when in one of his usual moods. He hoped he'll find the flat empty... then his gaze met Selina's deep green eyes shooting him a glare.

Sitting on the couch, holding her phone to her left ear, she put a finger on her lips to gesture him to be quiet.

"No es un problema.", she answered in the cell phone. "Vamos a verlo con Miguel, la otra noche fue su culpa, debia vigilar a la policia en el barrio. [It's not a problem. We'll see this with Miguel, the other night was his fault, he was supposed to monitor the police arrival in the neighborhood.]

What was the name of this girl she talked to again? Carla? Clara?... One way or the other. He never met her or her brother Miguel, so he wasn't going to bother remember these names.

Even though she was an outsider as well, whom may wasn't looking like someone having an active social life, Selina hanged out... quite a lot, in fact. Most of the time, with pretty unsavoury people. As far as he knew, the brother and sister she was currently associate with were junkies who stole in the stockpiles of a few minor dealers.

Nothing too dangerous, she had far worse contacts... Starting by the other guy, the tall Cuban she was seeing since a few months for training. Bane. He was a mobster and an addict to street battles and boxing rings, from what he earned lot of money by trying to break his opponents.
The kind of people one does not want to piss off, or even to be in the same room as. But what was Selina doing with him? Fighting! A lot. And since she was better than him but he had a complete battle formation, plus wasn't a bad teacher, one thing leading to another they spent long hours in the ring learning new moves.

Edward went to see their training a few times.

And it was scary, to ascertain just how much his sister was an overskilled... ninja or something. Not that he had no occasions to take note of her impressive skills already, of course; but it had been positively disturbing to see her fighting against a giant, muscular man and winning.

He felt so proud.

And Bane and her actually became good friends.

So well, he wasn't that bad of a contact; and she never had problems with him or because of him. Quite the contrary, he was always willing to help and genuinely liked her. So no, Ed held no grudge against Bane. However he was not approving of her other activities with a few people... But whenever he told her she should stop hanging out playing thief with dealers; she retorted he should stop hanging out playing genius -she always used the term 'lab rat', but he much preferred genius, thank you very much...- with mad scientists. Needless to say, none of them ever won the argument and they just stayed at... quarreling about it.

"Estoy en casa mia. [I'm home.]", she was saying casually. "Podemos planificar la próxima operación mañana en tu escondite. [We can plan the next operation tomorrow at your hideout.]"

Edward smiled a bit at the phrasing and the mention of an 'hideout'. Selina must have been a Secret Agent or a mercenary in another life, given how she spoke like she was on a mission with her various mischief coworkers, even if she never did anything too dangerous or what could get her in real trouble. A cop yelling after her? Check. One night in police custody? Twice, actually. And the GCPD had her fingerprints and photo since she get caught stealing at a fancy jewellery in a supermarket... when she was nine years old.

That is to say, nothing compared to what a lot of Gotham children already collected in their record. And she was a far more skilled survivor than anyone else in this town, so she rarely get caught.

Ed wasn't sure why he was standing in the entrance of the apartment without moving at all, the door now closed behind him. His coat and shoes were still on, and he listened without paying more attention than necessary to the end of his best friend's communication, not knowing what else to do.

Maybe it was because of the Spanish? He loved hearing Selina speak in the language her mother used at her home, back when she was a little girl who had a family, with her Latina mother and American father; so when she heard both being spoken daily in her house.

He didn't know her at the time; she was already... an adult, when they met; but he knew enough about her life story. He knew... everything in fact, and so did she about his. So yes, he liked listening to her second language very much. It always felt... relaxing. What was paradoxical since Spanish was spoken faster than English, but it appeased him.

Bane being Hispanic too, they conversed in a sort of self-made Spanglish together, it was always amusing to listen to them. Even though a bit hard to follow from time to time, since they changed way too many words from both languages, to the point they somehow created their own. And sure, it wasn't rare that Spanish words bloomed in her English when they were just the two of them.
So he ended up learning most of it. Having a bilingual best friend helped getting motivated to learn her second language.

Including the binary encoding to write computer codes -because it was a language in itself, no one would ever convince him otherwise !-, he currently spoke eight languages.

Whatever Selina said, Klingon was a very serious one to speak. And of course no, "sign language and Morse code" *don't* "count for one" ! It wasn't at all the same ! Which led to a quite long row between them about the exact calculation of Edward's multilingualism. He added that he had more than the basics in greek, and knew almost as much in latin, but she just brushed the argument aside. "Basics don't mean you speak it", she had categorically objected, and he had no other choice but to concede her that.

Their fight about the subject had been a comical one though ; it ended with her trying to bury him into the bed's pillows while tickling him mercilessly, and soon he was too out of breath and laughing his head off he couldn't do anything else but cry for mercy between two loud laughters.

He had quite an asthma attack afterwards, but it had been worth it.

Cheered up by the very pleasant memory, he focused back on the present reality just when Selina cut off the communication.

"... ¡Claro! Hasta luego. [Of course ! See you.]", she saluted before hanging up.

Thereupon she turned back to him, her shining eyes quickly checking him over.

And she frowned. Cats *know* when there's something wrong with their human-pets, don't they ? He smiled slightly. No doubt, sometimes *this* was the exact nature of their relationship.

"What happened, kitten ?"

Her voice was seldom soft, but it held this caring, *devoted* tone when she addressed him or Stephanie. Or both.

"I..."

Without warning, the burden settled back in full force on his shoulders as he recalled the scene he witnessed. How had he managed to do the bus ride from the laboratory to Selina's flat again ? It wasn't a long one, he could even have done the trip by walking if now wasn't a cold December night in a dangerous city.

So, so cold...

"Eddie ?", she tried again, worried this time, while standing up and taking a few steps towards him. "What have they *done* ?!"

No, not 'worried'.

*Furious.*

He saw the spark of ire in her iris already, and albeit her voice wasn't sharp yet, it was just a matter of time.

"Nothing !", he attempted to reassure her, wanting to dampen her anger before it reached its peak. "I swear, Selina ! They haven't done anything. Or... not intentionally. Not... against me."
He bit his lip, the tears forming again in his eyes.

Why did he go to Lina's place ?! It was Sunday night, of course she will be at home... at least there was a huge possibility she would be. Why couldn't he just... stay outside, or go to the Browns house instead ? Even if Art and Crystal were there, they could have...

"Edward. What happened ?"

He let her lead them both to the sofa, then helping him take his coat off.

Selina Kyle was a cat. Meaning she never felt guilt or anything close to this sentiment, but he easily understood at her expression she was a bit... bothered, let's say it that way, to have missed the fact he wasn't alright when he opened the door.

Because if she had payed attention, she won't have kept talking with her colleague, and would have taken care of him instead.

The vision of her being upset at herself that way was... comforting. It made him feel safe. It made him feel wanted.

And right now, he truly needed to be reminded he mattered to someone ; so that he could forget how he failed to matter in a... certain way, to a certain man.

"If they didn't do anything.", she took back, forcing her tone to be soothing. "Then why are you crying ?"

I am not..., he wanted to protest, but truth is he was crying. To deny it would look a bit silly then, won't it be ?

Getting he won't answer, Selina tried another way to gather information.

She was not a 'patient' person. Far from it.

But she made the effort for Eddie.

"Why are you here so early ?", she asked gently. "Did they... ask you to leave ?"

He heard in her tone that she tried to control her wrath, and to keep sounding caring and not just infuriated.

She was at this again, playing mother when he needed comfort.

He offered her a sweet smile. Of course it was by Selina's side he was seeking for solace. How could he have gone to anyone else... ?

"It's..."

His voice was weak. It almost seemed broken.

Was that truly how his heart felt ? Because if it was the case, then it was just... stupid. And stupid is something he was not.

He shouldn't feel heartbroken. He shouldn't... feel anything about it. The only thing he should sense was surprise, he could even allow himself to be a bit shocked.
But not... betrayed!

It wasn't like they were in love. Wasn't like their interactions could have *ever* been called even 'related to vaguely romantic'. They have never been anything more than colleagues, Ed was not certain they could even be considered 'friends'. And the doctor never... made him believe he was attracted to him by any means, or tricked him into thinking the sentiments could be mutual.

Before tonight Edward was not tangibly sure he actually had... those sort of feelings for him.

He never felt them before. How could he have guessed these were... akin to love?

"Crane and Tetch...", he confessed hoarsely, after a too long moment of silence.

His chin shook a little. He won't hesitate to tell her, he wanted her to know. *Needed* her to know, so that she could console him.

However it... cost him, to formulate a proper sentence. It felt alien in his mouth, tasted bitter and the words pricked his tongue as a dozen of invisible needles trying to drill through his throat.

"I...", he tried nonetheless, the wild words hurting as they left his lips to form in open air. "Tonight again, we were *socializing* together rather than working on thesis... The Christmas spirit and all."

She nodded quietly at his attempt of an explanation, gently brushing the orange hair out of his eyes, touching his forehead in the process to check him for temperature. He had no fever, so apparently he didn't lie on that point: the freaks had not given him any kind of homemade drug/toxin/medication looking like *poison*.

"I simply told them I wasn't feeling well, and I left the lab.", he pursued, helplessly reliving the scene, not managing to chase the images away.

"... Why ? What did you see ?"

How could she understand so fast? How could she...

He hugged her, straightaway burying his face on her shoulder, and she wrapped her arms around him.

"It's okay, Eddie.", she shushed him in her best comforting voice. "Just... tell me what it was. I won't say anything, I just want to know."

He nodded weakly.

As ever, she smelled this unique mix of leather, rich perfume, roses...

He managed to calm himself as he breathed her scent. She smelled of... home.

"I saw Jervis and... Jonathan.", he revealed quietly, slowly relaxing.

He wasn't crying anymore, but now he felt so... sad...

"What did they do ?", his mommy asked softly, stroking his hair the way he liked with one hand, while drawing small circular motions on his back with the other one. "Did they say anything to you ?"

"No... They didn't notice I was there. I... I wasn't supposed to see them. I wasn't..."
It was pathetic, wasn't it? He was pathetic, for reacting like a high school teen being rejected by his crush.

Why was he feeling so... betrayed...

"What did they..."

"I saw them kissing.", he ended, his voice breaking after the last word. "They... they were kissing, Lina."

He pulled away from the hug, just enough to meet her gaze.

"They... they are in love.", he had to clarify, his voice shaking a little. "Jonathan is in love! And it's with... with someone else..."

She sighed, and kept stroking his hair.

"He is an adult, Eddie.", she patiently responded, doing her best to sound supportive. "And so is Tetch. They knew each other for years before you met them, did they not?"

"Yes but..."

"Eddie."

Her tone was more serious as she pursued:

"You know what I think about your trio of science bros."

"... I do."

He felt hurt, and wasn't tempted by hearing the usual speech about why he should stop seeing them. The last thing he wanted right now was to argue with her.

"You know how much I hate them.", she went on, but her voice wasn't aggressive, she was simply reminding it as a matter of fact. "But they never... abused of anything related to this area. They never played with you on a sentimental level."

Wait, was Selina defending them?! When had the world lost its head...?

"And you know...", she took back with a smile. "You are certainly the reason Crane and Tetch finally get together. Isley and them, they were weirdos who never spoke to anyone else and had never been willing to do so before they crossed path with you. There you arrived, out of nowhere, and suddenly they accept a child in their group. It was almost a year ago now, and it has been a huge step forward in their 'global socializing process' as you call it."

"True, but that doesn't..."

"And now, they are kissing in the lab!", she exclaimed.

If he didn't know better, he would say she was amused.

She didn't like them, and won't ever pretend to appreciate anything about them. But they never hurt her Edward by playing with him this way. Sure thing, as his big sister / confident, and as someone who had experience in romance, she deduced, since a few months now, the nature of Eddie's feelings towards Jonathan.
That he never asked, or never even truly thought these could be 'love' didn't mean she failed to perceive the truth where he didn't figure it out. When she realized, she just hoped this won't last long. That it was just a few weeks-long crush at most, and that he will quickly find interest in something else. In someone else, in this case.

But now it was clear he didn't.

"You should feel proud of them.", she told him nonetheless. "You definitely are the major reason they look partly human now, and express feelings."

"... The irony isn't lost on me.", he acknowledged with a sad smile.

At least it was the beginning of a 'feeling better' mood. She winked, and pursued:

"Next objective : get Isley a girlfriend, or... a friend who's a girl, let's not try too hard, who has no green leaves."

"... Now that sounds impossible."

There he was. Really smiling.

Selina purred, then lovingly rubbed her cheek along the side of his head.

"I much prefer when you look happy, Eddie-baby. So, so adorable..."

He closed his eyes and relaxed completely, his mind pacified as his Cat was acting... well, like a cat.

His mom was a cat wearing leather, smelling of roses and strong perfume, who played ninja, warrior and thief in the streets during her free time.

And it was perfect that was.

"You look awful. What happened to you ?"

Edward just glared at his coworker, on Monday as they met.

"Had a tough night.", he only half grumbled.

The last thing he wanted right now was to have Wayne knowing about his... current indisposition.

But the older one frowned, obviously not getting he should just give up.

"What does that mean ?"

Another death glare.

"Do I look like I want to talk about it ?!"

"... You don't."

Good then, he was not going to make a problem and they could simply...

"And this is precisely why I know you 'want to talk about it'.", he categorically quoted, with a
determined look.

So Credit Card elected to play dumb. What a pain...

"I don't.", he repeated, but not as upset as he thought the question would make him feel. "I really don't. Please don't make me."

Bruce's eyes widened a moment, clearly not expecting the pleading. It obviously made him uncomfortable, and all he could do afterwards was to awkwardly apologize:

"Sure... Sorry."

"It's no big deal.", Ed tranquilly assured, and his partner indeed scrapped it.

What was for the best.

Even if he was not an idiot, he took note all too well of the way Wayne seemed to store what he just heard, or what he simply guessed about the situation would be a more appropriate wording.

Either ways, he was not going to let it go.

How wonderful...

"I had a few ideas for the final scene.", Bruce said later.

If they elaborated how their investigation will evolve, they still didn't agree about which ending possibilities they wanted to propose in the game.

It was a tricky part, and they shouldn't think of it in advance, will preferably make the ending after they created everything else about the game material itself.

"I'm listening.", Ed muttered, effectively ready to log what he was about to hear, but not even bothering to do as if he was interested.

It was childish, but he was in a terrible mood. And he acted like a smug brat all the time, so it was not gonna be now that he felt far from fine that he'll try being 'respectful'.

"... Are you even listening to me ?!"

Ed turned a bored gaze to the origin of the very frustrated voice.

"I am. And if you want my opinion, here it comes : you are not proposing anything even slightly interesting or making any sense. If I were you, I would be ashamed."

That was unnecessarily dismissive and mean, he was aware of it.

Bruce's reaction was not the one he'd expect after being insulted, though. The billionaire frowned, and rather than counter the provocation by getting mad, he asked practically softly:

"What happened last night ? You... don't sound like yourself at all."

Edward glared at him once again.

"And what would 'myself' sound to you ?! It's not like you knew anything about me to begin with !"

The pain that could be seen flashing in the metallic blue eyes, even for less than a few seconds, made
him feel truly bad. Why had he tried to hurt him on purpose...?

"I didn't mean..."

"Didn't mean what?", Bruce sighed, sounding more tired than infuriated. "You are right, we aren't friends, we aren't close... This is established, can we stop repeating it over and over?! I simply asked what was wrong because that was the nice, normal thing to do. Why would you take it as an affront or an excuse to be hurtful, instead of just answering?! Not because I'm not your... buddy, or whatever friends call each other, means I can't act normally..."

Ed lowered his gaze.

Next thing, he realized he was sorry for him.

"... 'Whatever friends call each other'.", he quoted, meeting again his comrade's eyes.

His voice wasn't cynical, neither was it contemptuous. Instead it remained casual, even though he felt a bit sad.

"You really don't have any friends, then?"

Bruce blushed a bit, and looked away, ashamed. What only confirmed the answer, and Edward felt even more bad he tried to reject his attempt at kindness.

"I have Alfred.", he responded flatly, still looking at nowhere in particular.

Alfred Pennyworth, Edward recalled from reading about the man, both in articles and in the gossip. He was Bruce's butler and his legal guardian since the day his parents died... He had been Thomas and Martha Wayne's closest friend for a very long time, and lived in the manor for years before Bruce's birth.

"Isn't he more of a father than a friend?"

Bruce turned back to him, and his empty look became a surprised one.

Then it just turned even more sad.

"So you... know.", he stated, his tone low and husky.

"... All of Gotham knows about your backstory, Bruce.", he said very softly, almost tenderly.

He had acted like a jerk while Wayne was just trying to be friendly, the very least he could do now was to apologize.

Or at least try to.

So he... put his left hand on his comrade's right one resting on the table. The other didn't pull away, even if Ed noticed the way he tensed a bit, more out of surprise than anything else. He quickly relaxed though, then moved his fingers to interlace theirs together. For a moment they didn't move, just holding hands on the desk.

It was the first time they shared a physical contact. And it felt like... a quite intimate one somehow. Bruce's fingers were warm; warmer than his anyway. It was pleasant to hold them.

Over a whole minute passed, then he was the one to take back:
"I know it doesn't mean much, and that you probably heard it a million times from strangers already, but... Sorry for your loss."

Bruce looked back at him.

His blue eyes weren't tearing, but they were... sad. Yet it was a different kind of sadness now, and it was mixed with a hearty smile.

"I heard it a million times, yes.", he answered, his voice still husky. "But... it means something when it comes from 'almost' a friend."

Edward felt a strange warmth blooming inside his chest. It was the kind of feeling he had with Selina, mainly at the beginning of their friendship. At the time, he couldn't believe how someone like her could want to be friend with... a freak like him. It took him months to realize the feeling was true, that it was mutual and she was not mocking him or not meaning any of the things she told him. That she really cared about him.

And he felt the warmth with Stephanie, though it had been different. He... knew, the first time he saw her at the maternity, that he would do anything to protect her, that this newborn was going to become the most important thing in his life. It was the kind of feeling a loving mother has when she sees her child for the first time.

Right now it was... a third kind of warmth he felt. Closer to Selina's feeling, but with something... else.

His heart wasn't beating this way when he and Selina became friends. He was excited, he was over the moon, he was the happiest he had ever been. Yet at the moment it wasn't... this kind of heartbeat he had.

Edward slowly removed his hand.

"So what are we, then?", he asked, sincerely confused. "Partners? Colleagues? Because I have this kind of relationship with three of mine, and it does not... it's not the same than this... whatever it is we share. I am a scientist, I need to name things, including related to social interactions. I can't just... You have no idea how stressful it is for me, not knowing something or not having a correct label to put on every subject, in all kind of areas!"

He hadn't mean to speak so loudly, and even less to let the anxiety rising, but here he was, feeling now awfully stressed. Why was it so weird to talk with this guy?! Why couldn't he just... ignore him, or if he didn't want to, then treat him the same way he did with Pamela and Jervis?! He liked both of them, in an odd but sincere way, and he wanted to think he had his place in their heart too. They were people whom he enjoyed the company of, yet they were only colleagues and they never...

Or maybe he liked Wayne... the way he liked Jonathan?

What was that even supposed to mean anyway?! He didn't 'like' Crane, not more than Tetch and Isley. He only ended up convincing himself that maybe he could... feel something else than a friendly affection towards the man for the only reason he loved working with him a bit more than with the two others, that he loved his bright intelligence and his sharp, clever sense of humour, loved hearing him talk, loved seeing him smile, even if those were rare sights, and always felt so proud and delighted when he was the one who made him smile! Laugh even! It was enjoyable to be around him, he was smart, funny in his very personal and a bit disturbing way... He had a weird, creepy vision of the way fear controlled people and how it could be used in therapy. But it was okay, despite his scary innuendos and theories, the doctor was also...
Calm down!, he desperately commanded to himself as he felt his breathing rate increasing.

Calm down, calm down, calm down, calm down, calm...

"Edward ? Are you... alright ?"

Great job, Genius. Now Wayne was looking at him like he was an unknown specie of a curiously intriguing animal.

How wonderful...

"... Not really.", he ended up answering, kinda grateful he could focus on talking to distract himself from the beginning of another panic episode.

His right foot was hysterically clapping against the ground below the desk.

"But it's not a problem. Like I said, I just... don't like not being in control. And not knowing some things means not being in control."

The explanation seemed to only make his comrade look more confused.

"I have some... anxiety management issues.", he kept telling, not properly getting why he was revealing a weakness of his, yet he found it appropriate to give Wayne a convincing answer.
"Among other things."

Bruce blinked twice, not grasping either the reason why the information came in the conversation, but keeping it in mind now that it had been given.

"Can I... do something ?", he proposed, not thinking of anything else to say, and Edward smiled faintly.

"No, you can't.", he responded, amused, and far less stressed as they talked. "Don't worry, I am not asking you to play doctor all of a sudden. Just... trying to justify myself, I suppose. Although it's not the best way to do so. In fact, I don't know why I told you ; not that it is exactly a secret, but still..."

Nope, he didn't know.

"I won't use this.", Bruce offered. "Then again, it's not like I had a lot of people to tell."

But he smiled at the end of his sentence, and Ed gave him a small smile in return, looking like an apology.

"I have someone I consider a true, very good friend.", he said, not even thinking it could be wrong to confess this.

What could Wayne do with the information, anyway?

"As for the other people in my life, I..."

Won't tell he became the mother of a baby girl. Bruce could hear about Selina, because she was an adult, because she was a rock and because she won't mind anyway. But he couldn't know about Stephanie.

No one knew about Stephanie.

He never told Jonathan, Pamela and Jervis ; and Selina never talked about her with her contacts.
Only Bane knew, he gave them a rattle as a present when he heard about her, but never actually saw her or expressed the desire to meet her. Good thing, otherwise Ed would have been compelled to refuse to this two meters tall and large giant who was a known thug in the underworld, a visit in the same room as his baby.

"I have colleagues.", he told instead, but saw all too well the frown on Bruce's brow indicating he understood he was lying by omission. "I'm not sure if we are friends, personally that's how I refer to them, but I don't think they see me as one. So there, I'm not gonna act as if I had a normal social life."

They shared an accomplice glance.

"... Did you go to the Christmas market already ?", Bruce asked afterwards and Ed nodded, not getting why he asked.

"I went. It's kinda enjoyable, even I have to admit it. Did you ?"

"Not yet.", he answered, wondering.

Edward understood at the look on his face before he spoke, and he felt all... bizarre inside to be thrilled by the prospect.

"What about we take a look together one day ? It... could be nice.", he said, shyly, and the sight was kinda cute.

He shouldn't say yes.

He shouldn't let Bruce Wayne in, he had no space for another friend. He didn't want of a friend like him, who made him feel so weird and so pleased at the same time, along with being a very stressful person to be around.

"How about we take a look today ?", he raised up, smiling, and it was... very nice to see Bruce's obvious delight at the invitation.

"I would love to."

Chapter End Notes

I saw an headcanon about latina!Catwoman once, and simply loved it. This is where the idea of a bilingual Selina comes from, and I wanted to give her both Latina and American origins.

My Spanish is a poor one, though. Truth be told, I just know a few words and speak very little of it, my only contact with this language had been classes during high school two years ago. So if you're a Spanish speaker, my apologizes if I made mistakes in these short sentences.

And well, since we're at the language talk : English is not my first one either. I'm working on my it, I really want to improve it, but I assume there are mistakes in my writing, so... my apologizes there as well.
And as ever, thank you for reading! ; )
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

"Those who go beneath the surface, do so at their peril."
- Oscar Wilde

Chapter Notes

This teenage Bruce is a mess of chaotic sentiments, awkward attitudes and... other things. He's a bit difficult to portray, but I hope you'll find him realistic in this chapter nonetheless. He's a jerk in the first section, but then the boys get to know more about each other.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"It's called a car. It doesn't bite, doesn't attack, and is not vengeful. You open its doors to get inside, then buckle your safety belt once you're on the seat."

Edward shot him a glare.

"I know what a car is, dummy!", he huffed and Bruce laughed.

"Then why are you looking at it like it was a specie of venomous spider?"

"I'm not.", he grumbled, but his attitude showed just how stressed he was, eying the parked black car.

Bruce lowered his head, in search of the best thing to say in order to convince him to get inside. When he agreed to go to the Christmas market, Edward thought they were going to take the metro like he usually did for this trip. But since Bruce came to school with one of his cars, he naturally proposed to drive them there after their classes. He was not going to take the subway whereas he had a car in the campus' parking lot, that would have been silly.

So here they were, standing in front of the Karma Revero with a very hesitating Nashton who clearly didn't want to enter the vehicle.

"If it is because of the speed.", Bruce clarified, not seeing a better explanation for his reticent attitude. "I drive carefully. Or... I can drive carefully when I want to. Besides, we are going to one of the most animated part of town, a lot of people are going to be outside, so even if it was my intention - which it is not-, I couldn't give you... motion sickness? by driving too fast while there are many drivers and pedestrians around."

"I don't have motion sickness.", he said, but kept watching the car as if it was dangerous.

"So what's the matter?"

"I..."
He bit his lip.

"I've never been inside a stranger's car before.", he admitted.

Bruce couldn't help but feel a bit hurt upon hearing that.

"I am not a stranger...", he objected weakly, and Ed's green gaze met his.

He seemed mildly sorry.

"That's not what I meant. I... You know what, nevermind.", he sighed. "It's not a long drive anyway. And I know the road, I have Gotham's detailed map perfectly memorized in my brain, so if you're doing a swerving, I'll know it."

"... Spooky.", he commented.

"Thank you.", Eddie answered, cheered up and actually taking it as a compliment.

Bruce shook his head fondly, placed himself on the driver seat, then his comrade entered the car as well.

It was only when he started to drive that Bruce fully thought about what was going to happen. He was about to hang out outside with another person. A person he liked. At a Christmas market.

Miss me, Brucie ?, a silky voice whispered in his ear, before it roared with a crazy, hysterical laughter.

His hands clamped the wheel. He did not miss him. He never will.

Not because the green-haired freakshow was the last person he went to a Christmas market with meant he was nervous going with his current partner. They were not the same person. Far from it. End of the discussion.

"I'm glad we're hanging out.", Ed told him, satisfied ; the first words exchanged in the vehicle, and it detracted Bruce from his thoughts.

"You are ?"

The ginger nodded contently, looking at him.

"It's a good way to be distracted, and it can be sympathetic."

"To be distracted from your 'night' ?", Bruce guessed, back at the 'Nashton investigation' mode, and letting the mad clown go laugh somewhere else in the dark corners of his mind.

"Partly.", he conceded. "But I am also happy to spend time with you."

Nope, that definitely wasn't making him blush. Not at all. Not even a bit. And it was not either the reason he felt warm, along with unsure when he spoke again :

"It's making me happy too."

They both smiled a little.

"Do you want to... talk about your night ?", he couldn't help but inquire later, his curiosity needing to be satisfied.
"No.", Ed answered quietly. "But not because I don't trust you.", he added, and Bruce heard at his tone that he said the truth. "Simply because... I'm not sure you'll understand. I fail to understand myself why I was... Why these things happened. Hell, I can't even tell if anything happened to begin with, so..."

"It... looks kinda confused indeed."

"It is.", he acknowledged sadly. "I am... looking for answers, but I don't have enough elements for now. You won't find it interesting anyway."

Bruce felt quite vexed he seemed so convinced by it.

"Maybe I will.", he retorted. "What about... you just tell me in what area it is, and I indicate if I have experience in it in return, so then maybe I can help."

A few seconds passed during the ones he thought about it.

"Deal.", he eventually agreed. "It's about... relationships.", he revealed, less confident already. "And not knowing if what you think you feel towards someone is... the real feeling. Or if it's something else, or if you're wrong. And... what to do with it."

He lowered his eyes, gazing at his hands on his lap, apparently quite sad after he pronounced the words.

Bruce considered it a moment. This described perfectly what he felt towards the young genius, but he couldn't tell him that.

"Are you in trouble?", he rather inquired. "Or... having difficulties communicating with... your girlfriend perhaps?"

Edward sighed loudly.

"I don't have a girlfriend, Wayne. Are you doing it on purpose or are you really that blind?..."

Bruce swallowed, blinking rapidly. It didn't mean...

"I am not in a relationship.", Ed decisively said, giving him an exasperated look. "And if I was, it won't be with a..."

"Okay!", Bruce cut off vividly, a bit too strongly, his heart pounding in his chest. "I don't care! I don't want to know! It was foolish of me to ask!"

"..."

Edward turned to look at the door's window, his fists now clenched on his knees.

Maybe he imagined it, but Bruce was sure he saw tears forming in his eyes just before he angrily turned around.

He felt horrible. But what else was he supposed to do or say?! He didn't want to hear Edward confirm he was... of a certain type. As long as Bruce only very vaguely suspected it, it was fine. But if he confirmed then that would mean...

They stayed silent until he found a free spot to park his car, close enough to the market.

Edward was obstinately looking through the pane, refusing to take his eyes out of the glass.
Bruce knew it was his fault, he had been the one who fucked up this time, now he had to fix it. But he didn't know what to say. And he definitely didn't want to risk learning more about... this area. For some reason, he was glad Edward had no girlfriend, but he didn't want to be faced again with the fact that maybe he wasn't looking for a girl when it came to romantic partners but a...

No. He misunderstood somewhere.

"Do you... still want to go to the market with me ?"

That was the worst catch phrase ever after having been hurtful to someone, Bruce realized it as he asked.

Nevertheless, Edward sighed again and looked back at him. He was not sad or angry, just looking... disappointed.

"I can give it a shot.", he answered. "But I'll appreciate it if you..."

He hesitated over the appropriate formulation.

"I don't have a girlfriend.", he elected to repeat. "Or... that kind of interest for girls. You can stop thinking that, but I guess I can't really blame you for..."

He shook his head.

"Just try not to insult me or look openly disgusted, okay ? You are not the first one to react that way, you are far from being the worst, so just..."

He paused a moment, then said, very softly and not looking at Bruce, almost as if he was talking to himself :

"My friends never make comments like these. They are not... bullies. They are friends."

A bully. Is that how Edward saw him ?

Ashamed, Bruce realized it was exactly how he acted.

"I'm sorry.", he apologized, truly meaning it. "I won't ask again about girls you like, I understand it can be painful if you are... currently experiencing complications."

Ed looked at him with disbelief.

"Wow.", he let out. "This level of denial ?! That's impressive."

Then he exited the car ; Bruce did the same, firmly erasing from his mind the more than obvious truth Edward wasn't even trying to hide.

Nope. Bruce chose to forget about it. Which was... a mature decision...

"Now come in, Wayne !", Ed smiled smugly, apparently leaving their talk inside the car and decided to move on.

That was the best solution indeed, and Bruce was glad he could do the same.
"I used to love all that stuff.", Bruce said, pointing at the chalets offering Christmas items, handmade objects -very pretty and shiny ones-, stuffed toys, various kind of appetizing chocolates in their sheer gift wrapping, or serving hot wine and food to eat on-site.

His tone wasn't sad, neither was it wistful. He spoke about it as if it was a neutral fact, something... normal.

Yet it was not.

What normally constituted eighteen years old doesn't like Christmas ?

"I would enjoy it all way more if there was no one in the alleys.", Edward dithered, rather than making his comrade realize how sad what he just said sounded.

So instead he smiled lightly as they eyed the crowded place, for now only watching the cabins closest to them, not being committed to enter the market itself yet.

"So your ideal vision of a Christmas market is a... ghost city ?", Bruce teased, and Ed laughed.

"I admit the ambiance may won't be as... festive.", he conceded. "But see the positive side of a 'ghost Christmas' : no one would bother you talking loudly, being... here, breathing, moving, or worse : coming too close as if it was normal to press their body against yours in the crowd, with no respect at all for your personal space. No really, people suck, will it be in a Christmas market or not."

"... Why do you hate people like that ?"

Bruce had asked it innocently, it was obvious he was simply curious about it. Edward just shrugged his shoulders.

"Dunno. Certainly because they're loud, mean, and there are too many of them everywhere."

He had fifteen years of life to acknowledge these facts, and he knew they will never change. He didn't appreciate humanity, and was not expecting things to get better. So in the end... it didn't matter that much. It was simply normal.

"Don't get it wrong.", he pursed, still smiling. "I don't want to live in a cave as a hermit far from any civilization."

Bruce chuckled at this very peculiar idea.

"But I don't like them.", Ed took back, and the older one heard the slight bitterness in his, for the rest, perfectly calm voice. "And they feel the same towards me, so I fail to see why I should act as if I don't despise our unfortunately fellow humans, while they just can't stand me in return."

Bruce had no persuasive way to object to this. Justified or not, he felt the same ; so it won't be him who will try to convince him otherwise.

"You said you have friends.", he thought nonetheless as an argument. "And I suppose they are humans ? I won't judge if they're not, but the way you referred to them, it really seemed that you were talking about actual persons and not... animals or plants. Or... computer programs, in your case that can be fitting as well."

Edward just stared a few seconds, not sure if Wayne insulted him or tried to make a joke. Since Credit Card started to laugh upon seeing his offended expression, it... must have been a joke in his head.
"Stop looking all proud of yourself, rich kid. You didn't say anything funny, so stop laughing..."

"What's 'funny', Eddie, isn't indeed what I said but the face you made.", he retorted, still grinning and, well, being way too proud of himself. "You look like a frustrated, grumpy ginger cat."

Edward huffed, his pride bruised but... Not in a hurtful way. It was just teasing, he may had the strong tendency to take everything a bit too personally, he knew how to distinguish friendly sarcasms from offences. At least from time to time, since most of the time sarcasms did sound like insults to him.

However, it was not the teasing that was puzzling him right now.

It was the other thing, the... weird one, which should not sound so pleasant to his ears yet was... very nice ; in a strange, unknown way.

"... How did you just call me ?", he asked, both unsure, and feeling all warm inside.

Bruce's smile faded slowly, replaced by an intense blush and a baffled expression. If he was not feeling just as confused, Ed would without a doubt have made fun of it.

"I..."

The dark-haired boy looked away, trying to regain his composure. Then he met his gaze again, his cheeks bright red, and not only because of the cold.

"I didn't... pay attention.", he confessed, awfully awkward and embarrassed. "Or thought it could be wrong. Hu... sorry."

"There is no need to apologize.", Ed reassured him, taking pity on his current lost state. "It just surprised me, I was not expecting you to use a nickname for me while I..."

It was his turn to blush, though not for the same reason.

In fact, it was making him truly uncomfortable now.

"I still use your last name to speak with you ! Not only, sure, but I called you 'Wayne' more often than 'Bruce' so far, and when I think about you it's mostly by your family name."

"... When you think about me ?", he repeated, more confused than ever.

Oh, great. Now Wayne was going to think he had a crush on him or something. Really, why had he used such an ambiguous wording ?!

"To avoid any misconception.", he brushed off, trying to sound casual and firm while being aware of the blazing red on his own face. "I only meant for the project. Sorry to disappoint, Apollo, I am not picturing you taking your shower."

Of all the incredibly smart things he was able to think of simultaneously in a very limited time, he really had to conclude by something so dumb. Especially after the talk they had in the car previously, why had he not thought of something else ?! Anything else ?! Or simply stop speaking after 'project' ! Why was it always so hard to just shut up before saying a stupidity he will regret afterwards ?! Because now he...

"Hu... I..."
Poor Bruce, these were apparently too many informations for him to process, and he seemed right now unable to clear his thoughts. Ed couldn't help but smile a bit. It was almost... cute, to see that tall, strong teen who was one of the richest persons in United States, in the planet even, being so awkward and incapable of holding a conversation without being completely at a loss whenever a few words he wasn't familiar or comfortable with were pronounced.

"I don't bite.", Edward offered after a moment during the one his comrade looked lost inside his head, without a map to help him find the way leading to the present.

Then he thought of what he just said, taking back Bruce's own words of earlier, and went on, pondering :

"At least I don't think I'm the kind to."

He actually considered it, and while doing so missed the way Bruce looked quite shocked listening to this.

"Not that I would know yet, I haven't experimented.", he sighed. "I suppose I will perhaps be a bit kinky, maybe more of..."

"Edward ?", Bruce cut off, the words having seemed to, at last, bring him back to reality. "Could you... I can't believe I'm gonna ask that but... Can you please stop talking about sex ?!"

Ed bursted out laughing at his memorable offended expression.

"What, am I making you uncomfortable ?", he teased playfully.

"Well yes ! You are !", he exclaimed. "Look... it's not like I'm trying to change you or whatever, but... this is weird, it really is."

At least it worked, Wayne was back to 'almost normal' and seemed over his previous moment of mild existencial crisis.

"Why ?", Ed asked innocently, pushing the provocation. "It's not like I asked you to take a hotel room with me tonight yet ! Oops, have I voiced that out loud ?"

Then he gave him an exaggerated, supposedly seductive, dance of his orange eyebrows, and Bruce facepalmed. Inside, he felt the fire rising, along with the little voice wispering "sinner" in his head. But he had to control himself. Edward was just joking, nothing else. He wasn't implying anything. He definitely wasn't.

"Are you sure you really are fifteen ?", he rather asked, trying to only sound mildly desperate and fond instead of... anything else.

"Pretty much, yes.", the younger one chuckled. "I'm a genius scientist who can perform calculations in my head that would take hours for a computer to make, among many other things. I know my age. I can even give it to you in days, hours or seconds if you ask me to, it will take less than half a minute to figure out."

Bruce sighed.

"That's not what I meant..."

At least the fire was slowly cooling off.
"I know.", Ed acknowledged. "So to answer your question: it doesn't matter. I've always been ahead of my age, and it's very frustrating not to be taken seriously simply because it's written on my identity card that I'm a minor. It shouldn't matter."

Bruce nodded. He could understand it must be annoying indeed.

"I never had this problem.", he admitted. "So I can't relate, being... kind of a known face means I could do whatever I wanted regardless of my age. However, I don't want to give you the impression I am not taking you seriously. All I thought there is that it's odd to have a 'child' making dirty jokes, I pay attention to everything you say otherwise."

Ed smiled faintly.

"As you said, it's just jokes, and not very clever ones I must recognize. Anyway it's not like I..."

He blushed slightly.

"I've never even been kissed.", he confessed quietly, feeling more embarassed than he should upon revealing it, while it wasn't that out-of-place for someone his age.

Teenagers who shared their first kiss around thirteen were numerous in the big cities, but it was not uncommon or considered 'late' not to have at fifteen.

"Okay.", was all Bruce managed to comment, and Eddie frowned at this particular confusion of his.

"What, you thought I had experience? I mean, I am in advance, I've always been, but... not in this area. Do I look like someone who dates frequently to you? I can't even talk to people without getting angry at the mere sight of them, how could I ask a boy out for now?"

Bruce felt his mouth drying instantly. Edward... was not even correcting the slip in his last sentence. He was... was he really a...

"Bruce?", he inquired, a bit worried. "Anxiety isn't supposed to be contagious! Or if I suddenly gained the power to transmit my syndromes, then you're gonna have a lot to deal with.", he joked.

But the young adult remained just as stressed, and obviously freaking out about something Ed failed to understand.

"Bruce?", he tried again, more concerned. "Can I do something? Because I actually can if you need, I know more or less how to deal with these episodes, I even have my meds in my bag if you want a tranquillizer."

Bruce shook his head, forcing himself to focus back on reality.

"It isn't anxiety.", he explained, the fire finally retreating. "It's... rage. And guilt. Sometimes it just... takes over, when I hear or see something I despise or... don't know how to deal with and react to."

Edward cocked his head to one side.

"That sounds very similar to anxiety issues. At least your reaction to the beginning of an attack seemed analogous to it. Do you have a treatment?"

Bruce blinked, surprised he took it so normally.

"I don't.", he answered, confused. "I see no point in following one."
Ed bit his lip.
"Maybe you should try.", he recommended softly. "It helps."

The blue-eyed boy didn't look coaxed.

"If you have medication but still are subject to episodes occurring without warning, what do..."

"It's not the same.", he interrupted. "If you take something just for anger, it can work, perhaps even completely. But me, I... have a few other things I also take medication for. So they sum together, and it ends up in a bit of a mess that is not an absolute guarantee. But... it helps, it really does."

This was starting to worry Bruce a little.

"And... what are these other things you have?"

"Nothing serious, don't worry!", he laughed a bit. "I have chronic asthma.", he explained quietly upon seeing Bruce wasn't at all reassured. "So I follow a daily treatment since my birth, I need to take it every day for as long as my lungs are still growing."

"Oh, alright..."

Nothing that serious indeed, and he was truly relieved to learn it was asthma and not... something worse or an orphan disease. Even if he was not asthmatic himself, Bruce knew some people needed more than the aerosol during an attack, and took corticoids daily.

"And... I'm on the autism spectrum.", he pursued after a hesitation.

Bruce felt incredibly strange, he told him this. Being asthmatic was not really a 'secret'; but this, it... sounded like a confidence. So he felt very touched Edward trusted him enough to reveal it. Even if he... guessed it already, it was something else to deduce a few of his behaviours on his own and to have him confess it.

"You have a specific syndrome?", he asked, trying to hide his excitement over learning more.

"I do.", he approved, but just shrugged his shoulders once more. "Although most people don't know about it, so I won't bother you with the name. I simply..."

"You have Asperger's syndrome, right?"

Ed's eyes widened.

"How can you possibly know that?!

He was sincerely impressed. And slightly scared, too. It... was odd Wayne knew about the syndrome itself to begin with, so to have him asking him bluntly if he had it, it...

"I'm on the spectrum as well.", he explained calmly. "But I don't have a definite syndrome; depending on the diagnosis some doctors said I'm not even truly on it, that the... behaviours, are explained by a few post-traumatic stress disorders and not by anything else. But... I did my own researches about all this a while ago."

Okay, he was impressed. And... very curious, now.

"You are full of surprises, rich kid...", he said, wondering. "If I was in my colleagues' lab, I'll add I want to do a few experimentations on you to verify some things... But out of context, it just sounds
creepy, doesn't it?"

"A little bit.", he smiled back, and they laughed lightly.

"But I am surprised.", he took back more seriously. "And now I really want to know more about you."

"Good thing, then.", Bruce retorted. "Because I am also interested by learning about you."

Ed's smug smile returned.

"Addicting little thing that I am, am I not?"

"... I suppose you are.", the billionaire played along. "Many layers of mysteries wrapped in riddles I'm gonna solve. Or... stuff like that."

"I guess I'm like an onion, then. A delicious one."

Bruce sighed affectionately and Edward laughed.

Now feeling all light and at ease, they finally headed for the alleys inside the market.

"You already found your Christmas present?", Ed asked as they were walking through many stands of various shiny handmade things, typical items related to the season or good looking objects that could be either useful or enjoyable to have in one's living room.

Or both, in some cases. Some came from other parts of the world, and a flag of their country of origin was proudly hung on the stalls offering them.

Plus the traditional foods, chocolates, nougats and various pastries and sweets. Looking at some of these, Edward thought he should drag Jervis along with him, next time. He will enjoy everything about this, it was a shame he never went to the market just because neither Jonathan nor Pamela ever went, and he was too afraid to go on his own.

"I don't do 'Christmas presents'.", Bruce answered flatly, causing Ed to focus back on him. "I just hang out in the markets sometimes because I like the ambiance, but I don't... celebrate otherwise."

Edward's eyes widened.

"You don't?! You are Bruce Wayne and you don't celebrate Christmas... at all?!"

Bruce arched an eyebrow, unimpressed.

"What does my name have to do with the holiday? Not because I'm rich means I necessarily want to waste money in these celebrations."

"I was not thinking of the fortune itself this time. But more about the world you live in. The end of December must be one of the times of the year you upper class citizens are doing the most... parties or gala things. So yes, I thought you'll be the kind to celebrate. In the traditional way, even."

Bruce chuckled, even if he was not especially amused.
"By 'traditional', do you mean religious?"

"...Sort of. Don't ask me what it is supposed to imply or my opinion on it though, I'm a convinced atheist. I only believe in science. And Star Trek."

This time Bruce laughed sincerely.

"That definitely suits you."

"But I'm not judging either, not at all.", he announced casually. "Not because I don't practise means I think little of religious people or simple believers. That would be very silly of me and the proof of a blatant close-mindedness."

"Many scientists were religious.", Bruce emphasized. "Newton, Darwin, Kepler, Copernic..."

"I was not only referring to the Christian religion... Do you know that before being supposedly the night Jesus Christ was born, the 25th of December was called..."

"Dies Natalis Solis Invicti, the 'birth day of the undefeated sun' in latin.", Bruce completed. "The Roman emperor Aurelian chose this day in order to do a religious syncretism of both the day of birth of the sun god Mithra and make it match with the tomorrow of the last day of the Saturnalia, in honor of the god Saturn, which lasted from the middle of December to, after Aurelian, 'Christmas' day. Before the date had been reclaimed by the Christian religion, it already was a mix between celebrations of two different deities."

Edward nodded, a large smile on his face and feeling somehow very proud of him.

"You definitely know more than you let on.", he complimented, and the older one smiled in return.

"I'm gonna take it as a compliment."

"You should. It was one."

He looked truly convinced of it, so Bruce won't make him notice he, in fact, just treated him of 'looking like a brainless idiot', while being intelligent inside. As it seemed, no Edward-made compliment could be just normal and completely flattering without having a small dismissive downside. The ginger didn't even seem aware of it...

"You were absolutely right about Aurelius, but may I play teacher about the other syncretism that led to Christmas?"

Bruce smiled.

"Sure, go ahead."

"Thanks. I was going to do it anyway.", the little genius said on his smug tone, and Bruce shook his head in fond exasperation. "It tends to be less remembered than the latin origins.", he started explaining. "But in the Norse mythology, it corresponded to a celebration of the winter solstice called 'Yule'. It commemorated two things. The first one was the death of a god-three, the Holly King, killed by his heir the Oak King. To celebrate that one, a red candle was lighted, symbolizing the renewal of the light. But it was also the day when Heimdall, the 'god who sees everything' and guardian of the Bifrost leading to the deities' home Asgard, went to visit the descendents of his favorite son, Jarl, who is basically the ancestor of all the Scandinavian social classes. Heimdall was the Santa Claus before Santa Claus, since during his trip, he gave presents to the children who behave well during the year, and ashes to the ones who didn't. Depending on the the translation of
the myth, you also have a version saying it's Odin, the main Asgardian god, who does this travel. During that time, the other Norse gods are enjoying their own mundane parties together in their realm, analogous to the typical ambiance we found now for Christmas. A lot of items we use nowadays for the holiday come from these celebrations."

"Interesting."

"You knew ?"

"I remember I read about these, now that you mentioned them. But I didn't recall the events in detail, or the names. For some unknown reason, I preferred Christmas' latin origins when I learnt them."

They smiled. It was always nice to learn things from people you enjoy the company of, both about their private life and their knowledge on more general topics.

"However.", Eddie took back, as they were now in front of a stand exhibiting notebooks, with their ornamented leather cover and elaborately tooled clasps. "Even if you don't go to parties, you still have the celebration everybody else is doing, me included. You have Pennyworth you're spending Christmas with."

But he hesitated to keep talking once he saw the other one's distant expression.

"You... don't celebrate with him either ?"

"Depends.", Bruce answered, evasive. "But when we do, we always... keep it simple. Like, very simple. No presents, or Christmas tree, or decorations."

Boy, that was sad.

"What about you ?", Bruce relaunched.

Ed didn't know how to respond. Not because he wanted to lie, but because as it seemed his Christmas since the last three years were way more entertaining than the billionaire's.

"I hang out with friends.", he chose to tell.

Not making it sound like something hyper fun he absolutely loved was a good way to dither.

"My best friend and I decorated her place for the holiday, and we went to the market a few times already. In fact I... have three places where I... meet people I'm gonna spend the Christmas night with."

That was very unclear, but he didn't want to explain further.

Not yet, not tonight.

This is how Bruce seemed to understand it, because he nodded. It was obvious he was a bit disappointed, but he won't ask for something more precise.

"Okay.", he assured. "Maybe you'll feel like telling me another time."

"Yes... maybe another time."
"This is so pretty."

The little handmade Christmas crib was well-designed, in the traditional fashion but with extremely
detailed pieces. The subject matter scene was the over represented organized santons in the cowshed,
the three King Mages coming to Marie and Joseph who were here in the company of the ox and
donkey. They were all looking at an empty space, meant to welcome the baby Jesus during the night
between the 24th and 25th.

"It is.", Ed approved.

Then he asked, because he didn't remember having read about it in what could be found on 'Bruce
Wayne' in the Internet :

"Are you a believer ?"

Bruce smiled faintly. It was a sad smile, a nostalgic one.

"I am baptized.", he answered, his tone oddly... empty. "But it happened when I was an infant, so...
it's not like I had my say in it."

That was a... strange way to refer to baptism. His tone was both sorrowful and... resentful.

They walked to a less busy stand, offering wooden animals.

"Your parents were Catholics, then.", Ed understood, wanting to confirm his thoughts.

The usual : he just couldn't stand to not know something.

"My mother was.", came the truthful validation. "So was my father, but he was less practicing. As a
result, I've been baptized."

He paused an instant, then added :

"We always made a huge crib for Christmas. The kind you find in the churches, with life-sized
santons and a lot of typical scenes of people representing every contemporaneous profession. It was
in the biggest reception hall, and it was the 'masterpiece', along with a giant, over-decorated fir."

"It all sounds very nice.", Ed commented delicately. "Actually, it is the typical fairytale-like
Christmas reception !", he ended with enthusiasm, imagining a huge room in the old manor,
decorated with the traditional representations and charming everyone with its impressive, realistic
crib.

It was a lovely picture. The kind that would repel Pamela and Jonathan.

Edward smiled.

"You don't sound very approving of it, though.", he noted as they spotted a vacant bench in the huge
square hosting the market, and headed to it.

They needed a short break from having been standing and walking inside a dense crowd. Too many
people around, too much noise, too much movements. So they’ll just take the time to compose
themselves before entering it again. Because for the rest, they sincerely loved the animation. They
just... needed a few adjustments of their own, to keep it at 'enjoyable' and not 'turning into an attack
episode'.
They sat on the bench, which offered the view to the front line chalets, the ones forming the 'outer border' of this part of the market. Then Edward took back softly :

"I suppose you have beautiful memories of all this."

Bruce's expression darkened. Nonetheless, he was not angry when he responded, his tone deprived of emotions :

"The decorations were pretty. But it was... for receptions, you know."

"Actually, I don't.", he countered when the older boy didn't pursue, as if 'for receptions' explained everything. "I never experimented these kind of entertainments... Or even less hosted one !". he ended, laughing at the improbable role reversal situation. "Sorry, rich kid ; we don't belong to the same world. I have no idea what a reception is like, or what it is supposed to be like... neither do I know about any of your other hobbies, I'm sure."

He was amused while saying this, not jealous. Sure, he had been, and when he took the time to think of it, he remained quite envious of this life the top upper class lived, made of shiny things, long parties, well-dressed people, very little responsibilities and all kind of luxuries. However he was not jealous of Bruce right now, he simply found it funny the young adult talked to him as if he could understand the references shared within the high society, and have an informed opinion on it, while he was... well, he was not one of them. Far from it.

Bruce understood his words as amused too, so he just smiled a little. And Edward must say, it was a lovely sight.

"You didn't miss anything never going to one.", the billionaire told him. "These are very boring, trust me. I never liked any of this as a kid. I always had to stay still, with a stupid smile on and to wear uncomfortable clothes. I had to be 'looking good', that is to say : not moving, not speaking freely, not wearing anything else than a suit, not... being a normal child, and smile politely to strangers my parents introduced me to. Sometimes the receptions lasted for hours. It was always... exhausting, to play the 'perfect son' of Thomas and Martha Wayne."

Ed's eyes widened as he went on with his confidence.

Was he expecting this talk ? Nope. Did he know how to react to it ? Definitely no ! What was he supposed to retort to...

"Can I... ask ?", he inquired, unsure and not wanting to make a mistake. "I mean... you are talking about your life on your own, and it really seems that you want to engage in conversation about it, but if you consider you said enough, I'm not going to..."

"No, it's fine.", he assured. "I... I'd love to answer a few questions if you have some."

'I'd love to', was what he said. But Edward understood at his expression that in truth he was desperate for it. Not necessarily talking about his past, but just... talking.

Talking with someone, anyone.

Ed needed to be careful not to let show how sad and... kinda pitiful, this fact was. So instead he took back, in his usual confident attitude :

"Were you always compelled to be present at receptions like these ?"

"Always. To make the 'heir' grow used to these things. At the time, I was supposed to learn how to
behave to host similar ones when I'll be adult. Along with other mundane entertainments, they were way more important for my parents than to teach me about the functioning of their society."

"Your society, Bruce.", he corrected, frowning a little. "And you are an adult now, you are supposed to..."

"I'm eighteen.", he countered. "It's not like there is any rush. Besides... Wayne Enterprises runs perfectly fine without me, the Council takes care of everything since... It deals with everything. I don't have to worry over the company, I never had to."

This time Ed heard it again, stronger than earlier. The bitterness.

He was angry over something, though it was hard to decipher what. The articles talking about Bruce Wayne never said much other than the usual refrain of how he was "a broken kid whom never got over witnessing the gruesome murder of his parents in the lane named 'Crime Alley' after the events". That was it. The perfect little boy whose life had been destroyed and never stopped mourning the loss of his family.

But it was almost ten years ago. And the nine years old orphan was not the 'Bruce Wayne' he had in front of him right now.

"How do you... feel about this?", Edward asked cautiously, aware it was a slippery slope and he could drive his partner very angry if he was wrong.

Yet he had to know. Because if he wasn't, if he really saw through him, then it meant the poor, broken hearted model child newspapers wanted to sell was in truth very far from being this image of the innocent lamb sacrificed on the altar.

"As far as I know.,", he went on, growing more and more curious - and thrilled-, but remaining prudent, as if he was walking on eggshells. "You never tried to reclaim Wayne Enterprises, and there are no more parties or activities of that kind at your house."

"None in fact.", he confirmed, and the somewhat dark undertone Ed thought he imagined was back in his voice, more noticeable than before. "The last time strangers from the high society were reunited in my parents' house consuming their food and drinking their expensive liquors, it was during the reception before the funerals."

Okay... how was he supposed to go back at asking questions after such a depressing sentence?

"Why have you said your 'parents' house'?", he wondered instead, because talking about funerals was far from tempting.

Bruce gave him a quizzical look.

"What else am I supposed to say?"

It was evident he sincerely was not seeing anything wrong with his way to lay it out. Once again, Ed felt bad for him.

"You talked about Wayne Enterprises as if it was the company of some... unknown persons you met once in your life at most.", he explained as an attempt to make him understand. "Then about the manor of your ancestors in the one you spent all your life as if it was only your parents' and had never been your home. Even your way to refer to yourself as a child is... weird! What is that suppose to mean, 'the perfect son of Thomas and Martha Wayne'?! It sounds like you are talking
about someone else... And none of this gives the impression that you ever..."

He bit his lip. He couldn't say it. Not because of any form of morality holding him back, he was above these kind of restraints. But because if he was right, then...

"It's like you never liked anything about this life. Neither the one you lived with your parents nor... the one after they're gone."

Genius with a big mouth who never shuts up, that he was. But what was Wayne?

Bruce stood up, and Edward did the same, fearing he pushed it too far by trying to verify his recent deductions.

"I have beautiful memories of my parents.," Bruce stated, in his low voice. "I sincerely loved them."

Ed almost felt reassured to hear this. So he was wrong after all, just because Bruce was a bit angry towards... something, did not mean he was nothing like what people said about him. For once, it was almost comforting to have made a faulty reasoning.

"But I don't belong to their world.", he pursued, his expression darkening once more.

And he was scary.

Honestly scary, looking like this.

Ed felt a shiver on the back of his neck as he kept talking, his tone grim and low, almost... threatening:

"I never belonged. Not to their high society, I always hated everything about these mundane interactions. Not to Wayne Enterprises, I know nothing about their company. I'm not even sure they knew anything themselves, all they liked to do was drink with other people in receptions, theatres and operas. And I certainly don't consider their manor as my home."

It felt like a punch.

It shouldn't have, he was aware of it. It was not like he knew Bruce since a long time and was suddenly taken aback by a major change in his personality.

But it... it was something.

Something tremendously exciting.

A wide smile gradually grew on his lips, he wasn't able to contain it.

Bruce frowned his brow, his expression remaining austere, almost dangerous -beautiful-, and asked in this low, gorgeous murky tone:

"Why are you smiling?"

"Because at first I was wrong.", Edward answered immediately, his eagerness more than audible in his passionate voice. "I thought you were only an upper-class citizen who happened to have a good idea here and there, but who was just as lukewarm and uninteresting as the average people. But you are not."

His smile widened more if possible.

"It took me a bit of time to understand, but tonight I just realized: you are one of us!"
"One of us?", he quoted, his expression turning slightly confused.

"Yes."

Ed took a step closer, making them standing nearly chest-to-chest, and looked up to him.

"The 'perfect son' is a *role* people made you play, isn't it? It's what others want to believe about the Wayne heir. But this is not who you really are, no... You are a *bad boy*, little Batguy."

Bruce smiled in return.

A scary, creepy smile that changed everything on his face, attitude and... all persona. May the reason he was so awkward and tactless was not because he had no experience in social interaction, or at least it was not the sole reason. Maybe the *main* reason was because he tried to *hold back* what he was, to not let anyone see this side of him.

Eddie felt his heartbeat and breathing rate increasing.

"What can I say?", the low, powerful voice that was driving him crazy with no warning whispered. "99, 99% of people are goldfishs to the ones you can make believe anything. So better keep telling them stories."

He caught a last sight of this magnificent, menacing side of him, then Bruce took a step back.

His complete attitude changed in less than half a second, and soon he was back at being the ungainly man, who looked like an insecure teenager or a guy a bit simple, who seemed to don't know what he was doing here. His mask was back on, and his voice had this shy, not assured tone, when he asked:

"What about we grab a piece to eat? They offer warm food everywhere, wanna try something?"

"... With pleasure..."

'Try something', *a lot* of things, was now definitely becoming his priority regarding Bruce Wayne.

His heart was still beating faster than it should, it took a bit of time for it to go back to its normal pace.

As for his mind... That was a harder battle.

He was expecting to spend a relatively sympathetic evening in Bruce's company at the market... as long as they didn't start arguing, which was always a contingency when they stayed together more than a few minutes. But he could not predict he will feel... any of this.

Because a dark Bruce, whatever it actually implied -and Ed was eager to discover what it truly meant and to learn more about him- was an *interesting* Bruce.

Hella interesting.

And... crushingly attractive.

Not that the billionaire was not from the start, and it was true he kinda liked their talks, his way of thinking, and his good looks already but... Now he just turned 1000 times hotter and more of his tastes.

What could he say? He had a thing for smart guys with a weird sense of humour and a general spooky attitude. Apparently it was also linked to tall, blue-eyed men with dark or brown hair who
also happened to be social disasters.

Yup, he definitely had a type.

_________

"Go ahead if you want, but I won't taste this thing."

Bruce arched an eyebrow. Then he remembered that despite being... him, Edward was technically a child.

"Oh, right.", he vaguely apologized. "Because you're a minor. Hu... no alcohol then."

Ed smiled lightly.

"You are the one who is a true-born Gothamite, don't tell me it's to you I'm gonna reveal children are doing whatever they want in this city, including drinking and being on drugs regardless of their age."

He was not wrong, and indeed Bruce was well placed to know about kids doing... very adult things. Not that he was going to tell Edward, no need to freak him out. It was already a miracle he reacted so well -way better than intended- to him talking about himself that way, he was not going to chatter about the sinful things he experimented over the last ten years.

"I know.", he simply answered. "But according to the legislations applying in Gotham, you aren't supposed to be sold alcohol before you reach eighteen, unlike in the rest of our country where twenty-one is the legal age. And with the value you seem to assign to the rules, I don't think you are the kind to break them."

Ed's smile turned malicious at this.

Bruce liked the sight of it more than he wanted to admit.

"I like to learn the rules.", he corrected mischievously. "Because they are just like theoremes in science: you need to have a basis and know it perfectly, then you can do your own interpretations, researches and experiments. I never said I agreed with everything, and I don't have any issues with being tempted to use a few things for my personal entertainement. Not because I'm an excellent student with perfect grades who knows everything, means I always want to play by the rules. I have to know them, that's it. What I do with them afterwards depends only on my good will."

It was Bruce's turn to smile.

"We definitely have a lot in common, then."

"It seems so."

They shared an accomplice glance, way more profound than what they did before tonight.

Bruce liked this boy more and more every day.

"But I don't drink.", Ed took back afterwards. "Not because of my age, but simply because I don't like the taste, or even the smell of it. I have no problem with cooked alcohol, though, I like dishes using boiled wine for example. I just don't tolerate liquor when it's... on its own like that. Feel free to take a glass nonetheless, not because I don't like it means I can't stand seeing someone drink."
"You're sure ?"

Because hearing this, it sounded like he had a few issues about it.

"Positively."

It remained free, so they didn't search for another spot, and went back to their bench of earlier, this time with two plastic bowls of Savoyard fondue and small pieces of bread. But no glass of strong alcohol, Bruce having decided against it in the end.

"It's French.", the billionaire muttered as he plunged a third piece of bread with his plastic fork in the hot mixture, after having miserably lost the two previous ones, gobbled by the blend of cheeses, spices and white wine.

"I know.", Ed laughed seeing the death glare his comrade was now adressing the yellow mixture, because his third piece of bread just espaced from the fork and drown into it. "Almost all kind of special cheese are from their country or from Italy. To the point all most Americans know about France is the 'camembert' and Eiffel Tower."

Bruce smiled at the -quite true- cliché.

"You already went ?", he inquired.

Ed shook his head no.

"The only trip I ever did was when I moved from my birth town to Gotham a while ago."

"Oh...

He lowered a bit his gaze. He traveled around the world twice, so he saw no way to retort to this without sounding either boastful or dismissive.

"But I read about countries.", Ed went on. "I want to travel. There are so many things I want to see... All around the world, but not only. To begin with, I want to see the United States ! I mean.... other than Gotham City, I never saw any the places people come from everywhere to see in our country."

"You never went on holidays ?"

His comrade answered by the negative once more.

"Never had the opportunity. Or... the time."

"... What child has no time at all to have a family trip organized just once ?"

As soon as he asked, Bruce regretted the words. They nearly sounded like he was judging him, Edward was going to take it as an affront and then...

"A lot of children, actually.", Ed calmly responded, apparently not bothered. "Not everyone has money to spend into a few days of vacations. And as for me... my parents were not what you'd call the kind to 'organize family trips'."

At this moment Bruce realized he had... no idea, what Edward's parents could be like. Or if he had siblings even, or...

Nothing. And it frustrated him, it was unfair he didn't know more.
"When you say 'were'.", he tried. "Does that mean..."

"They aren't dead.", he cut off with a sigh... almost as if he was disappointed by it. "Or... my father isn't. I don't know about my mother."

"Oh... I'm sor..."

"Don't be !", he vigorously interrupted. "I realize my formulation was not very clear... She is not missing or anything like that. She just left one day, without a warning, when I was eight. One morning I wake up in this stupid 'house' and there, no more mother. Not that she ever acted like anything close to a mother, not even for a few seconds. But there, she disappeared one day, taking all her things to go somewhere else, probably far from Gotham. And leaving me alone with the old man."

This time the anger wasn't even hidden in his voice. The resentment, the reproach poisoned every word he just spoke. Bruce felt... he didn't know what it was, but he didn't like it. And he instantly hated Edward's parents.

"You... don't get along with your parents very well, don't you ?"

Ed smiled a bit, trying to control the rage.

"You could say that."

They stayed silent a moment afterwards, finishing their fondue. With a few more curses from Bruce, provoking laughters from Edward, which completely lighted the mood.

"I liked it.", Bruce admitted later, and the younger one gave him a questioning glance.

"What are you talking about ?"

"This evening.", he answered gently. "I liked... learning more about you, and talking about myself with you. We should... we should do it again."

"We should.", he approved, a sweet smile forming on his pretty pink lips. "We really should."

They shared a hearty smile.

"Do you want me to give you the ride back ?", Bruce proposed as they walked away from the market.

"Thanks, but it's not necessary. My place of work is only a few subway stations from here, I could even do the trip by walking if I wasn't already late, and lazy."

Bruce laughed.

"You still have a few meters to change your mind."

But he didn't, and they arrived at the stairs leading to the metro in this part of town before they reached the next alley, where Bruce parked his car.

"When you say you're late.", the billionaire inquiered. "I hope you're not gonna get in trouble because of tonight, otherwise I can..."

"Don't worry, Batguy.", he smiled. "I don't need you to play dark knight in armor for me. Even if... now I think of it, the idea of you dressed in a black, sexy skin-tight armor and coming to rescue me
from whatever situation has a little something..."

"Please don't finish this sentence."

They both bursted out laughing at this.

"But no, no troubles with that job.", Ed took back then. "Besides, my shift starts later than the other
days on Monday, so I'm not *that* late."

They shared a last warm smile, then Edward winked at him.

"See you tomorrow at school, rich kid."

Bruce was about to answer simply, but then he had an enlightenment.

"What is it again... hu..."

He raised his left hand, and spread his middle and ring fingers for the first time, along with spreading
his thumb from the rest of the hand. It was a bit odd and he felt kinda stupid, but from the amazed
smile it provoked on Edward's face, it was more than worth it.

"Live long and prosper ?"

He hoped he got the quote right, since his memories of Star Trek were not fresh ones and he only
watched a bit of it, without ever being an actual 'fan', neither of it nor... of any other shows or movies
by the way.

"It is !", Ed hysterically validated, way too excited he heard the reference from... billionaire Bruce
Wayne whom he was just beginning to discover *tonight*. "Can I hug you ? Or kiss you ? Or both !
You know what, nevermind ! I loved tonight ! Qatlhō', qamuSHa ! [*Thanks a lot, I love you !]* See
you tomorrow ! Qapla' ! [*Bye !]*"

And he giggled, like a child, then went down the stairs and disappeared inside the subway station.

Bruce blinked twice, then lowered his hand what was still in the Vulcan salute position.

It had been... quite special. But an excited Edward was an adorable Edward, so if a little Star Trek
reference here and there made him happy, it was something Bruce could adopt.

He was smiling when he reached his car, unlocked it and sat behind the wheel.

He had a very, very good evening. He saw it in his comrade's eyes when he let the mask drop, he
was interested. Fascinated, even. He had been right to tell him, even just a little for now, about what
he really felt.

Who he really was, even if he still had a hard time figuring it out himself.

And he had an objective for tonight when he'll be back at the manor : google 'Star Trek' and learn
more about this universe. Since apparently, Ed also spoke words from it... maybe even an actual
*language*?

His fond smile grew wider.

He absolutely *loved* his little hysterical, nerdy ginger genius who welcomed him in his world
tonight.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! : )
"Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught."
- Oscar Wilde

Things were... pretty good.

He could have thought of a better adjective to qualify his thoughts, but truth is... everything was fine. Better than fine, actually. Thrilling.

It was all even more bizarre because he honestly believed he was going to remain hurt by the 'Jonathan loves someone else' affair, and will have a hard time moving on from it. Yet it... didn't last. Sure, it had been very weird to meet them again during the weekend.

He felt out-of-place and was truly uncomfortable, as if he had witnessed something he wasn't supposed to see -somehow, that was the case-, and couldn't face Jonathan and Jervis afterwards.

However, the awkwardness faded away.

It would certainly have been way more difficult if they acted as if nothing, if they didn't say anything about... their situation. It would probably have been... hard, to stay still himself and keep his cool.

But they didn't.

On the contrary, they formalized their relationship that night, to both Pamela and him.

It had been... special. Although a very nice kind of special.

To see the two men like that, awkwardly holding hands -Jervis was so excited they finally got to display the nature of their partnership, and Jonathan looked like he wanted nothing else but to disappear underground forever-, blushing like teenagers who dated for the first time, stuttering a bit as they confessed they were romantically involved... It was worth to see.

And they revealed they were together for the last month and a half, but hadn't found the courage to tell them before.

It made Edward feel all... warm, though in a new way. They were so touching, being both in their mid thirties yet acting like... kindergarten boyfriends or something. Whatever that meant. They weren't at ease to tell them, they feared their reaction and were blushing like children who shared a kiss in the playground and were worried to get caught.

Edward immediately hugged them both after they hesitantly informed them of the news, saying he
was so happy for them and so proud they disclosed it. Which made Jonathan tense and blush even more, while Jervis giggled and hugged him back forcefully. Then Ed grabbed Pamela by the wrist to pull her into the hug as well. She didn't knock him out, tried to break his arm or grabbed something sharp among the equipment around to chop off his hand by reflex, instead only menacingly glared at him for such a daring move. That is to say, he had been very lucky she was in a good mood. And she -reluctantly- got into the hug, before relaxing slightly.

They didn't stay long like that, but it had been an enjoyable sensation.

Jonathan's tomato red face when they pulled away from the hug had something extremely comical, and Pamela didn't wait a second to point it out to him.

Edward may wasn't sure they saw him as a friend, but after that night he strongly suspected that even by their standards of antisocial, scary weirdos with severe agoraphobia (mostly Isley and Tetch had this one, since even though Crane had some difficulties to communicate with everybody, he was a teacher and sincerely loved his job), they became closer than just work partners.

It didn't hurt when he saw the two men kissing again, this time after Isley asked them to "properly confirm" their relationship. Crane started by firmly refusing, but after a few pleading from Tetch, all motivated by Pam's sarcastic remarks, amongst the ones "what is it, Jon ? You don't want to show affection to your boyfriend ?", "Look at this poor Jervis, waiting...", "I hope you aren't as guarded in private, otherwise it must be very boring to be dating you...", and Ed's uncontrollable laughter at the funny scene, they finally concretized by a short kiss. Or, it would have been a short kiss if Jervis had let the other doctor withdraw quickly, and didn't put his arms around his neck to deepen it.

Pamela and him laughed so much he nearly had an asthma attack.

Which only caused her to laugh even more when he started coughing, and Crane dramatically accused his boyfriend: "See that Jervis ! Now we're gonna kill the kid because of your exhibitionistic tendencies !"

One inhaled corticosteroid dose aerosol later, he was able to argue back, and in the end they spent a truly funny and lovely night in each other's company.

He felt the twinge of sorrow however, somewhere in his heart. It was small, and it didn't hurt as much as he feared it would, not even close. But it was still present, as he noted just how... happy, the two doctors actually were together. Even if she knew them since way back, particularly Jonathan she met shortly after she had her doctorate nearly ten years ago, Pamela told him she hadn't noticed they were in love before, when he asked if she suspected it. But well, she had never been good with that all "sentimental stuff" as she called it. Or even interested.

She won't ever want of this kind of affection with anyone for herself, but that didn't mean she was not sincerely satisfied the two men could taste it together. It was the wisest, more friendly and appropriate way to react. And Edward too, was truly happy for them.

He won't tell them it hurt him a bit. This was his problem, not theirs, and he had to get over it by himself. He could deal with this on his own, and enjoy being here with them without causing difficulties or unwanted awkwardness what only risked to stain their already quite fragile friendship.

That was the best solution, and definitely the one he needed to keep in mind.

The Christmas market became another place he now regularly spent time at. He did manage to drag
Jervis with him twice. The two other doctors couldn't bring themselves to agree to go to what Isley called "this outrageous display of gross sentiments wrapped in commercial purpose", but he convinced the blond scientist to come along in the end. And it had been a wise move, seeing how excited he had been, giggling like a child and clenching his arm, pointing hysterically at everything while being careful not to get lost in the, quite stressful, crowd what seemed always crammed there whenever the time of the day. Even at the less frequented hours (the ones he picked to go with Tetch, simple precautionary measure), too many people were around for the scientist's liking.

But he enjoyed the trip nonetheless, and ended it by giving Ed a big, strong hug, coupled with yelling hysterically in his ear: "Thank you, child! I love you!"

Edward politely responded, smiling and not making him notice he just screamed directly in his right ear. When he wanted to, Jervis was expressing himself in a high-pitched, eardrum-shattering voice that was comparable to Stephanie's when she cried.

But he didn't tell him so, just made his peace with the fact his poor right eardrum was going to need a few more minutes of adjustment before functioning normally again.

Aside from this small inconvenience, it had been a funny trip.

And his time schedule changed as well. Usually, he stopped by the Browns house before he went to the restaurant in the evening, and came back to either their place or Selina's after he finished his shift.

But now he... spent that time with Bruce.

It had been a bit weird the next evening they hanged out, it felt like they already said everything last time, and they weren't sure how to hold a discussion now. But that first moment of awkwardness didn't last either, and soon it felt like he was in the lab with his science bros. Except they were not talking theoremes and experiments, but... everything. Pretty much like the four of them were doing lately, conversing and acting as friends rather than simple colleagues. The ambience with Wayne was kind of the same.

And he liked it very much. To the point Selina became more and more teasing about it, like the cat who found a new entertaining goal and didn't want to let it go now she saw something interesting in it. This contributed to the all 'very amusing' ambient sentiment.

So had been, in a peculiar way, this strange picture she brought of... Bane dressed up as Santa Claus. She explained they did a bet, and the loser would have to wear something ridiculous and take pictures of it. That was the most childish thing she had ever done with another person than him.

And he spent way too much time laughing when she showed him the picture on her phone, of the Cuban giant dressed in the Coca-Cola colors, looking awfully embarassed with that silly white cotton bear and red beanie ending by a fluffy pompom.

Really, he loved Christmas.

And he took all his time to teach baby Stephanie about both the spirit, the historical background, the beliefs, the habits and customs related to the holiday and how it was celebrated around the world.

She giggled as she listened to him, producing happy sounds and 'words' attesting her enthusiasm and interest.

This depended on the temperament, some babies were more 'active' than others. Albeit they basically all cried and laughed depending on the mood at a precise moment, some of them were more likely to watch quietly the movements around, either curious or mildly bored by what they saw and happened
around them; and their enthusiasm expressed on a different scale of manifestation.

He couldn't predict what Stephanie was going to be like when she'll grow up, but if he had to bet on one thing, it would probably be that she'll forever remain a joyous person.

Like, she was welcoming *everything* with way more enthusiasm and excitement than most two months old infants, was always chuckling and giggling, moving her little arms on the air, pointing to everything, wanting to see, touch and have access to everything she saw, wriggling everywhere wherever she was put on any surface. Sometimes she even held conversations. The sight was adorable, he started by talking to her almost seriously -at least at first, because soon he was smiling too much upon watching her expressions-, and she answered with nearly long sentences of 'Liyuiouda ! Ddie ! Stalla !", and a chain of articulated words repeatedly punctuated by happy laughters.

She was the 'very active' type. The joyful one, too. He had no doubt she was going to be the kind of person who were... always *smiling*, no matter what.

It just *suited* her, somehow.

"I don't understand... was Santa dressed in green before ?!"

And then, there was Arthur.

Who was currently listening to the Christmas lesson, in the decorated living-room. Neither Crystal nor him wanted to do the all celebration thing, not even a small part of it. But Edward convinced them to play along, and brought decorations items. He managed to persuade Pamela and Jonathan to have their own holiday celebration, after such a great victory it was not going to be the Brown couple who will resist him and his *need* to celebrate since the last three years.

He never had a Christmas to share with people, in a house, before he met Selina. But now that he tasted of this spirit and understood why so many people loved it, he just couldn't allow his friends to miss the warm ambiance of this time of the year.

And so here they were, Art listening to him and actually *learning* things, watching him with an impressed expression that was truly comical. Or weird. Or both, maybe.

"He was.", Ed answered, trying not to laugh at the way the blond man looked like a four years old having an enlightenment. "His red and white clothes had been given by an American advertisement about Coca-Cola in 1936. They dressed the typical, well-known picture loved by children in the colors of the bottles in order to please more families, and show a happy picture, almost a *joke* during the Great Depression when people needed it. Then it stuck to the representation. One thing leading to another, this became way more often portrayed than the old bearded man dressed in silver and green clothes, along with that blue cape he wore before. And it quickly led to the representation we keep nowadays of this Santa Claus in red and white."

"... I didn't know..."

"Now you do.", he retorted, holding back a chuckle at the amazed expression it provoked on the dude's face.

This guy was really funny when he wanted to.

Stephanie added a high-pitched : "Gloustleiya!", which made her giggle happily, so it must have been a joke in reaction to the situation. This time Edward laughed as well.
He kinda appreciated Arthur now. He never actually disliked him to begin with, just... found him a bit boring and too ordinary to hang out with. But now he... well yes, he could say it : he sort of became fond of the man. Art was finally learning how to act like a father, he openly loved Edward (he never tried to hide it, even if it hadn't been as clear as it was since the last month), and he was close to being a nice person.

All of that was for the best.

As for Steph... no question there, she was his little treasure, had always been and will always be. It was almost strange his science bros and Bruce didn't know about her, while she was one of the most important things in his life, maybe THE most important, along with Selina. The two women of his life.

However it had never felt 'right', to tell Crane, Tetch and Isley about his baby. They were not psychopaths... or let's say not completely, either ways it was unlikely they'll ever attempt anything concerning her. They would probably don't mind much, just smile at the mention, make a little comment -sarcastic from Pam, cynical from Jon and... as ever unexpected from Jervis- at most, then never require more informations. They probably won't ever even ask to see a photo of her, the most appropriate way to react for them would be to brush it over quickly.

Yet he never told them. And he never told Wayne.

It was as if he was not the same person, as if he had different sides of him and chose what personality he was going to wear depending the persons he was with.

Maybe one day he'll tell them.

... Just not today.

Anyway, all events happening were very... well, good since the last weeks, he was even getting over the "do I love / do I don't / does it hurt / why the Hell does it hurt" Crane episode. Things were nice, the ambiance was light, and the people in his little world were happy.

So he had no other word, he loved everything about his life lately.

"Would you please stop ?! It's not even funny anymore !"

Selina's amused smile unambiguously suggested the opposite, and she just looked at him with a mischievous knowing smile.

"Are you sure... ?", she purred. "Because to me, the prospect of you going on dates is something I should definitely keep making fun of."

He shook his head.

She was not going to let that go, it was clear.

"These aren't dates, Lina.", he corrected firmly again, although he was smiling too. "It's only the new arrangement in my time schedule."

"A 'new arrangement' which includes going out daily with a handsome billionaire who has a crush
She looked absolutely convinced of it. He held back an amused sigh.

"He doesn't.", he retorted nonetheless. "From what I understood, his only social interactions had been with someone a while ago, I'm not even sure if he was real or... an imaginary friend. But it had been his only socializing process other from with his legal guardian. So now, he is just happy to be hanging out with someone. Though he would certainly like it all better if I was a good-looking girl his age.", he added, and couldn't erase the tiny bit of sadness from his tone at the last mention.

It was true, and it was not like he could do anything about it. Be that as it may, it didn't mean Wayne wasn't a pleasant company despite his more than tactless words here and there.

"I don't think so.", Selina only said, her piercing eyes giving the impression they saw way deeper than just the present reality.

Very cat-like, always eying things you can't see and deducing way more than one could, from just someone's expression or the hidden truth behind a few words.

"Why is that ?", he inquired, failing to get the reason of the mild-creepy mild-knowing smile she kept on.

"You'll see.", she purred in return. "In the mean time... enjoy your afternoon, kitten."

No need to insist, when Selina decided to play the mysterious Cheshire cat, it was impossible to obtain clear answers from her.

So he just smiled back.

"See you later.", he saluted before leaving her apartment.

__________

"Well that's too bad. What are you going to do, buy a better grade ?"

Bruce glared at him. Today was Saturday, the first vacation day, with Christmas coming in less than three days. They were currently at a Café they already went to a couple of times during the past two weeks.

Their exams were divided between the ones they passed these last days and the rest, occuring in January. One of their teacher, eager to finish the making of exams faster than the others, managed to register the grades in the University website yesterday night, even though they had the exam of this course during the week. She corrected quickly, so she won't have to carry pupils' scripts with her for the holidays. That was a smarter move than to defer everything and wait the last deadline to get to work. On that point, both teachers and students were on the same boat...

"I don't 'buy' my grades !", Bruce protested.

He already half regretted he told Edward what he obtained at the said exam.

"That would be black-mail !", he pursued, slightly shocked -and vexed- the first option that popped into his mind was to think he could cheat. "Or... abusing of my position, how can you think I could do that ?!"
"The explanation lies in one word.", Ed answered, apparently not getting the offensive side of his insinuation, but talking on the contrary as if he was giving an important life lesson. "Money. You don't need to be smart if you're rich, you just have to open your wallet and pick a few scraps amongst its obscenely large amount of dollars, then give these to the teachers, academic jury or anybody making you pass an exam or an interview, and boom ! Suddenly you become the best of your class, first at the exams, everybody welcomes you in whatever school you want to enter in."

He concluded by a smug smile, then added, because Bruce kept glaring at him with a very disapproving eye.

"Oh, c'mon ! Don't tell me I'm wrong on that point !"

"... You aren't.", he sighed after an hesitation.

Then he went on, unmoved by the 'way too satisfied of himself' look his partner was now adressing him :

"But I am not doing these sort of things. I'm not naive, I know it's easy to pay a few people to succeed at whatever you want. For myself however, I never abused of the system this way."

Edward arched a skeptical eyebrow, after he took another sip of his hot chocolate.

"What good is that to be as rich as you are, if it's not to exploit it from time to time ?"

Once again, Bruce shot him a stern look. But he heard the faint... desire, hidden behind the boastful voice used to say these words.

"It doesn't work that way.", he responded patiently then, not pointing out the tiny bit of jealousy Edward failed to eraste from his tone. "I never cheated on my school records, but then again I left 'school' soon after... the accident. I went to homeschooling."

"I know.", the redhead stated more softly. "This is roughly the only thing that can be found on you in the Internet other than the articles about your... parents' death.", he carefully revealed, not wanting to ruin the mood. "All that is written about you is that you were homeschooling and travelling for the past years."

"That's all there is to say indeed.", he confirmed with a somewhat regretful undertone. "Putting as much distance as possible between Gotham and me, between the country and me even, had been the only thing I did. After my childhood, I spent more time in Europe and Asia than on this side of the Atlantic Ocean."

"... But you were nine.", Ed couldn't help but remind, while being aware it may wasn't the most supportive thing to say in regard of the situation. "You were a child, Bruce."

The dark haired boy shook his head no.

However, the gesture was not sad or sorrowful. It was categorical. When he explained, his voice was firm and suffered no objection :

"The 'child' part of me died that night. But it's true that I didn't run away immediately. I spent two years in the manor with Alfred, doing... nothing. Then I just couldn't take it anymore, and I left to go as far as I could from this city, this country, this all part of the world."

That was a very emotional and private thing to confess, it didn't take a genius to figure that out. So Edward felt truly touched he told him this like that, without a second thought, simply because he...
trusted him.

"You left alone ?", he asked, and his partner... friend ? nodded.

"I called Alfred from time to time at first. Then I truly wanted the break to be... absolute."

He paused a short moment, recalling how much the word 'break' was appropriate, in every sense of the term.

"I even had a phase during the one I wanted to change my name !", he told him then, smiling at the memory.

"Really ?!

Quite a juicy information for the gossip, wasn't it ? Bruce's smile widened lightly at the sight of Ed's stunned expression.

"Why is it so surprising ? I was in aa..."

"Damn it, when you are born with the Wayne name, you just don't think of dumping it !", Edward vehemently cut, as if it was the most absurd idea he had ever been faced with. "Whatever existential crisis you went through, how come you ever thought about abandoning your Wayne identity ?!"

Bruce frowned slightly.

"Why the Hell is that making you mad ? I didn't even do it in the end, it was just... the spur of the moment. Which lasted over eight months, but..."

"You are unbelievable.", Edward sighed desperatley. "Do you have any notion of how many children would kill to be in your shoes ?!"

He had exaggerated, he realized it as soon as the words left his mouth. Bruce was an orphan who lived as an outsider since the night he witnessed his parents' murder in front of him. Fortune or not, this was not exactly a dream childhood.

"I'm sorry.", he promptly tried to justify himself, feeling very bad about it. "I didn't mean you had it easy ; my formulation was stupid, untrue and hurtful. I was only referring to the money, not the... rest."

Bruce took it better than he feared he will, since he simply smiled sadly.

"Don't worry, that's how I understood it too. And... I'm not blind about this either, I know many people would love to benefit of the... advantages, of the Wayne name."

Ed bit his lip, both glad he took it with humour and quite ashamed by what he hinted.

"I sounded like a greedy vulture, talking like that, didn't I ?", he inquired with a sigh, and Bruce laughed at the comparison.

"Not really...", he cheered him up forthwith. "I am not gonna pretend I know what this kind of jealousy feels like, but I am a very jealous person myself. So I am no stranger to the feeling, even though for me it had always been in other areas than... dollars related."

Edward just nodded quietly. Purposeless to ask in what kind of areas, he had no doubt Bruce meant towards children, then teenagers his age who grew up without having their family shot dead before their eyes when they were younger.
"During... quite a long time", Bruce revealed later. "I honestly thought I won't ever go back to the United States, that I'll never step inside of Gotham again, that I'll live all my life without even coming back to my parents' house once."

"... What made you change your mind?", Ed asked delicately, his voice filled with sincere tenderness.

The blue eyes gazed at nothing a short moment, a nostalgic fog clouding them, then he shook his head again, coming back to the present.

"I did something.", he confessed, his voice suddenly hoarse. "Something... bad."

His fists clenched so strongly he must be hurting himself.

"Bruce...", Edward tried, regretting he had asked, but the moment quickly passed, and the young adult forced himself to relax, then opened his hands again, letting them rest on the wooden table.

The absolute rage had not left his voice nonetheless when he concluded:

"And I needed Alfred's help to move on."

Then he lowered his eyes, and sighed.

"What was..."

"Not now.", he cut him off, gently but firmly. "Maybe another day, I'll tell you. Just... not right now."

"Okay. I understand."

He smiled at him, proving it was not at all a problem for him, and Bruce smiled in return.

"You still haven't told me why on Earth you had such a bad grade on this essay.", Eddie reminded, his smug tone back in working order, and Bruce sighed out of despair.

"It's insane.", he complained. "I did a decent redaction, it's even six handwritten pages long!"

Edward laughed at his dismay.

"It's not about quantity, but quality, that you are judged, rich kid. Besides, sorry to overburden you but six handwritten pages are not what constitute a 'long' paper."

"Why, how much did you write for that silly subject?"

"I am not a reference standard, not about... anything.", he answered on a snotty tone. "But for this one, I was at fourteen pages."

"Fourteen?!", Bruce repeated. "I saw your handwriting, it's small and thight. How come... You are such a nerd...", he said, rolling his eyes, and the younger one chuckled.

"No point to deny that.", he replied, amused. "Usually for a table-top exercise like that in four hours, I write more between ten and twelve pages.", he admitted then, while staying openly conceited and proud to be. "But I found this 'silly subject' quite interesting."

"... You depress me.", Bruce concluded in a low tone sounding like fatality, and Ed laughed again.
"Tell me what your essay schema was.", he proposed on a more sympathetic voice in response to that. "And I'll explain what went wrong."

Bruce started informing him of the plan he followed for his exam as he remembered it... that is to say not very precisely, proving what little interest he gave to the said exam.

Which made Edward laugh again.

"Stop mocking me... How much did you have at this anyway ?", Bruce grumbled, and Ed grinned.

"Who, me ? Well an A, of course. I never had anything else, I'm not gonna start now."

"You... never had anything else ?"

From frustrated, Bruce's expression turned to honestly interested.

Ed looked wondering a short moment.

"I had a few B+. And a simple B here and there, though not many.", he conceded. "But these occured only when I didn't detail enough a calculation or handed over something deemed 'too complex'."

"Shouldn't that be enhanced ?", Bruce countered, even if he got what kind of complications it implied.

"Not in this world.", Edward confirmed his thoughts by answering quietly. "It's gonna sound... dumb.", he revealed softly. "But I had to learn the techniques about calculation in maths, physics and computer courses. Sometimes these informations were difficult to log."

"How so ?", Bruce asked, curious. "I mean... you don't seem to be someone who ever learnt anything in class..."

"That I did not.", he approved.

Then he just smiled a bit, and told the truth, because after all he had no reason to lie about it, furthermore he had been the one to broach the topic in the first place.

"What I had to learn were the academic reasonings. It started in kindergarten : as you guessed, no teacher ever taught me anything, when I wanted to learn interesting things I went to the library or in the internet whenever I could have access to a computer. So no, I never learnt anything in class. But I had to memorize... how they popularized things for the other children and themselves. And it hadn't been easy."

The slight bitterness wasn't hidden in his words as he pursued, lost in thoughts :

"You see, even if in science there is most of the time one way to do a calculation or an experiment, I simply... ply it, directly, in a way I'm not even capable to detail to provide an explanation in line with the expected academic process. It just... matches, in my mind. And when it's wrong, I know where to go back to correct my reasoning. Everything is perfectly organized in my head when it comes to these exercices, and when I'm with someone who understands, at least partly, I can adapt my explanations for them and perform very good work with them. But in school, with their whim to oversimplify everything to 'make it easier to understand' ?!"

He shook his head, clearly resentful about it. Truth be told, Bruce couldn't help but think it was somehow... sad. To be too intelligent to get why you should act as far less smart than you are just
because a few academic rules can't adapt themselves to the cases of autistic, clever children. The only thing he had to learn was how to act like an ordinary kid while he was not, and could never be not even if he wanted to. To act ordinary while he was special.

This fact made Bruce angry. And Edward validated his beginning of anger episode as he pursued his explanation:

"I had a hard time getting what it meant! As a kid, I couldn't understand why I had to detail so much everything, even very basic stuff while it was all so... simple, in my head. I never got why they wanted that many useless details about basic operations, so I had to learn when to add other calculations and when not. On the other hand, I couldn't explain too many aspects about the subjects either, otherwise I was told my answers are 'too detailed' effectively, but 'not in the waited way, not how they are supposed to be'. It must seem... dumb, said like this, but it had always been very frustrating, to know the answer, know how to figure out practically anything, and always way faster than the others about any subject. Yet I don't use the 'correct methods' and have to do strictly what is expected! It's just... it was a bit hard to reconcile, sometimes. And I'm talking about science, but it wasn't the only area... It was the same in literature, history and philosophy: I always had, written in my papers or verbally pronounced something like 'it's not necessary to know all of this to answer the subject', 'the reasoning is too complex', 'there are too many references'."

"How could a teacher write something like that?"

A sad smile appeared on his lips as he very simply rectified:

"Not 'a' teacher, Bruce. The majority of them. And not only teachers, by the way. Just... people."

They shared a strange look, reflecting upon this.

"Was it... always like that for you?", Bruce inquired afterwards. "With everyone?"

"No.", Edward answered truthfully. "Not everyone, of course, I am not going to caricature. I used to be the favorite in a few of my classes, actually. Not every teacher felt their ego bruised because they had a smart kid in their course. Some were very pleased, and they even took a liking on me during the year."

"Finally an appropriate reaction.", Bruce commented and they shared a smile.

"Not really.", Edward countered nonetheless, but he was still amused. "I am not an... easy student to deal with, I've never been. Even with teachers who liked having a genius in the ranks, I... Well, you had the occasion to attest how I talk to adults.", he concluded, shrugging his shoulders. "I can't help it, I have to play smart-ass, question their capacities and sometimes being hurtful. Even towards people who tolerate me. I can never just... be like anyone else."

"Why would you want to be like anyone else?", Bruce asked back, leaning more comfortably in the comfy seat of the cozy Café, his now finished cup of coffee and empty plate of what previously contained a chocolate brownie in front of him. "Aren't glad you are..."

"Oh, I am!", he cut immediately, his broad smile returning. "I'm proud to be different, and that this 'difference' lies in the intellectual level. But I must recognize, even though I like to know I'm... special, it is hard to always feel confident about it. It still is a problem sometimes. Not for the way I see myself, but it's just that it's not... natural, for me, to act 'like everybody'. To seem normal. I had to learn, and sometimes it was not enough. It still is not enough. It's... very complicated, to have to act as if I belong in a normal way to this specie, while inside I feel like I have nothing in common with the average persons, and will never be one of them. I just wish I could... not be obligated to pretend
to fit in. I don't want to fit in, but for now I have no other choice but to keep trying wearing this
mask. And it's... very hard sometimes."

Bruce couldn't do anything else than to nod quietly.

"I know the feeling all too well.", he stated in return, and for a moment they fell silent.

"It's like we are supposedly speaking the same language as the others.", Edward stated afterwards,
and once again Bruce felt like this boy was the only person he ever met-or at least, the second one,
but first here in Gotham- who could truly understand him. "I knew what to answer to what they
asked me.", he pursued, returning to his own case after he spoke for them both. "But we still fail to
interact properly because I am not using the 'right words' or the 'normal' ones, something like that.
And I always found it silly to be forced to act a certain way while I know the answer about... a lot of
things, and could simply talk about it my way. I know... it's stupid."

"It's not.", Bruce corrected immediately, baffled -and already feeling the rage rising- the redhead
could believe that. "The only thing 'stupid' in all of this is that you never met anyone who just let you
be smart and not try to conform you to act like the average, braindead people around ! That's called
discrimination, unfortunately it exists, but in our democratic republic it is punished. Why haven't you
tried to...
"I can't.", he objected, softly, but a somewhat sad sparkle glowing in his light green eyes. "I am not...
I never had anything to pay or to offer to someone so that they can let me be who I am. For now I
only have experience at school, so I can't relate in another area as long as I'm a minor, and am not
allowed to work in anything I'd want to. But that's no breaking news, neither in the school world nor
the work one, you know how the major part of humans are : they fear what's different. And being an
open-minded, clever child with very strong positions about many opinions, plus being ready to
defend them, on top of being smart, smarter than all of them, is being really different. The kind of
'different' you either hate or fear. And most of the time... a bit of both."

He had nothing to object to this.

Everything was true.

"I wish some things were... not the way they are.", was all he thought of as an answer. "In... a lot of
areas."

"So do I."

They shared a supportive glance. At least it seemed 'supportive', but even though Edward tried his
best to properly analyse the meaning of Bruce's expressions, it was still difficult here and there to be
sure what sentiment he expressed. As about many other things, he was working on it.

They were walking in the streets after they left the Café later, when Bruce told him after a hesitation :

"I met someone who didn't care, once."

Edward turned a quizzical look to him.

"You mean, someone clever who asserted to be who he or she is ?"

"Yes."

And his voice held a husky, regretful undertone.
"He was a genius, in his own way. Nothing like you, though.", he added with a smile, and Edward understood it must have been some kind of inner joke he had not the reference to share.

So he just smiled back slightly.

"But he was... very clever. And he was free. No issues with 'looking good' or 'trying to fit in'. No thoughts about keeping his mouth shut to benefit of something, no problems with facing any kind of authority and taking the blame afterwards. A part of him enjoyed it, actually. It always made him laugh."

Ed felt... bothered, to see Bruce smiling with more tenderness at what seemed to be a pleasant memory he was recalling about this person.

No, not 'bothered'. Jealous. As he realized, it left him more confused than ever.

"I can do that too.", he countered so, with more bitterness than intended, and it just made Bruce arch an eyebrow at the unexpected angry tone. "I mean...", he tried to pull himself together, blushing lightly at his anything but mature reaction. "I have no issues with saying what I think out loud, and I don't care if it doesn't please everybody. But... I want a doctorate.", he confessed quietly, lowering his gaze. "And a perfect school record. So that I can find an interesting, well-paid employment in an area I like at a high level, although I don't know which one yet. And if I get in trouble at school, I can have... complications, fulfilling this goal. Nothing I couldn't overcome of course, but if I can avoid them, I'll much prefer not having to deal with this kind of setbacks. Besides, I can't play rebel or whatever or join a... I don't know, 'club'? That's what young outsiders who want both company and a bit of action are doing sometimes, aren't they?"

"Dunno. I never paid attention to these sort of... activities."

"Well I can't!", he kept saying vigorously as if Bruce required for him to prove himself... better than the other?

"I never...", he tried to reassure him, puzzled by the strange way Edward was reacting, only to be interrupted right away by a frustrated voice talking very fast:

"I have responsibilities, contrary to your... anarchist clown or whoever he is. I can't just throw everything away because I want to be heard, not now, not yet. Maybe not ever. I have people who count on me, and I'm planning for a future, for both them and me. I simply cannot suddenly decide to..."

"Edward. I was not asking you to justify why you haven't set a church on fire just to prove you don't like being told what you have to do and to be.", Bruce settled firmly, seeing his comrade was getting angrier as he talked, but still not understanding why he needed so badly to excuse why he was not a thug, a potential criminal, blatantly a psychopath, or just a mad teenager with clear issues about authority.

Of course he was not like 'him'. But why would that make him angry?! It was a good thing not to be like J. No one was.

Only Bruce was like 'him', and again not enough, not until the end.

"Wait, your friend actually... 'set a church on fire' once?"

Bruce sighed.

"If it was the only thing he did...", he regretted.
The only thing we did, he should have said if he was honest. But who asked him to tell the truth here?

"Wh... Why ?! What happened ?! Were you..."

"It was silly of me to refer to him.", he cut off immediately. "Don't ask, I won't answer."

Okay, at least that way clear. Edward huffed, frustrated he had just been discarded like that. Even if he could understand. Sort of. After all, he still hadn't said anything about his own friends, not the names nor the actual relationships between them. Or how he literally lived at Selina and the Browns' places rather than at his father's. And still not a word about Stephanie. So he was not in the best position to give lessons about transparency to his... was Bruce a friend by now ? He liked to think of him as such, but they never ventured into this terrain to discuss it.

"Fine.", he agreed later, forcing the discontent to retreat. "So, still no Christmas present ?", he relaunched then, and Bruce rolled his eyes.

"You really aren't going to let that go, aren't you ?"

"Nope.", he ascertained proudly, and they laughed.

During the last two weeks, Edward tried to convince him to play along, arguing it was always a good idea, it didn't cost anything, especially not to him, plus it was something pleasant and now, three days before December 25 was the right time to play 'Chistmas spirit'. To what Bruce retorted it had been years since he last celebrated -it was partly a lie, and Ed understood it immediately, nevertheless he didn't ask for the whole truth-, and the ginger responded "so why not trying to get the tradition back this year ?". The argument haven't reached an end or a satisfying conclusion so far.

"I'll see you tomorrow ?", Bruce inquired gently, at the end of the afternoon, as they were about to part ways.

"Sure, you aren't going to make me change this new habit. I like it.", he smiled back. "About noon would be okay ? So that I'll still have a few hours to sleep before the night."

Bruce nodded. Even if he didn't get why Edward met his colleagues at night, most of the time the one between Sunday and Monday, he had the redhead's usual time schedule memorized by now.

"Sounds good. See you tomorrow, then."

"Bye."

They kept it simple. Since the last two weeks, they hanged out during the evenings after class, and during the afternoons in the weekends, longer on Saturday than Sunday. Now that the holidays were starting, they knew they'll see each other regularly as well. It had become part of the routine for Ed, and he didn't like things to change once they were set. He enjoyed having Wayne around daily, and although it may won't be as periodic for the next two vacation weeks, he still wanted to spend time with him.

He smiled a little.

For sure, even if they didn't agree on it or ever talked about it again, he really considered Bruce a friend.

He was... almost certain of it.
I just want to wish you a Merry Christmas ; a few hours in advance since I'm posting today. Whatever is your way to celebrate, or simply spend the Christmas night, I hope you'll have a lot of fun and will enjoy yourself !! Merry Christmas, my friend ! <3
Here, I hand over to you a bunch of happy, lighthearted sentiments emblematic of the season ! ; )
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

"The only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself."
- Oscar Wilde

Chapter Notes

This chapter is gonna be called an... experiment. I honestly don't know what to think about this story anymore; I was kinda excited to write it at the beginning, but since a few chapters I find it more boring than anything. Not enough plot, too many redundant talks. I will pursue it nonetheless, because I don't like things to remain unfinished or unsolved. So there, here comes something new in this chapter, to boost my own interest over this story and try to give you something readable. Key word here: 'try'. I hope you'll like it:

"So what, I can't see you either on December 26?", Bruce asked, his chagrin more than audible in his tone.

Edward chuckled, then retorted on the phone:

"You realize how desperate you sounded?"

The older boy wished he could deny it, but nothing could be further from the truth.

"What, am I not allowed to say I miss you?", he taunted in return, because a bit of humor never killed anybody, and it was actually appropriate here.

Edward laughed again onto the machine.

"Allowed you are, and I'm so very touched to know just how much I mean to you, darling.", he played along on the same tone. "But may I remind you I actually wanted us to meet today, and you are the one who refused?"

"It's not the same.", he countered, slightly uncomfortable about... precisely today.

"Okay.", Ed said gently, easily getting the reason of his refusal. "And I told you, it's not a problem. But I'm afraid I can't go out with you tomorrow. It's... a special day."

"Christmas is today.", he corrected, not aware of anything 'special' about the 26.

"Thanks, Captain obvious.", he jeered. "I won't have remembered without your help."

Bruce huffed, and he pictured his comrade's exact expression at the moment: satisfied, smug,
smiling.

He looked so adorable like that.

"It's special for me.", he revealed quietly after a short pause. "And it has nothing to do with Christmas. It's... another kind of joyful celebration. By coincidence it happens the day after Christmas, but it's not related."

Now that was surprising. Could it...

Bruce blushed lightly. He had no idea when Edward's birthday was, maybe it...

"Is your birthday tomorrow ?!", he immediately asked, wishing he had known and not...

"What ? No, not that !", he laughed in return. "I won't say 'special' if it was just my birthday. And I'll have plenty of time to hang out with you during the afternoon.", he clarified, the smile readily distinguished in his voice.

"Alright... Then what is it ?"

"... I'm going out.", he told him after a hesitation.

Bruce couldn't tell if this was a lie or not. Usually when he had a doubt it meant it was not the truth, or not the entire one.

"Fine.", he replied so, trying to get over the frustration of not being given a real explanation. "Enjoy your... whatever it is, then."

"Thanks.", he answered, unsure of what else to say since it was not difficult to perceive Bruce was now a bit upset. "We can meet the 27 if you have no other plans ?", he tried to make it up, and a small smile appeared on the young adult's lips at this last question, although it has nothing funny.

"I have no 'other plans'.", he attested flatly. "Don't start thinking I could have some, I'm alone in a house too big and desperately empty; calling you for Christmas day because I'm bored and on my own."

Great, that was depressing.

Couldn't he just let Edward enjoy his holiday in peace, without trying to drag him in his problems? Being alone today was not even an issue for him. It became... normal, so...

"I proposed we hanged out the 24 during morning, before I started the Christmas Eve preparations in the afternoon. I kept time for you in my schedule, but you refused.", Edward reminded him, although his tone wasn't accusative, just underlining the facts. "And I said we can also see each other this afternoon a little, but it doesn't suit you either. You can still change your mind about it, but don't do as if I refused to see you for Christmas. On the contrary, I tried my best and you were the killjoy."

That was true indeed.

"I won't change my mind for this afternoon.", he confirmed, emotionless as he said the words. "But... thank you for proposing. I guess."

"The 'I guess' was weird.", he pointed out, amused, and Bruce smiled as well.

"My thought exactly. After I said it though, so I was not able to take it back."
Maybe one day he'll manage to formulate a few sentences without having one of them sounding odd, sad or mildly spooky. Important word there : 'maybe'.

"What are your plans for right now ?"

"Wait until December 27 to see you again. And... that was creepy, wasn't it ?"

"It would have been if I have not heard you say worse than that more than once already.", Ed chuckled as a validation, and Bruce shook his head fondly. "I'll tell you later for the hours, but I'll be there all day normally if no mishap come out."

"Finally a good new."

Looks like it won't be Christmas only for the other boy, then. Ed wished him a good end of day, and they hung up the communication afterwards.

Today was December 25.

And he was standing in the middle of his huge bedroom, his cellphone in hand. Not doing anything else.

Alfred was outside since yesterday, he had no idea what friends he joined to spend Christmas Eve. Or what he was doing at all, in fact. Or even if he truly was with... people. Maybe he would have known if he just took the time to ask, instead of having clearly told him yesterday afternoon he didn't want to celebrate and won't come to eat dinner with him, so he'd better go find another kind of entertainment.

Perhaps he could try to be more nice with Alfred. He was from time to time, he didn't always play disrespectful brat or moody teenager. But he... was not very kind. Most of the time, he was far from being sympathetic, even towards this man who cared so much for him and whom he sincerely loved -he was almost certain of it-.

The guilt bloomed again inside him, and it instantly hurt. Guilt to be a jerk with Alfred, guilt to be such a shitty friend with Edward, guilt to...

"Do you miss our Christmas, Brucie ?", a mad voice whispered in his ear, and the guilt feeling made him double over.

He was alone in the manor.

And even if Alfred will maybe came back tomorrow, he just had to stay in his room if he didn't want to see him. The afternoon was just beginning, so he had an all day and a half to kill before the 27 when he could go out again and see Ed. And today was Christmas day.

Christmas...

"Care to join me, Brucie ?"

"I don't want to.", he protested weakly, but the sound was too frail and broken to convince anyone, especially not himself. "I don't have to."

True indeed.

No one was going to force him.

There was no one in the room, in the house. He was alone and he was talking to himself. The worst
in this was that he knew it. He was aware no one will make him do anything.

Yet he knew how he was going to spend the next 48 hours.

By sitting in his bedroom having an existential crisis for the following hours, maybe sleeping a little. Then going to the manor's huge gymnasium to practice various kind of sports and physical exercises until his body will be so tired it will plead him to take a break, when every small move will hurt and he couldn't pursue without risking to faint out of exhaustion. It took long hours of intense training to reach that state. More than a whole day, sometimes. And he'll grab something to eat somewhere in this schedule.

That's exactly what he did, for the rest of Christmas day and the following one, losing notion of the time, the day and the night. Who cares about the hour, when one is alone and can do whatever he wants. 

The guilt didn't leave, but doing exercises always had the power to clear his mind, to help him think of... nothing.

Bruce had no idea of the time, but it was now December 26 at night, he was still alone in the house. He went to his bathroom, and started to prepare feverishly a syringe of his regular intake.

Sure thing, it won't be with these kind of behaviours that neither the guilt nor the rage would retreat.

"I don't love you."

The statement was clear, assured, assertive. No objection allowed. No other option. No... hidden possibilities or tempting undertones.

Just a stern, absolute refusal.

Jack shook his green haired head and laughed uncontrollably, as if it was the funniest thing he had ever heard.

"Oh, Brucie...", he answered, then he tilted his head back and wiped a few tears provoked by his hysterical snort. "You do know how to make a man laugh..."

Bruce's hands nervously gripped the ground... grass. It was grass.

Now that he focused on the surroundings, the two of them were in a relaxing, pretty landscape of green valleys, a few olive tree grown here and there. It was by all means a peaceful afternoon, from the subdued atmospheric light to the spring breeze blowing around them, playing in their loose clothing and Jack's long hair, electric green curls what fell to the middle of his spine.

They were sitting under an olive tree, the sun was bright but not blinding, and the ambient air was filled with the heady scent of the thousand of recently bloomed flowers that lined the soft soil.

Everything was so... perfect, it didn't look real.

"It's because this is not real.", J said with a wide smile, lying on his back on the grass, his arms crossed behind his neck.

"Of course it is.", Bruce corrected dryly, however it felt as if someone else spoke the words from
inside his body.

Then he waved at the surroundings, to prove to both J and himself he was not imagining the scene.

"See all that?! I'm here with you. How can you say it's not real?"

The nonsense was making him angry. At Joker, yes, but also at... the situation. Everything was too lovely, too bright, too pure; it looked like they were inside a painting. What were they doing together inside a painting? And more important... why was he asking himself such inconsistent questions?!

"Then it is real.", J scoffed, an uncannily pleased spark shining in his black eyes. "In a way, it is...", he pursued, wondering, now looking at the light blue sky and its scattered rare small clouds. "I am not gonna say what's inside your mind does not exist. So, in your mind, we are really here and having this conversation, in this... somehow romantic landscape. This is lovely, by the way. I didn't think you were the romantic type..."

He turned his head back to him, and his broad smile bared all his yellowish-white teeth.

"Does it answer your question?"

"Not... really."

But he just smiled a little in return, and laid back on the comfy carpet of herbaceous vegetation. His body was close enough to touch the other teenager's.

"Why can't I call you Jack?", he heard himself asking as if a stranger took control of his body again.

Why was he even asking this? He knew the answer, he asked it enough times already. Besides, it was not the present conversation topic, so why...

"Because I don't like it.", the other teen attested straightforwardly.

Looking at each other like that, resting on the ground, they were close enough to kiss if they just drew up their heads of a few centimeters.

"But it's your name."

Who cares? They shouldn't be talking about their names, they set up the rules when they met. They had more important things to discuss, things they needed to take care of, they had no time to loose talking about their identities once more... It was outdated, they needed to move forward now, to take themselves to the next level, to start another part of their lives.

They were ready now, weren't they?

"My name's Joker.", he expounded again, still smiling this mad, large smile that made him look so disturbing, so creepy, so... inhuman, to everyone else.

This smile that melted Bruce's heart and made him feel light, warm, and in love.

"What is yours?", Joker returned the question.

"Bruce.", he answered immediately.

He never had issues with his first name. Only with... the rest. The family one.
"Bruce who ?"

He wavered, then looked up to the sky.

The sky what was grey, heavy clouds filled with rain coming to their position ; they'll be there in a matter of minutes. Wait, wasn't the sky blue just a few seconds ago ? How had it changed so fast, and how had he failed to notice the sudden... cold, the wind was, slowly but surely, bringing to their spot... ?

"It's because it's all in your mind.", Joker answered to his silent question and confused expression. "And we both know how things are chaotics, messy and how fast they can change up there !"

This made him laugh again.

Soon he was laughing so much he curled up on himself, clenching his stomach with both hands. Frantic, lunatic, psychotic... beautiful.

Now sitting next to him, Bruce stretch out his arm to the pale body wriggling hysterically.

He wanted to touch him.

To run a hand through his long, dyed hair ; to let his fingers grip his impossibly white skin, way paler than anyone else's, than any other living person. Along with being reminiscent of a corpse's, his skin was also smoother than a normal human's. His body should'nt have this appearance of fragile, glowing porcelain. It made him look pure, look... like a celestial creature rather than a man.

But one glance at his face, and from celestial he went to demonic.

No eyes could be so big, so wide and their colour so dark it seemed to absorb light. They were like two black holes devouring planets, solar systems, galaxies, maybe even universes. Their unsettling dark tint was highly accentuated by the snow white tone of his skin and the usual makeup he wore : a thick line of black eye pencil coupled with a heavy layer of mascara, which shade was just as dark, and a lighter purple eyeshadow. All of this made the black pupils and iris look bigger and... even weirder, on the rest of his angular face. As for his mouth, covered of this bright, resistant red lipstick, it was almost like...

Like...

How could he describe him ? How could he even try, by drawing a physical portrait of him like that ? He was not human. He was far from being an angel, but wasn't exactly a demon either. Demons have a purpose, they set up things, they tempt humans. In every definition given to these beings, whatever the believings and folklores, they never were mindless creatures or animals. They had a goal, even a very tiny one and not necessarily a smart one. But they always wanted... something, from someone, often to use it for themseleves.

But Joker ?

He was above that.

Above... any notion of rationality, normality and... sanity.

How could Bruce ever love anyone ordinary after having experienced so much with... him... ?

"I don't love you.", he repeated, but his voice was far less assured, as if he was trying to convince himself rather than claiming it.
The rain fell so suddenly he startled.

It could not be pouring that promptly... How come the surroundings were already clouded by a dark grey atmosphere which drowned everything around, erasing completely his visibility of the landscape ?... None of this was... logical...

"Since when are you looking for things to be 'logical', Bruce ?"

Jack wasn't laughing anymore, he sat just in front of him under the rain, his too wide and shining eyes fixed on him, never blinking.

"I don't know.", he responded, incapable of reason straight at the moment.

"Of course you don't.", J retorted.

His tone was fond, Bruce had learnt by now how to detect the emotions in his strange voice and expressions.

"You still aren't over the chaos, how could you move on for something organized yet ?"

"... You are not the chaos."

J cocked his head to the side, like a curious bird would, failing to understand.

It poured hard but Bruce wasn't feeling it anymore. He wasn't wet, the drops of water weren't crackling on his skin like they would have if it had been a real rainstorm.

"Am I not ? Then what am I, Brucie ? What do you want me to be ?"

The ground split up below them right after the question.

Bruce screamed as the floor fissured, as neatly as if an axe just cleft it. He tilted backward, starting to fall inside the chasm opening.

"JOKER !"

He stretched his arms to the closest rock wall to catch himself up...

He was now hanging, his hands clung to an iron railing, about to fall. They were in a warehouse. It smelled of chemicals, burning plastics, rusty metals and...

A giant tun of acid bubbled beneath them.

Bruce's heart missed a beat, and he froze. What were they doing here ?! And what was this place even supposed to be ?! It was just like... just like in his nightmares... One of these scenes happening, again and again, these situations he never lived and which never made any sense but were still haunting him, over and over, coming back... And he could not do anything to escape them...

He was suspended on top of a container filled with boiling acid. In an old-looking factory burning chemicals. His only grip being a guardrail what seemed to be ages old and about to rupture in his hands.

"Joker !", he heard himself calling for help, while inside he knew it was no use, he had no right to ask him to assist him. "Help me !"

Jack looked down to him from the iron bridge used to walk above the chemicals tanks. He cocked
his head to the side once again.

"Why ?", he asked innocently, as if he wasn't getting the emergency of the situation.

"Because... Because I'm gonna fall if you don't !", he cried out. "Please, please I need your help ! I need you..."

"Do you ?"

His smile was terrifying.

How had he ever thought this smile could be pretty, while it was just... chilling... ?

"I don't think you do.", J took back, his hair-raising smile growing, wide, so wide, too wide, way wider than a human's lips could expand. "That's not how I remember it."

It could have lasted a lifetime.

The moment the rail broke while he was still tightly gripping it, the moment he felt himself driven rearwards.

This instant which was over in only a fraction of seconds but inside his head lasted for hours, as if time had been slowed down.

Except he should not be the one falling. It was not how it happened, not the way they... He hadn't been the one who got hurt. Him, he was the one who ran away rather than tried to help his friend.

"J... Joker... I... I'm so..."

He needed to tell him he was sorry. Needed to tell him he... loved him...

"I don't care.", a little voice whispered in his ear.

It was not quite Jack's, not quite his own either. It was a mix of both.

"You left him... you left me..."

He closed his eyes.

He was not falling anymore. He had not been the one to fall. Yet he never landed either. He never felt... alive, before he met J. And he went back at not being real after he turned his back on him.

He was just an empty shell pretending to be human. Trying to act as if he had feelings, to make everyone believe he was... someone. Not even someone great, and far from a good man. Just... trying to persuade the rest of the world he was a real person.

While he was not.

He had never been. Not even when he was a child before his parents' death. He tried, to please them, for that they stopped taking him to the doctors, psychiatrists and priests to ask them for better diagnosis every time he acted... odd. They always claimed there was nothing wrong with him, that he was an ordinary little boy who just had slight difficulties expressing his feelings, but nothing alarming. Nothing that needed to be treated.

How could they guess anyway ? They were just people, and they were talking to the Wayne couple. Would they have noticed, how could they tell Thomas and Martha their only son don't belong to the
human specie?! That he had never been one of them.

Not even because he was smarter, or stronger, and certainly not better. Just because he was... empty. He was a stranger to the world, but most of all he was a stranger to himself. He had always been, always felt desperately alone in his own head.

Always... Except with Jack.

Jack was the only representative of his own kind as well, in his way he was even more lonely than Bruce. So they... they managed to be alone together.

But... why was he thinking about that now?

And where was Joker?! Joker should be here, he should be here with him. Bruce and him should remain side by side; from one alien to another who used to get along superbly.

Alien...

Someone else talked about being an alien. Someone who was not J. He was not J yet he was important too. So, so important he...

Oh-oh, I'm an alien. I'm a legal alien

I'm a...

What were the lyrics saying again?

I'm an Englishman...

No, not these lyrics. The other ones, the... changed ones. It was about being smart. Of course he was smart, he was a genius! A... a...

I'm a way too smart man in this world...

Oh-oh, I'm an alien. I'm a legal alien.

I'm a way too smart man in this world...

A flash of pumpkin orange hair, and pretty light green eyes glowing with a vivid, sharp intelligence. A smug smile, a frequent laughter. But not like J's. J's was freaky. Insane. This child's was... nice. Lovely.

Was he really a child?

Just as for Jack earlier, all he could do was to try a description of his physical appearance. He couldn't go deeper, couldn't go past the simple aspect of him. He was too afraid to look further, even though he knew just how beautiful this kid's mind was, just how brilliant he was inside. Who was he again?... Maybe if he looked at him long enough, he'll remember his name.

It was difficult to focus, he just caught glimpses of him, heared a laugh that wasn't Joker's echoing in his mind, a few words pronounced by a young teen's voice. It was as if he was underwater and tried to watch and listen to what happened on the surface world, but couldn't get his head above water.

Freckles. That was the third thing, after the hair and the eyes. He had freckles on his cheeks, on the back of his hands and... certainly his whole face and body, they must cover a large portion of his skin. Skin... what looked soft, delicate. But not in Joker's way of something pure or cold as a
stone. The redhead's milky complexion was pale as well but not \textit{disturbingly}, not in a drown dead body manner or a marble statue's. Just... pretty, freckled smooth skin. With a cute, sassy smile showing bright, clean teeth.

Why had he been referring to him as a \textit{child} ?

He was not. He was a teen, he was... just a few years younger than him, he recalled, even if he didn't know where the information came from. It was just that he \textit{looked} juvenile, because his features were soft, in a feminine way, he was smaller than the average boys his age, his body was thin and his smile was sweet.

But he was not a child.

He was... was... who was he again ?

"So \textit{this} is what you found to replace me ?", Jack mocked, but he was nowhere to be seen.

In fact Bruce wasn't seeing \textit{anything}. He was in the dark, it was night all around. He couldn't even tell if his eyes were opened or closed, the ambient darkness being so absolute he felt it, like a burden on his body threatening to \textit{crush} him by its mass.

"A bratty ginger kiddo who thinks he's a genius ?"

Joker's laugh rang again inside his head.

"That is so... disappointing..."

Bruce wanted to argue. He wanted to tell Jack he was wrong, to tell him he...

He should feel angry the green-haired teen took the right to insult this... other teenager. This other teenager was his friend, was he not ? He should defend him when people talked badly of him. Yet he felt... nothing.

He was just \textit{empty}. It was as dark inside his head as the ambient atmosphere was.

"I don't love you.", he finally let out, and his words sounded just as wrong, untrue and empty was the currently felt.

The laughter stopped.

In fact not a sound could be heard anymore.

The silence was overwhelming, even to him.

"That's a lie, Bruce."

But this voice was not Joker's. Neither was it Bruce's.

It was Edward's.

Edward. Of course his name was Edward. He was his \textit{friend}, they've been working together for over a month and they were getting... closer, since the last two weeks. He loved his company, and enjoyed the moments they spent together. How could he have forgotten him ?!

His tone was delicate, tender even, \textit{reassuring}. He went on with this fond voice of his, talking to Bruce as he would do to adress a child... or a \textit{baby}, to comfort them:
"That's a lie, and you know it. Although you have no reason to lie. I won't judge. No one will. You are lying to yourself, and as long as you'll keep pretending, you'll never progress. How can you try to move on if you still live in the past?"

The darkness faded.

It was cracking. The black shape of night started to light up, to...

"I don't love you...", he said one last time, weakly, desperately, and the broken whisper vanished in the gleaming, brightening light.

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Bruce opened his eyes.

His breathing was fast, his heart pounded in his chest, he was shaking and his pyjamas stuck to his sweating skin.

He stayed like that, not moving during long minutes, trying to calm himself down.

Once his body was back at being steady, under control, -that is to say, the opposite of the state his mind was in-, he sat on the bed.

A few more minutes passed, during the ones he remained in this uncertain frame of mind, focused on nothing else than calming down. Not trying to clear his thoughts either. Better don't get too close. It's dark inside.

He got to his feet, and took the required steps to reach the bathroom in his master bedroom.

He turned on the lights, closed the bathroom door behind him. Took off his clothes wet with sweat, let them fall on the tiled floor, before entering the Italian shower.

Funny, wasn't it? Italian shower...

The hot water ran down his body, pouring a blanket of warm liquid over his skin, washing for a small time all this invisible dross stuck to his being since way too long.

His now soaked short black hair adhered to his neck and forehead.

He closed his eyes.

Stop thinking, stop blaming himself, stop... feeling.

He never experienced things like he was supposed to, like other people did normally. Those people who never understood it was possible to see the world differently, that not everyone has to 'look the same' to be alive. And on his case, he was only partly a man, all he possessed was the physical appearance of a human being. The rest was... other. So he should not struggle at locking away any form of feelings.

Seconds passed. Minutes. Hours? When Bruce exited the bathroom, wrapped in a light blue bathrobe, he had been under the shower for nearly two hours and a half.

He sat back on his king-size bed, his cellphone in hand.
Hard to decipher what he was thinking right now, or the state of his mind.

And he had no idea what happened in this mess called the inside of his head when he went to the 'contact' section. Which contained two names: Alfred, Edward.

He pressed the second one.

A few long seconds passed before he picked up the phone.

"Bruce?", a quite sleepy voice answered. "What's up? And first of all... do you have any notion of the time?!

Listening to him, Bruce discovered they were in the middle of the night. As if he had been a robot for the previous two hours, he suddenly felt like he was coming back to life. And realized he had no reason to call anyone at... 5:13 on the morning, as his alarm clock informed him when he looked at it on his bedside table.

"Bruce?"

From sleepy, Edward's tone turned to vaguely frustrated.

"You just woke me up, the least you can do now is talk to me... What is it?"

He blushed slightly, back at being awkward and incapable of communicating. But even if his voice was far from being assured when he responded, at least it sounded not... broken.

"I... I had a nightmare.", he admitted, embarrassed but not finding a convincing lie to justify his early morning phone call.

"Wanna talk about it? I'm able to play both psychiatrist and psychoanalyst if you need, I swear I'm not half bad at it. And I know how to listen."

Bruce felt his heart warming up lightly. Or... a feeling close to this. Edward should be upset, that would be the normal reaction when being waken up too early during the holidays after all. Yet no, he was... offering help. Like a good friend would maybe?

"I'm sorry I woke you up.", he stated quietly, and heard the other huff in response.

"Don't worry about that. I suppose you either didn't see what time it is or... thought I'd be awake perhaps?"

"First option. It occurred to me after I called that you might be sleeping."

This time a tiny chuckle answered.

"I may not be a heavy sleeper, I'm on vacations like everybody. Meaning I'm not usually up by myself at five in the morning when I can avoid it. When I am, it... does not depend on me."

He sounded particularly amused and... was that fondness? while saying this. Bruce heard something crunching slightly, probably indicating he just sat in an old chair or a sofa.

"So.", he took back with his 'project manager' voice, brushing off any form of tiredness. "Are you gonna tell me what that nightmare was like or what?"

Bruce smiled, feeling way more relaxed.
"It was... vivid.", was the first thing he thought of to reveal.

"Bad dreams often are.", he stated simply, but without being mocking or dismissive.

He only enunciated it as a matter of fact, not a way to jeer him, and Bruce understood it easily.

"That's why they can wake us up when they are really disturbing or violent.", he pursued, effectively talking more like a doctor than an amateur trying to deduce the meaning of omens. "But they are just dreams.", he went on, as to soothe him. "Would they be induced by traumatic memories or imagination only, they don't carry a... message or anything like that. Don't let a dream frighten you, it's just the messy representation driven by your subconscious of something that lies inside your head."

"What lies inside my head is precisely what scares me."

He said it before thinking of what it implied, what it truly meant. Now that he heard himself, it was a mistake to announce this like that. He should not have called him to begin with... why had he called him? Couldn't he just... let him out of this, and try to deal with his problems on his own?!

If he had reflected upon it upstream, he would have...

"... Bruce?", Edward called hesitantly because the silence settled in for a bit too long after the older teen's mildly freaky sentence.

Then Ed took back, clearly wavering over if he should ask or not:

"Was it really an... ordinary dream?"

His blood ran cold in his veins. Edward was smart. Incredibly smart, that was established. But it justified by no means how he figured that out so fast! He could simply not...

"Talk to me, Bruce. You're scaring me."

He indeed sounded worried by now.

"I am not here to judge you.", he kept on talking, as if he tried to reassure him. "I am not an adult, neither am I... responsible of you or anything. It means I have no right to lecture you, even if I wanted to. Which, by the way, is not my intention. It would be stupid and the opposite of what a friend is supposed to do in a similar situation. So just... tell me what it was, okay?"

That he could not.

Edward only offered this solution to sound sympathetic, he was not really meaning it, and was even less tempted by hearing about it. It was unlikely he could want such a thing. But then again, how was it possible he... knew? Had he deduced some of his activities by studying his behaviours, or was it just a lucky guess? And was it even surely what he intended by...

"We can meet outside if you want.", he suggested, since Bruce wasn't proposing even the beginning of an answer. "It would be more comfortable than to talk about it on the phone. If you... if you want to, of course."

"... I am not sure I want to.", he finally managed to articulate, at a loss.

A pause followed this last statement. He started to think Edward left his phone and went to do something else, when he took back, more softly than Bruce ever heard him talk:
"You called me at night after that 'nightmare' woke you up. You called me, Bruce.", he insisted, his tone filled with both tenderness and determination. "You want to talk about it. But you can't with your guardian, either because you're ashamed or because he already knows, and you feel like he is not able to... understand, or to give you an appropriate answer anymore. It can help you to be provided a fresh look, and contrary to your butler, I won't play moralist or try to make you feel remorseful, whatever is it you took to provoke that... dream. You know what I think about moral, I'm not gonna give any lessons."

Another hesitation, then he added delicately:

"And I disagree with the Manichean view. To me it's... just the easy way of thinking, introduced by people who never managed to debate correctly about definitions. Because in the reality, nothing is ever black or white, wrong or right."

Wrong or...

"Edward ?"

"Yes ?"

"Do you... know ?"

"... I know what you told me.", he answered truthfully. "And what I understood. That is : you are comprised of so many insecurities about who you are and who you are supposed to be, how you feel about it and how you want to prevent yourself from expressing some of the things you sense because you are afraid it 'won't be right' and won't meet an approval. Those are basic deductions. For the rest, I don't 'know', not exactly. I just have... my theories. Scientist, you know.", he added, and Bruce heard the smile in his voice. "I can't help but speculate."

Bruce smiled fondly at this.

"Okay, I... would love to talk further about it."

It was the truth. Even if he didn't see how he could confess anything right now, he truly wanted to let him know. He just lacked an appropriate way to express these thoughts.

"Given the hour, we can meet for breakfast, then.", Ed submitted, and it was audible the prospect cheered him up. "What about we... hold on a sec."

"Edward ? Everything's alright ?", he worried hearing the sudden emergency in his tone.

But his comrade didn't hear, he certainly put the phone away from his ear.

The noises coming from the room he was in became more distant, but as he focused on these, Bruce heard something sounding like... screams ?! No, not exactly... more like... a baby crying.

Now that was weird.

What on Earth was Edward doing in the same place as a... baby ?!

Paying close attention, the noises increased and he identified a man's voice, muffled by the cries.

"... n't worry Eddie.", he distinguished from the other one, whom must have entered the room - certainly living-room- carrying the baby. "I've got this."

While tired, the man's voice sounded jovial.
He barely perceived Edward's soft answer of "Okay. I arrive in two seconds."

Then he spoke in the phone again, his voice clear and holding a loving undertone, different from the ones he ever heard him employ before:

"Sorry, a small hitch. Are you still there?"

"Yes...", he answered, puzzled by the interactions he caught a brief glimpse of.

"Still fine with meeting today?"

"Sure..."

He agreed to the Café and hour Ed proposed, and answered a weak "see you..." when he saluted him at the end, before he hung up.

What was that?

What was... this small insight of Edward's life he witnessed, without understanding any of it and which left him confused as Hell.

From what he knew, Edward had a father, a best friend, and three colleagues with the ones the relationship bond was... uncertain. That man whom he talked so tenderly to, could he be his father? It sounded... wrong. He hated his father, he never tried to pretend otherwise or to disabuse Bruce about it. How could he assert he detested his birther yet address to him showing so much... love?!

This man he talked to there could just not be his dad. No way. But then who was he and...

That baby. He had no doubt, the screaming noise belonged to a crying baby.

What did this...

Fingers brushed through his dark hair, and he automatically unwound at the affectionate contact. He turned around to meet the black iris, and Jack's red, broad smile greeted him.

"So not only is your new love interest a kid, but he also has a baby.", Joker scoffed bluntly, and Bruce shook his head.

"It certainly is something else.", he countered, feeling suddenly very tired.

"Sure... it definitely looked like 'something else'."

He glared at the other boy, and J just laughed in response, before pouncing energetically on the large bed, then he gazed back to Bruce with a mischievous expression.

"Looks like you could use a bit of comfort to get over it..."

"That I do not.", he sighed in return.

Then he shot him an accusative glance.

"You are not even here."

Joker seemed shocked upon hearing that, then just rolled onto his side before jumping out of the bed.

"And whose fault it that?!", he accused him squarely, while offering him a murderous glare.
Bruce held his breath, the horrible guilt twisting his guts and starting to burn inside his organism right away. But what could he say, how could he defend himself? It was his fault if the real Jack was now in a wheelchair with a shattered spine, barely able to move even his neck; his face, uncommon at the time but having its charming, seductive side now disfigured forever, with no hope of recovery for neither his body nor his mind.

Tears rolled down his cheeks.

"I'm sorry J..."

He closed his eyes, forcing the dreadful feeling to retreat. At least a little. Just enough to try having a normal day and interact with someone in not long this morning without looking like a... dead boy walking.

"I am so, so sorry."

When he opened his eyes again, the abnormally pale figure and its long green curls had disappeared, returning inside his head.

Faded like a morning mist dispersed by the rising sun.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

"The only thing one never regrets are one's mistakes."
- Oscar Wilde

Chapter Notes

The boys meet for breakfast and broach some... interesting? creepy?... a mix of both, conversation topics over coffee and croissants.

"Why is December 26 an important date for you?"

Edward arched an eyebrow.

"Good morning to you too.," he rectified. "How are you feeling?"

Bruce shook his head, as if to repel something. Then he enunciated simply:

"We talked over the phone something like two hours ago. I don't see why I'd..."

"Say 'hello'? Well just because it's the normal, required thing to do to greet someone."

But he was more amused by Bruce's blunders than offended by now.

The taller boy nodded a bit too sharply

"Hello.", he corrected flatly. "Why is December 26 an important date for you?"

This time Ed just laughed in answer. Once Credit Card had something in mind, it was impossible to distract him from the objective he imposed to himself as a goal to achieve. He was a lot like Selina on this point.

Furthermore it was... not really a secret. Bruce could even figure out the meaning of the day with only a few clues if he searched by himself, so... Ed didn't feel the need to hide the truth about it. As long as he wasn't requested to provide an exhaustive explanation, it couldn't hurt to answer, partly but with veracity, to the question.

"I'll tell you inside.", he answered so, gesturing to the bakery they met up at. "It's kinda cold today, so I'd rather don't stay outside too long while we have another option."

"Agree.", Bruce conceded, and they entered the tranquil Café.

A young couple was ordering when they arrived, but he establishment was mostly empty since it was still early; only a few tables were occupied, by people talking quietly. The place smelled of coffee and freshly baked pastries, a pleasant odour of bread and muffins baked in the ovens came from the
kitchen. The ambiance was a cozy, sympathetic one. They sat rapidly at a table close to a window, once they got themselves a steaming cup of coffee and a plate of hot, crisp croissants.

"Do you celebrate your name in the calendar ?", Ed asked after they sat comfortably on the red sofas, and Bruce frowned slightly.

"My name ? You mean... that weird thing of each day being linked to the name of a Saint ? Of course not !"

Who celebrated this ? It was not a birthday, not an official day off, not... It was not anything, and he won't have thought Edward could be the kind to give importance to such things.

But then again, he had a lot more to learn about his young comrade, so why not starting by that ?

"Was it a... Saint Edward yesterday ?"

Damn, that sounded odd.

Ed must perceive it like that as well because he laughed at the term.

"Now 'Saint Edward', that was the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard.", he jeered. "But yes, it's kinda the idea.", he pursued with a softer smile. "I've never celebrated these before, but I'll be doing it for the person whose name is registered in the calendar the 26 of December. It was... a first, but I'm resolute to institute a tradition of it, starting yesterday."

Unexpected... and strangely ordinary. That was almost disappointing, Bruce honestly thought it would be something more... peculiar.

"Was it your friend's... nameday ?"

"The word 'nameday' does not exist in American English.", he pointed out, perplexe. "I heard that absence of space between the terms. If you want to say it properly, it's name day in two words."

"But 'birthday' is in one.", Bruce argued, only mildly convinced even though it was making him smile a little. "And... I've just said that term in one word, didn't I ? So somehow, it exists now."

Edward frowned a little.

Okay, something was definitely different about Bruce today. He knew he was not alright when he called earlier, certainly even far from it. But he thought he'd be... refreshed by now, they were over two hours later. Furthermore, nothing proved Bruce called him right after his nightmare woke him up, he certainly took time to calm himself down and to try clearing his thoughts first.

That's what he used to do when he had bad dreams himself, before he could go to Selina for comfort, either by reaching her place or just talking to her on the phone. Of course that was also before he started practically living with her. Now not only were the nightmares very rare, but when they occurred he was most of the time in her bed or sleeping on her couch. Easier to be hugged and shushed immediately then.

And when he was at the Browns's, he could always wake Arthur up if he needed to, the man was always so caring and gentle with him, he assured him more than once he could ask him for anything at any time of the day.

So well, even if the nightmares were not completely eradicated, he always had someone to talk to now, to make him forget the images and get over the childhood memories. It was just so good, to
have friends.

And right now, he was decided to help Bruce the way his were doing with him. Or at least... to try his best.

"Alright for 'nameday', then.", he validated so. "But no, it wasn't my friend's. We've known each other for almost three years now, neither her nor me ever thought of celebrating this kind of event. But we knew it was done in some families and... we wanted to do it for someone."

He bit his lip, lightly nervous.

He shouldn't fear anything about Bruce's reaction, should not even think he could react inappropriately. But still, it was not like Selina or his science bros. He could talk about them, however it was way more difficult to open up about... her.

"You aren't gonna tell me who this 'someone' is, aren't you ?", Bruce guessed, and his resigned voice was... off, as he understood.

Edward felt bad to see his saddened expression. But after all...

"This is not why we are here.", he dithered. "I thought you wanted to talk about your bad dream."

The older teen's expression darkened.

Ed learnt it, better be careful when it came to ask Bruce about private topics, but... well, he had been the one who called him in early morning because he needed to talk ! It would be weird of him now to just close himself up like an oyster...

"How about that.", he proposed, getting he had to be the one to lead the conversation otherwise they won't progress at all. "We set up a question / answer game : you ask about something, I respond, and then you have to answer what I'll ask back. Clear questions leading to short answers only, and no further talk about it at first, just a give and take exchange, we'll see if we want to give our point on it afterwards."

"So I answer a question then ask another... but you don't comment what I'll give as an explanation ?"

How come no one ever proposed something like that in therapy ? That was the best way for him to manage to talk about it, if he could just let it out without fearing an analysis or an interrogatory about what he'll evoke, plus not having to listen to a lection either.

"Exactly.", Ed proudly confirmed.

He may failed to always figure out precisely what Bruce expressed or wanted, he had no doubt this was the only valid solution to offer him so that he could open up. So he felt glad his suggestion had been greeted with enthusiasm.

"And surely, we keep the answers as sincere as we can.", he ended with the rules they'll play by.

"Nevertheless, let's say we have the right to use a joker once, if a response seems too personal for our liking. Do you think it would work that way ?"

Bruce smiled, clearly relaxed and willing to play.

Inside, the young billionaire couldn't help but think he loved being friend with this boy.

"That would be perfect.", he answered truthfully. "So... only one 'joker', then ?", he inquired about
the rules, smiling at the employed term.

It was like Edward could read his mind, somehow.

"Only one.", the redhead approved. "We start simple, and we'll see where it takes us. Be my guest to start."

That was interesting indeed. And doing it as a sort of game rather than a therapy session sounded like a way better manner to evoke dark secrets. It made it all... lighter, and was kinda entertaining as well.

Bruce could definitely add 'psychiatrist' to his current list of various jobs Edward seemed able to perform way better than anyone.

"What was the name celebrated the 26 ?", he started so, simple as asked yet entering quickly into the subject.

"Stephanie."

His quick answer was truthful, no doubt about it, and even though he tried to sound casual, Bruce perceived how it troubled him to just pronounce the name. The way he said it, too, was both mysterious and... loving, but in a manner Bruce couldn't put a name on.

"Or... the day can be celebrated by both Stephan, Steffie... and the various spellings of these names.", he took back, wavering of his right hand as to get rid of these versions of the appellation he had affection for. "As ever, these days include alternatives of a name. But... mine is Stephanie."

Again that soft fondness, different from the rest of the feelings Bruce could recognize in Edward's tone and expression. Intriguing.

His comrade smiled lightly, then advanced a little toward him on the table, a sparkle of determination shinning in his green eyes.

"My turn."

Bruce couldn't help but feel a bit nervous. Although Edward played along, since he started by asking something very simple, to win his trust on that:

"Was your dream a memory or a scene coming from your imagination only ?"

"Imagination.", he answered immediately.

Doing it as a question-and-answer format was definitely making it all easier and way more sympathetic. The feeling truly was a lovely one.

"But it... featured someone from my past, as well as a scene that... could be related to a real event, although exaggerated and transformed, like it often is in nightmares."

Ed nodded quietly, but didn't say anything. Bruce felt... relieved he didn't comment. He could tell him more, as long as he didn't meet arguments about it all. So he kinda enjoyed the rules they set up there.

"Is 'Stephanie' one of your colleagues ?"

She was not his best friend since he just revealed they never celebrated the 'nameday' together. Given the way he spoke of her, he doubted this new girl could be one of his laboratory comrades, but may
asking it that way was a good method to innocently gather informations?

"No.", he answered, obviously very amused by the idea, and it clearly proved that whoever she was, the nature of their relationship was far different than the one he shared with his scientist friends. "My colleagues are all adults who hold a doctorate, they are working in the professional life since... around ten years old, a bit over that for one of them who has a few more years than the two others. But they are all... well, they're older."

That was not a revelation, hearing about them here and there for the last weeks, Bruce deduced already they weren't the same generation as Ed and him. But it was the first time it was confirmed out loud, so it still was interesting. And it meant his Stephanie was either around his age or... younger ?

"Was this person from your past this 'friend' you refer to from time to time ?"

"Yes.", he answered, surprised himself he wasn't confused or reticent to respond.

But he didn't give details about J, rather offered another kind of explanation :

"Since you asked I suppose you guessed it already : when I have bad dreams about my parents, it's mostly... memories, although not only. While there is no rule or habit with him, it can be both imagination and real events. Sometimes, it collides and it ends up in... a giant mess.", he admitted, sighing a little.

Ed adressed him a sweet, supportive smile at this.

But since Bruce was still in the excitement provoked by the sort of the game they were playing, he didn't feel sad or nostalgic, and simply asked back :

"What is your... relationship with Stephanie ?"

That was a daring question. But after all... Ed had a joker, didn't he ? He didn't use it however, just took his time to answer, without a doubt debating inside his head over if he should reveal it or not.

"She is very important to me.", he finally confessed. "But not exactly in a 'friend' way, since she... she is young.", he said softly. "Like, very young, so..."

So he couldn't pursue. The "She is like a daughter to me" he would have said if he played complete honesty didn't go further than forming in his mind, never spanned the barrier of his lips. He couldn't tell him. Bruce may was a friend, he was not...

Edward felt nearly sorry he already was not able to reveal the whole truth anymore. Not guilty, but... mildly sorry. A part of him wished he let Bruce in by unearthing more, but... he couldn't help. He was scared.

His eldest apparently got he won't have a more detailed answer, nevertheless he relaunched to try obtain some extra informations :

"You are fifteen, what do you possibly mean by 'very young'? And how come..."

"We said one question each.", Ed corrected, his smug smile coming right back as he saw his comrade tried to play by other rules.

And even though he was confused as Hell, Bruce smiled as well at his habit of following a schedule once it was set up. Thus Ed inquired, his project manager voice on :

"You are fifteen, what do you possibly mean by 'very young'? And how come..."

"We said one question each.", Ed corrected, his smug smile coming right back as he saw his comrade tried to play by other rules.

And even though he was confused as Hell, Bruce smiled as well at his habit of following a schedule once it was set up. Thus Ed inquired, his project manager voice on :
"So right back at you : what was your relationship with your friend ?"

"Well we were... friends. That's it."

Ed arched an eyebrow, not convinced. He was pretty sure this friend -who may was imaginary, he still wasn't sure he actually existed- had a huge impact on Bruce's life, even if he didn't know how or why.

"Really ?", he simply asked so, trying to figure out who this guy was to his partner.

And the next words left his mouth before he could control them, they just... slip out. As ever, he couldn't stop himself from talking.

"I thought we said we tried to play honest.", he mocked a little, while being aware he shouldn't accuse Bruce of not telling the truth right after he decided inside he won't tell more about Steph than just her name. "Was that guy... nothing more than a friend ?"

"... He was hu... Joker."

Edward huffed.

"Fine, but it's the only time. Your turn."

Bruce smiled a bit at this use of the word 'joker' Edward couldn't get the joke of but which amused him dearly.

"What do you mean by 'young' ? Because I heard..."

Why was he hesitating to say it ?

"I heard something over the phone earlier.", he told him. "You were... talking to someone. And for the rest it sounded like... like a..."

"Joker.", Edward said, a bit sharply, not at ease anymore he proposed the question & answer session.

For a moment, they just stared at each other, conscious of the sudden tension in the air.

Then Bruce gave a stern nod.

"Fine.", he concluded dryly. "So what now ? We keep pretending we're having a sincere conversation while none of us actually wants to answer the other's question and tell a damn thing about his life, or we can skip the act and..."

He sighed, and Edward couldn't tell if he was upset or just... sad.

"... I can still play psychiatrist.", he offered eventually, since he couldn't deny the last -true- statements his acolyte made.

Bruce frowned, so he justified, doing his best to sound convincing and not just making it... weird :

"I am not joking about that.", he assured. "I mean... I know what it's like to have nightmares and not being able to sleep a lot. I'm... kind of an insomniac myself. And even though the bad dreams occur more and more rarely since the last... approximatively two years and a half, I used to have nightmares practically every night when I was a child. So... I am not answering your questions because I can't... let you in yet.", he admitted.
He bit his lip nervously, commanding fiercely to the anxiety to go bother someone else. Then he found the best way to sincerely persuade his partner without resuming a question about his own life:

"I care for you, I really do.", he started gently. "But I can't let you know too much about me like that, simply because I... like talking with you. It's not about me, you see. Ask me something about myself that only concerns... me, then I'll answer, I promise. But..."

"Not something about 'Stephanie'.", he guessed, trying to hide his light deception, and Edward approved quietly.

"At least not yet. Don't... ask me about her."

"... Alright.", Bruce concluded, resigned even though not pleased.

Ed nodded. It was obvious Bruce was both disappointed and... slightly angry maybe? that their 'frank session' turned so short. Be that as it may, it wasn't the main subject they were supposed to discuss. After all, Edward only set up this little game to make him comfortable enough for him to speak of what he saw last night. So he took back, raising the topic again:

"However. For the nightmares, or... the rest of your habits, I have my own experience. I am not gonna pretend I know what yours are like, and I don't do... the same things as you. But... I can help. Or try to. I really want to."

Bruce found himself smiling a little at the friendly offering.

So indeed, he won't learn more about the redhead's life right now, and couldn't ask to elucidate what he caught on the phone earlier and confused him so much. The door didn't seem to be closed, though. Just... out of reach for the moment. But well, he supposed he could wait a bit. After all, they were progressing, were they not?

"Alright then.", Bruce retorted, biting into a second croissant. "It was your turn, and I'll tell you if it's a subject I don't want to detail for now."

"Reasonable.", Edward commented, pleased to see his comrade won't make a problem out of it.

So he relaunched calmly, by something innocent:

"When have you met your friend?"

"... J.", he said, aware of the sudden pounding in his chest.

It was the first time he told his name out loud to someone else than Alfred. It was not the same when the word 'joker' was used, or when he... drew this character, exaggerating Jack's personality and appearance. Joker was a common term, used to play, used... quite frequently by many persons.

It was not like J. Besides, Jack himself had never been completely serious about his 'Joker' name, the idea came from a joke and since then he adopted the nickname. Even if he held a certain affection for it, and this from the moment he started using it, it still was all it was: a nickname. J on the other hand, had always been his name. Never 'Jack', and 'Joker' was more "for the aesthetic", as Bruce teased him every time.

"J?", Edward repeated since the dark-haired boy seemed suddenly lost in thoughts and didn't pursue. "What is that, a riddle? Because if you want to play 'mysterious', it's perfectly fine with me, give me a few clues or a... properly formulated enigma, and I'll solve it. But I'm afraid one letter is going to
be a bit short for me to figure out what you mean."

Bruce laughed at the misinterpretation.

"No, it's not a riddle, it's... my friend's name.", he smiled fondly. "Since we are... talking about him, you see. I thought we could... use his name."

Edward blinked once.

"... Your friend's name is 'J'?"

"It's short for Joker.", he clarified. "And besides, he used 'J' since forever, while 'Joker' arrived when he was a teen."

The puzzlement on Ed's face was kinda funny. Although he seemed to be already more... frustrated, than confused. Bruce failed to get why. Was he thinking it...

"Are you... mocking me?", he asked sternly, his brow line frowning. "What the Hell are you talking about?!"

This was the applicable reaction after being told something so... strange., Bruce realized as his comrade's frown just deepened. But truth be told, as he evoked J that way, Bruce had the feeling he confessed something, that he revealed a... secret. He hadn't noticed how weird his formulation was, and how someone who didn't know about his friend just couldn't understand these words.

He refrained a sigh. Once again, he managed to prove to himself he was definitely not compatible with... speaking or interacting with anyone.

"I met him when I was just past fourteen.", he chose to answer to the original question, trying to sound less... bizarre. "He was only one year older than me, and he was... hu... There is no one like him.", he ended, smiling a little.

A somehow offended huff escaped from Edward at this.

"If he thinks he is the only one to be special, then he must be a pretentious, ignorant fool."

Bruce arched an eyebrow.

"What is that for?", he inquired, although he found the reaction more amusing than anything. "You don't know him, how can the simple mention of him make you... angry?"

Ed blinked again, trying to find the right answer.

To provide to Bruce, but also to himself.

"I don't know.", he admitted after a short moment, bewildered by his, he could say it, jealousy over this complete stranger who was not even sharing Bruce's life anymore, since he came 'from his past'. "It doesn't make... much sense, but I don't like him."

An assertive stance that left Bruce... confused, as ever.

"Why? I mean... how come one dislikes someone one never met?"

Ed took another sip of his coffee before responding:

"If I told you a friend of mine has terrible habits, dangerous ones, and he made me adopt them
because it was the condition for that I could stay his friend, and I accepted only because I felt lonely and I wanted company, so I could settle for even a very bad one; would you hold another opinion than 'disliking' that person, even though you never met her?"

That was a defiant question.

"You don't know him.", Bruce repeated, way more coldly than previously. "How can you speculate such a harsh judgment on him like that?"

"I... understood some things.", he answered, aware of the quite provocative tone he employed and acknowledging it may hadn't been the wisest way to broach the topic. "About you, how you act and from the small pieces of informations I caught about this 'friend' of yours in the way you evoke him from time to time. I haven't made the link before, but I just realized he is the 'Joker' you design to go along with your 'Batman' in our game, right?"

Bruce only nodded quietly to confirm this.

"Alright.", Ed pursued, the validation making him feel more assured about his deductions, even if he didn't possess many of these yet. "So your mental projection of someone who has been your friend is a creepy clown whom you pair with a grown man who hangs out in the night dressed as a giant bat. Sorry to break that to you.", he said with irony. "But not only is this kinda... strange, but it is also scary. So here's what I think now you confirmed you actually got along with this... J, whoever he is: you two have been close friends who used to share very... bad practices. Playing rebels and junkies in town, you certainly enjoyed yourselves quite a long time, until something went wrong. I suppose you either grew tired of this way of life, or that one day he made you do something that was 'too much' and you parted ways, probably after an altercation. And I'll add it corresponds to when you went back to Gotham. That after playing bad boy with your freaky clown, you wanted to try to be nice again and needed Pennyworth's help to handle a reconversion. So here comes my question: am I right so far?"

Bruce... smiled.

Which was very unexpected. Edward thought he'd be vexed, and that the frustration will quickly lead to an anger episode, although not necessarily a violent one.

But instead, he was... smiling. A wry smile, that had something incredibly... disturbing. The sight of it caused goosebumps to rise on his neck, and Ed removed his arms from the table, bringing them close to him as if to shield himself or to... recoil. It was more instinctive than out of actual fear, but...

Bruce was a very special guy. And sometimes, he had this... attitude, making him look like... Well yes, like a freak. But not just the 'unusual' type, no... More like the psychotic kind of freak. Ed read about it. The statistics said that one child on one hundred was mentally born 'psychopath'. It didn't mean the said child was a maniac hysterically laughing all the time and having a thing for seeing others suffer. These characteristics occurred in some cases, that was true. But not only. There was another frequent pattern, which described the... upgraded kind of psychopath, meaning someone who 'doesn't feel the way a person is supposed to'. And the maniac behaviours resulted there from this impression the subject had of being... empty inside, or feeling... too different to consider himself as a... human. Once you aren't human anymore, then how could you feel even the slightest compassion for the rest of this kind while you only see it as a... nuisance, or an object you can either use or leave aside if you aren't interested by playing with it.

And he was 100% certain this last definition matched perfectly with what Bruce Wayne was.

"What?", Ed asked, hating that he sounded less assured than he planned. "Have I said something
funny, rich kid?"

There, his voice was back at his usual frustrated and boastful tone. Bruce's dark expression disappeared, rapidly replaced by a far more sympathetic smile, and the change was so... abrupt, it was even more scary than his previous creepy face.

"Not exactly 'funny',", he answered so, casual and apparently not getting the nature of Edward's current thoughts. "It's just that I realize you know more about me than I do about you. On this point, it's kinda vexing for me. But for the rest... you are wrong about J."

"How so?", he asked, sincerely curious and feeling a mild... apprehension, over hearing the response.

"He never 'made me' do anything.", Bruce answered, and the goosebumps extended to Ed's arms. "When we were... playing rebels and junkies as you rightly figured out, among other things, we were doing it together and I never opposed to anything or tried to stop him. On the contrary, more than once I was the one who set up the plans."

Okay... how had they come to this information?

And Edward scolded himself inside for feeling so excited over such a grim confession.

It should make him uncomfortable. Instead, the fact that it mildly scared him also managed to make Bruce... more attractive to him. Really, he needed to do something against his fascination for people who were both dangerous and scary. Selina tried to make him leave his science bros for the same reason, didn't she? Nevertheless, she was on the same boat too: a young adult who played acrobat and ninja in town while being a seductive woman who used her charms more than once to get what she wanted was not exactly the model of 'innocent and sweet'.

Innocent and sweet, that was Stephanie.

Was that the real reason why he couldn't tell Bruce, Jonathan, Pamela and Jervis who she was and why she was so important to him? Because they were all bloody psychopaths, and the only thing that made him... different from them, was the fact despite his terrible tastes in people, he also loved with all his heart a baby and was taking care of her?

And what was purer than the love for a baby...?

"You're such a spooky boy.", he ended up saying, trying to control both his train of thoughts leading to these eye-openers answers and the excitement he still felt.

If he stayed at stating up neutral facts, it will be easier to keep his cool.

"Who else than your J knows who you are?"

"Alfred.", he answered, and Ed heard the sudden guilt in his tone, as his expression turned quite sad. "He... knows everything. And in their way, my parents as well figured out something was... different, about me. So they tried to have diagnosis, even back at when I was supposed to be a normal kid."

That was an unprecedented new.

"Because you are autistic?", he inquired, not properly getting what his parents could have searched in these 'diagnosis'. "May they wanted to..."
"Not because of the autism, no.", he corrected, his voice blank of any emotion. "If it was just this, they won't have tried to have different analysis from... so many persons."

He sighed, and Edward had honestly no idea what he was thinking neither of himself nor of his birthers when he pursued flatly:

"Autistic children show specific behaviours depending on their syndrom. But mine were not... matching completely with a syndrom, that's why they concluded I was simply 'on the spectrum', but it was more to find a catch-all term as an explanation. They never wanted to explore... other possibilities about mental illness."

"Illness ?!", Ed repeated, shocked by the term which sort of brought more light on a few of Bruce's insecurities. "Autism is not an illness.", he countered strongly.

It may wasn't requiered here, while he was grabbing a few more pieces on the complex puzzle that was Bruce Wayne. But Ed could not let him say something like that without proving him wrong. He understood Bruce certainly was not the one who needed to be coaxed of this though, that it was more his parents. Since they were, no doubt, the ones who talked rubbish, but he couldn't exactly tell them a word about it. So instead, he was going to make the lesson.

Bruce would certainly have loved to do so with his birthers, but this being not an option, they could at least team-up on that point. So Edward went on with his 'deduction voice' :

"An autistic person, whatever his position on the spectrum or his syndrom, had never been considered sick. That would be a mistake and an inappropriate analysis."

He saw Bruce's smile at this sentence, and it only encouraged him to pursue, so he went on, confident:

"An autistic's brain works normally by his standards, but the connections at a neurobiological level are different from an ordinary person's brain. So asking an autistic to 'act normally' does not make any sense since he physically couldn't be someone else or refrain his syndrom in his attitudes. It's not being sick, it's being different, at a biological basis. While other mental syndroms, like Tourette, bipolar disorders, schizophrenia... these are illnesses, because they happen in a brain which does not hold a physical variation of structure. But this brain works differently, and the behaviours are caused by a malfunction or an overfunction of some areas in a cerebrum which should have functioned normally given its physical structure and neuronal network. So these are illness, since they are the different functioning of something that could have been normal, while autism is the normal functioning of a brain which is already different at the beginning."

"Thanks for the lesson.", Bruce commented, his smile having grown wider as the younger one spoke. "I'm not gonna lie, I already made my researches about all that but it is... very pleasant nonetheless, to see someone else knows too."

Eddie smiled proudly.

"People just can't be all ignorant fools, can't they? It would be too easy."

They shared a smile; then he took back, making sure his tone was gentle now that he assured him he knew precisely about the illnesses and syndroms and was 'on his side' about it:

"So I bet having a son who has autism was not completely an issue for your parents, especially since yours doesn't seem troublesome, so can be easier to deal with. But admitting you have something else, which then won't come from a neurobiological difference in your brain but will result from an
actual illness, could be... hu... seen as inappropriate ?"

He wasn't sure how to formulate it yet keep sounding friendly.

"They wanted a perfect son.", Bruce confirmed, not even trying to erase the bitterness from his voice. "A good son. Whom would love receptions, would be sociable, popular, and have many friends from the same world as theirs. A good little... 'rich kid' as you keep calling me, whom would want nothing more than hanging out in fancy suits and would enjoy everything about their... world of luxury. But I have never been this child. So I let you imagine they were not exactly... pleased, by it ; and they wanted to know where the problem came from so that they could fix me before it was too late. So that I won't grow up... the way I am."

"... You don't have to be fixed, Bruce.", Ed objected, and as saying it he noticed the dim shaking of his voice, caused by both anger and... compassion. "You are just... different. The maximum you could need is a medication, or simply some therapy seance, only in order to get better, not to be... changed or anything. You are not broken ! Only broken things need to be fixed, and a broken thing you are not."

Bruce smiled faintly.

He loved this boy, he truly did. And he felt so very thankful Ed took it that way and sort of teamed up with him on the diagnosis rather than act... like the others. Like his parents, like Alfred. They were nice, they cared and he loved them all three dearly. But they never... understood. They never even tried, not once.

"I've done bad things.", he heard himself saying quietly, not sure why this was what he chose to retort. "Like... very bad things."

He took a deep breath, and when he looked Edward in the eye again, his low tone, though neutral, held a... chilling undertone :

"Things that could have made me end up in jail for a bit of time if I had been caught."

Edward only nodded, and responded, softly, as calm as if Bruce spoke about the weather or some very banal subject :

"Okay."

This time the billionaire blinked, taken aback by the simple word.

"Okay ?", he repeated, at a loss. "That's it, you think it's... 'okay' ?!"

"Well, I don't know what these 'things' you mentioned are.", Ed answered, shrugging his shoulders as if it was no big deal. "So I have no reason to feel... worried or anything. And I certainly don't have to and don't want to judge you. I stick at my position : the Manichean view is a simplistic idiocy set up by people who never managed to properly study and defend a case, or debate around a cause. Besides, I..."

He could tell him that.

After all, Bruce just somehow confessed a part of him that was close to a... deep secret.

"I don't only frequent people you'd call the most... reliable."

"Your colleagues ?"
"Yes.", he answered, quite amused Bruce figured that out so fast. "They are hu... working on toxins, that have the same effects as drugs. I won't go into details, but they are very good within their area. Certainly the best. It's not the only thing they experiment, but they all have a theory they are working on for years, and when they met each other, quite a long time ago, they started working together on each one's project."

"What are their projects ?", his partner asked, obviously very interested.

Edward hoped Pamela will never know he told anyone about her researches, otherwise he was a dead man.

"One of them works on mind control...", he started, as the excitement of explaining the theories overrided the slight apprehension of Pam's reaction.

"Mind control ?", Bruce interrupted. "What are you describing here, a wizard from a video game ?"

"No.", he brushed off the incredulity immediately. "And I still don't play video games. Anyway, it's not a sci-fi serie, but a theory. He is a neuroscientist, you see ; he works on hypnosis and other variants of this field that can control some zones of the brain, both to manipulate but also to understand how they function. An average person uses less than 20 % of his cerebrum to think, and feel. The rest, although active for the organ's global functioning, is not controlled by the mind. My colleague's thesis, what his researches are based on, are to optimize the lost space, to see how it could work if it was accessible by the consciousness ; to see what one could do if one managed to use an augmented potential of his brain. To theorize so, he uses hypnosis and drug-induced stimuli. It makes a subject react in a special way, and from there you can follow what regions of his brain are activated. His objective is to, if he reaches his goal, not only know exactly how the brain works, but also to optimize it."

"That's... impressive."

"It will be if he succeed. But ever since he had his doctorate eight years ago, he hadn't passed the 'research' stage."

"What about the others ?"

He was genuinely interested. Sure, he got the fact that when Edward was talking about 'science' and the experiments and calculations he led with his colleagues, it was not just some high school physics. But this ? It sounded... very advanced. And it was truly intriguing.

"About control as well.", Ed introduced. "That's the reason they met on the first place, because even though it is not on the same areas, they are all testing control at one moment, it's the... guideline of their researches, and what they wrote their thesis on."

"They wrote thesis ?"

"Indeed. In the program they were on to have their doctorate, you have to write a thesis about your researches and the theory you defend the year before you pass your doctorate exam. Just like when you prepare a master's degree in engineering or literature and have a thesis supervisor following you during all year, but with advanced biology.", he approved, feeling quite... proud to say this.

Which didn't make much sense, because when his friends wrote their thesis during their last study's year, he was... In fact, he was three years old when Jon did his, six when Jervis did his and seven when Pamela wrote hers. And sure thing, he didn't know them at the time. So feeling 'proud' was not exactly the most appropriate reaction, yet his current feeling was close to this sensation. Whatever...
"My other colleague's theory about control features plants.", he went on, feeling again the excitement upon talking about the thrilling researches his friends led.

"Plants ?"

"Yep. All plants are talking, if you isolate the correct electric impulse, you find out they have a language and they communicate. Many examples can be seen over history, of plants of a same specie communicating to warn others of the arrival of a predator, to relate a change in their hormonal cycle or more simply to inform of their intake on chlorophyll. These are known facts, but the experiments proving them are still in progress, and we only begin to learn about plants' languages, what they like and what they speak of. My colleague's theory there is that not only they communicate about common facts with other plants of the same specie, but that all the vegetable reign is able to interact with all species, debating about various subjects, maybe even setting up plans, who knows? together. If we find the correct way to understand, and how to search in the appropriate sphere, we could prove that plants are not only living beings, but also intelligent ones. And to verify everything, we need to insulate every connection, to experiment on individuals in order to see what makes a test subject react in a certain way, and how its reaction manifests itself. It's an all universe we know very little about and which offers so many possibilities ! There is... so much to discover about all this."

Ed realized he let his enthusiasm take over, as ever when he talked about thrilling subject matters or even more when it was some he worked on.

"It's... very interesting.", he added, trying to refrain the need to tell absolutely everything he knew about this to Bruce.

Not only did the other boy risk to not find it as captivating as Edward found it, but he also was not supposed to explain in detail the experiments Isley was currently doing, since she counted on being the first one to lead them and make great discoveries out of it. He could talk about everything she wrote on her thesis, because after all it was published, so other people read it.

But the experiments she performed in the laboratory? That was secret, she needed to finish everything before letting anyone know. She'll reveal her new researches when she'll have made enough advances on the area. Otherwise others risked to try working on her projects as well and if they found answers before her (even though that was hard to believe...), they'll take all credit for it. Science was a world of fierce, merciless competition; anyone who thought otherwise was a fool.

So what happened inside the lab stayed inside the lab.

"I'm afraid I won't tell you more on it.", he announced accordingly. "She is working on the subject, and I can't exactly..."

"Reveal the way her researches evolve before she makes them public?", Bruce guessed easily.
"Don't worry, I totally understand."

He smiled a little, and asked, not even trying to hide his sincere interest:

"What is the third one working on?"

"Fear. Contrary to the two others, he is a licenced psychiatrist, along with a scientist. So he is an actual doctor, he did studies in medecine while the others were on different divisions of neuroscience. His thesis is that fear controls people, and to master it would be the ultimate step one could take to have perfect control over one's feelings, emotional stability but also dieases, both mental and physical. Controlling fright would lead to control everything in an organism. Every animal, every living creature feels fear, by instinct, by overreaction or in a given situation. So I let
you imagine what one could do if he... mastered dread. If he was able to choose when to banish it. If he was able to provoke instant terror on another being to protect himself... Just think of the power a fear-centered weapon would possess. If you control an enemy's fright, you are victorious, whatever the situation! I mean, how could someone never be... scared?"

He shouldn't be so excited to say something so... creepy, yet as ever the perspective of all that could be done with such power was thrilling. And Bruce's impressed expression, showing he was excited as well, didn't help.

"On the other hand, it would also serve to help.", he pursued nonetheless, coming back to a more 'stable' discussion topic. "My colleague being a psychiatrist, he believes in the efficiency of phobia therapies. It's a... 'fighting fire by fire' kind of thing. To cure someone or to execute a good therapy on a fragile subject, helping him deal with his fears by making him face them, in a controlled manner of course, would help the patient. So he is doing researches to create a product that would be the perfect use for fear therapy, since he sees this solution as a far better remedy than the medications currently used or the... other stuff people are doing to deal with their issues. And there again, it's all about control, he studies both physical and psychological reactions and capacities."

Wow.

"And... what about you?", Bruce asked, now properly fascinated by all that. "What are you doing with... these guys?"

Eddie smiled.

"I'm a theoretical physicist. At least... potentially, since I don't have my doctorate yet. I mostly help them with calculations, I am... very good at any form of maths and physics. Like, very very good at these. And I am also skilled at making the links where they don't necessarily think of it. Because they may excel in their area, they are even better when they combine their works. And because I am a fresh view on their researches, and since I do have great analysis skills, I essentially play a part in the merging of their areas, to perform experiments that will be useful for them all. It's not complicated to figure out how control about mind and fear can easily be conciliated, but it works the same with plants as well. It's... an all web of multiple possibilities and thousand of interesting things to study. They are the best in their area, and I... play detective by helping them reunite their potential to perform experiments that combine their field. They were doing it since years already, but they..."

His face flushed lightly, what Bruce found adorable.

"They are not very... open. And not the kind to make compliments, either.", he said quietly. "But they admitted they had never done a... work as great as since I'm helping conciliate their potential."

The bright pink on his freckled cheeks and the way he tried not to look too proud of himself was very cute. His friends must be the kind of persons who never talked good on anybody and always criticize everything. Which was understandable since they seemed to be very brilliant persons. Bruce knew that type, so he got how it must be really satisfying to receive a compliment from such severe, smart scientists. That it truly meant something, and that if they praised Edward, even just once, then the ginger had every reason to be proud of himself and pleased about it.

"Your colleagues seem... special."

Ed laughed.

"That they are."
Although he was going to stay at these explanations about their researches and how he helped them. Everything there was true, and they indeed admitted he was a valuable mind to work with. However, Bruce didn't need to know that more than once, the 'products' they created ended up being injected in his veins and the hypnosis sessions tested on him. Nope... he definitely preferred to stay at being an ally, and not a lab rat. Even if he was aware of the fact he had... both functions.

Shaking off the thought of this quite disturbing truth, he took back :

"But enough about me. I feel like I told you way too many things all at once while I still don't know that much about you and the reason we're having this talk in the first place : your nightmare."

"True, hu... Let's fill the gaps, then. I am conscious you told me things that are important for you, and that you... trust me with these. So I promise, I'll answer truthfully to whatever you ask about... hu... whatever."

"Fantastic.", he rejoiced.

Then before Bruce's resolution got the chance to fade away, he quickly asked as casually as he could, as if broaching a perfectly mundane subject :

"Do you consume regularly ? And : what was the drug you used to provoke your dream ?"

Okay, deep into the subject.

"I... don't..."

"You can skip both the part when you deny being on drugs and the one when you ask innocently what it means. I'm... pretty sure I am not wrong about that. I... noticed a while ago.", he added delicately.

"How ? How did you..."

"I am a good observer. And... it's not very hard to see. Furthermore I..."

"You have experience ?"

"Not for myself. Or... not exactly. But as I told you, my colleagues are working on products and they study reactions provoked by various types of drugs, and stimulations caused by a certain release of endorphins they analyze on test subjects. So I learnt a lot about these areas with them, and knowing how to recognize few drug-induced symptoms is not something difficult for me."

Then he just gave Bruce a supportive smile, and his partner found himself nodding weakly, kinda surprised he didn't feel... anything wrong about Edward knowing that.

Somehow, it made it easier for him to simply have to confirm, and not inform Edward of this... aspect. Because since the younger one understood already, he wasn't looking for a confession from Bruce. On the contrary, he was... encouraging him to open up. And he obviously was still not judging.

"The dose is reduced.", he started telling so. "I... make the mixture myself. The goal isn't to pass out from overdose, only to... feel good a short time. And generally, it leads to a few hallucinations. But I have these kind of dreams even without taking drugs, it's... a recurrent thing. So much that sometimes I take drugs just to face the dreams... I tell myself I'll have a moment of peace before... confronting the night. While I know every time I inject myself with the product that I'll have a night worse with than wihtout ; but when I do I also profit of this little moment of absolute peace before... seeing it all.
J, my parents... many unpleasant memories mixed with nightmarish visions."

Some serious deal indeed.

"Since how long do you take ?"

"... Years. J was one Hell of a drug addict when we met, and he... showed me. We used to be such junkies, on top of everything."

He sighed.

"But...", Edward realized, genuinely concerned. "You were... fourteen when you two met. And he was... just fifteen then ! How come..."

"Drug dealers don't look at your age to sell you products.", he countered, his tone showing a blatant lack of emotion. "Here in Gotham for sure, but also in many places around the world. J isn't American.", he added more softly. "We met during my time in Europe, and he... travelled with me from there."

"What country is he from ?", Ed inquired, while being a bit surprised the gossip never caught the fact Bruce travelled with someone.

"Ireland.", he answered, an audible fondness filling the word. "But... I would like it better if we... hu..."

"If we stayed at the dreams ?", Edward guessed, and he nodded shakily. "Fine with me."

It turned out pretty short, though. Not that it surprised Edward : Bruce wasn't able to say a word about neither his nightmare nor what he took in the evening to 'feel good'. Somehow, Ed thought that talking so openly of his science bros would have been sufficient to help his comrade feel at ease enough.

After all, Bruce had been the one to call because he needed to talk, and even though he didn't reveal more than her name about Stephanie, Edward played along more than enough to establish a relaxed, trustful atmosphere. But apparently, Bruce now regretted he accepted to reveal, even partly, some of his secrets.

Maybe another day ?

"I think I'll go for it.", Ed accepted gently, holding back a sigh after his comrade repeated his dream was 'vivid', that he 'often had visions like these ones' (without describing nor the said vision or any other he had before) and 'the fact he took an, even reduced, dose of product never helped keeping the nightmares at bay'. "Don't feel like you shouldn't have called, though.", he added with delicacy. "Even if you don't feel at ease enough to talk about it afterwards, if you need to call when you have a problem... of any kind, really, I'll be happy to try to help. Okay ?"

"... Okay.", he answered, smiling a little.

Bruce actually felt a bit... remorseful, perhaps. He wasn't skilled at pinpoint emotions, others than guilt and wrath, so he was not 100 % sure of it, but his current sensation could be linked to slight remorse. He really wanted to tell him more about himself, to show him he trusted him yet he... couldn't. He said enough already. And Edward understood it, not that it was difficult to figure out.

"We need to see each other during the holidays.", Ed informed him later, after they concluded and were leaving the Café.
Bruce arched an eyebrow.

"Of course we do. What, you planned on... leaving me ?"

"No, don't worry.", he laughed. "But I meant, for the project. We need to start the programming, and to do so we have to meet in an appropriate place to work."

"... You could come at the manor.", he offered after a short pause, realizing that would be the best solution yet feeling... oddly unsure about this.

It was the first time he invited someone to spend time at his parents' house with him. It felt... wrong, in a strange and unpleasant way he was not able to put words on.

"I have computers which are more precise than yours and an all electronic equipment we can use.", he reasoned, essentially to coax himself it wasn't 'wrong' to ask a friend to come working with him at his house.

In fact, that was even pretty normal, and certainly the kind of offer Edward expected.

"May that could be... profitable ?", he ended so, still trying to convince himself of it.

Eddie smiled a bit. He was not certain about where the evident embarassment in Bruce's voice came from, but it didn't take a genius to figure out he was not used to have people over in his house. The dates of his friendship with this strange J-guy matching with when he was still travelling around the world, Edward was probably the first person he ever asked to join him in his house, for whatever reason. At least the first one since his parents' death, may he had children his age over when he was younger, but that was... something else, and in another life.

So Ed couldn't help but feel... flattered, Bruce invited him to his house.

Futhermore, his proposal was a very reasonable one, it could actually be useful, and indeed he counted on going to the Wayne house at least once or twice for their game development.

"Okay, 'partner'.", he validated so. "I like that prospect."

Bruce felt visibly relieved, which just made his smile grow wider.

"And... I can drive you if you want.", the older one took back, recalling the technical complications of reaching the Wayne property without a car. "The manor is at a fringe location from the enter of the city, so do not hesitate to ask, I'll pick you up."

Edward bit his lip. It was his turn to feel not too well.

"I... will call you to know when I can come by."

Bruce frowned slightly.

"I'm serious, Edward.", he insisted, frustrated he didn't trust him enough to have him as a driver while he could need it. "You won't reach the house by the bus without having to walk a long way. So call me and give me a meeting point for that I can pick you up."

Ed nodded quietly. He had Gotham City's detailed map clearly printed inside his brain, he knew the Wayne Manor's location was outside town.

"Fine by me.", he ended up agreeing. "We have a lot of things to do.", he added, now grinning, and Bruce chuckled.
"Are you talking about the project or our current interactions process?"

"Both.", he answered truthfully.

Then he winked playfully, still smiling broadly.

"But I actually have more interest for the way our social interactions are evolving than the game."

They shared a smile.

"Which is... quite unprofessional.", Bruce mocked, and he laughed.

"What can I say? It's not my fault if you are a very interesting and intriguing riddle I truly want to solve.

"On that point, same goes for you... Riddleboy."
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

"You are a wonderful creation. You know more than you think you know, just as you know less than you want to know."
- Oscar Wilde.

Chapter Notes

Hi there!
It's taking a little longer than planned, but I intend to give a conclusion to this story. So...
let's try, shall we?
Starting with this somehow weird... yet mildly funny chapter. I let you judge ;)

PS : I KNOW Harley Quinn's name is written with this spelling. The boys only call her 'Queen' like... well, a queen because it's their take on the character, not because I made a language mistake. Just wanted to be clear :)

"How many rooms does that house possess?", Arthur asked, genuinely interested, to what Ed simply shrugged his shoulders.

"He didn't exactly give me a guided tour of the manor."

He sounded cool about that fact, as if it was nothing and had not at all been offending. Yet it... bothered him a little. A lot, truth be told. When coming to the Wayne Manor for the first time, he kinda hoped Bruce will play real estate agent and show him everything in the near castle that was his dwelling. Plus telling him everything about the history, the secrets hidden behind the walls. He wished he'd been taught about the people who had lived there, the mansion's construction, the inheritances... He wanted to learn something from Bruce about his life.

But for this like for the rest, the young billionaire's reaction had been to make it simple. So he only showed him the main living-room they'll use and the office with all the high technological equipment for the programming. The rooms themselves were quite impressive, for sure, and there was tonnes of interesting things to see and to do inside these already, along with gazing at the elegant, ancient architecture. So Ed refrained himself from expressly complaining about not seeing more of the house. Or at least, he didn't protest for too long.

"Is that true that there is a portrait gallery of his ancestors in the main hallway? You know, like in the movies when a character enters an old manor! He is always greeted by the pictures of each dead family member for generations, and the eyes of the portraits follow his every moves when he walks down the hall!"

Eddie smiled at the cliché, overused in many, many horror or suspense movies. The only thing more amusing than this overemployed scene was the enthusiasm, similar to a four years old’s, the grown man was able to convey whenever he talked about something pleasing him.
"I actually counted on seeing something like that in the house lobby.", he admitted. "It would have been... logical."

They shared a smile.

"However there was... none.", he took back, his smile fading a little. "Only the rich tapestries, old wall moldings and an impressive collection of fancy chandeliers hung from the ceilings everywhere."

The all thing being beautiful and a feast for the eyes.

"I asked, though.", he went on. "And Bruce told me there was indeed portraits of his ancestors everywhere on the main corridors' walls and in many living-rooms. But... he had them removed, along with all the pictures of... every person having ever been painted or photographed over the generations. He took off all these images in both the corridors and the living-room he uses. They are now stored in the many unused rooms of the house, rather than to be kept on sight."

Which was somehow sad. Bruce had been indifferent when he answered his curiosity. He explained that the paintings, as well as many furnitures and objects, had been taken out of the spot they occupied when they were in the large living-room or the corridors and rooms he used. At least he didn't get rid of these treasures... Although Edward couldn't help but think it was a bit... annoying, maybe?

It was not what the house would have wanted, to be closed like that, to see all the memories of the generations that had lived in it being locked away as if they had to be covered up, as if they were something... shameful that needed to be forgotten. Bruce confessed that except for his bedroom, a living room, the kitchen and apparently a huge sport room, he never went to any of the other spaces inside the mansion. Alfred had his own bedroom suite and he was free to go wherever he wanted, of course, but as it seemed years passed since no one opened even half of the rooms in the property.

"Why has he done that?", Arthur pursued his questioning, very interested by the 'Wayne subject' now that it became serious and took an important part of Ed's time schedule. "Is he convinced they were haunted?"

Edward laughed at the sudden frown on the blond man's forehead, proving he truly envisaged the possibility.

Nevertheless, he was... quite close to the truth, so Ed let him know:

"In a way, they are.", he relativized with a mischievous smile upon seeing it added to his friend's confusion. "But..."

Then he lowered his gaze a little, and concluded softly:

"Not by actual ghosts. Only by unpleasant memories and... some issues he has about seeing himself as part of the lineage who lived inside this house."

Art seemed even more puzzled.

"So Bruce Wayne has issues about... being Bruce Wayne?"

His consternation was always a funny thing to see. As ever, emotions were just so visible on the man's face, transparents like on a kid's.

"Seems hard to believe, huh?", he confirmed, wondering. "Yet... yes. He's actually kinda struggling with this, among... other areas."
Hearing this, Stephanie gasped. Until now, she chirped happily in her father's arms whom distracted her with a rattle. But an expression of pure shock suddenly appeared on her round baby face, her blue eyes wide opened as she reacted to the conversation.

They both laughed fondly at the sight.

Wasn't she just adorable ?...

_________

"Riddler ?", Edward read the title written on the top of the charcoal drawing his partner just introduced.

He wasn't sure what to feel towards the appellation itself. It was... pretty. Yet... a little strange at the same time.

"I thought it was better than our provisional 'Master of the Clues' name.", Bruce went on, confident.

He was obviously very proud of his invention to rename their character, whose final appellation was until now a question they reflected upon.

"And it's a homemade word.", he emphasized to give more credit to his idea. "It's prettier than something like Riddleman or Riddle maker... Or stuff made out of an association of words. It's a new term entirely, a fresh one that had never been used before. Just like Batman. Furthermore, I think it's... catchy."

He ended his sentence with a smug smile, and no doubt he was super pleased with his brainwave.

"Riddler...", the redhead repeated.

Edward had to admit, the name effectively sounded nice. As ever when he worked on something, everything had to be perfect. Not a detail could be left aside, not a weakness could be highlighted neither in the plot nor in a demonstration. So for their game, the appellations were just as important as the designs. It formed the identity of their characters, and was part of what gave its charm to the story.

And... he liked the way 'Riddler' rolled on his tongue, he appreciated the soft melody of what was born to be, at least for their project, a meaningful name.

It tasted like warm, liquid dark chocolate spiced with ground ginger and turmeric powder.

The feeling truly was an enjoyable one.

"I'm in love.", he validated so, a Cheshire cat grin forming on his lips. "Riddler it is !"

Bruce laughed, glad he provoked such a cheerful reaction.

"I hope I'll look better in my thirties, though.", Ed took back, one of the paper drawing in hand.

"This man looks like a disheveled angry bird whom never slept his entire life."

A new chuckle escaped from his coworker at the description.

"The character isn't supposed to physically look like you.", he justified nonetheless, patiently. "If I wanted to try a portrait of you in your mid thirties, I'll... well, start by coloring his hair orange and not
brown."

"But most of all, you'll make everything in my look more elegant than you did with this character.". Edward belabored, eying the various sketches of the 'Riddler' in the pages on the large desk. "Starting with this face. I'm pretty sure even at thirty five or around I won't have such wrinkles around my eyes and mouth. It makes him look like... an old man."

"He isn't notably 'young'.", the artist countered.

"Thirty five is not 'old', my dear.", he objected. "It may is... in a very long time for us, it's not even middle age yet."

Edward wasn't going to tell him his first crush was (still was? he couldn't tell...) on a man twenty years older than him, and that he never either had friends or simple interactions with people his age his entire life. It never bothered him, far from it. Teenagers were... childish, uninteresting or mean. Most of the time, these three qualifications applied. So no wonder his sole contacts were with older persons. And... a quite younger one, Stephanie being an infant.

"But I'm convinced I'll be way more attractive than these designs when I'll be in this portion of my life.", he ended on a decided tone.

"I don't doubt it.", Bruce smiled, tangibly persuaded of it too. "But I couldn't have a villain looking like a top model. Our Clue-guy is already more sympathetic, interesting and likeable than the hero even in our story where he is the main antagonist! If he looked perfect on top of that, no one would even give a thought about Batman. If I based the drawing on you, that's exactly how it would have turned, that is to say the only normal reaction from anybody seeing the two characters. They'll prefer Riddler over the other."

An half-admitted compliment which made Eddie smirk.

"I am flattered."

Bruce shook his head fondly, but didn't add anything. It was true : if he did want to base the Riddler on Edward's appearance in addition of his main charming aspect, his intelligence, he would indeed have made him way more attractive. Not that the drawn character was ugly, not at all... He was actually kinda good-looking himself, but... he was not Edward.

Sure thing, the young genius will look way better in his mid thirties. This was not a speculation, but the only foreseeable truth.

"I have the ideas for the other ones.", Ed told him later, a sparkle of determination shining in his eyes. "Batman and Joker are you and your friend, and you told me Harley Queen is someone you knew as well."

"We met her during my travels with J.", the dark-haired boy attested, not thinking of this as a secret he must hide. "We stayed with her a few months, the three of us were... good friends."

No need to ask for what happened. Seeing the shadow clouding Bruce's gaze, Edward had no doubt his friendship with this girl must have ended in a... not very pleasant manner.

He gained no other clues about how his relationship (neither did he know about the exact nature of said relationship, he was still trying to figure that out) with this J-guy finished either ; and he didn't ask for more after Bruce made it clear he wasn't ready to talk about it.

Although it was fine with him so far.
He liked how the holidays had turned him going to the Wayne Manor almost daily for a few hours, working on their game.

"You said you wanted to include people from my life as well.", he pursued afterwards, and didn't miss the sudden interest flashing on Bruce's expression.

"I said I'd like it.", he approved with delicacy. "Joker and Harley are the only friends I ever had before... now.", he confessed, and Ed felt the pleasant warmth blooming inside his chest at what he implicitly implied. "And they have their role in our story.", Bruce went on, trying to brush off his visible confusion caused by what he just told. "I mean... since Batman and Riddler, whom are the main characters, are a little bit of me and you, it seemed... fair, to have your friends inside as well."

Eddie nodded, now perfectly agreed with the statement.

When Bruce proposed it, he said "no" at first, although it had been more reflexively than a warranted refusal. And during the evening following the discussion that same day, he realized it could be interesting. They invented a few characters useful for the plot story already, like a police officer ready to take the case, whom will be the one to ask Batman for help in the introduction sequence. The others were a gang led by Joker and Harley Queen and some henchmen around the newly named Riddler. But these last characters weren't revelant, they only had a walk-on role and some screen time.

However, they knew they'll need more important antagonists, would these only make a brief appearance. They wanted characters that would make a powerful impression even if they weren't part of the main plot.

And to find them, Bruce proposed they used people from his life. So even if his instinctive reaction had been refusal, he quickly made the maths and came to the -quite obvious, even for him and his reservations- conclusion that indeed, his social contacts impersonated perfect villains figures.

"I talked about it with my best friend.", he informed him. "She gave her approval to be a model for a character, both physically and personality-speaking. She actually finds it exciting, the idea of being a star there thrilled her.", he added with an affectionate smile. "And now, she wants to meet you.", he ended, grinning.

"Oh, hu..."

Bruce blushed slightly, not knowing how to take the information and how to properly analyse it.

"I... suppose she is welcomed at the manor if she wants to come by.", he offered, and it seemed to make Ed happy, so it must have been the best answer.

"Thanks.", he responded, obviously pleased.

From the moment he started going to the Wayne house, Arthur was curious about what happened there. As for her, Selina asked more and more precise questions to visualize a detailed plan of the mansion. But there was a difference in the way his two friends showed interest over his activities. Art asked because he understood hanging out with Bruce became important for Edward, and he -sort of, as Ed noticed-, wanted to make sure things were going alright. While trying to learn more about the house and the environment itself, but that was just the normal, appropriate curiosity brought by the Wayne name in every Gothamite's mind.

Selina on the other hand... Well, the prospect of stealing something from the Wayne house became a near fixation lately. It was the new goal she gave herself, and as ever when she had a set idea, she
was not able to brush if off anymore.

He refrained a fond smile, and instead went back to the 'new character in the game' topic:

"So I have... pictures of her for inspiration. As for the personality..."

This time he smirked.

"She acts like a cat in everything she does, her hobbies are to play thief, ninja and warrior in the streets, and the other side of her is a seductive woman using her charms to manipulate to achieve her ends. Works with both men and women."

Bruce arched an eyebrow at the first part of the description, and blushed harder at that last sentence.

"Oh...", he stated.

He shook the thought.

"With a portrait like this one, she looks like a character created in a comic book."

Edward laughed.

"That's a great description of her."

He was not lying on this, Selina was really glad to be part of this project now she realized it turned into something important for Ed. She proposed on her own to be a character in the story when he told her where the inspiration for the main characters came from, and that he needed more people to broaden the plot.

The prospect of coming to the Wayne dwelling to play pick-pocket just added to the fun. Maybe not on Bruce's side, but he was not supposed to hear about this... irrelevant detail.

"And my colleagues would be perfect in the game as well.", the redhead said later, knowing it was what his coworker expected.

Bruce nodded in agreement.

"I started to think of them as interesting for the story from the moment you told me a bit about their research subjects.", he revealed.

"I guessed that.", Ed validated so, while finding the vision of Bruce wondering over his science bros quite... amusing. "However, we... cannot have them as scientists.", he warned.

"Why ? They prefer to ply another profession here ?"

Ed bit his lip, nervous. Bruce did not even envisage the possibility he... didn't ask. What will that make him look like, if he told him the truth now?

But as his conception partner and designer, Credit Card had the right to know about everything related to the project. It was not like confessing a secret or talking about private topics. No, here it affected a shared research area or an experiment they performed together. He just could not lie about it. So he answered truthfully:

"I... haven't told them yet."

His legs swung nervously under the wooden desk they were both sitting at. Then he sighed, trying to
erase how uncomfortable he felt.

"And I don't think I'll ever tell them.", he completed with an audible hint of regret. "So we create characters, but not scientists, and we won't base the drawings on their appearance neither will we employ anything that could be tied to their life story."

Bruce nodded again, apparently not seeing it as a problem. What was a certain relief for Ed.

"Agree.", the older teen validated. "Technically, that's the Riddler and Batman's model too : they don't look like us and don't share... smilitudes with our lives. Others than the fact Riddler is a smart guy who likes mind games."

"Yes, but..."

He thought about it a short moment.

"It's different with my friends.", he said eventually. "They really can't be linked to that. So I'd like it better if we made their characters... creatures, instead of humans with intelligence, martial skills or a mental disorder."

Bruce arched an eyebrow.

"You want to introduce monsters?"

"Not exactly monsters...", he pondered. "But definitely not humans. I don't know yet. One of them is convinced he is the Mad Hatter from Alice in Wonderland, the two others could freak out anybody for life by only one glare. While claiming plants are better than people and having a weird... fear fetish. So with just the way they are, they can be included in like any kind of super hero story as mad scientists.", he conceded. "But making them doctors here would be... too close to who they are in real life, and I don't want them to be linked with this.", he repeated, assertive.

"It's fine.", Bruce assured calmly.

He smiled a bit.

"We can perfectly build an all different background for them, and using creatures, or... mutants, could actually be a smart move. It will give original designs, and will necessarily add a lot to the plot, along with being an innovative idea for a detective story."

Eddie smiled in return.

"It definitely will. And if we invent creatures, that will be to show their full potential in the story. Either ways... we have time to think about all that, don't we?"

"That we do."

"Then let's get to work, 'partner'. We have characters to create, include and make relevant in our plot story. Then you'll have to draw them ; after what we'll do their modelling process."

They already designed the introduction scene, and were working on the arcs featuring Batman, Joker and Harley Queen, since the three of them had been the first ones to have a face in their story. Needless to say, they were just at the beginning of their elaboration, they had a lot more to do.

But it was all fine, they were... super both happy and excited to work on all this.
"I am not gonna lie, I don't like it..."

"You think it's a bit too much?", Ed asked, failing to hold back a miserable little expression. "That's what I thought too at first, but then I... got convinced, and working on it seriously I... ended up enjoying it as a whole. I loved the ideas already, and I'm... very pleased with how the characters turned out. So are you... really sure you don't like it?", he insisted, hoping she'll offer him another answer.

Because to him the designs were admirably elaborated, and they were perfect for their game. But if Selina judged it was trash, no matter what his impression was; he won't be comfortable working on them anymore. Otherwise if she...

"I don't 'like it'...", she repeated, categorical.

Then a smirk appeared on her lips and she rectified:

"...I love it!"

Edwad relaxed, a luminous smile lighting his face. He felt instantly both relieved and glad to see a positive and enthusiastic reaction.

"This is glorious.", she went on, eying the 3D numerical modelling on his computer screen. "I want a costume like this in real life."

He chuckled.

"Sure thing, that would help you go unnoticed."

She stuck out her tongue at him in response of his mockery.

"You can't deny, I would be magnificent dressed like this during a fight or simply wearing a leather suit like this one for my night outs walking on the rooftops. I would make such an impression to whomever sees me... and I'll enjoy myself even more than usual!"

She paused an instant, picturing the scene with a dreaming expression.

"I definitely love it.", she validated, joyous, looking back at him. "And you say he came up with the name?!

"He did!", Ed answered proudly. "For all the characters actually! It was as if he had... always been thinking of this universe. I simply told him for the personality traits and stuff like that, and showed him a few pictures for inspiration during the holidays. Then from this, we adapted the characters to make them fit in the general ambiance of our story, and we managed to build an all life for them... While having them based on real people!"

"And I'm hot as Hell.", she concluded with her well-known assertiveness.

"... And you are hot as Hell.", he conceded, smiling, and she purred in appreciation.

The designs were beautiful. Pretty, perfectly in-character... And having their scary undertone as well, to match with the atmosphere they created. Spooky while staying very nice.

"I look like a goddess.", she complimented herself again, and Ed laughed.
"Actually, you are a thief.", he corrected. "An over-skilled ninja and warrior, thief and seductress."

"Tell me something I don't know."

They shared an accomplice glance.

"But not really a 'goddess'.", he kept explaining. "I mean...", he quickly added seeing she now adopted her 'disappointed-in-you' cat face. "You are strictly human here. A powerful, skilled survivor. But... human nonetheless.", he concluded softly, and she huffed.

"Why the distinction?", she inquired.

Luckily she didn't sound that vexed, but mostly curious.

"Aren't the others humans as well?"

"They are.", he answered.

Then went on, because since she manifested interest, he was going to give her the complete speech of the proud creator delighted to prove how brilliant every aspect of their project was:

"At least, the main protagonist and antagonist are. Batman is a detective and an over-skilled fighter as well, but he belongs 100% to the human race. Riddler, whose intellect is largely superior to anyone else's, considers himself above everyone but he is human too."

"A boastful guy with a brain working better than a computer's talking in riddles in a video game.", she scoffed. "No one is going to believe you didn't try to send a message to your planet via the net... E.-T. phones home.", she mocked, imitating the extraterrestrial's voice for the quote.

He shook his head.

"I am not an alien.", he objected with a broad smile. "Or... not this kind of alien."

They laughed together.

Not that it was the first time they joked about it, but it remained as amusing as ever.

"And the two clowns, Joker and Harley Queen, are humans as well.", he clarified afterwards. "They are mad, psychotic, frightening and... completely crazy, but they are humans. The three others on the other hand..."

She smirked.

"Are you trying to say you finally realized Crane and Isley are demonic creatures?"

"I wouldn't have say 'demonic' but..."

She arched an incredulous eyebrow, and he granted, giggling:

"Okay, maybe a little demonic."

They shared a smile.

"However, they are more like mutants here.", he went on, showing her the designs of the characters, Isley first. "Poison Ivy is able to control plants and to speak their language to make them obey, or to transform them into... kinda creepy things. She is like an evil version of mother nature, whom deeply
cares about plants. We aren't sure yet of her goal in our story, since she won't be part of the main plot, but will appear as an enemy Batman fought already. There's gonna be a sequence in the one he confronts her while he is searching clues to solve Riddler's puzzle across town. What we are certain of so far, is that being like a protector of nature, she must be very upset about everything happening in the world lately. So she will be some... radical version of a Greenpeace follower, but with powers and an all special design and characteristics making her...

"... beautiful.", Selina completed, cutting the end of his presentation.

Then she justified, because he turned a suspicious gaze to her:

"What, you and Wayne did make her attractive on purpose on top of being interesting, haven't you?! Look at this stunning woman! Don't tell me you aren't expecting people to fall in love with her at first sight..."

Using the touchpad, she moved a bit the 3D modelling on the screen to contemplate different views of the colored visual depiction.

"No, really.", she pursed, eying her at every angle. "I could date a girl like this after just looking at her for two seconds."

Which made his smile return, wider.

"You do remember she is based on Pamela Isley, right? Whom, things being what they are... you hate."

She frowned at the remark.

"Thanks for the reminding and breaking so soon my new fantasy.", she grumbled and he chuckled. "But based on her or not, this... Poison Oaky..."

"Poison Ivy.", he corrected, then bragged about it: "It's the popularized name of an actual plant, belonging to the Toxicodendron radicans, what contains various subspecies. The most common poison ivy variety is a plant whose leaves are smooth to the touch on the visible, exterior side, but rough on the other side, and it irritates the skin. The itchings can be more or less severe depending on the variety and the time of the year, since the poison ivy's toxicity changes during the seasons and its natural growth. To what has to be added the allergenic sensitivity of the subject touching it, of course. Children most of the time, because the leaves look so pretty and are so soft when you touch them delicately. So people who don't know about the plant end up grabbing an handful of its leaves, what they... regret dearly afterwards. A young or sensitive skin also has a disposition to overreact to the poison."

"Creepy.", Selina commented. "So this ivy is a plant looking both attractive and innocent... But when people approach too close, it hurts them."

"Exactly. This paradox was the source of inspiration for our character."

"... The result is gorgeous.", she concluded.

She won't ever like Isley, but it didn't change anything to the fact this character on Eddie's computer screen was marvelous. The explication of the poison ivy name may have its disturbing side, it radically added to the creature's beauty. And it was honestly impossible to recognize the original via the numerical modelling. The being here had a silken green skin covered of embossed ivy leaves and arabesques in relief of a lighter green covering her whole body, very visible since she wore a simple leotard made of dark green, almost black leaves. Her eyes were completely black, with bright iris of a
neon green, aggressive color. And her long hair, of a blood red shade, scattered with ivy leaves was... Well yes, she was gorgeous.

Impressively eerie too, as a sublime but dangerous creature.

It was an admirably done work.

"Here's the Scarecrow."

A spooky, scrawny scarecrow indeed, with a burlap mask, a pointy hat, an old faded brown trench coat and patched farmer clothes, along with fingerless gloves and... cow-boy boots?

"I love him already.", she smirked at the new guy's outlook. "And if your Poison Ivy is... I testify, very different from the original, this one, covered face or not, looks just like Crane."

For a long moment, they lost it and bursted out laughing.

"He is... scary, though.", she took back when they calmed a bit. "But aren't the red and yellow glowing eyes we see on the mask a bit... too much?"

"It's what makes him scary.", he countered. "Along with the stitched mouth on the burlap. If his mask wasn't spooky, for the rest seeing how he dresses he won't exactly be... the picture of fear."

He showed her another image.

"This is his weapon.", he presented.

"... A sickle for a scarecrow. How original."

"That's precisely why it's genius.", he started to boast again. "Scarecrow's character has to be 'fear'. We don't see it on the pictures, but his real weapon is a toxin his body produces, coming out of his hands and mouth. The toxin makes his victims or opponents hallucinate what they fear the most. That's why he is dressed like the typical representation of something scary, because he impersonates fear. Just like Ivy impersonates the force of nature."

"Powerful.", she approved, half-sincere half-sarcastic. "So what is he then? If... Ivy is a sort of mutation between a human form and the spirit of plants, what are Scarecrow's origins? Other than demonic?", she added with a smile, what he returned.

"We aren't sure yet. And his frame may be humanoid, or a spooky humanoid's, we never see his face or whatever. So who knows what's really under the hood? My bet is that he is a hybrid just like Ivy, but whom was born human at the beginning, while she had always been a mutation."

"Like... he has a human mother and a demon father?"

"Or the other way around. Or something more complex to explain his abilities. We haven't set it up yet. Besides, the origin stories of the characters won't appear in the game, we only invent backstories for our own interpretations."

She let out a little satisfied noise, then turned to the third character.

"Tetch is a... robot?", she saw. "This is weird as Hell, why have you given him this outlook? With bionic eyes, metallic hands... And what's wrong with the hat?"

He smiled at her frowned brows.
"The right term is 'A.I.'", he announced on a cocky tone. "He won't be an actual robot in the game, we only see his face on screens in the two sequences he appears. Mad Hatter has been set up by an organisation, what we still think about the name and purpose of. But he is a program travelling via the internet which practices hypnosis and takes control of minds when it collides with living beings."

She gave it a thought.

"Let me guess... You aren't over the Terminator franchise and still want to create your own Skynet?"

"I am not over the Terminator franchise."

"And Schwarzenegger for being the hottest and sexiest robot ever.", she completed on the same tone.

"... You know my point on that.", he elected to retort. "The T-800 are wonderful conception designs, yet I do have a preference for the T-1000 concept, to me this liquid metal shapechanger is Skynet's most advanced and beautiful creation. Even though the T-X is, no question, the most powerful weapon of the three. But Schwarzenegger's... charisma, is indeed a mainstay in the films' success."

They shared an amused look.

Selina had never been a big fan of cinema or TV shows before. Sure, she liked to relax watching a good movie, but it was simply... recreational, and not her favorite way to spend her free time during an evening. Becoming friend with Edward changed many aspects of her personality. In her sentimental and affectionate life for sure, but also... in her habits. For example, she was now able to hold long, geeky conversations about the designs in a futuristic robot movie about the Apocaplyse. And she sincerely enjoyed it, while it would have been unimaginable for her younger self.

After their last Terminator marathon, during a summer night, Edward concluded that if the Judgement day ever happened that way, he wanted to be the one who will have the honor to program Skynet; because he would do, to quote him "a way superior and better job than the idiots who designed the network". She totally believed him.

"But Tetch here is more of a X.A.N.A from Code Lyoko than a Skynet from Cameron's serie.", he explained nonetheless.

"X.A.N.A is an A.I. and a defense program whose goal is to surpass humanity, among other things by using an army of robots.", she argued, frowning. "What's the difference, expect for the fact Jérôme Mouscadet copied James Cameron and turned the Terminators' story into an high school show featuring jealous teenagers?"

Unexpected reaction from her...

"I thought you liked Code Lyoko."

"I like Code Lyoko.", she said. "But we render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's."

They grinned.

"The only difference is about hypnosis.", Ed clarified. "In every episode, X.A.N.A takes control of either a machine or a human, and circulates via not only the Internet but also the electric network. While Skynet designed robots to, of course, concretize Judgement Day. Mad Hatter's actions are similar to X.A.N.A's, that's why I compared them. However, contrary to these two A.Is and most of
creations in apocalyptic stories, Hatter's final purpose is not to exterminate humanity, but to make every individual hallucinate their perfect life, an imaginary world in the one they'd be happy and thought they would be living an actual life. While on the outside, the people are trapped and their energy, body and intellectual fluid are used to optimize the functioning of Hatter's own creations.

"... You managed to make Tetch creepier than Crane and Isley. Great job."

He smiled and went on on a boastful tone:

"And I'm very proud of it. Plus this character's moral is ambiguous, while Scarecrow and Poison Ivy's are more... direct.", he dithered. "Hatter doesn't do anything... wrong, by its standards, its goal is to make people... glad. But to do so, it isolates them into their own world inside their head. The A.I.'s conclusion is that no human being can be happy in the world the way it is. So it creates a custom-made world for every person it traps, and locks them inside. It's... kinda interesting once you take it that way and start thinking about it. It gives the A.I. a... superior goal, and one can philosophize about it without having a clear-cut opinion telling if it's right or wrong."

"Definitively intriguing.", she confirmed, quite impressed too.

Then she grinned.

"So after Terminator, you want to make your own reference to Matrix as well.", she taunted, and he laughed.

"Guilty!", he answered with a large smile. "When talking about rise of the machines, Cameron may be a hero, the Wachowskis are goddesses!"

They laughed together.

Even if the last Matrix movie left Edward so confused it took him days to theorize why the Hell has the trilogy ended that way and almost drove him crazy ; the Matrice and the universe of its story were a masterpiece he was a complete and devoted fan of. And she loved it just as much. Needless to say, she felt very 'Trinity' whenever she played ninja dressed in leather across town.

It just added to the fun.

"I needed to create characters very different from Tetch, Isley and Crane.", Edward admitted quietly later in the evening. "I couldn't make these antagonists three scientists whom work on mind control, plants and fear, otherwise if they ever find out they are going to kill me. So there I have an I.A., a powerful dryad and a somewhat god of fear. I can't have characters sharing their backstories and having been... transformed, at one point, during their researches or careers, what would have turned them into mighty supervillains. The characters are born that way and have natural mutations, rather than being doctors who made researches and provoked their transformation."

She nodded.

"Smart. And are you going to... tell them about this?"

"No!", he immediately, vividly protested.

What made him blush a little.

"I mean...", he corrected, surprised himself by his violent reaction. "There is no reason for them to
"...know.", he pursued more softly. "The character's names are Mad Hatter, Poison Ivy and Scarecrow. They don't have other appellation, and they are not even humans."

"Neither are your science bros to begin with.", she scoffed.

"True... expect that for my science bros, they are demons or aliens in disguise, we are not supposed to realize they aren't human beings."

"If this is really their purpose, then their act is terrible. Nobody believes they could be actual persons."

They smiled at the joke.

"But... I don't have to tell them.", he took back shortly after that. "The characters are only loosely inspired by their personalities, for the rest they don't look like them... or not really.", he corrected, seeing Selina's doubtful look at this. "They are original characters with an inspiration from people I know. Nothing more. The only true similitudes are Poison Ivy's hair color, Scarecrow's frame and Mad Hatter... hu..."

"Eddie, Tetch is a fan of Alice in Wonderland who jokes about being the Mad Hatter since way back, maybe since his all life. So even if you changed everything about him here, you can't just... not let him know you based a Mad Hatter character on his obsession over this persona."

He turned a confused gaze to her.

"Since when are you taking offence for... Jervis ?", he asked, at a loss.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Not that I feel concerned.", she said simply. "You know me."

He smiled a bit. Cat one day, cat forever. Meaning the notion of 'concern', 'worry' or 'guilt' were alien to her mind.

"But I can't help but think...", she went on, leaning gracefully against the couch. "You should tell him about that. You consider him a friend, don't you ?"

"I do..."

That was true. They may were... what they were ; the sociopath scientists were friends to him.

"So don't you think he would be happy, ecstatic even, to know you are working on a detective / superhero story and you based yourself on him to create a character ?"

"Indeed...", he had to admit. "Although, I..."

"Same goes for the two others.", she interrupted. "If the three psychopaths are your buddies, you have to tell them a word about this. They are going to be proud, delighted... may they'll even react normally and tell you how much of an amazing job you did there !"

He frowned a little, not convinced they would take it that way.

"I am not sure this will be their reaction...", he hesitated. "My bet is they are more likely going to get vexed, or to feel insulted... What will inevitably lead to them attacking me because they'll think I want to make their researches public or just to disrespect them. None of this is the case, but I'll probably end up being injected with a lethal dose of unknown product before I get the chance to..."
explain."

She huffed.

"And you still wonder why I don't like them...", she sighed, the slight resentment she continually felt towards the three showing again in her tone.

He looked back at his screen, not finding a correct argument to oppose to this.

But it was true, he really feared their reaction if they ever heard about his project and the... implication, even distant, he made them have inside. Even if the characters were only loosely inspired, they were based on... them. How could they take this normally while they were... anything but normal ? In addition of being violent persons, prone to rapid reactions with disastrous consequences.

No way they could be pleased or feel indifferent at him announcing he created and designed rogue characters for a school project based on their personalities. They were going to kill him. For real this time.

"And what about Steph ?"

He turned a quizzical gaze to her.

"What about her ?"

Selina rolled her eyes.

"I can't believe it...", she mocked. "You set up an entire universe based on the persons sharing your life and the ones in your boyfriend's..."

"Bruce is not my 'boyfriend'...", he objected, but kinda weakly, as if it wasn't a subject he wanted to protest about.

She quickly brushed off the argument with a wave of her hand, before pursuing as if she hadn't been interrupted :

"Yet you didn't include Stephanie in your story ! How is that possible ?? And more important : how are you going to justify it to her, hu ?"

Her way to present it was mostly amusing. Although the fact he didn't give an alter ego for his girl in this world what contained so much of self-projection, was indeed... bothering him a little. So he hoped Selina won't make a remark about it, and so far the topic hadn't been broached. But it would have been weird to think she won't point it out at one moment.

"I fail to see what a baby could be useful for in this story.", he responded, while knowing this was far from being a real or convincing argument.

His thought got its confirmation as his friend eyed him with disapproval.

"Seriously ?", she jeered. "You and Wayne turned yourself into grown-ups adults, you aged me of something like eight years, because I look like I'm in my early thirties here. So don't tell me you can't imagine a teenager alter ego for Steph !"

He lowered his eyes.

"I'll... give it a thought.", he answered, but his tone was distant.
It was unfair that Stephanie... along with Arthur and Crystal actually, had no role in his story. But if he wanted to make them... exist in it, he needed to start by telling Bruce about them. And... he was still at the 'not today' step.

"... All your characters are between thirty and forty in this game.", Selina took back, getting he won't develop on the Brown family subject. "You could use a younger face, so why not by having a teenage or child Stephanie fighting as... someone's sidekick perhaps?"

He frowned.

"What kind of stupid, mindless, dangerous and careless hero or villain would take a child as a sidekick and make them risk their life fighting by their side?!"

"... A very strange one?", she proposed.

And both protagonists and foes here were a little bit... special, no question there.

"I'll give it a thought.", he repeated, closing the 'Steph-in-the-game' chapter.

Seeing the sparkle in Selina's eyes however, he understood all too well she was going to relaunch it until she got what she wanted.

"So well.", she resumed. "No one knows about Poison Ivy and Scarecrow, but it's obvious they are adults as well. You turned me, yourself and your... coworker, into the same generation as your transformed science bros and these two weird clowns."

"They are aged up as well.", he told her, even if he knew it won't especially interest her. "The Joker-guy would be nineteen now, and the Harley-girl about twenty two, from what Bruce told me."

She shrugged her shoulders again, showing effectively her lack of interest in these pieces of information.

"So I'm the oldest of the young team.", she concluded nonetheless.

"As it seems.", he smirked. "Although not in the game, since the Catwoman must be something around thirty-two."

"I suddenly feel old...", she winced.

"That must be because you are.", he chuckled, and she shot him a death glare.

"How come you are such a brat all the time?!"

"Well maybe because contrary to you... I am young.", he smirked, only to end up with a pillow from the sofa thrown at his face.

It made him laugh.

"Fighting me won't change the fact you're aging fast, Lina.", he relaunched, pushing forward. "Soon you are going to need..."

It was to be expected, he was not given the chance to prolong his teasing further, because Selina tipped him over on his back on the couch and started to chock him with the pillows around while threatening and tickling him.

"So who's the child now, hu?!"
She was soon laughing almost as much as him, and didn't let go until he begged for it. Twice.

Being older didn't mean she wasn't young as well, she was only twenty four years old after all. But for him who was an actual child, it was 'the adult world'. That his science bros were around twenty years older than him while she was nine and a half didn't make a difference in his mind, they were all... on the other side.

Not that he minded, by the way. He never did, she had more than one occasion to attest it.

Because even though his reactions were a petty child's most of the time, for the rest he was an adult in his knowledge, way to apprehend a problem and sense of responsability. He had forever been like that, and never shared amicable contacts with people his age. In truth, Bruce was the person closest to his age he had ever interacted friendly with. What was... a good start, she saw it that way. For the rest, he only communicated with adults and always tried to act as if he was one himself. It often worked, anyone could concede it. Hearing him talk, it was easy to forget that behind these solid, tall walls of arrogance and claimed superiority, boastful attitudes, dismissive remarks and absolute knowledge about many, many areas, Edward Nashton was... just a child.

She was smiling tenderly when she finally let go of him.

Her beautiful, smug, bratty little brother who never acted his age, was always either too childish or too adult, but never anything in between. He never managed to be an actual teenager. He was... something else. Had always been.

Her little kitten.

"I've made my mind.", Selina announced after he showed her a few sequences they programmed for their game.

She still hadn't met Bruce, neither during the holidays nor the January month already arriving to its end. Other priorities concerning her social contacts took her quite a lot of time, so meeting Edward's friend was now registered in her 'to do later list'. But it still was... important, and something she definitely wanted and needed to take care of.

"I could date both Batman and Poison Ivy.", she went on after she saw parts featuring the two characters, (even if Ivy's episode was still a 'draft', they'll make it longer for the final version). "It's in moments like than I'm glad to be bi. You don't know what you miss."

He shook his head, amused.

"Believe me, one can lives perfectly happy without feeling attraction to both human genders."

She seemed to consider this, then denied, resolute:

"Nope, I can't understand how."

Then she took another sip of her beer.

"It's like closing the door on half the humans in this planet.", she outlined.

"... It won't be to you I'm gonna make the lesson about the all 'one doesn't choose their sexuality'
They shared a laugh at the idea. Indeed, that would be a funny role reversal.

Because well, among making him confident in many other fields, she was also the one who helped him... coming out. Not that he didn't already know he was gay, but he never managed to feel anything else than fear about acknowledging it completely, to himself or worse, to others. That would be admitting some of the insults from his father and his bullies were partly true, at least the ones concerning his orientation were. And he could not... give them reason, could he? That was the only thing he felt towards this truth about him, back at the time before he met her.

It seemed to be a lifetime ago.

"But let's get serious.", she took back later. "Am I going to fuck in your video game? Because if yes, I want it to happen with Batman or Ivy. Or both. And not necessarily separately."

He acted fakely shocked by this last innuendo.

"This is gross.", he jeered. "And you know, you corrupted my mind by making remarks like that all the time. I managed to shock Bruce more than once with not even half of the things you say sometimes."

She smirked.

"I don't think that's entirely because of me.", she opposed, sarcastic. "My bet is that you had a corrupted mind to begin with, and I simply helped you realize it."

What made them laugh. It may wasn't a particularly smart conversation topic, it was... pretty funny nonetheless. And... they were friends. Best friends. Meaning they talked about everything, and given their personalities, of course these subjects were on the long list too.

"Dunno.", he stated later. "I do admit we thought of a connection between Batman and Catwoman, but I'm not sure you could call it anything romantic. At one moment, depending on what the player chooses, he is going to ask her for informations, and they work together for a more or less extended time depending on the scenario. We haven't programmed everything yet, but we thought of most of it by now."

There he was, back at bragging about his project, as ever when he introduced topics he either mastered or worked on. Or both. And Bruce and him advanced way faster than they thought they would on their game for the last month, being so thrilled by everything they had to do.

"But we agreed to say she is strictly a 'Rogues Gallery' member.", he insisted on Catwoman's case. "Contrary to the others, she has a... bond with the Batman, but this can't be the main aspect of her character. It would be boring otherwise. It simply is... part of her persona, and it gives her a special status among the villains."

"I like that. And I enjoy hearing about this world of yours more and more every day."

She paused, wondering. Then plunged her emerald green iris in his, green as well but of a very different, lighter shape.

"You know what.", she said strongly. "You shouldn't stop at only a video game for a school project."

He blinked, not getting what she had in mind.
"What do you mean ?"

She smirked, and leaned a bit toward him on the couch.

"I mean, Riddler.", she purred affectionately. "That these characters and the story you are creating could actually have success, and I'll even add you may found the perfect job for you: directing stories about this universe. Maybe create other characters? Invent a complete backstory for your protagonists? I am certain all of this could be declined into various type of medias."

"I... don't know....", he simply responded, not knowing what to feel about it. "I really like what we are doing, and I know it is... interesting, because based on good ideas. I even want to think it could be appreciated by other people than its creators, but..."

He was conscious of the fact his story revealed a certain... quality, he was the one working on it after all. But he also knew his judgment could not be an objective one, being the co-creator of the project, and having a strong tendency for self-congratulation to begin with.

So far, Selina was the only one who heard about Bruce and him's work, but since she was part of the story as well he considered her as very involved, instead of being an outside perspective giving her opinion. Thereupon he took back, trying not to sound too disappointed but it failed miserably:

"I doubt our story could be... enjoyed by a larger public. So even less have this kind of good reception you evoked. That would be... glorious, but I honestly don't think of it as something possible."

"I believe it is.", she told him, and he heard in her tone she was truly convinced of it. "I have a gift for this, whenever I have a feeling for something, it always happens the way I see it."

He smiled fondly.

"True.", he confirmed, having indeed witnessed more than once how she rarely got wrong once she predicted something. "It won't be the first time the cat-part of your metabolism has precise visions of the futur.", he concluded accordingly.

She purred and leaned forward.

"So here's my prediction on this, Eddie-baby.", she smirked. "You..."

She touched the tip of his nose with her index finger while saying the "you", then ended, more confident than ever:

"... your boyfriend and your ideas are going to meet one Hell of a success with this... Batman universe."
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

"Society, as we have constituted it, will have no place for me, has none to offer; but Nature, whose sweet rains fall on unjust and just alike, will have clefs in the rocks where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed. She will hang the night with stars so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track me to my hurt: she will cleanse me in the great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole."
- Oscar Wilde

Chapter Notes

A little change of scenery is always welcomed.

"So this is an actual date."
Edward rolled his eyes.
"No Lina, it's not a 'date'. It's an invitation to hang out, like we have been doing for the past weeks."
"You can't deny it's different."
"... It is.", he acknowledged with delicacy. "But not the way you think."
She huffed, clearly not convinced.
Stephanie let out a happy giggle, and the young woman grinned. Her Cheschire cat smirk showed all her white teeth, in an expression similar to a satisfied predator's whom just noticed an appetizing prey and was tempted by playing with it. She looked more frightening than charming, but as ever the sight made Stephanie laugh with enthusiasm. Selina stroked tenderly the toddler's soft blond hair.
"I agree with you, little bird.", she purred. "Your mama Eddie has no idea what he's talking about."
He shot her a death glare at the remark, then turned to the baby and corrected very seriously at her intention:
"Don't listen to auntie Lina, Steph. She is just trying to make herself interesting by talking rubbish, instead of taking the time to properly analyse a situation. She is such a terrible role model."
The two of them shared a defiant look at the little provocation.
"I don't want her to call me 'auntie'.", she growled after a moment, eyes narrowed. "So quit associate this word with my name, otherwise she risks to remember it."
"Because you think I want her to call me 'mama'?!", he argued back. "Yet you keep saying it all the
time, the first person she's gonna call mom will be _me_ instead of Crystal if you keep it that way!"

"That would be an actual _truth_, not a digression.", she retorted, her tone expressively daring him to contest. "So I fail to see what you're complaining about here!"

"I simply want to make you realize that..."

"Hey there pals!", Arthur's enthusiastic voice called as he entered the house.

Then he eyed the scene in front of him, so Selina and Edward still glaring angrily at each other while Stephanie, sitting next to Selina on the comfy large blanket laid on the living room, looked up to them with big questioning eyes as if she attentively followed the conversation.

"Troubles in Paradise?", he asked, and it made the two of them relax, more openly from Ed.

"Not exactly...", he answered, smiling lightly.

Then he went back at the activity he was doing before this little argument, that is to say tie his shoelaces.

"I'm going out today.", he informed the man. "Bruce invited me for a Saturday outside the Manor."

"A day out?", Art quoted, frowning a bit. "Where?"

"I don't know. He wanted this to be a 'surprise'. I'll tell you tonight."

Selina huffed again.

"See that, Art?", she scoffed. "Bruce Wayne is the kind who does 'surprises' now. Yet Eddie dearest still refuse to call him his..."

"Okay, Lina.", he cut, blushing just a little too much for it to go unnoticed and to deny he felt concerned. "Thanks for your input."

Then he stood up, his shoelaces tied, and took his coat on the hanger in the hall.

"See you later guys.", he concluded. "I'll tell you what it was when I'm back, since it seems to interest you both so much."

Then he took a few steps forward, before he leaned down and put a kiss on Steph's forehead, making her raise her little arms in the air with a joyous chirp. He smiled fondly, and winked at her:

"Take care of your daddy and auntie Selina 'til I'm back, will you Stephanie?"

She giggled more forcefully, while Selina hissed in disapproval. Arthur eyed this reaction with a mid-confused mid-scared expression that was a truly funny thing to see, and Stephanie went back at twittering and moving her hands and feet all around to manifest her current good mood.

Edward contemplated the peaceful sight with a tender smile as he was at the door, then left the house.

He loved everything about his life.

And the prospect of seeing what Credit Card had in mind when he proposed him to come for a 'special day' intrigued him _dearly_. He loved mysteries, and couldn't wait to solve this one.
Bruce told him to bring warm clothes because of the outside temperature, quite low this beginning of
February, and to wear shoes in the ones it won't hurt to walk a little distance. This last request left
him perplexed, and he pointed out he was not exactly tempted by a hike, but his coworker just
highlighted that he'll 'need those' and the rest was a 'surprise'. Plus asked him to take a bottle of
water and sandwich to picnic. So they apparently won't go in a place they could buy things at.
Outside the city then?

Damn, he was really impatient to see what Bruce thought of.

His curiosity started to be satisfied when the car the billionaire used most often parked at their
habitual meeting point. He instantly got on the passenger seat and closed the door behind him.

"Good morning, partner.", he greeted happily.

"Hi Ed.", the other smiled back. "Ready for a scene change ?"

"You know me, I'm always 'ready'.", he grinned as an answer. "And right now, I'm very curious to
see what you planned."

"Hope you won't be disappointed, then.", he said while starting driving.

"I do hope so for you, my dear.", he retorted smugly. "Since you had me expecting, now you'll better
meet my usual standards of excellence."

Soon they were both laughing, as Bruce headed for their destination.

"You've got to be kidding me."

Bruce was kinda proud of himself because he managed not to burst out laughing at the despair
written on his friend's facial expression and more than audible in his current tone of voice.

"I'm not.", he responded, trying to sound impassive, but amusement transpired in his intonation.
"You said you wanted us to take a break 'cause the game advances faster than we thought it would,
so we could do something else together, outside the project.", he reminded him.

"... It was not exactly my call.", Ed told him, already in a terrible mood and wondering if Wayne was
joking or if he really wanted them to...

No, he must be joking. And because he had a very strange sense of humour, this was the only thing
he found to prank him. Yeah... must be it.

"Selina underlined I spend way too much time on the game.", he explained quietly. "And she's not
wrong, she knows me: whenever I work on something I love and is quite long to perform entirely, I
tend to turn it into a near obsession and focus on it during a too extended amount of time. So she
suggested I could try to convince you to do something else here and there."

Bruce nodded.

"I know the feeling. Obsessiveness over something beyond health, even when the said thing
is positive at the beginning, is my way to proceed with... basically everything I like."

"So I've realized.", Ed mocked gently. "We are one Hell of a good team when talking about weird
fixations and sleepless nights working on elaborations."

They shared a smile.

Bruce won't tell him however that it was... a bit different on his side. Because even though they saw each other daily to work on their project (and had a very good time doing so), contrary to him, Edward had... a life.

When he finished modelling with him, will it be at College or at the Mansion, Bruce drove him back and he returned to his best friend's place or... his other house. Bruce may not possess the full picture yet, he deduced a lot. He was now certain Edward had two places he lived at.

And none of them was his father's.

So well, he went back, and didn't work on the project on his own. What was more than understandable, since Bruce and him progressed fastly together. Ed rather spent the other part of his time, the long one, the one he shared with his friends, enjoying... this sort of family life he must have.

Him on the other hand...

No need to hide it, he obsessed. Way more than Edward, with way more... implications too. He was not thinking about anything else than their world now, both the one they designed and... the rest, that came back in full force in his mind lately. He hadn't introduced or even referred to said 'rest' in front of Edward for now, but he knew he'll show it to him.

The redhead worked on their project. Meaning he has the right to see his original version of this universe, with other characters and a way more... dark atmosphere. This world Bruce started to design years ago, with a version of Batman (whom was not wearing that name) really different from the hero they created for their story.

Yes, he'll show him.

But for now, he had another objective.

"What are we doing... here ?", Edward asked, looking around, brows frowned. "Not that I'm lost.", he clarified quickly, brushing the possibility off with a wave of his gloved hand. "I mean, we are just in the park around your house.", he justified. "But the question is why are we currently looking at the woods starting after this way too big already 'garden' of yours as if we were supposed to enter in those."

Bruce smiled.

"This portion of the forest belongs to the Wayne Mansion.", he exposed. "The woods circling the house are private property for miles around the Manor. And the reason why we are here is because even if there is other ways to reach our destination, I kinda like the hiking trail what starts there.", he said, pointing to the entrance of said path, what disappeared inside the vegetation wearing its winter colors and outlook.

Edward eyed him with disbelief.

"You own a forest ?"

"A part of it.", he corrected. "Another hiking path passes by the North borderline of the woods at one moment, so backpackers have a right of passage on it. Not the one we'll be using though, and the entire space is private otherwise. We won't meet anyone in there."
"... Alright, you own a forest.", Ed shook his head, slightly desperate. "That's... fine, and not actually surprising. But why would you want to go inside?!", he exclaimed. "Instead of just... I don't know, leave it be and not being preoccupied by it."

"It would be a bit silly to possess something yet never do anything with it.", the young adult pointed out with a hint of mockery.

Edward was about to object that this was precisely what he was doing with practically everything inside his house, on board of his company and in the all empire coming with his family name. But Bruce added quietly, his blue-grey eyes softening visibly:

"Besides, I... like to go on walks."

From the way he said it, it seemed to be... pleasing him. Perhaps it was his method to relax? Therefore, by showing it to him may he was... letting Edward in on a quite private area? So even if this was far from exciting in his opinion, Ed supposed he could make an effort.

Maybe. Depending on how long Bruce intended to make him trek.

"I'm not a 'camping' kind of guy.", he said nonetheless before they entered the path. "I don't practice activities inside these kind of surroundings. Neither am I someone who especially like these to begin with."

But he wasn't bitter, simply informative.

"My world is made of big cities.", he pursued as to prove his point. "Of all kind of electronic creations, an environment full of movements and never resting, even if it's also stressful sometimes. But not... nature and silence."

"Nature is not silent.", Bruce opposed delicately. "It simply speaks using another medium."

They stepped into the walking trail.

"You are interested by researches on plants, though.", the billionaire recalled as they progressed in the path.

The snow covered some spots on the ground and on the branches of the trees around. The ones what lost their leaves during winter offered an artistic contrast, between the dark brown or grey of their bark and the pure white of the snow, put like a blanket over them. On the contrary, the persistent foliages added bright or soft shades of various greens everywhere, their pointy needles shining with snow crystals. Even if this year was less cold than the previous ones, with far less snowfalls, February wore the typical winter forest landscape.

"It's not the same.", Edward categorically denied, looking at their immediate surroundings. "I am interested by studies led in a laboratory, concerning, effectively, plants. Among other areas. And I sincerely find it fascinating. Yet it doesn't mean I like to... go out and meet vegetation or other stuff in their natural environment. I'm perfectly happy with strolling in the Gotham parks for sole contact with trees and grass, and I do find it very relaxing. But this kind of interaction we're having here? I am not in my comfort zone."

Strangely enough, hanging out in the parks inside the city was something he practiced regularly and truly appreciated. But to him it was very different than to go inside an actual wild vegetation. The gardens inside Gotham were numerous, and some of them big enough and planted to look like actual forests on purpose. Yet it was not the same. It still was contained, or gave this impression anyhow. So he never felt uncomfortable inside a park's vegetation, because it seemed... under control.
But right now, he stepped inside a realm of anarchy, with plants growing as they wished without anyone to decide and set up the rules that must apply in the landscape.

"I feel out of place.", he sighed accordingly. "Not that it isn’t a well-known sentiment for me, but it’s usually due to feeling very different from the other human beings around. It’s new however, to have this sensation while surrounded by... trees."

"Don't tell me it's the first time you go on for a walk outside Gotham?"

Because Bruce may guess this activity won’t be Edward's favorite, it seemed weird he never went on trekking... at all.

"It's not.", Ed confirmed casually. "I was born in a... small town.", he told him then, and interest grew immediatly inside Bruce's conscious. "And back there, I loved to enjoy some quiet time on my own by going in the woods around."

"Why the radical change?", his eldest inquired, curious.

"... Gotham, I suppose.", he ended up responding, a bit more evasive. "I've... never asked myself this question.", he added, wondering. "It just became normal, when living in such a big town, not to go out anymore. I never hanged out with anyone in my birth town, I was alone when I went on walks. So it became quite difficult to do the same in this city without any conveyance. Sure I could have if I really wanted to, but... it's not like I ever missed it. The Gotham parks have always been more than enough for me, since I simply like to relax sitting on the grass from time to time, not going on long hikes. I find sympathetic the gardens in towns. They are even sort of lovely, because well designed."

"... I suppose they are."

Edward arched an eyebrow at the somehow weird answer.

"Don't tell me you never went inside one of the gardens in your city?", he asked, quite mystified.

"Gotham is not 'my' city.", Bruce retorted, a visible shadow clouding his expression. "It's only the place I was born in and where I currently live. But I don't feel anything like attachment to it."

They spent a bit of time pondering over it walking, then Bruce asked in a low tone, almost a whisper while looking in front of him:

"Do you?"

No doubt, he was still referring to the town. Edward took the time to think about it, in order to give him a sincere answer.

"I met people in Gotham.", he responded truthfully. "People I love. My life changed completely, and it turned way better than what I used to think my teenage years were gonna be. I was a child when I arrived here..."

"You technically still are a child.", the older teen interrupted, and Edward huffed.

"I was five, almost six.", he rectified. "It was under ten years ago, so I was a kid back then. The person I am now however, is way different from the little boy who stepped in town for the first time. Believe me."

"I do."
After all, Bruce was more than well placed to understand how changes occurred, even at a young age. How easy it was to become someone else entirely because of an incident, a modification in the surroundings, an external transformation having a direct impact on a living being. Age never meant anything when it was about these kind of effects.

Ed stretched lazily, apparently not getting this part of Bruce's thoughts, and went on:

"I met Selina when I was just past thirteen. So I don't only have a good vision of the city, I spent years alone with... my burden of problems and issues to deal with. Mostly coming from my parents, but also linked to school, and... in everything I did, honestly."

But he quickly brushed these thoughts away. And before Bruce could comment on it, he rather took back on a more joyous note:

"Although things are pretty good for me now.", he said with a wide smile. "And they won't be the way they are if it was not thanks to this town. Selina, the... other people in my life.", he picked his words. "Everyone who is dear to me, I met them in this town. So even if the list of things far from alright is alarming in this city, and I never miss an occasion to complain about these, I... I like Gotham.", he confessed. "I owe Gotham a lot."

It was true, and no matter how much he protested about everything, he always felt that way. It was like flying between the paradox of living in what was, of the general opinion just like of his own, the most dangerous city in United States; and the fact this town was also the place which... made him alive.

He won't be if it wasn't for the people he met there. He owed them to the city. Selina, Stephanie, Arthur, Jonathan, Pamela, Jervis, Crystal... And of course...

"There is you, too.", he said softly, with an audible fond undertone. "We won't have met if we were not both living in Gotham."

Bruce considered it.

"I must say this is a... very good reason.", he admitted.

Even a bit lost in thoughts, his tone sounded like closure, so Ed didn't pursue on the subject.

It didn't take a genius to understand Bruce Wayne's justified, Edward conceded it with no hesitation-resentment towards Gotham City. His parents' blood soaking the pavement in Crime Alley (named after their murder!) must be the only real image he used to have of the town, since he locked himself away after their funerals before leaving the country, to put as much distance as he could between him and the location.

Crime Alley, the Gotham cemetery and his property inside the one he felt like a stranger. These were the only places he most likely associated with the city.

No wonder he didn't like it.

They kept walking on the path. Edward recognised the winter forest had something... incredibly pretty, even for him who was not very sensible to these kind of charms.

"Let me guess.", he said at one moment, still looking over. "Coming here to walk was your favorite activity as a child ?"

"It was.", he confirmed with a hint of nostalgia. "Before the... accident.", he developed. "Pretty
much like you did, though not for the same reasons. I always liked to take a break from the world by going in the woods. It felt relaxing, to be alone, away from the loud noises of too many people crammed together, laughing, partying and sharing all these... mundane talks. Even when they weren't hosting galas, my parents almost always had people over in their Manor. So it was... vital, to leave all of this behind whenever it became too exhausting. Luckily I could go out by just walking in the woods inside our property."

"My God, you were in vital need of 'a break' from what is every little boys and girls' dream of a fairytale. Instead of participating to parties hosted in your own house, mister rich kid preferred to spend his free time playing Mowgli in the forest.", he jeered, but although teasing, his tone was friendly. "No wonder why you are so weird."

"Hey !", Bruce protested, but his beginning of offence faded when Edward laughed at the expected reaction.

The young billionaire felt the usual warmth inside him coming with the sound.

"This is not funny.", he protested again, but he was smiling as well.

Inside, he thought once again of how much he loved hearing Edward laugh.

He had a very cute laughter. The melody of it was a fresh, free little sound. Almost like... a child's.

It was lovely. And Bruce felt oh so very proud to be there whenever the ginger expressed joy. So he was even more delighted when he was the one who provoked it. It gave him the need to... brag about it.

They progressed way more slowly in the woods than Bruce did when he was on his own. He often ran on the hiking trails. But even when he was only walking, while his mind drifted as his feet paced in the known path, he never took... that much time.

Neither did he have that much fun.

Right now, as ever, Edward talked. He was babbling all the time, a lot, about many subjects. Until now Bruce hadn't found an area in the one his comrade was not able to hold a conversation, for the one he had not his own explanations, interpretations, solid web of references and justifications offering a long, detailed analysis. Bruce wasn't even sure it was possible to broach a subject in the one he would have nothing to say. Yet... if such topic existed, he'll find it. It became a strange yet interesting goal.

He smiled.

And not liking going on walks into the woods meant by no manner Ed didn't know about it and had precise anecdotes and scientific informations to share related to their immediate surroundings.

They chatted gently during the trek, mostly resuming speaking about their game and their approach on its world. Not everything they talked about was part of the plot story or useful for the designs. On the contrary, they loved to invent other situations or wonder over external characteristics or different speculations. What if a character was a little bit more like that, what if their purpose was something else, what were their motivations to begin with, how have they met for the first time, what were the laws in this reality, what if... They loved to theorize.

As their friends rightly noticed, they obsessed.

It matched with their personnality though, so it was not like it surprised anyone.
"I must admit, it's... nice."

That was a lie. The landscape there was not just 'nice', it was... beautiful.

Bruce winked, a truly funny gesture because very unusual from him.

"Told you it was worth the look.", he boasted with an inviting smile. "Now come in, let's get closer. And... there's more than the cascade."

Genuinely curious, Edward followed him to the bank of the brook, careful when he left the path and descended to reach the soil at the same level as the small river. Only a few steps were required on a mildly steep access, nothing that could be qualified 'difficult'. As a result, he didn't complain about stepping across the tree roots and having to steady himself with his hand during the short descent that connected the difference in ground level between the trees line and the riverfront.

They headed for the bank, now on the same ground as the creek.

"Depending on the winters, sometimes the river is frozen at this time of the year.", Bruce told him, pointing at the water running freely. "It gives a completely different outlook to the place, which I find beautiful too. May I could show you once?"

"I would love to.", he answered gently, a big smile lightening his face. "And you realize what you just implied, right? That you want to have me around for more than only this year!"

"I...", he blushed slightly, before he ended, mid-fond mid-exasperated: "Am I not allowed to project myself a little?"

"You are...", he grinned. "I actually love it when you do that.", he concluded, half mocking half... appreciative.

The torrent in front of them may wasn't frozen, a few spots around some rocks were covered of a thin layer of ice, and the snow sprinkled the top of most stones surfacing from the shallow riverbed. A bit of ice crystallized the shores themselves too, leaving white spots between the ground and the water, circling the shape of the brook and giving it a very artistic curve. It was like a drawing whose contours had been underlined with white to make it look sliced in an elegant manner. The thin icy line underscored the river and its transparent, pristine waters through the one the eye could see various types of colorful pebbles rolling.

Where they were at, the river was something like one meter at its deeper spots. A few feet ahead from their position, the water cascaded into a deeper and larger pool at the bottom of an almost six meters tall rock cliff. The water at the center of this little lake was a nice shade of green, proving it must be around three, may even four meters deep. And the mesmerizing sound of the cascade falling into the pool filled the forest air, giving an all... untouched aspect, a place that forever stayed that way and never... changed. No matter how much the world moved around, this place had this... aura, quite indescribable, of something immortal.

"It's charming.", Edward commented sincerely.

A small cloud of mist formed out of his mouth as he breathed.

He wasn't freezing though, not after their walk. He felt the usual slight burn on his nose and cheeks
indicating they must be red because of the cold, but it wasn't as strong as during other beginnings of February month in this side of the country. This winter was far less cold than the previous one, as the temperature attested.

"The pool is deep enough to dive, I've done so more than enough times, there is no traitor rocks under the water in this part of the river.", Bruce added. "So... care to swim ?", he taunted and Ed addressed him an horrified look.

"I am not suicidal!", he retorted, and his friend laughed.

Then the thought occurred him, and he frowned. He looked at the cold water, then back at Bruce with a confused expression.

"Don't tell me you already immersed yourself in a freezing water during winter."

"I can't tell you' this if you want.", he smirked. "But it won't change the fact I did."

Ed looked at him with disbelief.

"You definitely are a very special guy."

"Thanks."

"I am... not sure I meant it as a compliment, this time."

They pursued their mutual teasing, but it remained friendly. They interacted instead of fought; and they enjoyed learning the difference in the way they led their conversations since the last weeks, as they advanced in their socializing process.

They approached closer to the small lake a bit later.

Carefully kneeling close to its shore, Edward took off his left glove and plunged two hesitant fingers inside the fluid matter. He winced, and retracted them before looking back up to Bruce.

"I feel like my fingers have just been chopped off.", he whined. "How on Earth have you managed to swim inside this pit of burning cold ?!"

The other smiled as the redhead stood up again.

"I did weirder.", was all he answered, and Edward chuckled.

"I don't doubt it.", he smiled in return. "You won't catch me being your partner on this, though. Unless there is an interesting prize to earn, no way I'm playing mermaid in that freezing cold water. I probably won't do it even during summer, so even less in winter."

"You don't swim during summer times ?"

Ed shrugged his shoulders.

"I've never done something like that, no. But mostly because I never had the occasion, not because I'm... opposed to it or anything. Furthermore, I'm pretty sure the water is always cold in these kind of places, no matter the weather."

"It is.", Bruce confirmed. "But when it's a hot day, diving into a fresh water has its... satisfying side."

"I can get that.", he nodded. "Not that it tempts me, but easy to figure out why it must be... a source
of contentment."

Then he cocked his head to the side, wondering.

"Where was the first place you swam inside a deadly cold water?"

"I started here.", he said, pointing to the green and transparent river with a movement of his chin.
"As a kid I loved to come here, irrespective of the time of the year. During summer it was normal, and my parents came with me a few times. It's Alfred who showed me the place, and I went with him very often during my childhood."

"Your butler let you hang out in a frozen river?"

"No...", he laughed. "He actually tried to make me acknowledge doing so during winter was a stupid habit, and we used to have such fights about it because I regularly caught a cold after spending hours swimming in this river whatever the time. Inside the property, there is two more spots where the water is deep.", he answered to the silent question. "One being a lake of good dimensions, with a small island in the middle. It's lovely too, but only suitable for a dip, so more accurate during summer, even I have to admit it. But this specific place has something else, and it's what I wanted to show you."

Edward was really interested by what the 'something else' could be. Right now nonetheless, he loved the picture of a kiddo Bruce Wayne happily swimming in a partly frozen water and enjoying himself, then returning to his home sick because of his expedition, before being lectured by his butler for the behaviour. It was just... so cute.

"And I thought you were an intelligent person.", he jeered. "But apparently, deducing that the addition of cold water, cold weather and complete body immersion results in sickness is too complicated to calculate for you. I must say I almost wonder if you..."

The end of his little teasing was cut off by a splash of freezing water sprayed into his face, and he let out a scream of protest, surprise and indignation as he urgently backed off of a few steps.

Then he analysed the situation: the tip of Bruce's left boot was wet as he made a strangely precise movement resulting in splashing water right onto his face.

"You... you savage!", Edward yelled vehemently, then furiously took off his green scarf. "Now my scarf is wet because of you! And I'm freezing! I'm gonna catch a serious illness! And I had a bit of this water inside my mouth! You spread it with your damn shoe... Do you have any idea of how many bacteria you just injected me with?! I'm gonna die and it's your entire fault! Stop laughing, you idiotic fool! Goddamit Bruce, this is serious!"

Bruce's laughter, from tiny chuckle-appropriate when meeting such an overexaggerated reaction-turned into uncontrollable as Ed went on more and more dramatically while frantically scrubbing his face with the other end of his scarf (it was ruined by the water already, so...). At the end he was bent in half, his hand on his knees, trying to catch his breath and Edward shot him a murderous glare, his whole face red of frustration, anger, cold and shame.

"Will you stop laughing?! Since when is the prospect of having me killed cheering you up like that?!"

Bruce shook his head, and finally managed to calm down, then to unfold slowly, a smile so large it must be hurting his cheeks on his face.

"Don't you think you are... just a little, exa..."
"I am not exaggerating!", he protested immediately. "Bruce! Stop laughing!

"Sorry Edward... but you are so... not helping!"

The ginger's ever-lasting frustration over everything had never been more funny than at the moment. And he intended enjoying it at his expense as much as he could.

"So this is why you brought me here?!", Edward furiously hissed. "To make fun of me, try having me going on hypotherminia and catch some serious disease."

Bruce rolled his eyes.

"There is no 'serious disease' or... contamination of any kind here. Just cold water.", he jested. "It's a river, not Gotham's sewers."

"Maybe.", he dryly retorted. "But do you have any notion of how high is the percentage of..."

"I don't.", he interrupted the plaintive words. "And I honestly think you're just being overdramatic."

He concluded the sentence by a firm nod, and Edward huffed before crossing his arms on his chest, acutely offended. What kept Bruce's smile on.

"... You owe me a scarf.", the ginger muttered afterwards.

"Yours is not ruined, just wet on a small portion.", he pointed out, very amused.

"It's contaminated now.", he severely replied. "And there's nothing you can do to change that."

At least this time Bruce didn't loose it laughing for too long this time.

Not that it was breaking news anymore, but he sincerely loved having Edward Nashton around.

Since they started their walk on late morning and it was already passed noon, they paused for lunch on the riverbank not long after this.

"If this is what you think of the river for now, I can't wait to hear your opinion on the other part of our program."

"What did you plan?", he asked, bitting into his tuna sandwich. "I thought your lake was not interesting at this time of the year."

Then he gave him a stern look.

"Either way don't expect me to put a feet on it no matter the month."

Bruce chuckled.

"I'm certain I can make you change your mind.", he said confidently and Edward scoffed:

"Oh, don't be so sure of yourself, Batguy."

But they shared a smile.

"Do you know about the feeling?", Bruce asked later, his metallic blue eyes lost into the translucent green at the middle of the small lake.

Interrogative glance from Ed.
"What feeling ?"

"Home.", he answered, blinking a little.

Then he took his eyes off of the center of the pool, and looked back at him.

"You know, having a place 'feeling like home' or somewhere you... belong."

Ed felt his heart warming up.

"I know about it.", he said tenderly. "Although for me it's not linked to a place."

He was not sure why, but he didn't feel the need to hide it from Bruce anymore. On the contrary, he... wanted to be sincere. They were friends now, weren't they?

"It's linked to people.", he completed softly accordingly. "And coming with them, a few sights, odours and noises I associate with the sentiment. My 'home ambiance' is not provoked by a place or an environment, but triggered by olfactory and auditory sensations. See what I mean ?"

"I do.", he responded and his eyes softened. "I... feel it too. Sort of. But to me it comes with pleasant memories I recall when a view or a specific scent reminds me something."

Then he blushed slightly, and added, a bit awkward yet decided to complete:

"I have the feeling with... my mother's perfume.", he spoke quietly, and it felt like the words were a bit too heavy for his mouth to carry, as if he had difficulties voicing them, as if they didn't want to come out. "And J's.", he admitted, an audible remorse mixed with clear nostalgia. "It happens here and there, I smell something reminding me of their fragrance. And it... appeases me. It's not 'sad', though.", he clarified. "More like... something comforting."

"... What else feels comforting ?"

Edward was genuinely interested, yet tried not to turn it into an inquiry. That's not how Bruce saw it though, because he simply answered, a quite enigmatic smile on his lips:

"Curry."

"Curry ?"

"It's my comfort food.", he explained. "It has always been my favorite dish Alfred cooks. Before the accident, it was just something I liked, like anybody who has a meal preference. But it took another meaning... after. I... wasn't in the mood to eat or to do anything at first, I let you imagine."

"Understandable indeed.", he commented quietly.

He wasn't good at showing solicitude, but comfort was not what his friend was seeking for right now. He was telling a story, not mourning over the past. Edward much preferred it, he could learn without having to try interact in a way that could only be awkward for both of them.

"So I... haven't touched anything neither have I slept or... any common stuff like that at the beginning.", he continued, effectively in the role of a storyteller instead of a victim talking about his traumas. "In fact, I stayed more than twenty four hours without ingesting anything else than a bit of water."

"And curry was the first thing you ate ?", he guessed, feeling the soft warmth blooming inside him upon learning so... private things about his coworker.
"I wasn't hungry despite having fasted.", he confirmed. "I ingested nothing aside from pieces of bread, crackers and an apple for almost a week. I... ended up agreeing to eat something at some point, Alfred was almost pleasing me to do so by then. I didn't want of a cooked meal though, or of something too... heavy. Yet he made me a curry. At first I couldn't eat it. It felt... wrong, to have my favorite dish at this moment. I wasn't supposed to have something making look like everything was back to normal while... nothing would ever be the same anymore."

It had been unconscious, Edward sincerely didn't register the gesture as his body was doing it. Only when he felt Bruce's hand squeezing a bit his fingers did he note he just took hold of his right hand. It made him blush, but he didn't... remove it. He felt content, and it disturbed something inside him, strangely on both his chest and his guts. The feeling was unknown, and new, and strong, and pleasant, and... he loved it.

"It was the first thing that felt real.", Bruce said, looking at their interlaced fingers with a facial expression impossible to read. "The police station, the rides, the people talking to me, the flashes of journalists, even Alfred's voice... None of this was real. I was... in another world when all of this happened, and I stayed in this blurred state for days. It may seem... odd, a bit trivial even, but Alfred making me sit in the kitchen, and eating curry with me over six days after that night is the very first thing I associate with... reality."

"It has nothing trivial.", Edward desabused him gently, trying to erase the emotion from his tone. "On the contrary, it's... logical. Being with your guardian in a known atmosphere doing simple things you practiced all the time before became a fixed point in your memory. You called it a 'blurred state'? It's even stronger than that : this 'fog' you experienced is a recurrent reaction provoked by a defensive action of survivors' brain after accidents, especially for children. It isolates them, shut them from the awful reality, almost trying to have them going numb. It's a both normal and... dangerous mechanism. Because once it fades away and disappear, it carries victims to depression in many cases, regardless of their age. So you... you have been very brave and strong, in the way you dealt with the after of the murder, the moment when you went back to reality. Before then, you couldn't tell if you were alive after the incident. Or if none of this... really happened."

Bruce didn't respond to the analysis at first, and Ed feared he ruined the mood by doing scientific speculating over something so... intimate and traumatic. His comrade's gaze stared at something that wasn't here. After a long moment of looking lost in thoughts, he simply stated :

"My mother's perfume, J's, Alfred's curry, and the ambiance in... another place."

Then he blinked a few times, almost forcing himself to go back to the present.

"I'd say those are my... olfactory and auditory sensors of 'home'.", he considered. "The ones what are attached to senses."

"They are lovely.", Ed said quietly. "I... feel very touched you told me about them."

Not that Bruce's list required a judgement, but he couldn't think of another way to comment such a personal confession.

The dark-haired teen looked back at him with a small smile. A sparkle of distance or nostalgia clouded his blue eyes, but he was back at focusing and being interested when he asked :

"What are yours ?"

"Perfume as well.", he responded truthfully. "It's a pretty common thing actually, for a subject to associate the scent of someone they love with a comforting feeling."
"True, I saw a lot of psychological theories analyse that.", he validated, now fully back onto the moment. "But yours is... not your mother's, isn't it?", he guessed too.

"Indeed, it's not. It's Selina's.", he confessed with an affectionate smile. "Breathing her perfume has a certain power to... calm me down, to make me feel safe. And my other comfort sensations are linked to Selina's purr, the..."

"Her what?", he cut off, puzzled.

Edward laughed.

"I told you she is a cat!", he grinned. "We call it 'purr' mostly as a joke, but it's... similar to it. When she is happy or content with something, she let out a pleased noise very close to a cat's satisfied purr."

"... I definitely love it every time I hear about your life.", Bruce said with a smile, what Ed returned.

"I've been lucky.", he answered softly. "I... am aware to have good things."

He knew he shouldn't feel 'lucky' when evoking his life story as a whole. Things may were good lately, he had it very hard over the years. A certain number of things will forever stay forbidden for him, he won't be able to do them because they were linked to memories he was not over of or areas that still held a painful meaning. And how could he ever forget about the scars on his back and the events behind those?! They will never disappear, as a constant reminder engraved into his flesh, of just how much things had not always been easy.

Yet now he still felt... lucky, compared to Bruce.

"There's a laugh too.", he completed tenderly. "It's a soft, happy little sound that holds so much joy it could... bring a smile to anyone's face. It's just so... pure, too, and so... light. It feels like home every time I hear it. I unconsciously filed it in my mind, so sometimes I hear it as an echo. And it's always... It always makes me happy.", he revealed lovingly. "It makes me feel... loved. Makes me feel home."

Bruce was almost holding his breath listening to this. Saying he 'obsessed' over Edward was undoubtably the best way to describe his feelings, and he just hoped it was not transparent on his expression, otherwise his young comrade risked to see him as... some sort of creepy weirdo. He probably saw him as one already, once he thought of it, but chose to brush away the possibility. Whatever name Edward referred to him under, or picture he had of him, he still came along to the manor, and agreed to go out on a walk today. So he must be past the issues of thinking of him as a psychopath. Or at least, he didn't let the thought keep him from doing things with him, and even enjoying himself doing so.

Paying attention, Bruce perceived the change of focus in the redhead's tone, indicating he was not talking about his best friend anymore. This 'laugh' he evoked and that seemed to have so much influence on his feelings belonged to someone else, Bruce was at least sure of that.

"I don't have a 'comfort food' though.", he pursued afterwhat. "Rather a few... other things having the power to appease me, such as some physics theoremes acting like a lullaby when I recite them; along with riddles, and my favorite math formulas. Some tricks like that I convene in my head to calm down, most of them linked to melodies or comforting visual sights. The color green has its effect on this too, when I think of it.", he added after he quickly reflexioned upon it. "Not only because I like its shade. I mean, it's my favorite color, so of course I like the visual representation of it and its variations across the color spectrum. But that's partly because I find it... relaxing, in a way. I can't fully explain why, or figure out where it comes from; but I feel both appeased, important and..."
safe, with this color. I don't know why, but it's like I wear it to protect me. It's not just an armor though, 'cause it's also... smooth. Like something I could properly interact with, and is at the same time powerful and gentle with me. I suppose it enters in the 'home feeling' field."

"It certainly does, given how you described it.", Bruce confirmed.

Eddie smiled.

"It's my longest relationship, too.", he said with a tiny bit of self-mockery. "As far as I remember, and that is to say when I was very young, way younger than most people have conscious memories of..."

"Why am I not even surprised ?", Bruce laughed at this, and Ed addressed him a satisfied smirk.

"Genius, Asperger's, computer brain.", he listed to justify this other element making him... who he was. "I always had a very good and precise memory. And green has... always been my favorite color."

"Approved, then ! I didn't know a color could be so powerful, I'll look at 'green' differently from now on."

They smiled.

"And this place is somewhere you feel at home in.", Edward concluded after what, circling the surrounding with a global glance.

"In fact it's the place.", Bruce corrected. "I found other localities over the years when I travelled.", he went on. "And I truly loved and felt at ease in these. They are places I know I'll go back to when I have the occasion, and they will forever hold a special meaning."

"Cute.", he commented.

"Do not mock."

"Me, mocking ? Never !"

For a short moment, he acted fakely offended Bruce could imply such a thing, and they laughed.

"But... this one is different.", the dark-haired boy clarified after what.

He waved at the surroundings once more, and Edward took the time to look at everything. Bruce was right, it was not... silent. The river burbled, the vivid and cold air and the sensation of icy breathing coming with the temperature gave a strong aspect of... cleanliness. The green color of the lake married with the shades of green and brown of the vegetation, although far less plants had their leaves on at this time of the year. The colorful pebbles in the creekbed stood out from the matt surface of the ground on the riverfront and the tree trunks around. The crystallized snow offered more or less extended patches of thick, fleece white cushions to the view.

This type of surroundings may was not his favorite, he willingly acknowledged the sight was lovely. May he could even adopt this kind of trips in his schedule here and there ?

"It is the first place I ever felt at 'home' in, and the only one here in Gotham.", Bruce pursued. "The Manor has always been... something else. And even though I liked it back at... before the turn of tables, strangely I never saw it as more than just a few brick walls and too many living-rooms with an ancient architecture."
"Your house is beautiful!", Edward protested, but without judging Bruce's opinion, just pointing out the truth.

"I'm aware.", he approved delicately. "And I always considered it like that, too. As a... very nice, grand house. But never as my very nice, grand house."

The statement didn't sound sad however. It was a simple matter of fact.

"You are born the heir of the most magnificent, rich and huge mansion of the city, live in one of the most famous habitations of the all United States... yet you come to a torrent on your own to feel home, like a boy from the woods."

They spent a long time laughing after this true conclusion.

Bruce was definitely... anything but conventional, and far from the image most people in town had of the Wayne heir. Edward felt proud once again. He was glad to count in the closed circle of people who got to know him, even partly. To be one of the very few persons he considered friends.

"This place has something else.", Bruce added with a warm tone, standing back up, a determined sparkle shining in his gaze. "And the something else is what makes me like it so much. Wanna see?"

"Oh yes I do!", Ed instantly answered, almost jumping to his feet. "What is it?"

Bruce grinned, manifestly too content of his effect.

"And what does..."

"Are you claustrophobic?", he inquired, cutting the rest of his question and making him even more curious.

"I'm not.", he shook his head no.

"Good.", Bruce smirked, pleased by the answer. "Then you can come along."

And he graciously extended his hand to him as an invitation. It was the most 'gentleman' Edward had ever witnessed Bruce act. And he played caring young man in the middle of a forest whilst he never managed to seem sophisticated when they were outside or inside his own mansion so far.

Ed was smiling way too much as he energetically took his hand and let him guide the two of them into this mysterious secret he now wanted them to share.
"Keep love in your heart. A life without it is like a sunless garden when the flowers are
dead."
- Oscar Wilde

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes.

"... There is a cave behind the cascade? ... For real?!

"Just like in an Indiana Jones story.", Bruce bragged, a wide satisfied grin forming on his lips. "I fell in love at first sight."

Edward laughed at just how proud his partner seemed to be upon telling this.

"Then I suppose we are going to take a look closer?", he concluded.

They had approached the cascade's side, and looking at it from their position diagonally, something emerged: a difference in the rock frame. It was not immediately evident, but once observed further, the existence of a recess could be guessed, over one meter above the pool's surface, so overhead the bank's ground level. The spot was not out of reach, in fact a rather large rocky ledge provided an access from their side of the river. It offered a 'path' big enough to walk. Various holds to grip the rock with their hands for support were visible too, what seemed indispensable in order to do the short climbing on the cliff's side, then to effectuate the travel on their left to arrive at the cave's location.

Yet...

"I promise, it's very easy.", Bruce reassured him as he followed his coworker's slightly worried look as he studied the travel with his eyes.

"For you maybe.", he countered, trying not to seem too stressed but not managing to erase the apprehension from his tone. "But I am not... the most 'coordinated' person around. And I don't usually play adventurer climbing cliffs during my free time."

"There is no real climbing.", Bruce brushed off the argument, then pointed to the vertical rock surface in front of them. "Just the access to reach the cave here, but it's only a few steps, and nothing dangerous. I won't propose if the activity presented a safety risk. Just this portion and some twisting movements to do afterwards, to go from the first spot to the main room. That is if you want to see the entire thing, of course."

Bruce was indeed... reassuring, in his way to describe it. What was nearly paradoxical coming from him and his habitual weird / mildly creepy attitudes. He must really love this place, plus truly wanted to show it. His curiosity therefore back in full force, Edward smiled in agreement, feeling the interest taking over his first apprehension.

"Alright, Batguy.", he validated so. "Lead the way, I follow you."
Bruce smiled back, and started to climb the rock to reach the steep access, then to walk on it. The way his body moved as he took the few steps to arrive at the cornice was incredibly... graceful. All awkwardness and hesitant gestures gone, he looked...

Edward frowned. He didn't know what it was due to precisely, but right now, right here in this environment he obviously mastered, Bruce held a somewhat *mature* allure, being so elegant and skilful. It was... very nice to watch.

"See ? Nothing difficult.", the young adult said turning back to him once standing on the ledge. "And I'll ensure security fence for the rest of the walk. Think it's okay so far?"

"It is.", Ed must recognize, before he replicated the moves his new-found climbing teacher had just done.

Indeed, even for him and his complete lack of experience in the area, he had to acknowledge it was not troublesome. While their position was not that high from the riverfront level, he still felt kinda *proud* once he stood up on the rocky ledge next to Bruce.

"I'm ready for next part.", he announced, his curiosity and excitement as ever being his best motivation to advance and discover more.

Bruce smiled back, very pleased.

"Keep your feet on the main cornice.", he told him then, taking the lead of the operation and pointing at the rocky lane they were standing on. "There is no need to try another access, this one is the easiest. The only thing you have to be careful about is not to slip on the rocks. So make sure to always have a hold on the wall with your hands, that will help keep your balance. The rest will go just fine, walk in crab steering mode."

"... Right, I'll go for the 'crab' thing.", he mocked lightly, but did as he was told.

He may wasn't at ease, he trusted Bruce on this. So he gripped the rocks, maybe a bit more tightly than necessary, then moved on his left, took a step, followed by another and there he was, progressing on the cornice to come closer to the cascade.

"Very good.", his improvised guide whom opened up the path for him complimented, and Eddie smiled.

He remained focused on the task at hand, cautious not to make a wrong move, but the mild fear had left.

They arrived at almost the end of the passage rather quickly. The holds there became far less visible, and the rock wall more wet as they approached closer to the cascade. A little bit *too* close for Ed's liking ; but their clothes won't necessarily be damp because of this, and he was too *into* the moment, so he didn't complain about it.

However, then Bruce extended his arm to take the role of a solid grip for the last access section, because of the less simple progression. And despite the situation, *this* was something Edward couldn't help but comment:

"If you wanted me to take your hand so badly, you could have just *asked.*", he smirked. "You didn't have to set up such a complicated scheme..."

Bruce laughed in response, and shook his head.
"You should have known it by now.", he retorted nonetheless, playing along in the same tone. "That I don't do things the easy way."

"... So I've understood."

They smiled, and Edward took his hand for support as he progressed on the ledge. This last passage was not that complicated, yet Ed found himself gripping his hand tightly and walking carefully, completely focused on the cornice what became both more narrow and slippery. Concentrated on the short walk and on keeping his sneakers from slipping on the rocky ledge at his feet, he missed the way Bruce's gaze was filled with fondness as he secured him during the travel. The dark-haired boy could do this walk eyes closed as he knew it by heart, so no need for him to focus on his own movements. He rather found very interesting to take all his time to shamelessly look his friend over.

It was easier to look at him when he wasn't aware. To note his focused gaze, the way his eyes seemed to... analyse, or to calculate his surroundings. This manifested in everything he was doing, thus Bruce could notice how vivid this habit of his was right now. It was... pleasant, to see how he moved, how he took the time to effectuate a gesture, how much he was into something. He was like that when they worked on their computer encodings, but also in... everything else. He was always entirely absorbed by the task at hand, and when he wasn't it was simply because his brain deduced other informations about different subjects at the same time.

He liked this side of him. But not only, Bruce also happened to appreciate many other characteristics of his by now. He loved to witness the way his eyes always lighted when he led a conversation on a subject he found interesting and enjoyed to develop. He had this same expression whenever he talked or explained a topic area or when he worked on something he liked. This sparkle of eagerness shined in his gaze every time he got to prove his intelligence by displaying a part of his extended knowledge and deduction skills.

Since he was at it, Bruce could also say how he was fond of his smug smile, his soft laughter, his expression whenever he...

"Bruce, you blacked out. Again.", came this amused, sarcastic and boastful tone he had so much affection for. "You can give me my hand back, now."

The young adult blushed as he realized, and let go of the fingers and palm he was still holding firmly even as they arrived at destination.

Luckily Edward didn't comment on this, since he had many other things to focus on at the moment. Even for him, it seemed more tempting than his constant need to play bratty. So he rather said, looking over:

"I must admit, this is wonderful."

The space accessible behind the cascade was a room with a curved wall at its end. The ceiling wasn't high enough to stand up, but once crouched or sat, the place had both a cozy and sympathetic outlook. The ambient noise of the moderate-sized waterfall filled up the place, and looking across this liquid wall, the surroundings were... fogged, as if the rest of the world appeared through another dimension gate. It gave a certain spirit to the place.

The rocks were humid under their sneakers, and the walls dripped here and there on their clothes, but strangely Edward didn't mind the inconvenience. Even him whom heavily -and easily- complained about everything didn't want to ruin the moment by making a remark about the fact his coat was beginning to get wet.
"I spent many hours here.", Bruce confessed quietly.

"I can understand why...", he approved, a somehow husky note blooming in his voice.

But then, the young billionaire opened his backpack and took off... two hard hats with each their headlamp on the top.

"What are you doing..."

"You'll love it."

He hadn't noticed at first, but when getting closer to the rock wall on the back of the three square meters spot, one could discern a difference on the left side of the rock face. It was like a split in the rock, and paying attention he noticed a narrow passage what seemed to continue underground on his left. An opposite side appeared nevertheless, about eighty centimeters further the rock wall was back. But a hole, of a not that extended circumference, opened in the ground. And from what he saw, this descending path quickly turned on his left again... May it continued into an underground gallery?

"Does this..."

"See why I asked about claustrophobia ?"

Ed nodded shakily, the stress suddenly deciding to increase at the incoming prospect.

"I... have my aerosol.", he resoaned, as to reassure himself.

Bruce turned back to him, concern written on his face.

"The place itself is huge once we arrive, but the passage to reach the room is a bit tight at some moments.", he clarified on a neutral tone. "So if you..."

"No, I want to see !", he exclaimed immediately, curiosity largely winning over the apprehension provoked by the sight of this dark hole in the ground.

Bruce smiled warmly.

"It's safe.", he promised again in a convincing manner. "I know what I talk about, I've been doing this since I'm four years old."

"I trust you.", he assured, not even hesitating to state this.

Then he grinned and added :

"Besides, if I die because of you in a cave in the middle of the forest, be certain I'll come back to haunt you for the rest of your life."

They laughed.

But truth was, even a bit scared, Ed really trusted him on this. Bruce may was... very odd in his way, Edward knew he wouldn't have brought him here if there was a risk things could go wrong. And he would have never agreed to follow him in the passage if he doubted the safety of the expedition. He had responsibilities, after all. He had a baby, he could just not play with his life for entertainment whenever he wanted.

Putting the hard hat on has been an affront to Edward's dignity, so he felt very glad no one else than Bruce was around to see. Selina would have died of laughter if she happened to see him in such
outfit.

Then they abandoned their coats at the back of the cave where they won't get drenched, after Bruce told him wearing them risked to hamper movements. Temperature lowered for their organism as they were now in their sweaters, but Ed had no doubt the activity about to come will soon be enough to warm his body.

Their headlamps produced a bright light, they were now ready to venture farther inside the cave.

"Give me your backpack.", the guide invited. "It will be easier without."

Edward handed it to him wordlessly, and watched him disappear first in the tunnel with a strange mix of fascination, excitement and joy raising. He had never done something like that before. Therefore he was so both impatient and thrilled to live this new experience.

Not long after, a stronger light shined from deeper in the insides of the Earth. So Bruce must have let a lamp inside the galleries once, and had just lighted it up now. Afterwhat his head popped up from the hole ; what, with his ridiculous helmet on, was quite a funny sight.

"Ready ?"

"Damn yeah !", he answered immediately, and Bruce seemed to appreciate the enthusiasm.

"Mind your head.", he told him as Ed entered the narrow path then put his feet on the edge of the hole. "The passage is a bit tight, you'll have to stay in crouched position at first. Careful not to bump, even with the hood it's never pleasant."

"Logged.", he nodded.

Then he knelt on the edge of the entry, and cautiously went down, using the holds on the walls. He reached the next ground without complications, but it had been a very thrilling first step all the same.

Arrived on the small flat surface, he turned on his left from were the lights came, and met Bruce's smile.

"The following part is a bit more complicated.", his cavern expert of the moment warned. "Feet first, careful on your right, the floor is more slippy than in the rest of the access."

"Okay, boss.", he winked playfully. "I've got this."

He watched Bruce disappear once more.

"Your turn !", came the invitation, and he gladly answered it :

"On my way..."

This pass wasn't as difficult as he feared, but let's say nonetheless that being on his back feet first in a narrow underground tunnel was not a position he practised every day.

The descending corridor was not as long as he thought it would be. After a bend inside a smaller breach that sank deeper under the ground, he arrived at the room where the light came from.

The last segment honestly looked like a chute in the rock, with its descending, smooth surface that must be slippery.

Bruce waited for him at the end.
"Slide ?", Ed asked, kneeling on the platform on top of this unexpected toboggan, watching it with incredulity.

"Like in kindergarten's playground.", he confirmed with a smile. "Mind the ending, it slips a little too much."

A statement Edward had the occasion to attest as he went down this last section and enjoyed its ride; but then arrived on the floor... less gracefully than planned.

"No comment.", he warned Bruce after he stopped a bit too violently on the ground at the end of the rocky slide.

"Not my intention.", his eldest answered with amusement.

Then he elegantly extended an arm to him and Edward took his hand to stand up.

"Such a gentleman you can be when you want to."

They shared an accomplice smile.

"Ready for next part ?"

"I already found the passage bit so funny, I am ready for your final.", he replied with a large grin, then followed him.

The chute led to a quite large 'room', where a powerful lamp with battery had been posed. Another hole opened in the cave's floor a few feet ahead, way larger than the previous one at the entry of the tunnel.

Bruce bent and took something else from his backpack.

A fluorescent tube.

"Wanna play the all thing, hu ?", Ed scoffed, but the other teen only retorted proudly:

"In order to impress you ? Every time."

They laughed, and he let it fall.

The hole must he a bit less than four meters tall at first observation. And little iron bars were nailed to its wall, from where they stood manifestly up to the bottom of the gap.

"Are you the one who added these ?", he asked, pointing to the bars.

"With Alfred's help.", he approved. "I used to go down the hole by simply climbing the walls, but once I slipped, fell and broke my ankle when I landed on the floor. Since then we made a few security adjustments. Because getting hurt or not, I loved the place way too much to agree to 'stop going back there' as my parents ordered me after I wore a plaster for two whole months."

"No wonder why they used their authority on that... And given your reaction to what was only common sense, I conclude you are such a rebel."

They smiled.

"I'm going first.", Bruce took back, before he turned off the large lamp.
The clarity inside the room lowered, even though their headlamps remained bright.

"Not that I encourage you to.", he pursued. "But if you happened to fall, I'll catch you."

"So thoughtful.", he jeered.

The descent was not difficult, though. Sure, Edward felt the small knot of worry constrict his stomach when he entered the gap and gripped the first iron bar. But then it was just like climbing down a ladder, with bars being both regular in their dispatching and large enough to offer comfortable grips. He relaxed after only the first two steps, and actually liked the travel from then. While being conscious as he went down the moist rock wall that Bruce eyed him closely from the ground he waited on, and was ready to intervene if needed.

As a result, because he was at ease and enjoying himself, he decided now was undoubtably an appropriate moment to make his friend uncomfortable:

"Quit staring at my butt.", he taunted so, when he was almost at the end of the descent.

"I am not...", the other objected, then sighed because being aware it was a lost cause. "You really can't help yourself, can you ?"

"Nope, I can't !"

They were both laughing when he stepped on the ground.

The lights from their headlamps flickered on the stones around. The projection of lights looked like yellow flames dancing on the walls, it almost made the rocks come alive. It gave a both mystic and mysterious atmosphere to their surroundings.

"We are almost there.", Bruce introduced, crossing the small room to reach another narrow access Ed hadn't noticed. "Follow the guide."

"Nice.", he joked in this so special environment. "Then it's my turn to leer at the guide."

Bruce rolled his eyes but didn't object, then entered the next vertical breach, leaning forward since the entrance's top arrived at the level of his chin. The only reason Edward had to bend over a little too was because of the few centimeters his hard hat added on the top of his head, otherwise he could have just walked straight inside the passage.

This corridor descended too, and its shape was made of so many bends it almost felt like going down a spiral staircase, only without steps and far more slippery. This part of the travel may required a complete attention, it took only a few minutes to arrive at its end.

Edward stood up on the floor it led up to. Their headlamps' lights got lost into the absolute darkness of this new place, and he instantly had a chilling impression, like a cold wind blowing. Although there was none. He knew it came from the typical sensation created by a sudden change from cramped to open spaces without transition.

"Where are we... ?"

Even his voice seemed to lost itself into the distance, and it made him shiver.

"Wanna see ?"

Bruce's confident smile had now a both entertaining and... frightening undertone, lighted as it was by
"Hell yes.", Ed whispered, as if he was afraid to break the aura of the space if he spoke too loud, yet feeling the excitement raising upon discovering... whatever it was they were in.

Not loosing another moment, Bruce took a few steps on his left. His lamp revealed the presence of a voluminous electricity meter on the rock wall, and he pulled a heavy-looking lever on the meter. Edward was about to ask what that machinery was, curious over this electrical equipment looking like the one used in mines, while being way more modern than most installations found in old tunnels. He wanted to know, but as the place slowly emerged, light spots lightening and progressively revealing the immensity of the space, he found himself at a loss of words.

Saying they were in a huge room was the minimum he could use to describe the scene in front of him. Tall, large, immense... The pinkish-red brick color, almost yellow at some locations, of the humid walls covered of crystals, stalagmites and stalactites. The open underground space's shape formed of various nooks and crannies at the borders. The way the ground, flat on a large surface where they stood, slowly went down by curving then arrived at a spot where the floor seemed to divide, offering a second ground level that enlarged all the more the spacious cave.

But what really caught his attention at first sight was the mineral concretion at the center of the place. An enormous stalactite, descending from the ceiling at the opposite side of where they stood. It looked like a giant chandelier, formed of multiple crystals and an impressive number of complex waves in the rocks giving a draping effect, making the stones look like soft lace of a stylish design.

"... This is... Wow..."

Bruce smirked triumphantly.

"Have I just managed to make Edward Nashton speechless ?!", he jested with pride. "This is a sight I began to wonder belonged to the possible !"

Edward chuckled in response.

"We are doing a... Journey to the Center of the Earth kind of trip !", he outlined, in awe. "This is even more impressive in real life than when reading Jules Verne's descriptions of an underworld... And you installed a complete electrical system in your giant, secret cave ! This is just so weird, and nice... But above all, so unexpected, it....."

"... left you speechless.", he emphasized.

"Maybe for a few seconds...", he conceded, before he grinned mischievously : "But you have no proof to confirm this statement, so no one will believe you."

He winked again, and they laughed.

"A part of the river runs down over there, and an all gallery starts following the riverbed.", Bruce introduced afterwards, pointing to the other side of the large place : the second level after the ground difference. "There is a lot of things to explore if you are interested, but starting in the main room, there's already... quite a lot of things to look at."

"Indeed.", he approved, watching the various concretions with a strange emotion, contemplating such beautiful surroundings. "I don't... know that many stuff about caves.", he admitted next, looking over the place eyes wide, with the expression of someone who badly wants to learn and can't wait to discover new things. "I read about it, as for... pretty much every subjects.", he clarified though, with
a knowing smile. "So I logged a file in my brain about how stalagmites and stalactites form, the name of many concretions, how to derive the humidity and temperature grade in a cavern, and what are the favourable environments for the flourishing of some specific rock formations as well as gemstones. But I've never..."

"Been in the field ?", Bruce guessed, and he nodded.

"Theorically speaking, I know a few things.", he concluded. "But its far from being an area I master, or even one I had the occasion to talk or collect further details about. Now that you brought me here however, I am really interested and thrilled by the prospect of learning more !"

He adressed him a challenging look, his smile luminous.

"So... care to teach me something ?"

Bruce returned his bright smile and delighted expression, then whispered almost tenderly as an answer :

"Nothing could make me happier."

___________

"You suddenly discovered you had a thing for holding my hand, don't you ?"

Bruce rolled is eyes.

"Fine, do the rest of the descent on your own.", he retorted to the smug remark. "But if you fall and hurt yourself in the process, don't start accusing me. I offered help."

Edward laughed, then, careful not to give reason to this last statement, got down the slippery rocks. His climbing may wasn't as confident as Bruce's -not even close, but he didn't fall so far, so he was pleased with himself-, he managed not to slip and crossed the last steep access. He even allowed himself a small jump from the last portion to the stony soil, where he landed on his feet next to his partner.

The cave was huge. The largest part of it was more or less at the same level as the breach by the one they arrived earlier, and they spent a long time looking at the concretions and exploring the main crannies of this upper part.

Bruce knew a lot, and he played his whole 'tour guide role' very seriously, answering with a sincere enthusiasm to Edward's every questions, plus giving him anecdotes and some of his funny or lovely childhood memories related to the place. Ed enjoyed every minute of this complete immersion into both his knowledge about the place and the fragments of his life he invited him in, along with the meticulous description of their surroundings.

Surroundings in the ones there was... one more intriguing thing, after they spent so much time at the first floor.

The cave had two levels. Its main horizontal surface curved slowly at its end, after the rather large flat area. Then, as if a giant knife had cut in the brown and magenta pink humid rocks, the ground level got down, opening a vertical cliff over three meters tall linking the two floors.

And a river flowed at the bottom of said second ground.
So the creek they saw outside had two riverbeds, and was running simultaneously on the surface and underworld. That was an amusing discovery.

Another 'stair' was amenaged in the rocky wall to meet the ground difference level between the main space and this second river bank. Once they got down, it felt like they were inside a completely different place. Once looked at from this position at a low angle view, the cave's proportions changed. It now felt like being at the foot of a tall cliff, because even though the crack forming the ground difference was neat, the rest of the cave was not flat everywhere, instead slowly descended from where they arrived to the sharp edge they just got down from.

"This is so amazing.", Edward said again, looking up and around.

The space seemed enlarged from their new spot, and Ed felt incredibly... vulnerable, in such an imposing place. It was different from his previous sensation when he entered the cave. He still felt the joy of seeing everything in there, but it was now coupled with a slight... unease, as he felt too small in this giant place.

And the ceiling appeared as way too high from here, like a catedral ceiling, in the one the massive chandelier concretion occupied almost half of the irregular rock roof.

"It is.", Bruce completed calmly, both proud and happy. "I always loved everything here, so I feel... glad, I suppose it's the feeling, to see you like it too."

He deduced his current impression could be translated that way, and Edward confirmed the speculation when he replied, still clearly enchanted by the surroundings although sounding a bit more... intimidated than before:

"What's not to like ?! Everything is just so pretty."

They shared a smile.

"Are these the other main galleries ?", Ed asked afterwards, his short moment of uncertainty replaced by the interest over that new decorum coming from this second, quite different, view they had of the place.

"They are. The underground river follows the layout of the surface's one, except at one moment where it divides and creates another space underground. These galleries reach said spot."

Edward hoped he didn't look as overexcited as he felt right away.

"This is..."

He looked around once more, trying to organize his thoughts and to understand why he still felt so... surprised, even after having seen so much of the cave. Then he understood where his confusion most likely came from, and lost no time voicing it:

"How come no one knows about this place ?", he nearly whispered again.

"It's in private property.", Bruce responded as a legitimate justification, making it sound as if it was not important. "If the cave was... I don't know, an archaeological treasure or something, it must have been retroceded to the public domain.", he reasoned. "But it's not, it's... just a cave. The crystals and concretions inside are only semi-precious stones, so it's not considered valuable. Anyway if a diamond deposit or something alike was discovered here one day, it would strictly belong to the owner of the land. And this place has never been used by native Americans at Pre-Columbian times, so it doesn't belong to History either."
This was effectively convincing enough to justify why this location, though beautiful and impressive, had not been turned into a tourism activity of some sort. Edward could actually be glad it has not been used in such a way, otherwise he probably won't have had access to it, and even less have the privilege to be there with Bruce as his personal guide.

Shortly after that, a speculation sprouted in his mind regarding the first part of Bruce's analysis.

"Do you think it could work reversal?", he inquired therefore.

"What could?"

"The 'diamond' thing?"

Could he have just figured out the explanation behind the Wayne fortune...?

"Do you think your ancestors indeed found diamonds... or gold, or other precious stones or metal, in this place or a similar one inside the property?", he developed his theory. "May even before the lands were theirs, or just after having bought a piece of it without knowing what hid underground. And one day they would have found... interesting materials after a drilling. I mean... it's a bit cliché when looked into in modern days, but after all California hasn't been the sole place representative of a gold rush, only the most remembered because of statistics and number of people having effectively found gold in the rivers, then in ore deposits. But... may it happened and worked as well, under another form, in this part of the country too?"

"Smart boy.", Bruce congratulated. "It took me a while to make that link, but you just discovered the cave and there, deduction already."

Ed blushed of contentment at the praise. He definitely loved receiving compliments way too much.

"So... Am I right?", he longed to confirm.

"I can't give you an 100% affirmative answer.", his eldest dithered. "I have no evidence of it, but the thought crossed my mind, given the fact it is... highly probable. Although the lineage was rich already.", he added. "They were upper-class citizens from the high society in Europe when they arrived in the USA during the 17th century, and they indeed bought the land where the manor has been built, they extended and transformed the property piece by piece as well as the city started to be created. They had shares in the East India Company, they actively participated to the development of the town, and contributed to many sides of the trades in vigor at the time. So if they found something from the ground of this land, it's not the origin of their fortune. But I don't doubt it could have contributed."

Logical for sure.

And he knew the Wayne name was around since a long time. But for that long? If it was true, then why...

"Bruce?"

"Yes?"

"Don't... take it wrong.", he started prudently. "But... how come you have no family at all if you retraced your origins up to the 17th century?"

"'Wayne' itself wasn't the name present at that time.", he answered simply, in a detached tone. "It appeared a bit later, I surely learnt when at some point, but I chose to forget about it... after. And I
don't know if the origin lineage name is still worn by someone nowadays. So...

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I have cousins.", he added though. "The Kane family. And I know I have other distant relatives here and there too, but I never met them, or maybe once when I was a child. I don't even know if they have shares in Wayne Enterprises or not. But the property itself here in Gotham, it exclusively belongs to my parents. So...

He waved of his hand, as to get rid of the subject. 'Family' was definitely not something he extended too long on. Still...

"It's a bit weird.", Ed couldn't help but remark, although it was just an observation, not a judgement. "That you haven't been... badgered by relatives, even distant ones, while you are the Wayne heir."

"... I think that too.", he admitted after a short hesitation. "But truth be told, I don't care. I have no interest in meeting people who might have possessed a drop of blood in common with mine a long time ago. It's... pointless, to have this sort of social contacts, and far from interesting as I see it."

He nodded quietly in agreement.

Not that he could relate to anything concerning either rich lineage or the importance of blood relations -quite the contrary on that point...-, but he got Bruce's opinion. He wasn't sure he would have done the same if their roles were reversed, but... He understood why his friend thought like that given the way things were. Sort of.

Not that it was the most captivating thing right now.

"Where does the river descend underground ?", Ed relaunched, looking at the translucent water.

"Not far from here.", his partner responded, obviously far more pleased by giving more details about his cave than by talking about his family.

He showed the path from the one the river arrived in the cavern, a quite tight access opening the entrance of a tunnel around the riverbed upstream.

"I went up the river a few times by this path.", he told him. "The trail is quite complicated and underwater practically all the way. It's not very interesting, mostly physically arduous, plus there is no other large space except for a small cave upstream, at the one I could take a break before descending back the river. Then the water runs by galleries too small for a human to fit in and by ingress. On this end though.", he opposed, pointing to the creek disappearing into the other side of the cave, following the stream. "There is a lot to see."

He grinned smugly.

"The main creek can be followed on a little distance before the access starts to be too narrow again downstream. On the other hand, the river divides not far from where we are. And the second branch created by this junction leads to a space that opens up again into another large cave, deeper underground than the one we're in. I don't know if there are other big caves on the way, but I bet the entire forest is organized like that following the riverpath. So there are certainly more tunnels and caverns, but they don't have an access reaching the surface. Or if one does, it hasn't been found yet."

"Let me guess, you played Indiana Jones on your river the all way to try find a twin to your beloved cave ?"
"Exactly! But I regret to announce that so far, I found none."

They laughed. Edward loved this new 'Bruce Wayne the adventurer' persona very much.

"The other cave is not as wide as this one, but of good dimensions too.", the dark-haired teen completed. "That room possesses a bank and... a lake."

"Another one?"

"The underground one is much bigger than the pool we saw on the surface. Way larger, far deeper. It's constituted of five successive pits, the four first are of good size and the last one is the lake. At the bottom of its water at one spot, a sort of gap opens, about ten meters deeper. It's almost strange, to discover that much running water there. It's as if there was an entire world underground. And the lake room opens the way to more tunnels, I explored all the ones big enough to go into. Both by walking and swimming."

"That... sounds even more impressive."

Bruce didn't even try to hide the pride he felt once more, as every time Ed made an impressed comment. What has been frequent since the beginning of their exploration, yet he was far from getting tired of provoking the redhead's enthusiasm. The opposite, in fact.

"Have you already done scuba diving?", he inquired later.

"Scuba diving?"

"Yes. You can access to this second place without necessarily having to immerse, but there is an entire passage interesting to see underwater. Then properly at the second cave, you can swim keeping your head in open air for sure, but the most interesting in this place is the exploration of the lake and the underwater galleries. Oxygen cylinders required for this part."

"Oh... sure."

He blinked.

"Hu... That won't be for me then."

"If you want, one day we can do a diving baptism at a more tranquil location before maybe doing this trip.", he proposed, figuring it must be the most both friendly and normal thing to say. "I'd show you the bigger lake in the surface property, or... at the swimming pools in the Manor, why not. It could be a calm surrounding to start getting used to the wetsuit and diving bottles. The contact is a bit disturbing at first, but then you get used to it."

Ed blushed slightly.

"I... hu... no.", he desabused him, trying to sound more assured than he felt at the mention of the topic. "That's nice of you to offer, but... I can't do that."

"Of course you can!", he retorted, misinterpreting the origin of his unease and therefore doing his best to sound reassuring. "I'm pretty sure you will simply have to..."

"Bruce.", he cut off, gently but firmly, before his guide started to expect from this new activity he introduced. "I don't say 'I can't' because I've never done that and the idea scares me.", he clarified, trying to brush off his nervousness. "I say 'I can't' like in... I really can't. Physically and psychologically speaking. I can't go into water somewhere I would be neck deep. So even less..."
dive."

"Oh.", he understood.

And addressed him an apocolagetic smile.

"Sorry. I... didn't think of the asthma.", he apologized, now embarrassed he proposed in the first place. "I should have realized it prohibits an..."

"It's not because of the asthma.", the younger one countered.

Then he sighed.

He hadn't even thought of using his chronic respiratory insufficiency as a valid excuse to decline the scuba diving offer. It seemed quite normal however, that Bruce thought of this instead of... anything else, to justify his refusal. How could he have guessed it was something else entirely?

"Asthma doesn't forbid diving.", he went on, watching the elegant creek at their feet. "Or at least not for every person. I suppose in the severe cases they indeed can't do something that includes a change in the surrounding air, but... for the rest, an asthmatic can do both free diving and breathing pressurised oxygen from a scuba tank."

Bruce frowned lightly.

Hearing this, he got Ed's issues about going underwater belonged to... another area.

"You told me you aren't claustrophobic.", he reminded. "So what can..."

"I didn't lie on that.", he confirmed sincerely.

Then he shifted uncomfortably, regretting in the end he let down the offered 'asthma' cover. Because now he started giving honest answers, he failed to see a loophole other than... telling the truth.

"I..."

He bit his lip, then looked back at his guide.

In the yellow and orange lights of the cave, Bruce appeared as... other. Different. More shadows danced across his face, more... life, seemed to animate his persona.

How come he looked like someone else inside this cave?!

A shiver ran down his spine, but he brushed aside any form of unwanted paranoia.

"I can't swim.", he confessed faintly, to distract himself from the vision of Bruce looking so... scary, and rather went back at being embarrased he acted honest.

His coworker frowned mildly, and the shadows moved, playing around his eyes and on his forehead. It made it look like he... wore a cowl on the upper side of his head. A mask that would let his square shaped chin apparent, but cover his forehead, making the glowing metallic blue of his piercing eyes stand out.

It was almost frightening.

Now was not the moment, nevertheless Edward couldn't help but note how beautiful this precisely 'frightening' aspect made him look like.
"You can't swim... at all?"

Hu, yes. The humiliation part. They were at this, pretty/spooky Bruce's confused question harshly brought him back to the present.

"I never learned.", he responded, trying to hide the slight shame he felt when revealing this. "My birth town is located farther inland from Gotham, so no access to the ocean. And there was a lake in the countryside around, but whenever I went, it was only to stay on the banks to read, relax or... activities like that. I never went past putting just my feet into the lake's water during summer. And then at Gotham, I never..."

He shifted again.

"I never learned how to swim.", he repeated, looking away.

Bruce felt quite... odd inside, upon hearing this. Not exactly bad or remorseful he broached the topic, instead he was more like... surprised, though in a way he was not familiar with.

"Sorry.", he said softly accordingly. "I didn't know."

Ed smiled a bit at that, and turned back to him.

"How could you have?", he retorted somehow fondly.

"I suppose I couldn't..."

Then he frowned again. Because okay, Edward never learning because having no either interest or access to a body of water on his own was... not that strange once looked into it. He couldn't predict it, but it was not unsettling.

But how come...

"You went to school, though.", he couldn't stop himself from pointing out. "Fine, you skipped a few grades, but you went to elementary and middle school, even if you stayed there less years than most people. So you... never had swimming classes?"

Ed blushed once more.

"I... had.", he admitted, ashamed. "But I... never participated."

"Why? Have you been..."

"Bruce!", he interrupted, growing kinda frustrated by now. "I tell you 'I can't', that's it. There is no... special meaning or hidden reason behind it for you to find out. It's just a silly, insignificant information, not a subject I thought you were gonna investigate! I can't swim, not because of the asthma, not because of the anxiety, and certainly not because of the autism. It has no link with anything about my personality, it's only a fact caused by a range of elements forming my past. It's nothing, don't do a fixation on this."

He looked over at the place once again. They had far more interesting things to discuss here, so Bruce won't insist longer on such a stupid subject. Instead he will most likely...

"You are not... afraid of water, are you?", he asked however, and Ed sighed.

"You are persistent.", he huffed.
Then he knelt at the river's level, and plunged a hand in the cold water.

"I'm not.", he refuted sincerely, and Bruce knelt as well. "Earlier outside, when I made you the all bacteria scene?", he smiled slightly. "It was just because you threw water in my mouth with your shoe. My reaction was your fault, not the water's."

He took off his wet hand, and the lights and shadows of the peculiar ambiance played on the smooth, pale shape of his face as he smiled.

"I'm telling the truth.", he added softly, his green gaze following the stream. "I don't have... issues about water, or even about the action of swimming. But I've never done that, so it makes me a bit uncomfortable."

Then he turned back to him.

"There are a lot of things I have never done.", he confessed. "These things that must seem so... normal, for you, but are... out of reach for me, at least for now. Not because I have a problem with said activities, but only because I never had the occasion to test any. And I can't master an area, especially not a physical one, I have zero practise in."

"Seems... logical.", Bruce approved delicately.

"For example.", he pursued with amusement. "I retained everything we know nowadays about gravity and centrifugal force. Doesn't mean I have any idea of how to ride a bicycle."

What made them both laugh, and he ended:

"Well it's the exact same thing about swimming."

He wasn't lying, indeed. The reason he never learnt wasn't linked to a phobia but simply to the lack of appropriate opportunity.

Bruce didn't ask why he never participated to the swimming classes, and he felt grateful for this. Because even if he knew he could trust him, the last thing he wanted right now was to tell him he couldn't... be in a swimsuit, or even underdressed, in front of other persons. The scars may weren't that numerous, they weren't discreet either, and besides back at... this time of his life when, effectively, school proposed swimming activities, he had an impressive, complete, ever-lasting and expanded collection of bruises everywhere on his body. They faded and disappeared, but his skin was always marbled with a myriad of purple and red marks. Impossible for him, his all childhood long, to wear short sleeves or shorts pants. So even less be seen in a bathing suit.

Although maybe he could now. Only the scars remained, the bruises weren't there anymore so technically he had not that many patches of skin to cover. Yet... he honestly doubted he could ever do that regardless. Selina, followed by the Brown couple later, were the only ones he had been slightly underdressed around, and it had never been to go to the beach or anything that would involve be seen by other people. The only reason Crystal saw him in undershirt was since that first time she helped him relocate a dislocate shoulder. Being a nurse, she was able to deal with injuries, and gave him a hand a few times. Both her and Arthur knew by now, and he didn't feel the apprehension anymore when he was with them. Just as he never felt it with Selina, not about any subject. But in front of anyone else? With strangers around? It was not something he could do. Not now.

Maybe later, when he'll be older. He had time to overcome this issue; after all... he wasn't even adult yet, there had no rush.
"Have you already got lost?", he asked later.

"Many times.", Bruce laughed. "And I panicked a few of said times when I couldn't find my way back at first try."

"Seems... stressful."

For nothing in the world he would have ventured alone into unknown tunnels without being assured he'll return from it. Bruce was quite an adventurer...

"It was.", he confirmed. "But I always ended up finding my way. I wouldn't be there if I got completely lost, now wouldn't I? I thought your deduction skills were *optimal*, yet you need to ask if the guy standing in front of you has not died buried in a cave years ago..."

"... You're an idiot, Bruce Wayne, you know that?!", he laughed in return, and Bruce pushed him playfully on the shoulder.

"Once, I spent almost three days in the galleries.", he told him later, his tone husky as he recalled the events.

"Three days?! What happened?"

He didn't even try to suppress the evident worry in his voice.

"I broke my leg.", Bruce narrated. "At the second lake, I was diving, and everything went just fine until I made a wrong move in the galleries. I'm still not sure of what happened, but at one moment a stone fell on my leg and I got stuck underwater."

Edward's eyes grew wide.

"How did you get out?!

It was like following a suspense series.

"I had explosives in my equipment.", he told, obviously content he provoked such effect. "I always have a survival kit for these expeditions, in case something like that happens. So I know how to use a small explosive charge to split the rocks enough for me to get out. Unfortunately it caused a part of the tunnel to collapse, what I couldn't predict, and my oxygen tank got drilled by a shock as more rocks started to move. And of course, I was still way too deep underwater to reach the surface on my own without the diving cylinder's help."

"Sounds like the script of an apocalyptic movie!", he claimed, excited. "Or a very good episode in an animated series. The rocks didn't knock you out?"

"Lucky me, they didn't.", he said, a strange shadow noticeable in his low tone at the voicing of the words. "If I lost consciousness there, I would have died, since the oxygen reserve was running out too fast."

Serious deal.

And Edward failed to link the expression on Bruce's face with the tale of the events. Why was he looking... both angry and... disappointed? after he said he didn't die during this trip. Could it be possible he...
"It may sound apocalyptic said that way, but... it was not.", Bruce interrupted his inner questioning, his voice softening visibly, as to let aside whatever thought occurred him. "I knew my way back, and I was not in total ‘danger’ inside the tunnel.", he pursued, back at being proud of his story instead of... whatever it was he felt in a flash previously. "The real issue was my right leg, it bent at an abnormal angle when the rock collided, and I knew it was broken at least at two spots. But I forced it to obey, and pushed on it to move towards the surface. I should have done a decompression stop before reaching the surface, in order to..."

"Thin the blood.", Ed completed, still into his story. "Whenever a diver goes deeper than ten meters underwater, will they be experimented or not, they have to do a stop of a few minutes when passing from a pressure water grade to another; the time for their own blood pressure to adjust to the surroundings. They need to do so during both the descent and rising, the time spent at each stop depending of the person, but being necessary for every organism. And of course, the deeper the diver goes, the more stops they have to observe."

Bruce smiled fondly.

"So you have never done scuba diving, Hell you never even swam, yet you... know about rules of blood and water pressure to observe to dive."

"I know about a lot of things. Doesn't mean I tried everything."

They smiled.

"The decompression is obligatory.", Bruce took back his tale. "But as you said, it's more or less sensible depending on the person and the frequency at the one someone is used to dive. So even though I haven't done it there, I didn't... suffer of it, not really, and I didn't require a decompression chamber after what to regulate the pressure. Only a slight treatment for a few days."

"What have you done once you reached the surface with a broken leg?"

"I started by feeling... hu... grateful I wasn't dead."

So why are you hesitating like that ?, Ed didn't retort, but he definitely opened an investigation file in his mind, and decided he had to collect more data on this event, to understand what truly happened underwater that day.

"Seems like a good beginning indeed.", he said nonetheless, not letting his confusion transpire.

"And then I started to panic.", Bruce pursued. "I tried to go up the pools to reach the galleries, but I couldn't move like I should and the leg hurt like Hell."

"What did you do?"

"The only thing to do."

This time he smiled, and added, a sweet note in his tone:

"I waited for Alfred to come and get me."

Ed felt the soft warmth blooming inside him, provoked by his friend's expression at the mention of how his guardian saved his life... as he apparently did many times over the years.

"I had a first aid kit.", Bruce precised again. "So I took care of the injury as best as I could, and I tried the phone. A few hours later, Alfred was in the cave to rescue me, and he did the trip back with
me up the cave and across the forest."

"... When do all of that happened?"

"During summer, in August when I was eleven. I went to the hospital after what, and I've been firmly prohibited to go back to the cave. I didn't indeed, and when my leg was completely healed with no complications, I left the country instead."

Edward blinked. He rapidly made the link and asked to confirm his suspicion:

"This place being where you feel at home...", he announced prudently. "This is where you have been seeking for comfort during these years you went homeschooling."

"I had a very opened schedule.", he approved. "I went with Alfred most of the times, alone for the rest. But yes, I spent many hours across the forest and the river. Both upper and underground."

"It was... the last, and only place in Gotham you liked.", Ed realized. "Yet you get hurt here as well..."

"That's why I left.", he confirmed delicately. "I wasn't going anywhere inside the city anymore, even inside the Mansion I started to avoid most rooms. But when even my cave tried to have me killed, I... let go of everything in this part of the world."

The Bruce Wayne puzzle completed itself more and more every time, and today he got a few of central pieces.

"This is my heart.", Bruce revealed quietly, eying the place over. "This is... where I felt at home before the accident, and where I went to be comforted after. This is where I came back to when I returned from my exile around the world, and the only space that follows me and I have feelings for since that long. Even if it hurt me. I never stopped loving this place."

"I can't tell you how I feel.", Edward admitted softly in response to the moving confession. "Because I don't know how it's called, or if it... has a name. And you know how much I don't like not knowing how to label something. But..."

His cheeks flushed lightly.

"I feel so very... content, you trusted me on this. It means a lot to know you let me in regarding something so important for you. And... you have a beautiful heart, then."

"... It was not completely altruistic from me.", Bruce mocked after a moment, choosing to let the last remark aside. "Been a while since I want to bring someone here, other than Alfred, and you are the first person in this city I could have showed the place to. So, simple as that, since fate decided it this way, it... fell on you."

Their laughters echoed on the walls of the cave.

"Have you given it a name?"

"No...", he answered, wondering. "Alfred and I thought of a lot of things when I was a kid, and we tried a few appellations, but... we never found anything convincing. So we stayed at 'the Cave'.

""
Sometimes with a capital letter, sometimes not."

"The Cave.", Edward repeated, smirking. "How original, for... a cave."

"Oh, shut up."

They laughed together, then after a last glance at the place, started to do the walk back to the surface.

Saying the afternoon passed 'fast' would be an euphemism. It was dark outside when they emerged from the cavern. Not night yet, but late in the evening.

"I know my way back.", Bruce assured as he helped his comrade descending the last rock portion and arriving safely on the ground at the bottom of the cliff's cascade, after he secured him during the walk on the cornice. 'I've crossed these woods at night many times, I promise we won't get lost. That it's late doesn't change a thing to the fact I know the place by heart. Besides, I promised I'll take you home safe and sound, and I intend on keeping the commitment."

Ed smiled at that.

"Wanna play hero in the dark night, Batguy?"

The temperature was now way colder than it had been during the afternoon, and the night will soon fall, so no way it won't be complete dark by the time they'll be back at Bruce's mansion. But in spite of these elements, Edward didn't feel even the slightest scared. In fact he was... very satisfied of the way his day had been occupied.

A bit tired after so much physical activity, too, but most of all truly happy with the way things went.

"We'll come back to your Brue-cave, won't we?", Eddie grinned as they walked on the riverbank, making the other one chuckle.

"I'd love to take you back.", he approved energetically. "Not sure about the 'Bruce-cave' name, though. We just call it... the Cave. Adding a name in front of it would sound strange."

"Perhaps..."

Then he laughed. Bruce arched an eyebrow.

"What is it?", he inquired, and the younger one raised a luminous eye to him.

"I just thought of something..."

He smiled broadly, and went on:

"No wonder your mental projection of yourself is a man dressed as a bat... Since you spent all your life considering yourself at home in a cave!"

Bruce bursted out laughing with him at this, then answered, all proud of himself:

"I knew you were gonna love it."

They kept joking and talking as they started the walk back on the hiking trail, their headlamps still on as the evening advanced around them, slowly drifting into the night.
And thus, an experimental version of Bruce's Batcave appeared ;)}
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

"Everyone may not be good, but there's always something good in everyone. Never judge anyone shortly because every saint has a past and every sinner has a future."
- Oscar Wilde

Chapter Notes

I don't speak Italian (and I am not Spanish, I just know a few words and some basis of this language), I simply believe Bruce would. I don't know if it's canon, but it seems logical that his Matches Malone identity speaks at least a bit of Italian.

"If he kidnapped you, use the emergency signal word to confirm it, and I'll be there to rescue you in a matter of minutes."

Edward refrained a laugh.

"No Lina, he didn't 'kidnap' me.", he responded over the phone. "We simply didn't see time passing. We've been surprised by the late hour, so his butler proposed I stay the night at their place."

"This is just his excuse.", she huffed, openly disapproving. "Don't tell me Wayne has not perfectly planned his scheme to have you stuck with him at night and forced to stay in his house! Therefore I ask again: are you retained there against your will?!

This time he didn't hold back a chuckle.

"You're being overdramatic, Selina."

"What can I say?", she scoffed. "You are the one who impacted on me about that point."

He laughed.

"The very least you can do, now that you're gonna spend the night at the Wayne Manor, is to bring me something shiny, precious and that I could sell outstandingly well in the black market."

"This is not going to happen.", he replied, amused yet serious. "I am a guest here, I won't abuse of the hospitality."

"He is the one who asked more from you in the first place!", she protested. "You weren't supposed to be stuck with him all night long, only to stay the afternoon! So now better take advantage of this digression he made in your mutual time schedule agreement!"

"I don't think I want to consider the..."

At this moment, Bruce arrived at the entry of the bedroom.
"Edward, are you ready for dinner or..."

Then he saw the phone glued to his ear.

"Sorry.", he apologized. "Didn't want to interrupt..."

He was about to walk away, when Ed called him, breaking in a large grin:

"Wait a sec ! Selina, wanna stop accusing me for being out tonight and say a word to the real culprit ?"

Getting what it meant, Bruce was about to object or to prudently leave, but he had the time to do none as Edward switched on the phone's loudspeaker.

"Good evening.", he therefore greeted awkwardly. "I'm...

"Hello, Wayne.", a velvet, charming voice cut him off, more politely than he feared.

It made him relax slightly, and he briefly thought he could hold a normal conversation with this woman he never met yet knew a lot about already. But his hopes were quickly torn apart when she pursued bluntly:

"So you think it's okay to kidnap my kitten and bring him to your house for the night without asking his mommy first ?!", she exploded without warning.

Bruce's eyes grew wide and Edward bursted out laughing.

"I'm listening.", she went on with her daring tone. "What is your goal there exactly ?! Because so far, even when you two worked together late at night, it was only via your computers, so each at their place ! And today you are sleeping together, like that, without any preparation of any sort ?!"

Edward had no idea what was the funniest between Selina's choice of words to lecture them or the shocked expression it provoked on Bruce's face.

Probably a bit of both.

"I assure you, Miss Kyle.", the poor boy tried in a desperate attempt. "That I don't either kidnapped him neither do I hold any... unsavory intention towards him..."

"I damn well hope you don't !", she exclaimed. "It would be underage if you tempted anything against him !"

"T... 'tempted' ?!", he quoted, scandalized. "I... I have no..."

"And Edward !", she growled at his intention. "Stop laughing this is serious !"

"I fail to see how I could stop right now !"

She let out a very displeased sound.

"Wayne, I'm warning you.", she chose to say instead of scolding him for keep giggling. "He comes home in one piece tomorrow morning, and next time you want to take him to your house for the night, you ask first, you don't make everyone believe you're gonna spend the afternoon out with him only to trap him into hanging out with you for longer."

"I didn't 'trap' ! The only thing I did has been to..."
"I don’t give a damn about your opinion.", she cut right away. "Are we clear about I said or not ?!

"... We are.", he heard himself answering, his tone cooling significantly. "But you have no need to...

"Wonderful.", she interrupted again. "Then I managed to have my garantee. Now Eddie, you send me a message when you go to bed."

"Will do.", he promised. "See you later, Lina."

"Kiss, baby."

He hanged out.

Then his eyes met Bruce's confused gaze and he saw the *recoil* his body language indicated.

"That was Selina.", he began, making the older teen emerge of his cold state.

"She is... hu... nice to meet her."

Edward refrained a laugh at his attempt to act friendly while he was still so obviously shaken by their exchange.

"If it makes you feel better.", he said to cheer him up. "Whatever way you two were supposed to meet, she planned to either attack you to test your reflexes or start by throwing threats at you, because that's how it works for her with people. She needs to evaluate if you are worth it, and she can be quite scary, hurtful or dismissive doing so."

The other boy didn't look coaxed.

"Don't worry.", Ed assured again. "She is just being protective."

Bruce frowned. From everything Edward told him or let him guess about his life, he understood that Selina Kyle, being his eldest and his both first and best friend, must feel somehow... responsible for him. In her way. Even technically speaking, she was the adult and he was the child of their duo; so she probably impersonated more the role of an older sibling looking after him than just a friend with the one he spent good moments. He practically *lived* with her after all, sharing his time between her place and this... second home he had, which still was at the 'deduction phase' in Bruce's investigation.

But these kind of formulations she used to lecture him ?! Voiced with so much... unjustified *bitterness* ?!

This couldn't help but make him wonder... Even if every time Edward referred to her, it has strictly been to call her his *friend*, could they be... more than friends ?

They *did* live together, didn't they ?! So may it won't be that surprising if...

"What are you thinking about ?"

Ed's gaze was curious as he asked, he obviously tried to figure out the explanation behind Bruce's current unease.

"Your friend just accused me of kidnapping and potential aggression.", he stated with an emotionless voice, the words coming out meaner than intended. "How should that make me feel in your opinion ?"
The redhead's brows frowned.

"She didn't..."

"That's what she said.", he corrected, his low tone turning aggressive. "And I feel very insulted about it."

The younger teen looked a bit bad at this, as if he understood all too well why Bruce felt that way yet hoped he would have reacted differently.

"She is always... playfully rough.", he eventually explained, picking his words. "With everyone, will she be talking to people she knows or to complete strangers. This is no... disrespect, or even less affront from her, she is only..."

He sighed.

"Just don't take it personally, okay ?", he required, both to defend Selina and avoid an unwanted argument with Bruce. "She has nothing against you, quite the contrary. She thinks you are way better than my other social contacts, and she approves of us being friends. She sort of likes you.", he ended with a sweet smile.

"This is far from the impression I had.", Bruce retorted nonetheless, although the evident sincerity behind Edward's words made him relax a little. "It sounded more like hatred than affection."

"Believe me, it was friendly.", he assured, amused. "You should hear her when she speaks with my colleagues, you'll understand just how much she loves you in comparison."

This provoked a tiny chuckle from Bruce, and Edward instantly felt better. He knew whatever first impression his partner was going to have on Selina could just not be... sympathetic, given it was established she would attack him. And she has never been interested in pretending to be polite, not even with people like Bruce whom she somehow appreciated.

She was simply... herself, and won't change to try being more politically correct.

They started to walk out of the room. When they arrived earlier, Alfred proposed he stayed for the night, and he set up a bedroom suite for him close to Bruce's. Then told them he'll make dinner while they made themselves at home.

All of Bruce's clothes were too big for him, but it went just fine as pyjamas. So after he took a shower (and used more wash products than necessary, just as if he was in a luxury hotel room), he found himself dressed in some jumper and baggy pajamas trousers of Bruce's. He thought it would be weird, but not at all. The opposite : it felt strangely good, and... safe, he loved the feeling.

And he gave the quick call to Selina before joining his hosts for dinner.

"What is you guys'... relationship ?", Bruce tried as they reached the stairs to descend to the kitchen. "I think I have the right to ask, since she attacked me to play... protector or whatever. But it sounded...

He tried to fish the right words from the mess of his thoughts.

"It sounded like someone who really cares."

"That she does, sure.", he confirmed, not getting why Bruce seemed bothered by this obviousness.
Then he understood what he was trying to figure out, and he had to refrain a laugh at the idea.

"I love her.", he said instead, finding the most appropriate way to disabuse him yet keep telling the truth.

Something like betrayal flashed one second in Bruce's eyes.

"I love her as my best friend and my big sister.", he clarified patiently, as if he was talking to a child. "My mother, sometimes. We joke about that a lot too."

"So you guys are... just friends."

"'Love' is not a word reserved for romance."

His gaze shined with tenderness and he added:

"There are many ways to love someone, and many people one can love differently. Friendship is a form of love, a very strong one for some people, and I am one of them. I never felt anything else than hatred and disgust towards my blood family, so to me true friendship looks way more like family than anything else I experienced. Selina and... my other friends, they are like family. And my colleagues are like friends. I'm sure you already felt that with your contacts."

"I did.", he admitted. "Alfred, J... they are family. Were for J.", he added with a hint of remorse or bitterness, it was difficult to say which one. "Harley was a friend, and you are... a friend.", he ended.

However, the way he said the last word sounded... weird, almost out of place. As if he used an official title to hide a stronger meaning.

Ed stored the unexpected fact to investigate on it later, but since it was not important right now, he didn't relaunch.

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"Stay with us !", he invited before thinking about it.

What resulted in Bruce and Alfred sharing a glance, their impossible to read facial expressions making them look like two statues establishing a mental bond to communicate. They were so alike right now, no one could doubt they were family.

Eddie smiled a little.

"I don't know what you guys usually do when you have company.", he took back seeing they obviously weren't sure how to treat said 'company'. "But since we're the three people in this house and we're all here tonight, why won't we have dinner together ? It would be rude to separate for the evening."

He just hoped this didn't sound intrusive or judging, he was simply giving his opinion ; not trying to break whatever habits the Wayne Manor residents shared.

"We don't have company.", Bruce refuted, still clearly wondering how to act to be a good host. "And when we are both at the house during the evening, we eat together."

"Most of the times, we do.", Alfred clarified, all his britishness audible in his voice and noticeable in his allure. "When master Bruce prefers to be alone, he discharges me."
They shared another robotic look.

These guys really were special ones...

"Well why won't you stay tonight?", he insisted, because apparently if he didn't take the situation in hand, no one would.

"If it seems appropriate.", the butler answered prudently. "I would appreciate to stay for dinner."

"It is, Alfred.", Bruce approved, his low tone tinted with a strange nostalgia. "It can be... sympathetic, to spend the evening together with a guest."

"I agree.", the valet confirmed, apparently proud of the younger one's decision. "I'll set cutlery for three at the table, then."

The two shared a tender smile this time. They were... cute, in the way they expressed attachment without showing it openly.

"Let me help you!", Ed said happily when Alfred went back to the kitchen.

What provoked a surprised gaze from the butler and Bruce staring at him as if he said something factly inaccurate.

Damn, they were creepy now.

"What? Have I said anything that doesn't match with the etiquette?"

"No etiquette rules apply here anymore.", Bruce replied, apparently kinda... curious.

"So sure thing it doesn't seem odd to help in kitchen?", he asked patiently.

Better not rush anything, even to make them agree with some very basic ideas.

"Given the fact I already did nothing to help with dinner, I can at least help for the service, can't I?"

"... You certainly can.", Alfred answered with delicacy. "Forgive our lack of manners, last time guests were here, they were adults friends or colleagues of Mr and Mrs Wayne. I admit I don't know what to normally expect from the company of a child friend of master Bruce."

This made him laugh a little.

"I'm afraid you won't learn much about 'normality' from me, sir.", he joked in a light tone. "I am not an ordinary child."

At least this relaxed the atmosphere, and no one seemed at a loss about how to behave in the following minutes. Therefore, given who he was with, Edward considered he won a battle.

And as the evening went on, it appeared he won a few more others.

It was the first time in his life Edward was doing something like that. Apparently today was the 'try-something-new' day. The cave having been a great and fascinating discovery, he wasn't expecting to experience something else new today.

But as he quickly found out, an evening with Bruce and Alfred was not something he could apply
his own knowledge to in order to interact.

Or at least, not completely.

The butler was an open person who seemed truly delighted to have company, but simply failed, to begin with, to find the appropriate way to talk to him, and therefore seemed surprised, awkward and not knowing what to tell him. It was almost cute.

As for Bruce, he was at the edge of blacking out, Edward saw him like that more than enough times over the weeks, it was scary.

As a result, both of them were very funny to watch.

"Call me Edward.", he corrected gently when the butler, for some obscure reason, addressed him as 'Mr Nashton' when he handed him the dishes.

The adult seemed shortly disoriented by the request.

Given the fact he called his protégé 'master Bruce', it must indeed be weird for him to refer to someone he barely new by his first name.

It was not the first time Edward and him interacted, but the few occasions they saw each other previously were only when Alfred brought tea to the office or living-room Bruce and him spent the most time at, and they exchanged no more than a few words.

"Mr Nashton is my father.", Ed explained as a convincing justification. "And also how most teachers call me. But it has nothing respectful from them, most of the times it's to make fun of the fact I'm not of age to be a student at their stupid college. I know it.", he added seeing their slight doubt about that last portion. "Mockridge told me so last year."

From the curve of Bruce's eyebrows at that, he undoubtably filed the information.

"Will 'master Edward' do ?", Alfred inquired, and Ed had to force himself not to burst out laughing.

"This is hu... very honorific.", he tried. "But kinda strange, too. Really, I'm fine with 'Edward', no need to add artifices."

"... Alright, then.", Alfred validated, even though it was clear he would have appreciated something else than just his first name to address to him.

Were all rich people that touchy about the 'name' subject?

"Bruce told me about some of his expeditions in the Cave.", he launched during dinner, insisting on the appellation to lightly mock its lack of originality.

What didn't go unnoticed, since it made Alfred smile and Bruce grumble with disapproval.

"But I want to hear some stories of yours too !", he completed energetically.

Alfred considered it, then he asked, wondering :

"Could this be the moment I'm supposed to embarrass master Bruce by telling some childhood events of his only I know about ?"

Edward grinned as Bruce choked with his food at the idea.
"You tell me.", he retorted with confidence. "I'm sure you have tons of stories like that stored in your memory and never, or at least not many times, had the occasion to share them."

"Never.", he responded. "I never talked about master Bruce's childhood that way with my social company, and never had some friends of his to tell."

"And this is not starting tonight.", Bruce protested, trying to show as much authority as he could. "I may have missed a lot about social codes, I'm glad I never had to suffer this kind of embarrassment."

Ed leaned on the table, his smirk announciating he won't let go until he got what he wanted. It was very cat-like as an attitude, and he had no doubt Selina was for something in some of his behaviours.

"Lucky me, I'm gonna witness your first time, then.", he taunted. "You know, this very cliché yet loveable picture of the parent giving good old-fashioned embarrassment to his teenage kid in front of his friends by telling how cute and clumsy of a baby he used to be."

Edward couldn't tell what was the best after his reply, between the flush of Bruce's face and the affectionate expression on Alfred's, whom seemed both enchanted by the prospect and delighted by the mention of their family bond.

They definitely were moving.

"You are not going to leave this aside, are you?"

"Nope!", he proudly attested, taking a spoon of hot food. "It's your fault, Bruce. If you didn't want me to take advantage of the situation, you shouldn't have brought me to your house."

Bruce sighed, Alfred laughed (this was a held back, almost inexistant sound, but the movement of his lips under his small mustache indicated he was amused...), and Edward smirked, proud of his effect.

"Well this is unfair.", Bruce objected. "You can't answer back to that."

Then he realised his words could be seen as insulting, and hastily specified:

"I didn't mean that you..."

"It's fine.", he laughed. "And actually I think I can."

It could lead to a funny exchange, so why not?

"My conscious memories go back at a rather young age. Not properly when I was a 'baby', but definitely a very young boy. So let's say I can participate."

The two upper-class spooky weirdos looked not totally convinced.

"And if you are not satisfied with what I say, you'll just have to invite Selina next time.", he chuckled. "I may was a teen when we met, she witnessed... many embarrassing events and can attest better than anyone how much some of my habits are odd and caused funny situations."

Both of them relaxed at this.

Bruce must have told Alfred everything he knew about him, when he thought of it. What seemed only fair, given the fact he openly talked about Bruce with Selina and Arthur. It was logical the butler had his share of tales as well; and this made Edward feel like he somehow knew him already. He was Bruce's loving family, so of course he'd feel affection towards him.
So he started confidently:

"There, let me prove my statement. Starting by something funny: when I was eight, I wanted to create a revolutionary power generator I'll install where I lived at the time, in the Narrows, to have electricity for free in the quarter. To do that, instead of trying some basic engineering systems that would probably have worked too, I decided I needed yellowcake for the prototype power supply."

"What is a yellow cake?", Alfred asked politely, playing along. "Something a friend of yours gave you?"

"No, I never had any friends during childhood.", he chuckled, and his amused reaction made them laugh too, more held back from the butler and audibly fond from the young master of the place. "It's a type of uranium concentrate powder. But since I had no money to buy it, I tried to hack a company's internal network administering the society's rate of return. I wanted to change the entire disposition of their website organisation, with the purpose to sell them my homemade algorithm enabling them to reorganize their network later, once they would have realized they can't enter any more data in their base without seeing everything getting flipped and destructured."

"You managed to do that?!", Bruce asked, very impressed.

"Of course not, that's a sci-fi story. All I managed to do is to hack a tiny bit of their camera system, what made no sense related to my plot, and furthermore was of an idiotic simplicity. For the rest, my big plan very elaborated and which I totally believed in when I began, ended up being a giant backfiring bruise to my ego when I realized it was impossible to even start entering the society's intern security network. After this event I started looking for an actual job, because curiously one simply cannot hack their way that easily to earn money for their project developments. It has been such a depressing discovery. So, almost convinced so far?", he asked, way too pleased with himself, and they smiled.

"Master Bruce thought it was possible to fly with wings made of a mix of leather, metal and kevlar.", Alfred took his part of the contract. "He wanted to design his own costume with this alloy, because he was persuaded it could create a combination allowing to fly without the help of a reactor or of any impulse."

"Cute.", he jested playfully, much to Bruce's embarrassment. "What desabused him?"

"Gravity.", the British man answered very seriously.

"That heartless bitch, always reminding us of our condition.", he laughed, and this time they both nearly chuckled along with him.

Oh yes, he was definitely going to enjoy his evening.

Alfred Pennyworth was effectively British. His slight accent and general phlegm attested of this already, but it could also have been more of a choice of appearance or an education-induced thing.

But as Edward learnt during the evening, the butler was born in England, did his complete schooling there, joined the British Army when he became an adult, and met Thomas Wayne during his first visit of the USA.

Their little exchange on funny memories had been a fine way to bring them closer and make them open up, and although it lasted most of the dinner time, they naturally extended their conversation topics to tell more about themselves.
"You speak morse code too ?", the butler repeated, impressed, after Edward commented on one of his army memories.

Ed typed on the table the bits corresponding to "yes of course", and the two others smiled.

"Then we can hold a conversation.", Bruce informed him, before typing on the wooden surface: "Alfred taught me the language a long while ago."

"Master Bruce has always been an excellent student.", the butler ended, still by typing the bits with his digits on the wood, and Edward laughed at the end of the exchange.

"Looked like an Addams Family conversation !", he claimed out loud.

It made them laugh too.

"The Addams Family...", Bruce reflexioned then. "It's the movie with the hand moving on its own, right ?"

Ed put a hand on his heart.

"My dear, don't tell me you never watched this delicious piece of dark humour and family feels."

Bruce and Alfred shared a look.

"I kinda get why you must like it.", the young adult only commented, and Ed smiled.

"Furthermore, it's not just because I'm a geek.", he specified. "Everybody knows about that family, even without having watched the movies."

"There are many movies ?", he asked and Ed shook his head at this blatant lack of culture.

"Originals and reboots.", he answered. "Plus a few other projects here and there. But the greatest part of the Addams' popularity are the stories made around the main theme, and how it led to give this nickname to people a bit special who love each other and interact as per a family bond."

He looked at them with a smug grin.

"You guys are actually more of an Addams Family than mine is, living together in a Gothic Manor surrounded by woods and doing trips inside a cave and underground galleries in your free time."

The evening went on.

After dinner they played a few board games. It felt like they were in the previous century, maybe even before that, being here in an ancient mansion, playing old wooden games.

It was very good all the same.

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"I want to see the master bedroom !"

"Why ?"

"What 'why' ? Come on, show me where you live !"
"Don't you think you saw enough already... ?"

"I never have 'enough'. I want to see, pretty please !"

Ed fluttered his eyelashes and, after a sigh, Bruce acknowledged he had no real reason to object. Therefore he guided him back inside the Mansion after they wished Alfred good night.

The bedroom lent to him for the night was only one corridor away from Bruce's, so he saw the door of his room already, but had no time to demand to enter it yet.

"There it is.", he simply introduced.

"You abandoned the theatrical persona in your cave ?", he jeered. "That's too bad, I loved the 'Bruce ex machina' adventurer !"

The older one glared at him, unamused. Then he gestured to invite him passing the doorway, in order to avoid hearing another remark.

"This is not a bedroom.", Ed announced after he stepped inside. "This is an entire hotel !"

Bruce couldn't help but smile.

"The door over there is the bathroom's.", he listed. "The other one leads to a complete office with library."

"Nice."

Then he snooped around the large space, obviously enjoying himself. Bruce hoped the ginger was tired enough now that it was very late in the night, and won't start commenting on everything inside the room.

"You speak Italian ?", he asked at one point, curious, after he picked up a book from the low table in the living-room side of the space.

Bruce smiled. That was something he could talk about, no dark secrets behind this ability of his.

"I do.", he confirmed so, kinda proudly if he was honest. "When I was little, I had to choose a second language I'll study in class. And since I already had latin in my schedule, both civilisation and language, I've always been very interested by Italy's History. So it seemed normal to learn its language. Do you ?"

He shook his head no.

"My latin is more than correct, I can read and translate relatively easily.", he told nonetheless.

He looked back at the book he recognized the origin of on the written parts of the cover.

"Selina is Latina American, so I ended up learning Spanish as I heard her speak it.", he informed him too. "The two languages have a lot in common."

"They do.", Bruce emphasized. "... Harleen was Italian.", he said then, his tone coming out almost shy, as if he thought it could be... bothering, to talk about her. "But her English was perfect, and J never managed to learn anything more than 'Ciao'. Hello.", he translated and Ed smiled.

The accent sounded slightly different than Spanish.
"So we mostly spoke English together.", he went on. "But I improved my Italian with her, and living in the country for months, I became bilingual. It has been the place J and I spent the most time at. We travelled, the two of us, but then in Italy with Harley we... settled in, somehow. It was different. It became... something else."

"And did you..."

"Another day.", he cut, gently but firmly. "I... I will tell you, about J and Harley, about... me. It seems right that you know. But for now... can we go to sleep? I'm very tired."

Ed approved delicately.

"Me too.", he answered, letting the interpretation open if he only referred to the 'very tired' or the 'telling everything' about their lives.

Maybe a bit of both?

"How do you say good night in Italian?"

"Buona notte. I bet Spanish is almost the same?"

"It is. Except they say it plural for some reason: buenas noches."

Then he smirked.

"In Klingon, it's maj ram."

They laughed at this, then Ed reached his bedroom, sent a short good night text message to Selina, after what he fell on the thick mattress. It was the most comfy thing he had ever lied on.

He smiled, burying himself deep inside the warm blankets and the soft pillows that smelled a light lavender scent. It was so comfortable, he fell asleep in only a few minutes.

___________________

"Are you hu... doing anything tomorrow?"

Eddie grinned at the question. Even asked in an innocent manner, the fact he asked in the first place was already... something.

He loved it.

"You realize I am well aware of the fact tomorrow is Valentine's Day, right?", he clarified, not willing to let Bruce imagine he could have forgotten about the calendar and its implications.

That was apparently what the young adult counted on, because he looked very embarrassed after the question.

This was just so funny.

"Don't take it in an... inappropriate way.", the older teen defended faintly. "I simply ask because most people are busy outside this day, and I thought you could... maybe... benefit from enjoying a quiet evening at the manor. We'd work on the game and do... I don't know, a night in. Play a few board games? Watch a movie together?"
"You liked our 'night in' of last week and want to do it again, don't you?", he guessed easily, and Bruce had no other choice but to nod in approbation.

"I liked it very much.", he even admitted with a clear fondness. "It felt... good, to pretend the house was alive again."

It was not the first time Edward came to the mansion, far from it now, but that time he spent the night had been... different. Years passed since Bruce last had an evening like this one in his property. Alfred was so happy, it had been delightful. And it made him realize how much he missed having a good time with his butler, being just here, enjoying each other's company and sharing a piece of domestic life together.

He missed it, way more than he thought he would.

And he loved the way it went in Edward's company. It had been... refreshing, to include him in what used to be a family life atmosphere.

It helped make him feel alive.

"I enjoyed it too.", Ed promised, his voice brimming with affection. "And I will definitely come back to your house to squat."

They shared a smile at this, before he dithered:

"But I'm afraid I can't for... this occasion. I already have a schedule planned for tomorrow night."

Bruce frowned immediately, as a traitor feeling of betrayal materialized inside him at this insinuation. What was that supposed to mean, Edward being busy during Valentine's Day?!

"I didn't realize you were...", he started, his tone cold all of a sudden, but was cut off by Ed's laughter.

"You can stop thinking what you're thinking of right now!", he laughed. "I am not dating. If I was, I would have let you know."

"Why?"

Edward arched an eyebrow at the prompt reply, spit out almost aggressively.

"What do you mean 'why'?", he retorted. "You're my friend, I would have told you if I got into a relationship at some point. So no, nothing new about that area on my end."

Bruce denied he felt so very reassured and pleased nothing changed in Edward's love life.

"So why are you busy tomorrow?", he relaunched.

"Because my friends are.", the ginger answered truthfully. "They celebrate Valentine's Day... as one could expect."

"Is Selina dating?", he asked before he thought of it.

Then blushed when the words formed in open air.

"Not that I want to know! Or need to!", he hastily precised. "Just that... I mean... because you said..."
"It's okay, Bruce.", he assured calmly. "Of course you can ask."

He smiled.

"But no, she is not. However she... knows how to take advantage of a night starring many bachelors out to drink in the general 'love' ambiance coming with the 14th of February. She is one of these persons who has for objective to do some interesting meetings in the bars outside and enjoy a night in good company with someone met in the field. When I say 'good company', I mean making out.", he detailed with a smug expression, and Bruce's cheeks turned a bright shade of red.

"Thanks for the clarification...", he muttered, not sure if he was more upset or embarrassed by the nature of their exchange.

That Eddie kept on smirking, perfectly aware of his unease, didn't help.

They currently were in a quiet part of the campus' library, Edward's computer opened on the table in front of them. They seriously worked for a bit over two hours, and were now more at the 'friendly socializing outside work' part of their daily interactions.

"I have other friends too.", Ed told him later.

"The other house where you live ?", Bruce immediately asked, and he approved.

"I suppose you have a few speculations about that already."

"I have. I have quite a lot, actually. But I... would love to hear more from you."

"Sounds fair.", the younger one agreed gently.

What bad could it be that Bruce knew ? And beyond that, he also wanted to let him know.

This was a both weird and lovely feeling.

"They're adults.", he started. "Crystal and Arthur Brown, they're a married couple. We paid them tomorrow night out."

It felt so natural to tell him that way. So... normal. Perhaps the Valentine's Day relaxed ambiance helped ?

"Selina and I made them the surprise. We reserved a table in a nice restaurant and an hotel room in a fancy place. With the all deal, massage, jacuzzi... stuff like that to do in couple."

"That's a nice gift."

"Selina chose the place and everything else. My take on a romantic date was a night at the Gotham Astronomical Observatory to watch the stars and display my unlimited knowledge on astronomy."

Bruce chuckled.

"Unlimited, hu ?"

"The only reason I didn't say 'infinite' is because there still are so many unknown data about Space, and the scientific community is only at the beginning of their journey into discoveries to make. But, I know everything we are aware of nowadays.", he boasted. "And I'm not just saying that because of Star Trek, scientifically speaking I'm well aware of every recorded and understood little action and event happening inouterspace that we know about."
"I totally believe that.", he assured, and Ed grinned with pride.

"But it was not a model of romantism in Selina's opinion, so she took the lead of the operation to find something 'more appropriate'." He sighed, and Bruce smiled. He easily pictured the funny scene of them debating over what could be 'the most romantic'.

"I think your vision of romantism is more than valid.\textquotedbl", he said then.

"Thanks ! Then sure thing you'll find entertaining the Doctor Who convention taking place next holidays in Gotham ! It's a fine way to enjoy a cute date or a sympathetic experience to share between friends."

"... I should have known what I got myself into."

They laughed.

"It was a good occasion. The hotel thing.\textquotedbl, Edward took back afterwhat. "You see, they are currently... getting back together.\textquotedbl", he informed him, after having obviously wondered if he should tell, but looking willing to talk in the end.

"Were they divorced ?", Bruce questioned, decided to gather as many elements as he could during the time Edward opened up.

He shook his head no.

"And they were not actually at war either, or separated.\textquotedbl", he completed. "But let's say they used to be much closer. They used to be in love, but then a few... events changed in their lives, and it has been a bit hard for them to face everything together as a team."

"What were these... events ?", he tempted.

Edward bit his lip.

Arthur and Crystal, fine. But...

"I could show you.\textquotedbl, he realized after a bit of time.

As if he was suddenly struck by something, he looked back to him, a strange mix of joy, excitement and a tiny bit of fear visible on his features.

"I could simply... show you...", he repeated, whispering it as if he was afraid to speak too loudly.

Bruce took the time to organize his thoughts, getting this was a very important part for Edward and that whatever he was going to say needed to be both normal, friendly, inviting and perhaps reassuring.

"Who else is... your friend ?", he asked so. "Does it have to do with..."

"I used to think I hated them.\textquotedbl, Ed interrupted, a lump in his throat. "Arthur and Crystal. I found them loud, and... uninteresting, when we met."

So he preferred to evoke his meeting with his friends rather than extend on who they were. It was completely fine from Bruce's point, and probably a good start once he thought of it. So he played along, manifesting interest:
"When was that ?"

"About four years ago. I was looking for a job to pay my schooling, and I managed to get hired in a computer store. I liked it very much, furthermore it was the only thing I found letting an eleven years old work and still pay him the same salary as an adult worker. I met Arthur there."

"He was the owner of the shop ?"

"No, he... was a trainee."

He paused.

"He told me so, he always had a hard time keeping a job. He has never been very lucky with employers, and he left school when he was kinda young, so he can't work in anything involving showing a grade, high or not."

It sounded quite ordinary said like that. Some very... mundane informations.

Yet Bruce's interest was only growing as Edward went on with his little tale. He was eager to discover more about this part of his life he only caught a few glimpses of so far.

"And Crystal ?", he asked consequently, trying to sound collected instead of dying to learn more.

He managed to keep it casual, so the objective has been reached for now.

"On her side it's fine.", Ed answered in a lighter tone. "She is a nurse, she works at Gotham General. I properly met her a long time after Arthur. He told me a bit about his life and stuff, but we were not actually... friends, or even less close, so we didn't rush about meeting everybody. Quite a period of time passed before we effectively... bonded or something like that. A little. But even after Ste..."

He bit his lower lip again, the gesture more violent than earlier, and Bruce had no doubt he remained very hesitant about telling him the whole truth.

He didn't force him or asked another question, fearing it would ruin the fragile truce. While inside he hoped Edward will set up for going on with his story, rather than stopping it here and letting him expecting.

"What have you already understood ?", the redhead required, now looking at him as to dare him to answer or to take up the challenge.

"That there is a baby involved."

Wow, from the way he annunciated that, it sounded cold, clinical even, and about the contrary of someone who cares.

Bruce refrained a sigh. Why couldn't he behave in accordance with the situation ? Or at least politely if adequately was too difficult ? Why was it always so hard for him to seem... normal...

A too long moment passed in an awkward silence, and Bruce began to fear Edward will stand up at one moment and just leave the place without another word.

But instead he ended up asking, at a loss and his tone weak :

"How did you figure that out... ?"

"... I heard it cry over the phone a few weeks ago.", he admitted. "And after this I... made the links
over the days, from what I caught about your interactions with people in your life. And now that you just told me your friends are a married couple ? It's even more... logical."

Ed remained as quiet as a carp after his deductions.

It was out of character for him to stay still and quiet like that, Bruce began to worry. So he desperately activated the -quite thin- 'social skills' area in his brain. What was he supposed to do, or to say, or more important to avoid to say because it could be taken poorly in the situation... ?

"They were... not able to take care of her after her birth, not like they should have anyway.", Edward took back after another too extend blank, his eyes looking at nothing in particular.

Bruce experienced this state of in-between almost daily, so he didn't say anything, just hoped he'll pursue. That's what he did.

"I took the role they were not able to play."

A sparkle of determination and... devotion perhaps? suddenly shined in his eyes.

"The role of mother and father looking after their newborn."

Bruce took a bit of time to analyse the information. It was obvious this was truly how Edward felt, and certainly what happened too. But he had no idea how to react to that.

No clue about what to... say, both to be in osmosis with his friend's feelings and to... simply make a comment.

"And how..."

No, he had no idea how to express himself in reaction to this. That he suspected a strong bond between the ginger and this baby he deduced the existence of a few weeks ago didn't mean he had any idea of how to react to the confirmation of this reality.

"But they are your friends now.", he rather chose to point out.

Talking about the adults seemed an easier solution, so he went on :

"Something made you change your mind about them."

"Indeed, things got better.", Ed confirmed, now back to the present and apparently not noticing the other boy's momentary deep confusion.

It was better that way.

"It took them a bit of time, but they made progresses.", he developed. "Arthur mostly, he... really tried, and by now no one could guess he has been absent during the nine months of pregnancy and never there at the beginning of his daughter's life."

"He was absent ?"

"Not technically.", he clarified. "But let's say he didn't... act as one could expect from a husband living with his pregnant wife."

"And you took that role... ?", he repeated, his voice shaking lightly.

Because even though he said so already, it still seemed... special, to think of Edward being a... sort of
It somehow... didn't *match*. In Bruce's head at least.

"So you did...", he began again. "I don't know, the things an... adult in charge does in similar situation ?"

"I did everything, yes.", he approved quietly.

He wasn't lost or hesitating anymore. On the contrary, he looked so... happy, saying this. It almost *hurt*, to see him like that, though Bruce had no idea why such a sentiment occurred him.

"Reading about the implications of this body transformation, attending birth and parenthood preparation classes... I don't know what your knowledge in this area must be like, but just know that I... participated in everything I could. And I did my best to make everything easier for Crystal, from doing researches to taking care of the house, and assisting her during a few... complications. I even..."

He paused again.

"What did you do ?", Bruce asked immediately, not wanting him to stop his story.

"I don't know why I tell you all of that...", Ed realized.

He now looked confused as Hell, and Bruce felt the strange, and *wrong* impression of 'hurt' increasing inside him.

"Because you trust me ?", he suggested, hoping he sounded more neutral than demanding. "Because I won't... judge.", he pursued.

Edward had repeated this sentence many times to reassure him. So surely using it now could be an... adequate move ?

"I know."

A certain affection gradually replaced his confusion.

"I used to do everything.", he repeated consequently. "Including *paying* for everything, as much as I could, to support. They were dealing with money problems arriving, as ever, at the worst possible moment, so... I took a few jobs, kinda let go of school last year to try winning money, it became more important than classes."

"You left school ?! You ?!"

That sounded *alien*.

"Not completely, no. But my schedule was a *very* busy one, and I had to pick my priorities. This year looks like a tranquil vacation in comparison."

Bruce felt bad upon hearing this. It sounded... out of place. That Edward took care last year of both the house maintenance and the well-being of a pregnant woman he didn't even *like* while he was a *fourteen* years old boy going to *school* was almost... disturbing, as Bruce saw it.

"Why did you do all of this ?", he asked so, failing to get over his confusion related to the odd situation. "Why working so hard for people you... disliked ?"
Ed took the time to think about it.

"I don't know.", he ended up responding.

"What do you mean you 'don't know'?! You can't just not have any opinion on this! You're the one who chose to play that role, of course you'd know why you involved yourself like that!"

The young genius sighed.

"What I mean, is that I have no actual, valid answer to offer you.", he concluded rather than thinking about it further. "I had no heartfelt sympathy for them, and I still had a hard time considering them friends after their daughter's birth at first. Yet they always behave as friends with me. Arthur has always been fond of me, and Crystal certainly became over the months I helped her during her pregnancy. She already helped before.", he added too. "Taking care of some... difficulties."

"What kind of difficulties?"

"Injuries mostly.", he responded quietly. "She patched me up a few times, and we kinda bonded over that. Yet... I didn't consider neither her nor Arthur as friends."

Bruce didn't ask about the mentioned 'injuries'. He wanted Edward to keep going, not to get vexed and shut up, and he felt like the subject would be too slippery.

Then Ed concluded, his tone a bit hesitant:

"When I look back at this... not that long ago period of time now, I wonder why I ever felt that way.", he murmured. "I had way more... issues, about trusting people, so I guess it's part of the reason; but I don't have a complete, satisfying analysis about all this. I met Arthur before Selina.", he added. "It contributes to the explanation: I never had a friend before, and Art and Crystal are not... like us. They are normal, average persons. This must be why I didn't see them as closer, as friends, while they have always been very nice with me. Probably a lot more than I've been."

He looked away a few seconds.

"You had more than one occasion to see how I behave.", he went on next. "I don't respond well to adults, plus I always have to play either insufferable or boastful. Or both. It took more time with the two of them because they are different, because it was before Selina and when she heard about them, then met them, she disliked them too. This only exacerbated my mixed feelings about them. But they are far from being bad persons, and even if they took more time than another couple, they ended up acting like parents. I don't feel these 'mixed feelings' towards them anymore.", he revealed sincerely. "They are friends now."

"Fine, but why did they keep the baby if they didn't want it?"

Then he realized what he just asked, and cursed himself inside.

"This question was terrible, both in phrasing and implications.", he vainly apologized, expecting Ed to get mad. "Don't... just don't answer it, okay?", he pled. "And please don't take offence about it."

"It's okay.", he assured him, and Bruce sighed of relief. "It's actually a... valid question, since Arthur and her indeed asked themselves what to do when I found out she was pregnant."

Bruce blinked again, more forcefully.

Did he really hear that?...
"When you found out?", he repeated, baffled. "What the Hell 'you' found out she was pregnant?!

Edward laughed.

"You look cute when you feel lost.", he jeered.

Then he listed calmly, while the flush on Bruce's cheeks increased:

"Ascending hunger, changing in tastes, mood swings, a few physical weaknesses that weren't there before... These signs start to manifest very early in a pregnancy. Although for these as for the rest, it also depends on the person. Not all women present the usual indicators at the same time of their gestation, and it's more of less pronounced depending on the cases. But Crystal was the 'early' type, so my speculations about her condition appeared rather soon after the baby’s conception. I shared them when I was positively sure of it, and one test later we ascertained the 'positive'."

Bruce was aware of the fact his face must look like a rotten tomato. Although he also knew he shouldn't be so bewildered.

The feeling was a strange one. And not the 'pleasant' kind of strange.

"You look awfully embarrassed.", Ed commented. "This is truly funny to see."

"If it amuses you to make fun of me..."

"It does.", he smirked. "You shouldn't feel unease about these kind of subjects, though.", he added patiently. "Pregnancy is not a taboo."

"I never said it was!", he quickly defended. "But..."

He frowned a bit, trying to figure out how to formulate his thoughts.

"You were fourteen when she got pregnant.", he elected to say. "Isn't that..."

He shifted uncomfortably, not knowing how to voice the words without sounding like a macho or a weirdo.

"... a bit young to know about 'these kind of subjects' precisely?", he ended his question, hoping it won't be badly taken.

Luckily Edward just smiled.

"I'm in advance on my age about everything, do I really have to remind that?"

"No, but..."

"I know.", he acknowledged gently. "It's not the same. And I... didn't know much about that before.", he completed. "Only about the reactions and how to deduce the condition, mostly because I saw it in TV shows. You know, that scene when someone deduces a female character is pregnant because of some of her habits. For the rest, I learned all I could at the moment."

"... Ah."

"That was an expressive and constructive remark.", he scoffed.

Bruce rolled his eyes.
At least hearing Eddie's soft laughter helped him relax.

"I just never thought you'd be... that kind of person.", he admitted after a moment.

"The kind to have friends?", Edward asked, frowning a little. "You knew I have social contacts already, why..."

"No, not 'friends'. What I didn't think was you could be... the kind to have a child.", he ended cautiously. "Because that's what this baby is to you, right?"

He guessed it from the moment he heard the cries over the phone weeks ago, and even though he had no occasion to confirm his theory until now, he was certain of it.

"Indeed.", Ed answered tenderly. "But I..."

He bit his lip again.

"She is my baby but not my daughter.", he clarified. "I like to think our relationship will be more of a siblings one when she'll grow up, and that her bond with her parents will be a strong, solid one."

He looked mildly unsure.

"I want to matter to her, but I don't... want to interfere between her and her mother and father.", he revealed. "Does that make sense? I am not sure my words come out clear."

"It makes sense, even to me. That you want to be more of an older brother than a parent to a baby whose birthers are your friends. It's certainly the best way to react."

"Then we understood each other on that!", he declared happily, pleased to see Bruce's encouraging expression.

Then he tilted his head to the side.

"I wonder why I felt so nervous about letting you know about her, while it feels so... normal in the end, to talk about all of this."

"It's a matter of trust, I suppose.", the older teen analysed simply, and Edward nodded.

"I have no other secret.", he said.

Bruce was convinced he could find more, but didn't object.

"Or no other important ones, at least.", he conceded as if he heard his friend's doubts. "The rest just concerns... far less interesting elements. Stephanie is the most important."

"Your most important secret?"

"The most important thing in my life.", he corrected delicately, and Bruce felt a warmth slowly replacing the unease inside him.

How could he feel embarrassed or... hurt even, while Edward was talking with so much affection about what he held most dear?!

Then Ed winked and said:

"You'll know the feeling when you'll have a child."
The blush didn't loose a second to come back in full force.

"That won't be for me.", he objected. "I won't ever want of a kid."

Edward laughed.

"That's what I used to think myself, and look at me now!", he retorted mischievously. "... I didn't want of a friend, either.", he confessed afterwards.

"How can someone not want of a friend?"

Ed shrugged his shoulders.

"Simply because it belonged to the area of things I had never tired, just like for the baby."

He looked at him, wondering.

"We both had a lonely childhood.", he drew the parallel. "Though not for the same reasons, and I'm not at all trying to compare our experiences.", he justified. "But...

He gave him a small smile.

"Friends were not a known field when we were kids, and I was the type who preferred to pretend it was better that way, that I was an antisocial who doesn't care about anyone and doesn't want any interaction whatsoever with people, so who didn't want friends. It was easier to keep repeating that, rather than to acknowledge how lonely I truly felt. I guess I ended up convincing myself it was fine, and probably that it was 'better that way'. But... Now that I experimented friendship, I realize just how silly and untrue these thoughts were."

Bruce nodded in agreement. He knew the feeling all too well.

"And I know some teens, even children sometimes, project themselves with kids already.", Ed took back. "Even if I find it more weird than anything when it comes from too young girls or boys. Not that it's my call to judge.", he precised, and Bruce smiled.

"But you were the kind who never thought of that either?", he understood, and Ed approved.

"I didn't want any friend, but I even less wanted any children. I never seriously gave it a thought, but let's say that even as a kid I found them uninteresting. I never hated them, not all of them at least, but I definitely found them annoying and not something I'd want to test myself."

"But now... you do."

He smiled broadly.

"I do.", he proudly claimed. "I want to be there to hear Stephanie's first word. I want to hold her after she takes her first steps. I want to show her the world, to answer to her every question, to teach her how to talk, how to write, how to read, how to analyse, how to ask riddles... all these things someone does with their growing child! I want to see her going to the best school I can offer her, I want everything around her to be... perfect. I want her to have everything I never had during childhood, and to be loved and supported in everything she does and all the choices she makes. I want to see her grow. I want to be with her as she does, and to be by her side following her in her every steps."

Bruce realized he held his breath.

"... Sounds like what a parent would say. A very good parent.", he told him softly, and Ed smiled.
"Maybe it does.", he conceded. "But I want to be her friend more than to be her father. Or mother."

He hesitated a bit.

"I don't know how to be a parent.", he confessed, slightly more unsure. "But I think I know how to be a friend. I learned how to behave with mine. With you as well.", he said fondly, and Bruce instantly felt all grateful and lovely inside. "So far though, the way I act with her is more of a parental affection than friendly interaction.", he admitted. "But I suppose it's just normal given her age and our situation. Besides.", he grinned. "Who would stay indifferent in front of the most beautiful and adorable baby girl Earth has ever seen ?"

"... I... don't know ? Hu..."

"Here comes a friendly warning.", he kept on smirking. "I bet you never interacted with a baby and their relatives before, so this is what you must always have in mind for when you'll meet her: Stephanie is beautiful, intelligent, cute, skilful, exceptional, unique... Don't you dare make a comment saying she looks like... I don't know, 'any other baby', otherwise I'm gonna take it very bad."

Bruce gulped at the warning.

"Not my intention !"

Then he thought of it.

"Wait, has someone said this already, for that you fear hearing such nonsense again ?"

"Yes.", he answered after an approbative nod at the 'nonsense' term.

"Who said that ?!"

"... Her mother."

Oh. Bruce began to understand why Ed used to dislike those people...

"But she's getting better.", he sighed. "She struggles, but... she's trying. And I am not a spiteful person. Or not completely.", he told him too. "You can do or say bad things, in a certain measure of course, and then change who you used to be. I'm not going to blame forever someone who wants to... reform."

"Funny... or not really given the subject.", Bruce reflexioned. "But I wouldn't have taken you for the forgiving type."

Edward laughed.

"Not because I don't have faith in humanity means I am not. I agree it may seem contradictory.", he acknowledged. "But I am at the same time quite a pessimistic person who spends all his time complaining, and someone who wants to think there's still good in people's heart."

Then he frowned mildly at what he just enunciated.

"I think it's more complementary than anything, in the end.", he shared his reflexion on it.

"How so ?"

"Simple: I don't believe wrong and right are strict units. I think there can be good in everyone, even
when it's tempting to see a person who has done bad things at one moment as an evil being. It's tempting because it's easy. But you can do... questionable choices in your life. Choices you make because of issues you have, because of events or people pushing you in the wrong path. There are plenty of reasons why someone can become troublesome. Let's be clear, I am not talking about mass murderers and abusers.", he specified, and Bruce nodded sharply in agreement.

"Of course. I got that don't worry."

"But for the rest?", he pursued. "For people who are just... a bit not right or a bit not good? People who would want to change at one moment? I think they deserve to be listened, and to be supported."

Bruce felt so... happy inside upon hearing this. It was as if he talked to someone who understood him. It felt... safe. And that was a wonderful feeling.

"That's what I think too.", he approved in a husky tone of voice. "Everybody should be able to reform."

His fond smile enlarged.

"That's what I count on for myself. In a way.", he even confessed. "I want to have a second chance."

Edward returned his bright smile.

"Then you are talking to the right man, Batguy.", he assured confidently. "I believe in new beginnings."

They shared a peaceful glance.

"I know I don't seem to be that kind of person.", Ed said softly after a short hesitation. "But in truth... I am a sucker for a happy ending."
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

"To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all."
- Oscar Wilde

Chapter Notes

This is no breaking news anymore that Bruce Wayne is a mess... but the question is 'just how much'? 

Bruce turned nineteen the 19th of February.

It was not an age he was pleased to reach. Because coming with his birthday arrived the prospect of his parents' tenth death anniversary.

He was already eighteen when he came back to the country, so he wasn't there for the past celebrations. And he managed to come back for their ten years. Why couldn't it have been another year?! Any other year?! It would have been difficult enough, but this year was a way more important date, he didn't know how to handle it. What he should do, what was expected from him for the occasion.

Ten years. It was at the same time an awfully long and a ridiculously small period of time. And he had no clue about how he should feel and behave towards it all.

Needless to say, he was anything but eager to be at the end of March, and be faced with the date waiting for him there.

Although, even if the question of what to do then indeed appeared in his mind after his nineteenth birthday, it has not been his first and immediate preoccupation.

Because even though he made himself as clear as he could about the subject, Edward decided to do, as ever, as he wanted instead of how he was told.

"I don't want to celebrate."

They were the day before the 19th and he firmly rejected the possibility from the moment Edward started to suggest a birthday party. Yet they were still at this even now while it was the eve of his birthday.

"This is stupid.", Ed judged with amusement. "Everybody wants to celebrate their birthday when they have people to celebrate it with!"

"I strongly disagree with this statement.", he refuted on a blank tone.

"Look at me.", Edward mocked, imitating his intonation in an exaggerated low accent making him
sound like a caveman. "I am Bruce Wayne, I talk like count Dracula, I hate celebrations and I'm full of teenage angst and unsolved post-traumatic stress disorders. Screw the rules, I have money."

"... I never said anything like that. And I don't sound like that."

"I'm convinced you could say something like that one day.", he grinned. "And you sound worse."

"You really have nothing better to do than to make fun of me ?!"

"Right now, not really."

Bruce sighed and he laughed.

"This is serious, Edward.", he took back later. "I don't want to celebrate this birthday."

Eddie frowned upon hearing such earnestness in his voice.

Then he understood. Not that it was hard to figure out, but he didn't have it in mind when he started his little teasing about a birthday party.

"You were nine at the time of the murder.", he recalled so, feeling a bit sorry he insisted like that.

"Turning nineteen means it's the tenth anniversary."

Bruce nodded quietly.

"It's also the first birthday I'll be in Gotham for for years. I was already eighteen when I came back to the country last year."

Ed lowered his gaze, trying to find the best thing to say.

"... How about a little distraction, then ?", he ended up proposing.

"What do you have in mind ?"

"Maybe just do a little going out ?", he developed. "Somewhere you like, or maybe somewhere you'd like to go, and we don't call it a birthday outing but rather an excursion ?"

"... That could work."

He actually considered it.

"That could work... pretty well.", he even conceded.

Then, because he wanted to make things clear:

"But no birthday cake, no present, not a word about the date. Just a sympathetic little trip, not a party of any sort."

"Got it.", Ed laughed again. "What about a candle ?", he teased playfully, only to receive a stern reply of:

"No candle."

He chuckled.

"Okay, we'll keep it simple.", he agreed then.
"That I'll appreciate."

Edward, of course, only half agreed to the deal.

They effectively spent noon and the beginning of the afternoon together, just going out and not making it look like a birthday at all; but in the evening Bruce was greeted by something definitely looking like a birthday party at the Manor, only very cozy and at a family scale.

He started by contesting this affront, but soon realized it was... nice in truth, and a lovely way to live the end of the day. With Alfred and Edward.

He refused anything looking like a celebration, but had a very good time during the evening with them. The presence of a cake baked by Alfred at the end of the dinner was the only distinctive sign of the date, for the rest it was simply enjoyable and everybody was in a good mood.

It was all so very nice.

"She is..."

He felt the lump in his throat, the burn inside his eyes.

But he couldn't let the dreadful feeling take over him. He thought he was prepared enough for this day, he did his best to train himself about how to react.

"Hello, there.", he greeted then, awkward and it seemed forced and anything but natural. "Pretty little thing."

Edward arched an eyebrow, but didn't comment. He expected it to be weird, so it would have been if Bruce started acting in control and all normal that he would have worried.

"Stephanie, say hi to Bruce Wayne. She knows you well already.", he added at his intention, smiling happily. "I told her everything about you."

"... She is five months old. She doesn't understand anything."

Disapproving glare.

"Try again.", he lectured him dryly, and Bruce blushed slightly.

"I meant... She seems to be very... awake?", he tempted, and Edward refrained a sigh of despair.

"I'll go for it.", he resigned himself.

Then he gave him a reassuring glance.

"No need to be stressed, it will go just fine.", he assured calmly, and Bruce tried to relax.

At least a little.

He knew he could do it, he was able to face an afternoon outside in a park to meet a baby. Damn, that sounded just so bizarre, even to him.
The season was a very pleasant one. They were in the middle of March, and it felt like spring was there in advance, because the days were getting warmer and more sunny since the end of February. It was nice.

What didn't change a thing to the fact he found weird as Hell to be hanging out in one of the Gotham gardens with Edward who took his baby for a walk in a stroller. The mere idea gave Bruce the urge to disappear underground.

Meeting Selina Kyle, at the beginning of the month, hadn't been that odd. Quite the contrary even. As planned, she began by asking him what he was worth in a one-on-one fight, and because he bragged about being a skilled fighter, she immediately invited him to prove his merit.

He admitted it, this girl was a way better fighter than he thought, and he even added out loud that he could learn a lot from her. This pleased her very much, and from there things went smoothly between them. He saw her twice after this day, but they hadn't really spent time together again.

But today was different. Very different.

Selina was an adult and he heard a lot about her previously. But reacting to the presence of a baby whom was practically Ed's daughter... Nope, that was not the same. Far from it.

Meeting Edward's big sister, fine. That this sister was a ninja with terrible manners didn't mean he liked it less, the opposite : he easily understood why Ed liked her. She was one of them, he saw it in her energy, it was transparent in the way she behave. She was another freak, so it was not surprising in the end they got along.

But this ?

It was not something he had resources to deal with.

Edward didn't rush anything, instead he waited over a full month to propose they meet. And Bruce agreed immediately, because he won't pass a meeting of Edward's family.

Yet now they were at it, he was far from being at ease.

The ambiance was a peaceful one, Ed was babbling about stuff as usual, as they walked together in the park. Everything seemed normal and sweet. Yet the presence of a stroller he pushed before him, and the fact he talked both to Bruce and to the petite creature whom watched the world curiously was... Hella unusual.

Because he was not just talking, he also showed their surroundings to the baby, whom responded to everything with enthusiastic chirping and 'words' proving of her disproportionate joy over the quite ordinary hike.

It was very cute.

It gave Bruce the strong desire to kill himself, or something alike.

He managed to answer by half words to Ed's light talk, not paying much attention to what he said and watching the wriggling baby. Were all infants this age that joyful and moving all around ? The image he had of a baby was more of an amorphous, sleeping thing whom opened its eyes no more than a few minutes per day. Not a wide awake little ball whom wriggled so much on the cushion of its stroller Edward had to steady her from time to time ; and produced noises as a continuity, answering to the teenager's every words.
Being raised by Edward Nashton must correspond to being *always talking*. Or was this small creature incapable of shutting up because of its own personality? Did babies have personalities, by the way? He couldn't tell.

Yet looking at the, effectively, *very awake* blonde thing interacting from its purple cushion, he was almost certain it understood what happened around. In its way.

They stopped under a tree at one moment, Bruce had no idea when, to sit on the grass. With the clement weather and the bright afternoon sun, it almost looked like they were in summer earlier in the year.

Bruce straightened when Edward scooped the infant from the stroller and put it on the thick green grass before him.

"It-She.", he corrected urgently. "Hu... Does she... walk ?"

He just sat beside them.

"Not yet.", Ed answered. "But she wriggles so much, sometimes she manages to cover a great distance by rolling and crawling on the floor. It's adorable to see, but needs to be watched over, for that she won't hurt herself."

He smiled fondly at the blue-eyed minuscule human, whom kept voicing its high-pitched joyous sounds. Then it suddenly turned to lay on its stomach and moved its legs and arms around on the herbaceous ground as if it tried to swim on the grass. Bruce had to admit, this was sweet.

"I thought babies were inactives...", he said out loud.

He kept a safety distance between him and the grass surfer of the moment, but he felt way more relaxed every passing minute.

"Some of them are.", Ed responded, looking at his girl with an adoration Bruce never saw him express before. "It depends on the temper, they are more or less active and will talk and walk more or less early."

He gently brought back the infant to their position, since for whatever reason, she managed to move a little too away from them. She almost rolled over when he put her back closer, then started giggling, now sitting facing them, while hysterically moving her arms in front of her.

"... She sits ?", Bruce noticed, while trying to determine what must have caused the toddler's sudden increased joy.

"This is relatively new.", Ed explained proudly. "And I am persuaded she is going to walk earlier than the average, given how she moves all the time."

"... Certainly.", he just commented.

Ed kept laughing and talking with both of them, Stephanie manifesting an exaggerated enthusiasm over everything, and Bruce felt strangely out of place. He was not supposed to be there. He felt alien in this perfect picture of the parent and his child enjoying a peaceful afternoon outside.

It was not his life.

It could have been, though. Not like Edward and Stephanie, whose bond was more of a father-daughter relationship, but as a... a...
He didn't want to think about it.

Luckily Stephanie was blonde, even if the sight of her bright blue eyes gave him the urge to cry. He didn't want to think how he would feel if Edward's baby was a dark-haired, blue-eyed boy.

A butterfly flew just in front of them, and Stephanie nearly screamed of happiness, pointing to it with her chubby arm.

Edward laughed fondly, then put her on his knees as she pointed to the orange and yellow butterfly what started to fly away.

"This is a painted lady.", he told her lovingly, hugging her with a wide smile and visible delight. "You recognize it because of the black serration circling its orange and yellow shades, and the little round spots at the bottom of its lower wings."

Stephanie let out a happy giggle as an answer, now looking at the sky with a big smile. Beginning of small white teeth could be seen at some spots in her pink gum, but no actual tooth formed yet.

"Hu... Edward?", he risked, incredulous. "Are you honestly giving her... classes of some sort, about... butterflies?"

Ed laughed again.

"Not just about 'butterflies'.", he opposed fondly. "About everything, from science and computer encoding to politics whenever it makes sense in a situation or for an occasion."

Bruce blinked.

"And... you really think it is... useful?"

Ed smiled softly.

"It is.", he assured. "I also repeat scientific theorems and talk to her in the languages I know. It helps wit and cognitive capacities to develop. It is theorized.", he added seeing the skeptical expression on his friend's face. "A baby who never hears anything else than 'gouzi gouzi' doesn't develop their brain potential at the same speed as one who benefits from higher stimuli. A foetus needs to be talked to for the same reasons.", he told him too. "The more it is included in conversations and addressed to during its intra-uterine life, the more it will have facilities learning once properly ready to get into life."

"... You talk to this baby about physics and every other stuff you know, and you did too when she was inside her mother's womb?"

"Exactly."

He smiled broadly, apparently all proud of himself.

"I want her to choose what she wants to do, study, and what she will prefer, but to have the choice she has to master the most extended subject areas possible."

He smiled at the baby, whom now looked at him from her position nested on his knees.

"I hope you will like science, Steph... So there is no time to loose to convert you to the mania."

"... Okay.", was all Bruce thought of as a remark to this.
He was going to keep to himself his strong doubts about the utility of teaching engineering to a five months old. It was obvious Edward really believed what he explained, so better not start a fight by sharing his reservations. And from the way the little blonde human reacted to everything Edward said, it indeed felt like it understood and was genuinely interested.

It made Bruce feel all... strange. Would have Robin been as reactive to movement and noise if he had reached five months old? Or would he have been like the picture he had of most babies this age, that is to say sleeping all the time and looking either bored or uninterested by the rest of the world?

He was staring at the girl on Edward's lap since quite a time now, not following or registering anything Ed was saying anymore; when a gentle question, accompanied by a small squeeze on his shoulder, brought him back to the present with as much impact as if it had been a strong punch:

"Do you want to hold her?"

"No!"

He jerked away immediately, his breathing laborious and his heartbeat increasing dangerously.

Edward frowned.

"Just... I'm scared I might hurt her.", he said weakly, his voice shaking. "I..."

He closed his eyes a few seconds.

If he thought it was going to be so difficult, he wouldn't have agreed to this meeting. All his self preparation seemed futile and pointless once into the moment, he was just as pathetic and looking as broken as he would have if he skipped the part of psychological training to face today.

"Bruce?"

Edward looked both unsure and surprised. He may expected Bruce to handle the situation in a peculiar way, he thought it would only be because of the awkwardness. Not... this.

What was even this... well, 'this'? What was Bruce... thinking about, that plunged him into such deep, unpredictable confusion?

"It's okay.", he promised, while still trying to figure out what caused him troubles. "I'm not gonna force you to hold her if you don't want to. I simply suggested it because you were staring, I thought you might want to. But it's not a problem. Do not worry."

Bruce nodded shakily, with a jerky movement.

"Can we just... walk?", he asked faintly. "Or talk? Or both? But not... hu... not..."

"Fine by me.", Ed assured nicely, doing his best to comfort him.

Stephanie let out a high-pitched "Jeeniaaa!", and he smiled brightly.

"Steph approves."

"... Sure."

Ed resisted the urge to give him a light slap on the back of his head for showing so much disbelief. The gesture would have been friendly from him, but he was not certain how Bruce would take it, so better not do anything that could backfire on him.
Keep enjoying his afternoon as normally as possible was the best option right now, and one he much preferred.

There was a difference between talking and acting. A step to take between giving a clue about a truth and opening up to turn it into a confession. A bridge to cross between making a quick promise in an hesitant tone of voice and keeping it, being ready to defend it at all cost. A gap between having an unclear idea of something and seeing it for real in front of us.

Steps to take, progresses to make.

This was an established reality, a well-known fact called life.

Drops of blood fell on the floor. They were thin, small, almost invisible. But they were real, they stained with minuscule crimson circles the rich carpet covering this part of the old wooden floor.

Bruce opened his hands, not even wincing when his nails came out of the flesh of his palms they have been digging inside without him even noticing. Or maybe he noticed? Maybe he did so in purpose?

He contemplated the red crevices on the skin of his hands. These were not even injuries. These didn't even... hurt.

He wanted more. He wanted something to hurt himself, to... distract him. Distract him from thinking, from blaming himself over something he wasn't even sure was his fault or what his fault was supposed to be in the situation.

Why was it so difficult? Why was it... out of reach for him, to behave normally, or at least... differently. At least not the way he was acting right now, not how he reacted to handle the situation.

He entered his attached bathroom, and stared at himself on the mirror.

"I hate you.\text{\textquotedblright}, he murmured, and his reflexion's lips moved, voicing the words, accusing him of it.

He had never been good to stay in the present. His timeline life moved between past and dreams, not pleasant ones most of the time, with some small slivers of consciousness here and there called present time.

"Well this is a lie too.\text{\textquotedblright}, an amused voice objected.

He turned around immediately, ready to welcome the owner of this so peculiar intonation.

"Over there, Brucie.\text{\textquotedblright}, the voice corrected, before bursting out laughing of this insane laughter Bruce never understood why he was so fond of.

He turned back to the mirror, and smiled at J who decided this time to appear inside the glass just behind his own reflexion.

Then his smile faded, replaced by a severe expression.

"Where were you ?!\text{\textquotedblright}, he attacked him right away. "It's been a while since I last saw you !"

J only laughed more forcefully, his whole body shaking as his shoulders raised and fell following the
rythm of his laugh.

He looked like someone who just escaped from an asylum.

"This is not funny.", Bruce scolded him, his tone darkening. "I thought you abandonned me, where
WERE YOU ?!"

J stopped his maniac laughter to look back at him. Bruce realized he was out of breath, rage *blinding*
him once again.

And he noted that he just punched the mirror, too.

He blinked, looking at the now deformed reflexion. He just punched Joker in the face, and the spider
web of broken mirror ran across his pale visage and his red mouth. Bruce felt the burn on his fist, but
it was only a *slight* pain, more like a minor inconvenience than something that would hurt.

Yet he saw the tiny red areas on the spot where his fist made contact with the glass, and he knew his
knuckles were bleeding.

"Was that blow really for me ?", Jack interrogated, still under the spider web-like area of the large
mirror. "Or am I taking the blame for someone else ?"

Bruce blinked again.

"You left me...", he said instead of considering the question. "I thought you were supposed to stay
with me, yet it has been *weeks* since I last saw you ! Months even, since we are almost at..."

Joker sighed loudly, then his silhouette disappeared from the inside of he glass.

"J ! Don't you dare... Come back here RIGHT NOW !"

"Calm down, Brucie.", he told him on a softer tone. "I'm still here. I am not going anywhere."

A snow white hand slowly caressed his right fist still rammed into the glass, and he relaxed. J was
there, by his side as he should be, everything was going to be fine. To go... just fine...

"Care to take that hand away so I can see the damages ?", he suggested with an audible hint of
mockery.

"You still haven't answered me.", Bruce retorted without moving a inch. "Why did you leave ?"

J shook his head with a giggle, his long dyed curls flying all over his face like some kind of cascade
pouring green water.

"I never left, Brucie.", he explained, looking back at him with a fond smile.

His voice suddenly sounded more patient than usual. More... mature, too, in a way.

"I only stopped visiting because you found another buddy to join you in the playground.", he went
on, and Bruce froze.

"I don't..."

"What are you gonna do now, deny it ?", he asked, cocking his head to the side with a large smile,
obviously very curious to hear the rest. "Are you seriously going to pretend you didn't forget about
me, now that you have another partner in crime ?"
"... He is not my partner in crime.", he protested, voice and eyes empty as he spoke the words. "He is nothing like you, or me. He is... nice. And smart. And cute. He is a good person. A very good one, way more than I thought he was. And that makes him... different, too different, too... unlike us..."

He looked back at Joker, *his* Joker, the only one.

"He is not you."

The last sentence sounded like a conviction judgment or a final verdict. It seemed to resonate inside his head and in the room, filling the air around them, overloading every particle and atoms of matter.

"Of course he is not.", J said after a moment.

He was talking like that again, with this... soft tone and patience in his attitude. This was not him. This was not... the real him. He never sounded like that before. He was not supposed to talk like that, or to act like that, to be... delicate. To be comforting.

He was not that kind of person, never been. And he was not supposed to *change*.

"Give me that hand, Bruce.", he required, extending both his owns, palms facing the ceiling. "The cuts need to be disinfected."

Bruce eyed his fist, still encased in the mirror. Yes, he supposed he could take a look at the damages... A few minuscule shattered glass pieces stayed attached to his skin when he removed his hand, revealing the point of impact at the center of the web drawing. The main spot was red with blood.

"Do you feel it ?", Joker asked, carefully running a long, angular index over the hurt knuckles.

"No."

He looked at the injuries. They were just small cuts, and only a few transparent splinters of glass needed to be removed from the skin.

It was nothing.

"It may is nothing.", J repeated, following his thoughts and still stroking gently the exposed flesh. "Yet you still must feel it. At least a little."

"Well I don't.", he retorted coldly.

It was not completely a lie. He may feel a little disturbance coming from his hand, it didn't *hurt*. For some reason that made him angry, and he firmly removed his arm from the other man's touch, then glared at him.

"You damn well know I don't FEEL PAIN !!", he screamed, nearly *accusing* Joker of it, and surprising himself with the violence behind his words. "You know it, why do you ASK ?!"

He wanted to punch him again.

To beat him up, to *hurt* him, because that was the only way he could make him *feel*, make him *understand* how much he...

"I know you, Bruce.", he said on a sing-sang voice. "I know you better than you know yourself."

Then his smile enlarged, showing all his teeth and when he pursued, his voice was back at being the
mad, frantic intonation that suited him so perfectly, much better than his previous caring tone:

"I know who you are. I know what you are."

And he laughed.

Laughed and laughed, hysterical and enjoying himself and not thinking, not even for a second, that he was scaring everyone around whenever he did that.

*Everyone can go to Hell.*, he often replied when Bruce made him remark people were staring. *The only person who matters to me is you, and you love me as I am.*

"You won't if I was like the others.", he said once his laughter stopped, hearing the memory as it echoed in Bruce's head. "If I was just another sheep taking care of my ridiculous problems and of my boring, conventional life."

Bruce lowered his gaze.

"He has a family.", he addressed the cement tiles on the floor rather than to J's face. "He has an all... complete... beautiful lovely little family."

He spat the word as if it was something disgusting. Something shameful. How could he be so angry? How could he feel so much... resentment, so much rage?! Why was he so... horrible...?

"You are not asking me if I met them?", he almost dared Joker to answer.

"Bruce, I know you met them.", the clown only laughed as a response. "I am inside your head, remember? I know everything you do, say, think, feel and are."

"... Is that why you stopped coming?"

The words were formulated before he thought of them.

J smiled again, then his black iris gazed into Bruce's blue ones, diving so deep it seemed he was looking at his soul. Or inside his heart perhaps?

"I stopped coming because you stopped making me.", he told him, back with his sing-sang tone. "And you know why you stopped?"

"I don't..."

"Because you found a new way to entertain yourself!", he declared. "Because you found someone else to play with, and you were so, so happy with the way things went you didn't need me anymore!"

He was right, of course. And Bruce knew it. Yet...

"Then why are you here tonight?"

He asked but he didn't want to hear the answer. He didn't want to hear it because he knew the response to that.

"I'm here because of... their happy death day.", Jack listed, faking to be in deep thoughts about it, as if he had to remember the reason of his visit. "And."
He grinned, of this frightening hyena smile of his.

"Because your new buddy with whom everything was so perfect so far, disappointed you."

"He didn't... 'disappoint', he simply..."

Joker shook an index finger in front of him, as to say "no no no, you don't". Then he concluded:

"He was all good and fun to play with until the day he actualized to you the fact he has a Robin."

Bruce tensed.

"A baby.", he corrected sternly. "Not a Robin. Just... a baby."

Then he sighed.

"It would have been easier if her eyes were... other than blue.", he tried as a convincing argument.

J just raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"Really? That's your big excuse? So how are you going to introduce it, hu? Something among the lines of... 'Sorry Eddie-boy, the reason I now can't look at you the same way is because your baby has blue eyes. Not because I'm a mess who sees his traumas everywhere in everything, even in areas not related at all like this one. Nope, there's definitely nothing wrong with me, the problem just comes from your daughter's eyes.' Sure thing, it would convince anybody."

Bruce suddenly felt extremely tired. Of course Joker was right, and the eye color was just a pretext. Of course the problem was more profound, and came from deeper, psychological wounds that never totally healed.

And right now, all it made him feel was... tiredness. He just wanted all of this to be over, once again.

He just wanted...

"I miss you.", he told him, his voice filled with an impossible to contain emotion. "I miss you dearly, J."

What caused another frantic laughter.

"You know what?", he managed to articulate between two loud laughs.

Then he leaned a bit towards him, his smile so wide it seemed to split the flesh of his cheeks in two, and he said tenderly, almost lovingly:

"I miss me too."

Then he laughed again, this time his body shook so much he had to bend down, then to crawl on the floor as if he hiccuped.

Bruce looked at his shaking frame a moment, before a slight burn from his hand reminded him of the shattered glass newly lodged inside his skin. He sighed again.

It was a lie to say he was numb to pain. He was not. He just... felt it differently. It had always been that way, he was aware his resistance to pain was above the benchmark.

That's because you are the Devil., a voice whispered inside his head. It was not Joker's. Or Alfred's.
Or even Edward's. It was not only 'a' voice, by the way, but instead a mix between two adult intonations, a man and a woman. And what they were saying may have never been voiced out loud in front of him, he saw it in their eyes more than enough times whenever they looked at him or talked to him, whenever they took him to the doctors or the priests to ask for a diagnosis of what was wrong with him and what miraculous treatment or drugs they needed to put him under to make him stop being... different. But don't worry, my son., the hybrid voice took back with an awfully honeyed undertone, and he figured all too well the bright, fake smiles on their faces. You just need to be... fixed.

He tasted copper in his mouth and realized he bit hard the inside of his lower lip.

"Stop hurting yourself, Brucie, will yah?", J required, his smile wide and his eyes locked on the sight of Bruce's mouth painted in red on a small portion, where the teeth marks cut into the smooth flesh.

"Why?", Bruce retorted sharply. "I thought you have never been bothered by a bit of blood.", he spat and J chuckled darkly.

"That I've never been indeed.", he sing-sang, then made a little taunting, sardonic reverence before pushing the provocation: "But seeing blood on you is turning me on; and I don't believe you want of that kind of attention right now."

Bruce shot him a death glare.

"You are a sick fuck, you know that?!

"As a matter of fact, I do."

And it made him laugh again.

Bruce turned away from the sight, feeling the rage burning bright inside him, destroying everything in his consciousness. It was like fire. A giant blaze consuming every little atom of his soul and blinding him, keeping him from thinking, from talking, from seeing, from getting anything of what happened around him.

_________

"Ask him to come with you."

"Get out, J.", he brushed the suggestion off. "You left me for weeks, and now you can't give me a second of peace when I need it?!"

"Oh, someone is in a bad mood again...", he scoffed, and Bruce sighed.

Alfred didn't ask when he saw the bandages on his hand in the evening. Bruce simply told him he "took care of the injury" And that it was "truly nothing", so the butler didn't insist.

It was late in the night, and he was sitting on the floor of his bedroom, in front of a fire he kindled in his fireplace, his back against the foot of an upholstered armchair. Scarlet and yellow arabesques were drawn on the velvet of the chair, in the one J was curled up, his fingers softly brushing in Bruce's hair.

He really felt the touch. He closed his eyes, and leaned into its comforting aspect. It was almost a...
maternal type of comfort. And he felt the contact as if it was a real one, just as he heard Joker talk and laugh as if he was really here. As if he was not just a ghost coming from the dark, tormented part of his mind.

"He has nothing to do with that.", Bruce said a long while later, opening his eyes again and letting them getting lost into the dancing flames spreading a very pleasant warmth.

The weather may was a very soft one this March, with higher temperatures than the previous years, the nights remained a bit cold.

"So what ?", J asked lazily, as if he was fighting not to fall asleep in the comfy seat and calming ambiance.

He kept stroking his black hair with affection all the while.

"He proposed to come with you, didn't he ?"

"He did...", he confirmed weakly. "But he thinks it's going to be an... anniversary of some sort. He believes I am going to celebrate as if it was something... sad."

"Why would he expect you to weep ? It was ten years ago, Bruce. No one will tell you are a numb bastard if you don't cry over something that happened more than half your life ago."

"You really think so ?"

He moved a bit, looking up to him from his position on the floor.

"Because I don't think so.", he ended.

Jack just smiled.

"Then weep !", he exclaimed in a dramatic tone of voice. "Burst into tears over something you aren't sad about if you think that's what your ginger kiddo waits from you ! Scream in front of the grave and say something stupid like 'mommy, daddy, I miss you so much and you were the greatest parents ever and the best people in the whole world!' Is that what you truly wanna do ? Act like a fool because that's what everybody always asked you to say while you never thought a word of it ? You think mister Ginger Genius won't figure out you are faking ?"

Bruce stayed quiet.

He had no need to lie or to deny anything to J. After all, the boy nested in his armchair was only a projection of his mentally ill conscience, not a real person with whom he needed to keep the mask on.

"I told him I'll go to the grave for the tenth anniversary of their death.", he said, emotionless, after a moment. "He asked if I wanted company going to, or if I wanted to do it alone but could use a little distraction afterwhat, when I come back. He even thought of doing a little... reception of some sort, as if we were actually celebrating something."

"You will indeed be celebrating something.", Jack insisted with a strong pang of mockery. "You will celebrate ten years of lying about Thomas and Martha Wayne and pretending you loved them."

"I loved them !", he immediately countered, jumping to his feet and glaring angrily at him. "Don't you dare say I..."
"It's okay, Brucie, it's okay.", he laughed, raising his hands in the air as an imitation of surrendering. "I never meant to upset you!"

He laughed some more, his black eyes already filled with tears because of his amusement.

Bruce knew he should be more angry at the moment. Yet he... couldn't.

He couldn't because J was the only one who knew the truth. Alfred might know too, but they never... talked about it openly after the accident.

Before the murder however, the butler had always been the one who came inside his bedroom in the evening to wish him good night, only to find him crying himself to sleep because of something his parents told him, something he caught his parents doing, something he overheard or just something he... felt.

"What is wrong with me, Alfred?", a memory of a scene repeated many times over his childhood appeared in front of his eyes without warning.

He was in his bedroom, he was crying, as ever, and as ever a younger version of Alfred just sat beside him, hugged him, told him it was fine and everything was going to be alright.

"There's nothing 'wrong' with you, master Bruce.", he answered softly.

"... Then why do they hate me? Why am I not... enough for them? What do I have to do for that they stop looking at me like I was... a perpetual disappointment..."

"There is nothing need to be done, master Bruce.", he responded so very gently. "And you don't have to pretend to be someone you are not either. Your parents will acknowledge just how great of a person you will become. They will be proud of you, and one day they will tell you. They will realize just how wrong they are about you."

"How can you know that?", the little boy whimpered helplessly. "They hate me..."

"No they don't."

He tenderly wiped the tears on his young master's cheeks.

"And as for how do I know, it's simple. One day, Mr and Mrs Wayne will be proud of you. Just as I am proud of you. I believe in you, master Bruce. Always have. And always will. So trust me, your parents will feel the same way too."

The child hugged him tightly, as almost every other night, after his butler found the words to comfort him.

Too bad his parents died before they ever actualized Alfred's predictions.
"Children begin by loving their parents; after a time they judge them; rarely, if ever, do they forgive them."
- Oscar Wilde

Chapter Notes

Warning in this chapter for strong syndrome of survivor guilt, self-harm and suicidal undertones.

"It's been a while since you last came here."

Edward tensed. It was Tuesday, he came by his father's house at the usual hour, the one when his dad wasn't there. Except that apparently today he changed something in his habits, because the door opened while Eddie was still in the living-room.

"This is incorrect.", he dryly retorted, trying not to feel too angry already. "I stop by every week, once or twice, to respect my part of our agreement."

The man looked like he was about to object, or to probably start yelling, as ever. But instead of this, he only gave a nod with his fat head, after what seemed to be an eternity.

"Yeah, I know.", he eventually answered.

Edward wondered if everybody else who heard him speak found his voice so unpleasant, greasy, and... awful; or if it was just him.

"There's food in the kitchen.", the guy pursued.

If he had been with anyone else, Ed would have rolled his eyes and make a sarcastic remark about the impressive observation skills required to arrive at this conclusion.

But he didn't. He still feared the reactions from his father if he provoked him. And he felt pathetic for being so afraid of such a moron. He hated the feeling.

"As I said.", he took back, forcing himself to sound neutral and hoping the conversation won't last. "I keep my part : I fill your stocks of food and alcohol, in exchange of what you sign when I need an autorisation or something of that kind for school or work. And I don't bother you in your house anymore."

"Yeah, yeah I know that."

The man was still blocking the access to the front door, so until he moved Edward was trapped with him inside the small, dirty house. And he failed to understand what his father wanted right now. He
was not drunk and he didn't seem too upset, so maybe Ed could leave without a punch if he behave well.

God, he hated how submissive and weak that thought sounded.

He bit his lip.

"Where do you live ?"

Ed raised both his eyebrows, stumped by the question. How unexpected...

"Since when that matters to you ?!", he retorted coldly without thinking about what he said.

Too late, the words escaped his mouth, and if his father took it as an affront, he won't escape a beating.

He cursed himself mentally. Why couldn't he just shut up ?!

But his dad only looked at him with a deep frown, as if he strongly tried to remember something but didn't manage to. Edward refrained himself from saying anything else, knowing it could only aggravate the situation.

" 'Been a while since I last saw you.", his father repeated after a tensed silence. "It became... bizarre, not to have you around anymore."

Okay... what was he supposed to answer to that ?

"Our agreement started more than a year ago.", he only reminded, keeping his voice steady. "It's not exactly new."

"It was not the same. I was glad not to have to deal with you daily anymore, but you came back a bit more often. While now..."

"... I would have talked to you for the end of the school year.", Edward ended flatly. "Since I need my legual gardian to sign to allow me pass the final exams, and a guarantee from him to fulfill my registration for next year."

It was in moments like that he was impatient to turn eighteen. Not to depend of his dad anymore and needing his approval for everything.

The day of his birthday, he will finally cut every relation with him. He won't ever come back to him after that. He would have stopped a while ago if he could, so he sure as Hell won't spend one minute of surplus with this man he hated more than anyone when he won't need him anymore.

"It's still not the same.", his father opposed, the frown on his forehead deepening. "I used to see you more, even if you stopped living in my house. But now you only... bring food somewhere during the week when I am not here, and disappear completely the rest of the time."

Once again, what should he do with that ?!

"What, you want me to... catch up the lost time or something ?", he concluded, the sarcasm quite audible in his tone despite how dangerous making fun of his father was. "Well... happy new year, then.", he went on, anger rising in his organism. "We are maybe at the end of March but you're right, last time I saw you was the beginning of December. Do I have to add anything else, or can I go now ?!"
His father stared at him, and Edward honestly expected the blow. He was already bracing himself for it and for what will follow as much as he could.

So he was very surprised by the reaction:

"Have you been adopted by someone?"

A short moment, he felt at a loss, not getting either what his father wanted to hear, what he tried to insinuate, neither what he should answer to that.

Then he decided playing it simple stayed his best option, so he responded with a neutral intonation, matter-of-factly:

"If I had been legally adopted, I won't keep coming back here. The only reason I still come back to you is because as long as I am a minor, I need my legal guardian to provide an address and signatures for college and the jobs. If I had a new one, I won't need your... contribution, for anything anymore."

The man apparently needed a bit of time to proceed the information, as if he tried to decipher if Edward provoked him and should be punished for it or if his son had just been informative. Ed saw this look on his face so often, he felt like it was the only thing he'll ever associate with his father. That, the alcohol scent, and the pain.

Great job, dad. You're the best., he jeered inside.

"And what about not legally?"

His father may sorely lacked of vocabulary, it was not difficult to figure out what he meant by this question. The only thing that bewildered Edward was the reason why the interrogation has been posed. What was his father trying to obtain now? What was he after?

"I found something.", Ed simply answered.

He tried to keep it casual, but it definitely came out more bitter than intended.

No, not 'bitter'. More like... daring. As if he challenged his birther.

I found a family., Edward thought but didn't deliver out loud.

His father had no right to hear that, no right to know about any of them, to ever be informed of neither their names nor their existence. He didn't deserve to know about his family.

I found a sister, and a daughter., he proudly claimed in his mind. I have friends who love me, with whom I live. Other friends with whom I work, and who are almost my intellectual match. And I have Bruce, who's... something else, and I enjoy the way things are turning in his company.

And you, dad? What do you have?!

"Something you will never know anything about because even though I'll explain it to you, you won't understand.", he voiced at the man's intention. "Because you are incapable of feeling that."

The words filled the space between them, and the well-known sparkle of fury appeared in his father's eyes, while the vein on the side of his forehead started to stand out under his growing wrath.

"Go back, then.", he spat, then took a step forward and Edward flinched. "Go back to that... something you found, whatever it is. Get out of here."
Ed didn't wait for it to be repeated, and reached the door. His legs turned into jelly when he passed close to his birther. He waited for a big arm to extend and grab him by the collar to drag him backward. For a strong fist to collide with the side of his face and make him fall on the floor.

He crossed the small distance.

He couldn't breath, couldn't think, his mind was constricted and his heartbeat pulsed too fast; he felt almost nauseous and his legs were not even able to carry him without shaking.

But he hadn't been punched.

He turned over, slowly, when he was at the door. He didn't understand. And what he liked even less than being beaten was not understanding something.

"There's nothing to change in the 'agreement'.", his father concluded darkly.

"... Indeed.", Edward responded cautiously.

He hated how weak his voice sounded.

"Since I am the one who set it up, there's nothing to review.", he specified, his tone more steady.

A little provocative even, perhaps. Not strong since his voice remained more shaking than firm, but he now eyed the man with a daring look.

He hated him. Hated this stupid agreement and the laws forbidding him to be legally autonomous on his own for again the incoming two years and a half. Who said one needs to be eighteen to be freed from their parents for good?!

His father turned over, then reached the dirty kitchen. He was already looking for booze.

Edward didn't ask for more, and silently closed the door behind him. He may wasn't sure why it went smooth with his dad today, he was not going to push his luck by staying longer inside the house.

________________

"If you didn't want me here with you, you could simply have said no."

He hoped that sounded in reality less petty and more informative than to his ears.

But no need to worry much, apparently Bruce was completely focused on something else. Not that it was especially surprising.

Edward knew Gotham like the back of his hand, because he logged the entire city's precise and detailed map in a file inside his brain a while ago. But he hadn't visited every part of town yet. He may know where the cemetery was, he had never stepped inside before.

It felt weird. Weird because today the sun was bright, the air was warm and they were in shirts, their jackets abandoned for the first time of the year at this end of March. The weather was a very sunny, pleasant one. It didn't feel like a day to be sad. The graveyard appeared anything but grim, on the contrary it felt like they were doing a peaceful walk outside.

The paradox was... uncomfortable.
Edward couldn't tell how to handle it the best way. And since Bruce was as quiet as... well, a grave, it won't be from him he'll obtain an instruction manual about how to behave in a suitable manner for this situation.

"... So ?", he tried again after a few steps across the place, not meeting more reaction. "Hu... do your family have a vault somewhere or are the graves..."

"Have you already lost someone ?"

At last, something from Bruce. Hurray...

"No.", he answered simply. "No one I care about died or left. The only person I knew, somehow, and who left my life is my mother, but it was her choice and I don't miss her. Just as I won't miss my father the day I will finally be done with him."

He realized after what that evoking his parents may was not the wisest option he could have chosen.

Not here, not now. Not with Bruce who was about to reach his own parents' grave.

"I am not a reference in the area.", he therefore elected to say, and in his tone it came out as an apology. "I'm afraid I can't share experience about loosing parents I loved, given the fact all I wished with mine was to see them disappear, and that as far as I can remember."

He sighed. That was not what he should have said right now either. He shouldn't be talking about his birthers, they had nothing to do here in this cemetery. Nobody invited them to join the conversation, they had no right to stay in it any longer.

"But it doesn't matter.", he concluded so, trying to bring an enthusiasm that won't be seen as inappropriate.

Then he asked in a much softer, caring voice :

"How are you feeling ?"

Bruce blinked rapidly, apparently only half listening to him. What was to be expected, so Edward didn't comment.

Then the young billionaire pointed to an elevated part of the cemetery. His arm was not shaking, he was in his 'robotic' type of mood.

"They have an overhanging spot.", he declared flatly. "I guess that's because even dead they still need to feel superior to everyone around."

Not making a remark about the questionable choice of words seemed to be the best solution.

It was not the first time Bruce referred to his parents showing a slight bitterness after all, so it didn't take Ed off guard to hear the, held back but present, rage in his voice.

Although he won't have guessed the resentment will pop up today. Whatever unfinished business he had with his birthers, it seemed serious enough for that he couldn't shake the feeling away even at their tenth death anniversary. Edward had an inquisitive nature, but today his curiosity over the situation was tainted with a mild... apprehension.

Bruce and his parents were different, they didn't share the same hobbies and their tastes were opposite. That's all he knew so far, but looking at it it didn't seem enough to justify why Bruce had so many issues about his identity and his family, why he tried to cut off every link with them, and
why he didn't like being reminded of his lineage.

What truly happened between them? What part of his issues came from the trauma provoked by the murder; and what part was because of... what may have happened during Bruce's childhood with his parents?! Could they have been...

"We're there.", Bruce introduced, his voice cold as a stone and his face frozen in a blank expression.

A few more steps, and they arrived where the grave stood, in its part of the small hill.

A massive, crafted tombstone, with the golden inscriptions on the black marble giving the names and dates of birth and death, followed by a, quite usual:

\[ \text{Beloved friends, children, and parents.} \]

Strangely enough, Edward expected something more... striking, coming from the Wayne couple.

Below this part of the epitaph, a quote was written in a very elegant calligraphy, with these same gold letters standing out on the marble:

\[
\text{Even as the Sun goes Down,} \\
\text{To end the Light of Day;} \\
\text{It's rising on a new Horizon,} \\
\text{Somewhere far Away.}'
\]

"I never liked the quote."

These were the first words spoken in front of the grave, after an uncomfortable silence lasted for too long. And Bruce was the one who broke it. His statue-like expression was still on, but his low tone seemed slightly more... alive, than it had been since they stepped inside the graveyard.

"Why?", Edward relaunched. "It's a pretty one."

"... I don't like the grave.", he attempted so. "It doesn't... match."

"With what?"

"With them.", he whispered. "The spot on the hill? Check, that sounds like them. Expensive back marble and gold for the writings? We're all good so far. But the rest?"

He shook his head, as if the gesture could help him getting rid of the sight of this grave he found so inappropriate.

"It should have been different.", he pursued. "They should have had... something else written. A different epitaph. Something..."

"... with more peps?", Edward proposed, and he nodded vigorously.

"Precisely."

He shook his head again.

"That would have been more adequate, and way better for the all 'they died like they lived' deal.", he
said, and it was impossible to decipher what he thought of both himself and his birthright at all. "This grave is not how they lived.", he ended, and this time a dark undertone showed up.

"... It's a grave.", Ed heard himself stammering. "It is not supposed to be... the picture of life."

Bruce considered it, then ended up approving.

"You have a point.", he conceded. "... Have you ever thought of that ?", he asked later. "Of what your... afterlife residence will look like ?"

"Never.", he responded sincerely.

He knew he had to be delicate, the subject was a sensitive one after all, but playing honest still appeared to be a good choice.

"I thought about death when I was younger.", he went on. "A few times, when I..."

He just decided to be honest, didn't he ? Well time to prove it.

"... when I crawled to the bathroom, bleeding and hurt after a beating more severe than the others. Although I never thought I'd die because of that. It... hurt, but none of the injuries has ever been fatal, so my life never was in danger."

He was not even resentful as he told this. He was over it now, wasn't he ? Meaning he could talk about it openly. In theory at least.

"So I never thought I could die.", he ended, keeping his attitude nonchalant. "But I already wondered... what would happen if ? What would be the after, when someone would find my dead body ? Will my father go to jail ? I won't have a grave, he'd never pay for that. So... what would the authorities do with the corpse after the autopsy ? Burn it, more likely. And what would they do with the ashes ? Keep them in a box somewhere ? Throw them in the garbage ?"

"... How could you imagine something like that ?", Bruce asked, mildly worried as it seemed.

Eddie shrugged, indifferent.

"No one would have reclaimed what was left.", he explained, not minding it much. "And I honestly preferred this solution. If for some mysterious reason my parents decided to buy a funeral urn and keep it, that would mean even dead I would... stay in their house ? Still in the same room as the old man when he passes out on the floor drunk or when he has one of his anger episodes ? Really, I much preferred the option of ending up in a trash container but at least away from him, who would be my murderer then, rather than be collected in a bottle next to his alcohol in the kitchen ! Yerk, that would be horrible."

He shivered. He did consider all of that a few times years ago. And once he looked back at it from the present, it seemed positively disgusting and woefully wrong to think these thoughts will forever be associated with events in his childhood.

It was in moments like that he was glad to be done with this part of his life for good.

"... That's harsh.", Bruce commented after a short reflexion, visibly not knowing what else to offer.

He seemed quite sorry too, even if none of this actually concerned him.

"Not that much.", Edward shrugged again. "I mean... if I have died, I would think this is a shame
because that would have mean I've been wasted, and gone before I get the chance to become somebody. That would be the harsh part. But what would happen to my corpse afterwards? Not really what matters the most."

"True.", Bruce nodded.

They looked back at the tall marble stone.

"And what about now?", he asked a while later.

"I don't think about death.", Ed revealed delicately. "As I told you, last time these thoughts occurred me, I was... ten years old. But now? It's not that it's a taboo or anything, it's just that I... don't think about it. I don't believe in God, or... any kind of religions, so I don't feel like I must be 'prepared' or anything for what will come next if there is actually something. If it's the case, then I will meet whatever it is with genuine interest and will gladly explore it. But in the mean time? I have a life, and I am not suicidal. So I won't waste my time thinking about death. I never lost someone I love, either; so it's just normal I don't ask myself the question."

Then he gave his friend a little smile.

"Yes, I guess in the end I am more on the... life side. I want a future. These thoughts themselves are pretty new for me now I think of it, but... they're real. And strong. Kinda welcomed too, I... I really like them."

"You want to be recognised?"

"... Maybe I do.", he admitted. "But most of all, I want to live. I like my life as it is now, so I definitely don't want to loose it, all I want is to... keep going, and I will see where it takes me. The only thing that occupies my mind is how to optimize the way things are, not the 'what if' of if things went sour."

"... That's actually a very wise choice.", the other validated, vaguely impressed as it seemed.

This time Edward laughed softly.

"You think it is?", he asked, malicious. "Maybe I can become a great philosopher..."

"For this just like for the rest, I'm sure you'll be the best."

They shared a smile. Nice, it was Bruce's first smile of the day.

Great job, Eddie., he congratulated himself. Keep it up, you're doing it right.

"Maybe if I have a grave one day, that should be written on my epitaph.", he joked so. "Something like... 'here lies the greatest mind who ever walked on Earth, a gifted genius like you only meet once in ten generations'."

"This doesn't suit you.", Bruce shook his head no. "It's too modest."

They laughed at this, the mood definitely lighted.

"I have nothing to declare except my genius', could be more catchy.", Bruce proposed then.

Ed tilted his head to the side.

"You just made an Oscar Wilde reference and thought it would go unnoticed, didn't you?", he
jeered, what clearly amused his eldest.

"I guess it's impossible to make a reference you won't get...", he resigned himself.

"Indeed, don't count on that. I know everything."

He winked and Bruce smiled.

"I like that one, though.", he conceded. "But I don't think it would suit an epitaph. More like... the title of my future autobiography !", he decided, excited suddenly, and Bruce laughed.

"That would be perfect!", he approved.

"What would be yours, then ?", the ginger teased him back. "'Any fool can make history, but it takes a genius to write it' ?"

He shook his head.

"For an autobiography I would more likely go for 'Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth'."

"So dark.", Ed mocked. "I fear what the epitaph one would be, then."

Bruce's smile faded a bit. Ed was about to tell him he didn't have to answer, when he quoted, his low tone having lost the lightness it won during their little exchange :

"'I don't want to go to Heaven. None of my friends are there'."

Of course it would be that one., was Edward's first thought. Then he sighed, and retorted :

"I think you are wrong about that."

He looked at him, his green eyes determined and a certain seriousness written on his features.

"I think you are wrong about you are, Bruce.", he pursued on a firm tone of voice. "I think you go way too hard on yourself, and that it's a disastrous copying mechanism. Trust me, I know about bad habits. I know how much damages it can provoke."

The older boy didn't answer, just eyed the stone, his expression back at being unreadable.

"I don't have these.", he stated after a moment.

"Don't have what ?"

He took a deep breath, and looked back at the redhead.

"Copying mechanisms.", he repeated. "I have none. It's just... bad habits. They are not linked to finding a way to cope, only to what I do."

"... You may see the two as independents, I highly doubt they are, Bruce. Most of the time, one is induced by the other, would that be conscious or not in the mind of the subject experiencing them."

Bruce glared at him for this response. It clearly was not the support he expected or wanted right now.

Edward refrained another sigh. Maybe doing psychological diagnosis was not the best option for the moment indeed, however that didn't mean he was going to apologize for saying the truth. After all, if
he had just voiced something inaccurate or silly, Bruce won't be mad because of it.

What was the adage, again? Only truth hurts and offends? Something akin to that.

"I should have a grave right there.", he said rather than commenting the analysis, and he pointed to the spot at the left of the tomb. "'Bruce Wayne', with the same death day as them. Followed by something just as flat, 'Beloved son and heir' why not, and concluded by an inadequate quote."

Edward held his breath hearing that.

When he joked about being able to play psychiatrist, he just meant by giving a few analysis or some percentages explaining mental syndromes or diseases; plus talking about the manifestations of traumas and the impact it has on the brain. But he was by no means qualified to offer an appropriate answer to that. How could he react accurately to someone who just admitted it would have been normal for him to die at nine years old and end up six feet underground next to the rest of his family?!

He was not able to handle it.

"... You can't say that, Bruce.", he finally elected to retort, and he heard the shaking in his voice. "You... you just can't think something like that!"

He was more angry than he thought that would make him feel.

He didn't feel sad over what his partner annunciated, and he sure as Hell didn't pity him for voicing such thing. But he was... angry at him. Very angry.

"You have no right to let such thoughts invade your mind! What would..."

"... my parents say?", Bruce completed coldly, looking back at him with a piercing glance. "Well we'll never know, won't we?! Strangely enough, dead people don't talk much."

Edward frowned.

"Your parents?", he repeated, at a loss.

Then he understood, and he looked at him as if he had grown two heads.

"You think I care about... 'what your parents would say' if they heard you?!", he quoted, baffled. "What kind of monster do you think I am?!", he almost screamed then, anger dangerously close to take over. "I don't give a damn about what people told you regarding how you should feel, or how you are expected to behave because of your parents! They're dead, they have nothing to do with you anymore! Please don't tell me you still take your decisions while asking yourself if your parents would judge you for what you do?!"

It was Bruce's turn to be lost, and he blinked.

"But you said...", he tried, not getting why it evolved that way. "You said I can't.!", he reminded. "As if I..."

"I was talking to you!", Ed vehemently exclaimed. "To you because it's not healthy, because it's horrible and it scares the Hell out of me! Because I can't get why, even ten years later, you are able to think and voice a survivor syndrome! You... you honestly still believe you should have died with them?! What prevented you to move on from the guilt of surviving your parents' death?! Is that because coming back to Gotham made the thoughts come back in full force too? If it's that then why
not, it can be understandable. But if you... My God, if you still think such things every day in your
life, what would..."

He couldn't even find the right words.

And Bruce seemed now completely lost and even more incapable to interact than the usual. Great...

"What did you do after ?", Ed rather asked, forcing himself to calm down. "You have been followed
by psychiatrists, didn't you ?"

He nodded, with a shaky movement.

"And so ?", he tried to obtain more reaction. "They never told you having that kind of ideas is a
syndrome called 'survivor guilt', it has been theorized and needs to be fought because it's the best
way to have victims of a disaster or a traumatic event ending up killing themselves ?!

It was a good thing no one currently was in this part of the cemetery, otherwise someone would have
either interfered or stop their walk to listen to them shouting about suicide and death.

Bruce blinked some more.

Edward thought he pushed it too far and was going to be asked to leave. Maybe even punched, after
all he would have been asking for it in a way.

But far from being any of that, Bruce's reaction was... different. Unexpected. And kinda disturbing,
too.

He slowly unbuttoned the two buttons on the right sleeve of his dark blue shirt, the ones that held the
sleeve snugged against the skin on his wrist. Then he repeated the movement on his left sleeve. Still
just as absent and with robotic, slow gestures, he rolled up the right sleeve up to his elbow. Then
repeated the same action on his left side.

After what he extended his upper arms in front of him, in the space between them.

Without a word, without a tremor, not even a dim one. No emotion on his face. No expression from
his body language. No life in his eyes: just an empty, dead blue gaze that stared at nothing.

Thinking back of this moment, Edward couldn't tell why he felt not surprised at all. Why he didn't
jerk away, why he didn't let out a shocked scream or an horrified yelp. He couldn't tell why it
appeared so normal, and why seeing these for the first time was just a confirmation, just a step to take
in the process of actualizing what he already knew.

Because he suspected so, didn't he ? He may never properly visualized the existence of these specific
scars, he knew Bruce had some, starting by the needle wounds in the inside of his elbows. These
would necessarily be there. So seeing the dozen, hundred perhaps, of lines marbling his upper arms,
from his wrists to the elbows and their needle marks, was not a surprise.

It was horrific, and wrong, and it made his eyes tearing.

But it was not surprising.

"... And I have the same on the thighs.", Bruce said, absent.

In return, Edward's body acted independently, not asking his brain for control and reacting way
differently than if he was in full command of his faculties.
That was the only explanation for why his fingers suddenly brushed against the rough flesh. The scar material was of a clearer shade on Bruce's skin, standing out in a drawing comparable to multiple interlaced *snakes* running across his arms. Some scars were large and white, old marks that seemed to be printed inside the flesh since forever. Others, more swollen, had this faded pink color of injuries that healed but were not old enough to fossilize on the body like the first category did. But what was worse, *much worse* and the most noticeable, was the third kind of injuries.

Minuscule, almost invisible, small thin cuts.

Not deep enough to leave a significant, permanent mark. Maybe not even deep enough to mark at all, they would more likely fade away and disappear.

But what stood out, what was... dreadful, was the fact they were *red*.

Red and wet, some cuts with already a thin scab covering it, others barely clotted on the skin.

Edward felt sick.

When he looked up to Bruce again, the fingers of his right hand still brushing very softly and with an extreme gentleness the scar tissue on his left arm, his green eyes were filled with tears on the verge of flowing.

"... Why ?", was the only thing he managed to ask.

His chin shook, his eyes were definitely burning now, but he forced himself to ask again.

"Why have you done that... ? And... why are you still doing that to yourself... ?!"

Bruce eyed him with something looking like *confusion* in his, for the rest, stoic gaze.

"Are you... sad ?", he only interrogated.

Edward stared back, not believing the doubtful question.

"Are you asking me that ?!", he retorted. "You just... you just show me you hurt yourself on a daily basis and you cut, yet you need to... ask if it makes me sad ? What..."

He took a step back. Just a small one, but the gesture clearly indicated just how horrified he felt, and Bruce let his scarred arms fall back on his sides.

"What are you thinking, Bruce ?", he required.

His eyes still burnt and he knew he was about to cry, but right now he just... didn't get it. He could simply not understand anything anymore about the man facing him.

"What... who are you ?", he corrected in the phrasing. "I... Every time I feel like I learn more about you, or that I figured you out, or that you trust me with something, all I realize is just how much I don't understand you at all. I can't... visualize the full picture about you. Why... why are you like this ?"

Bruce only buttoned back his sleeves.

"My parents would answer to this question by saying I am an evil creature of some sort what needs to be fixed.", he responded flatly, no emotions showing. "Alfred would tell what I've become is not my fault, and that I would have been different if I grew up in another environment."
"But what do you say?"

A mild uncertainty painted his expression.

"I don't know.", was all he managed to offer as an explanation. "I hate who I am and what I do. And thinking that only makes me hate all of this all the more and blame myself over what I keep inflicting to me."

"What does Alfred think of that?"

"What should he think? He hates what I do too, but he never managed to keep me from doing any of it. From cutting, using drugs, being... a mess."

"You are not a 'mess', Bruce.", he countered, throat tight with emotion. "You just... need a bit of help, that's it."

This caused the young adult to smile darkly. Although he was not amused at all, and he aggressively spat, as if he dared Edward to answer:

"Wanna take me to the doctors too?!"

But not taking up the provocation, Ed on the contrary considered it.

"You think that could do good?", he argued with serious. "Because having a treatment helps. That's what it is made for, and it works in many cases. Having medicine is an advantage more and more people can benefit of. Not only patients who are sick, but also persons dealing with traumas. It's useful. Maybe you can give it a try."

"... I gave it a try.", he confessed, his short anger episode replaced by a much more downed feeling.

For the first time since the beginning of the day, he looked sad.

"My parents always looked for a cure to give me to get rid of my... differences, so I tested quite a lot of these when I was a child. But they never found a 'right' one that would 'annihilate' who I am and allow them to reprogram me."

Edward made an effort not to let the rage rise again at this insinuation.

"A treatment is not, by any means, made to get rid of someone's peculiarities when we are talking about a syndrome and not an illness.", he told him firmly, but doing his best not to sound bitter.

It was not Bruce's fault, after all. He thought such wrong things not because of his personal opinions, but because of what others told him. Because of how he has been raised.

"It just serves to facilitate dealing with your condition. Not to transform you but to help you feel better, in your life and in your rapport to yourself. If a doctor tells you he is going to get rid of your personality by giving you a few pills, then not only is he damn wrong, but he also didn't understand anything about what his job is supposed to be and who his patient is."

Bruce pondered over the information.

"Have you already..."

"I never felt a feeling close to your one.", Ed interrupted before Bruce started to think they had the ground in common. "I made my self-diagnosis about my syndrome, and I have been tested in school when I was very young, many times, by different people. And about my treatment, it's just some very
basic tranquillizers I take to avoid having a panic attack, not something that blocks my abilities. I never looked for anything that would annihilate who I am, I just take a few medicine to help me deal with life without too much complications coming from the anxiety. And I am perfectly fine with that, that's why I believe it could help you too."

Bruce lowered his eyes, only half convinced.

Then he looked back at the grave, and Edward followed his gaze. No doubt, it felt special to talk about these things here, and today. The conversation popped up as almost... out of place. But then again, it may...

Then Edward thought of something else.

"When have you started cutting ?", he asked so, suddenly struck by the possibility of... being right about that too.

"... They were alive when I began.", he gave reason to his speculation, now looking him in the eye. "I wasn't doing it regularly, and it didn't leave scars at the time. But I liked to hurt myself already. I... needed to, is closer to the truth. I never actually 'liked' any of this, I just... felt like I had to. Felt like it was the only way I'll finally feel alive."

"You tried to make yourself feel alive by... cutting ?!"

"That and the rest, yes."

Edward took the time to process all of this. He still was not that surprised, even if he would have thought Bruce's issues came from... something slightly different. Maybe he expected to find an origin that would have been a little less... dark ?

"Is that why they wanted to diagnose you ?"

"No. It's after they started to diagnose me that I began taking some... habits of that sort."

Ed suddenly took note of the hatred he felt at the sight of Thomas and Martha Wayne's grave. What kind of parents give so many insecurities to their child by trying to 'help' him ?!

"Did your parents... did anyone... know ?"

"Of course.", he said, just as detached. "Them and all the people they hired to take care of my education.", he specified. "Telling me about how I should keep the blood name, how it was my responsibility to make sure the lineage stayed alive, in power, richness, reputation but also in flesh and blood. Telling me..."

He shook his head, his features suddenly distorted with a barely held back rage.

"Telling me about superiority, about who are the best people, who deserve to stay on top of the world and who can never reach it."

"... This sounds like brainwashing. How come your parents allowed that ?!"

Bruce smiled.

He actually smiled, and it was one of the scariest things Edward had ever seen.

"Your question was not accurate.", he opposed with this frightening smile still on. "Because not only did they allow, but they were at the origin of it. You honestly think they weren't aware of what
happened during the classes my instructors gave me and the impact it had on my mind?"

"... That's not what I meant.", was all he could reply, both uncomfortable, unsettled and... horrified.

What was he supposed to say? What was anyone supposed to tell Bruce upon learning all that, how was he supposed to react for it to be appropriate?

For a moment, they just stared at the grave, a confused mix of feelings and thoughts storming inside their brains.

"It was the same about love.", Bruce was the one to break the silence once again.

Edward looked back at him.

"How so?", he asked, while having not so much difficulties figuring out the reason of this issue.

Still, maybe it...

"For example, I've been told it was 'not right'.", Bruce confirmed his thoughts, eyeing him with an indecipherable expression. "To be a man who likes other men. Same for a woman who likes other women."

"Your parents used to tell you that...", Edward realized, feeling so bad and almost nauseous inside.

What kind of parents... no, what kind of monsters truly were Thomas and Martha Wayne?!

As he saw it now, there was a huge difference between the Wayne couple and his own parents. Because his father calling him degrading names, including homophobic insults, was one thing. His dad was an abusive alcoholic who never tried to pretend he gave a damn about him or considered him anything else than his personal punching bag. That was a fact, and at least Edward himself never... pretended, either, to feel nothing other than hatred for his old man in return. Their relationship was clear: hatred and disgust. Zero ambiguity.

But Bruce and his parents?! It was an all different deal, and equally violent in a way. Because he hated them, Edward had no doubt about that anymore. He hated them yet under the sole excuse they were dead, along with being famous people too, he never acknowledged how he felt, neither to others nor to himself.

He never felt like he had the right to be clear about his feelings. He has never been allowed to, will it be because of self-command or under peer pressure. No wonder why he always seemed so... confused, about everything.

"I am gay.", Ed confessed quietly after a rather long moment, in response to the broached topic.

He was not certain now was the best time to come out to his friend, but... Bruce induced it himself, in a way. Now it was voiced anyway, so it was not like he could question his choice of timing further or take his words back to expose them later, when they would be in a... lighter ambiance than the one oppressing them both in this graveyard.

Instead he completed, slightly more unsure:

"Does this... is a problem for you then?"

"... No."

Somehow Edward felt relieved. Because Bruce gave him some pretty contradictory clues over the
months about how much of 'a problem' this area was for him. But now he had the reason why, linked to his education. An education he loathed, and from the one he certainly wanted to move on more than anything.

It felt like an appropriate time for making things clear in the end. Even if it was evident Bruce's awkwardness about a few subjects won't vanish from itself that easily.

"... I knew you are gay.", the young adult said after a hesitation, his voice husky as predicted. "You never... actually tried to hide it or to pretend otherwise."

Eddie nodded in approbation. That was good way to put it indeed.

"I have no issues about being me.", he developped, but cautious to keep his voice patient, since he was aware they discussed a... quite peculiar ground for Bruce. "And it touches all the characteristics related to what 'being me' means.", he pursued therefore. "Intelligence, wit, personality, interests, wishes, philosophy, opinions... sexual orientation is one of these 'characteristics'."

Bruce approved with a movement of the head, still dozed, then he asked :

"How did you... find out ?"

While his voice hesitated, there was definitely something... else, in his eyes, when he spoke.

"Why ?", Ed asked back, curious. "You want a guidance for a coming out ?"

Bruce blushed a bit, embarrassed.

"No...", he objected. "I just..."

He looked back at the grave, his expression unreadable.

"They would kill me if they heard I might... maybe... consider I'm..."

He shook his head, his body language now openly bitter, and Edward shut any kind of comments or questions his reactions provoked in his mind. There again, he didn't know what to say or what to... understand, from what was happening, so better not make a mistake he risked to regret later.

"... It's funny.", Bruce took back, the resentment slowly but surely turning into sadness. "Everybody says how great and loveable Thomas and Martha Wayne were, how wonderful and caring people they have always been. But in truth..."

His eyes were watering now, even if he didn't seem to notice. And even though they didn't roll, tears could be heard in his tone when he concluded :

"They were terrible parents.", he revealed weakly, as if he was afraid to say it too loudly.

As if the words hurt, and as if they were forbidden and voicing them was a sacrilege.

"They thought I was... not right.", he whispered, almost fearing to be heard but not managing to hide it anymore, not able to stop talking now that the train of thoughts was in high speed. "They thought they could fix me, could get rid of my syndrome and get over my habits, could... program me, control my personality, teach me how to think and behave to make me their perfect son just as dumb and cruel as them. They tried to correct me for not wanting to be like them, and all they did has been to..."

He suddenly stopped in mid-sentence.
His eyes grew wide as he apparently realized he said all of that out loud.

"Forget about it!", he immediately ordered, his chest going up fastly as his breathing rate increased due to obvious stress.

Then he recoiled, and started to get away from where they were.

"Bruce!"

Edward quickly went after him.

"Wait, don't worry! Don't..."

"Get out of here.", he barged in coldly, looking at him with sharp, merciless eyes. "Leave me alone."

"No way!"

Edward firmly gripped his arm, taking another step so that they were only inches apart.

"You are scared?", he asked again, his tone almost provocant. "Well let me tell you it's okay to be scared right now, and you have no need to..."

"Edward.", he cut off darkly, more cold than ever and despite himself Ed shivered under the ruthless look he gave him. "Let. Go."

"Or what?", was all Ed thought to retort, tightening his grip around his upper arm. "What are you gonna do, hu? You won't get rid of me that easily, Bruce. You just told me your secrets, it's fine if you are afraid, I think I'd be terrified if I was in your shoes!", he even admitted. "But you can trust me with that. That and the rest. I am your friend, and I won't..."

His sentence was interrupted by the blow exploding on the right side of his head.

Hard, violent, what made him see stars. Only when he felt the ground under his hands did he realize he fell on his back under the powerful impact.

And when he looked up at the figure on top of him, he saw him in backlight, the bright afternoon sun blinding him what made Bruce's face look obscure, as if he wore a... cowl. The darkness and wrath that radiated from him at this moment was the scariest he ever looked.

"Forget about that.", he repeated, his low voice austere and intense, frightening. "Don't ever mention what I told you here again."

After what he turned around and disappeared inside the cemetery then out if his view, letting Edward stuck on the spot, still on the ground after the punch he just received, much stronger than what he usually collected from his father. At this moment, he was incapable to think straight and to organize neither his thoughts nor his feelings.

And he most of all had absolutely no idea of what to do now.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

"The truth is rarely pure and never simple."
- Oscar Wilde

"I sincerely hope for you that this is important.", a clinical voice warned him over the phone for sole greeting. "Because I am busy, so you better not be calling just because you're bored and are looking for a distraction."

"I never called you 'for a distraction'.", Edward answered to the reproach, quite amused by the -very predictable- way the doctor reacted to his call. "And I don't remember a moment when I've been 'bored' over the past years.", he completed. "I am more overworked on a regular basis, than in search of an activity."

"Are you done talking about yourself and are you going to get to the point, or can I just cut short this uninteresting exchange?"

"Thanks for reminding me how I am so glad to count you as a friend, dear professor Crane.", he jeered in response to that. "It's always so pleasant to hear you address me in such a sympathetic, caring and supportive manner."

Jonathan huffed audibly, and Eddie grinned. Making fun of Jon was something he always had way too much pleasure practicing, even if for sure he wasn't inventing the fact the doctor was... not very kind with him. But it just came from the way he was : he acted like a creep and a dismissive bastard all the time, so if for some obscure reason he suddenly started to behave like a cinnamon roll around him that would freak Edward out.

Nope, he... sort of liked his interactions with the 'good doctor' the way they were.

"I need to talk to a psychiatrist.", Ed told him quietly, getting 'to the point' as required. "I want... an advise, or something like that to help me understand a situation. And you are the most qualified person I know to give me a hand with that."

There was a brief pause on the other end of the communication.

Jonathan must have been expecting something else, and now took the time to decide if he wanted to get involved or to tell Edward to leave him be and deal with his problems on his own. If he settled for this solution, he will certainly add that he could not, neither did he want to, help him with anything. Edward patiently waited for him to make his mind, hoping Jon won't just cast him aside without even considering asking what it was about. Since he was perfectly capable to do just that without a second thought, Ed wished he was in a good mood today and will feel curious enough to take the time to at least get informed of the nature of his problem.

"... Do you need a psychiatrist's advises for yourself, or to help you deal with someone?", Jonathan interrogated at last, and Ed didn't hold back the victorious smile growing on his lips.

He recognised the beginning of interest behind Jon's steady, cold voice. It meant he was curious
enough to learn more before deciding if he truly wanted to get involved.

It was a fine first step.

"To help me for someone.", he answered truthfully. "But also because I don't know how to behave in that person's company anymore, and I need to... understand who he is to me, I think that would help clear a few things. Between us, but for myself too. So in fact, I'd say it's a bit of both, and you'll be a better help than what I'm trying to deduce on my own."

"... Is it urgent ?"

Yes, Jon was definitely taking the case ! He triumphed internally, but tried not to let it show when he responded :

"Kinda, yes. I mean... it's not a life or death situation, so I can wait if you don't want us to meet today, but I'd like to hear your point. I feel a bit lost, and if someone has an answer to provide me, it's definitely you. So... I'd like to hear what you can analyse from all this."

"... I am currently at my place.", he informed him after a silence, clearly debating inside over if he should invite Edward to come by or not.

Ed didn't rush his decision, and patiently waited for him to propose :

"Do you... do you want to stop by ?"

His smile became luminous, and he answered, joy radiating from his tone :

"I would love to !"

He could easily picture how Jonathan must have shifted uncomfortably in reaction to his obvious delight about being finally invited to go further into his private surroundings than the laboratory they worked at.

"Fine.", Jon concluded, the awkwardness showing up in his voice. "Hu... I'll text you the address. And... well... let me a bit of time to... clean up a little. Hu... I think that's it."

"Thank you, Jon.", he said nicely. "I really appreciate."

Jonathan cut the communication before anything else he won't be able to handle resulted from their exchange.

Inviting someone to his apartment was a huge step to take for him, Ed was aware of it. As far as he knew, only Jervis and Pamela ever entered where he lived, and that was the same for their houses as well. The three of them were the only contacts they had with anyone outside work.

And in a way, even if they definitely grew closer, Edward was also 'part of their work'. They met at the lab, and they talked science plus performed experiments together. So sure thing, they socialized here and there too, and they were a little more than just colleagues. But Ed never met them outside the lab, except for the few times he took Jervis to the Christmas market with him in December. Now Spring was there and even if Pam indeed suggested he could come to her place to see her greenhouse and her garden, in the one all her plants started to apparently be 'beautiful' at this time of the year, she never went further than letting this hover in the air. She never actualized the idea by a proper invitation.

So no, until this day he never went to one of this science bros' residence.
As a result, he felt truly enchanted when Jonathan's message arrived, giving his precise address.

He preferred not to think too much about what happened in the cemetery earlier. He still wasn't sure what to do with that, and he was angry at Bruce for the way their interaction ended. At the moment, he just felt confused, but rapidly after this first state, anger replaced his initial reaction.

Who did mister Wayne think he was to dare raise a hand on him like that?! He had no right to do that, no matter what Edward said or did that could upset him.

He had no right to hit him. Not under any circumstances.

Eddie was at Selina's place when he called Jonathan, that same day not long after, in the afternoon. His sister was out with Stephanie, so he knew he had the place for himself and therefore elected to stop there instead of at the Browns' house. He wanted to be alone for a bit, he took a shower to try getting rid of his feelings towards the frustrating experience, and was about to conclude he should probably join Selina to explain to her what happened, or just to distract himself from his thoughts, when the eventuality of asking Jonathan appeared as a better solution.

Because Lina won't try to analyse, she will just take a cab to Wayne Manor and go fight with Bruce without letting Edward finish his presentation of the events.

And right now, even if he was mad at his coworker, he wanted an advise more than a clash.

And who better than a licensed psychiatrist who knew by heart the topic of traumas and psychotic behaviours to try giving him a valid answer?

The building Jonathan lived in was not far from his place of work. Edward knew the metro and every bus' map precisely, so he didn't even have to check for an itinerary to reach his place. The route was not a long one by the way, it was only a few subway stations away from where he took the public transit from Lina's place, and then by walking he arrived quite rapidly at the block the teacher lived at.

It felt special to be there, but he was so very pleased all the same.

He could allow himself to forget about Bruce being a jerk, given the fact today he took a huge step into discovering more about Jonathan.

After all... he may was not sure what the nature of the bond he shared with the billionaire was, he still felt the little... flush, whenever Jon tried to be nice with him or smiled at him.

Because well... one doesn't forget that easily the first ever crush of his life.

"This is way cleaner and more tidy than I feared.", Edward joked when he stepped inside the flat after Jon opened the door for him.

Jonathan grumbled something for unique answer as he closed the door behind him, and Ed smiled. Then he pointed to the spread papers on the table in his living-room he used as an office, and grinned.
"When you say you are 'busy', in fact you just mean you are correcting pupil essays."

"... I said that because I didn't find a better idea to get rid of you.", Jon denied immediately, and Ed held back a laugh at his frustrated expression.

"Sure, that's totally convincing.", he smirked, and the doctor huffed.

"... The 'clean' aspect is Jervis' fault.", he told him then, looking over. "When he comes by, he cleans up, so..."

He made a circular motion to point at the, indeed, relatively structured items in the living-room.

"Besides, I spend most of the week at his house, lately.", he reinforced. "Meaning I have less occasions to make a mess of this flat since I stay in here for less time than before."

This time Edward laughed.

Could Jon be more opened in his place than he usually was at the lab ? Because if so, he was going to take the opportunity of having access to a more approachable Jonathan Crane.

"Aren't you guys going to live together some time soon ?", he teased him after the professor invited him to sit on the small couch.

The doctor buried himself in his old armchair facing him, and crossed his fingers below his chin.

"We... discussed it a little already.", he admitted carefully. "And we do live a few days per week together, so... it's a possibility."

But it was clear he did not really want to expand for too long on the subject or give more precisions. So he ended:

"However, I don't feel like living every day, all the time with someone. Even if I am truly fond of that 'someone'."

Edward approved quietly.

Poor Jervis, he still had a lot of work to do to turn Crane into an actual caring boyfriend. Although given how Tetch interacted and... behave himself, it was not as if they were two normal human beings seeking for love in the first place.

"What happened to you ?"

Jon pointed to the purple bruise on the side of his head, that swelled slightly the external corner of his right eye.

It was not the first time his colleagues saw him a bit bruised, but they never insisted after he told them he had an argument with his dad, neither did they try to gather more informations or to show any kind of compassion. So the curiosity in Jonathan's blue eyes was... unusual.

"... A little problem.", Ed answered, now quite uncomfortable.

He was the one who called Jon for help, and he was glad to be provided a sort of friendly attention from the doctor. So he shouldn't be uneasy. On the contrary, he must feel pleased to be listened to and asked questions. Then why was he... hesitating ?

"Who did that to you ?", the teacher adjusted his tone of voice and phrasing when he saw Ed's
discomfort. 

This time no caring undertone, no affection of any sort showing neither in his voice nor his expression. Just this... curiosity, close to scientific interest, and those blue eyes trying to dissect him alive to comprehend what happened. Selina was not exaggerating when she said his science bros saw him as a 'lab rat', and sometimes it also felt like he was an... appetizing, sweet candy they wanted to devour.

But Ed didn't shiver, he was usual to the very unsettling way Jon, Pam and Jervis eyed him and talked to him.

"Someone I consider a friend.", he answered so, laying back in the sofa.

It's not like Jon would do anything with the informations, other than maybe give him a few pieces of interesting ideas and clues about how to react. He had no reason to refuse to open up, contrariwise it could even do good and be profitable.

"Who ?"

"I have other friends than Selina.", he responded, amused by the light confusion coming from the scientist. "Not close ones like she is, but... friends nonetheless. And this guy is... quite special. Actually, he is a lot like you.", he added while his expression softened.

Jon arched an eyebrow then pushed up his square glasses on his nose.

"May I ask how so ?", he demanded, openly disapproving over being compared with anyone.

Edward smiled.

"Well he is a tall, spooky man who hates other human beings and prefers to spend time alone with his dark thoughts and his unhealthy life habits. He holds a grudge against his education, both towards the people who raised him and the things they forced him to learn during his childhood; things with the ones he never agreed. I might add he has a weird fetishism. His one is not fear itself but it's closely related, since it's a mix between a cave, a man dressed as a bat who is a mental representation of himself and an alter ego under the shape of a mad, psychotic, murderer clown. He also is the whole package about child abuse, even if it was psychological rather than physical abuse. Plus traumas, angst, identity issues, suicidal thoughts, aggressive demeanor and certainly a few other personality disorders. Doesn't that remind you of someone ?"

Jonathan glared at him.

But then he had to concede, on a resigned voice:

"Indeed, I am familiar with every characteristics you just described. So ?", he went on with his teacher line of conduct. "You were friend with this guy until today when you stepped too deep into his private life and he ended up giving you a blow before letting you down ?"

Ed blinked rapidly.

"Yes, exactly.", he responded, impressed. "How did you..."

"You just said he is like me, didn't you ?", he explained, smiling just a little because feeling proud he managed to pleasantly surprise the redhead. "And given the elements you relayed, it's clear that this person doesn't want anyone to get too close. The only reason I'd have recourse to brute strength against you is if you forced me to talk about my past or my thoughts and I suddenly realized I
revealed *too much*. It's an animal, defensive instinct: give a punch to a physically weaker creature to get it out of the conversation and try to have it consider you a monster rather than anything else it felt for you before. Hurt before you *get hurt* by letting someone in."

Edward felt all... strange inside, hearing that and the resonance it had in Jonathan's personal experience.

"Is this... what you think regarding Jervis and Pamela ?", he asked, suddenly more curious over Jon than willing to learn more about Bruce.

Jonathan considered his options, trying to decipher if he wanted to tell the truth or not. Then, much to Ed's amazement, he answered in all sincerity:

"It was not the same with them. When we met, the three of us already had this... internal shell we wear to protect us from the world, acquired after having been used in so many ways by so many people before. It's not as if I let someone *normal* getting close to me, it was just meeting people who felt just as damaged as I am and trying to be alone together. Although I admit, I won't have bet it would result in a *friendship*, and neither did they. And now with Jervis I..."

He smiled a bit.

"I didn't see the friendship coming when we started meeting for work. And I certainly did not deduce it would evolve into... more than a friend bond, with one of my colleagues."

Edward smiled. The guarded, almost *shy* way he revealed this was so touching, it would warm anyone's heart.

"It's you.", Jonathan pursued quietly at his attention.

"What about me ?", he asked back, not getting it.

"... You impersonate the 'fear of letting someone in' variable."

Ed felt his heartbeat increasing significantly.

"How so ?", he inquired. "I... don't think we are exactly..."

"You are the cute child coming out of nowhere who took interest in us, while we never had this kind of attention from a person like you before.", Jon interrupted sternly.

Ed tried to understand precisely what that meant.

"... 'a person like me'?", he repeated. "What are you trying to say by that? I may be younger than you guys, for the rest I have *a lot* in common with the three of you !", he justified, attempting not to be too vexed by being compared to the average people. "I am smart, I'm an antisocial, I don't have the..."

"Of course you are not ordinary.", Jon cut off more delicately. "That's not what I meant. If you were like anyone, you won't wish to stay around with us. You would do like everybody else, run away after throwing insults at us for being so 'weird'. What I wanted to say is that... you are not one of us. You share a lot of characteristics, you are clever and you are special. That's established. But you are not... a freak. You are a brilliant, beautiful young person. You are the kind none of us had ever been granted a *glance* from all our lives before we met you, and your age just adds to the fact you are... way different from who we are. You are a good child. That you choose to be friends with the monsters under your bed is a questionable choice, but it doesn't change anything to the fact you *still*
are the nice kid on the bed, not the monsters lurking beneath."

Edward blinked.

So... Jonathan just complimented him. Kinda *heavily*, too. He flattered him while treating himself and his friends of 'monsters' and insisting on how *unlike them* Ed was in truth. What... happened? Did he fall into a rabbit hole and arrived in another dimension inside the one Jon was almost *kind* with him and openly praised him?!

"Why... why are you complimenting me?", he asked, because even though he enjoyed being praised, and liked even more having Jonathan praising him, it was... weird as fuck and totally scary.

Jon smiled a bit, apparently expecting the suspicious reaction.

"I am a psychiatrist, and a teacher.", he reminded him. "Meaning I know how to make a subject comfortable when in need, before starting to enter their mind and analyse them."

Okay, Jon was back at being creepy, everything was fine.

Edward relaxed.

"What do you know about Bruce Wayne?", he asked so, getting to the point.

Jon frowned slightly, his gaze studying him closely.

"Is he the one who punched you?"

This is Jonathan Crane., Edward firmly reaffirmed to himself internally. He won't do anything either to defend you or to blame Bruce over what he did. He doesn't care about you enough to react like Selina, Arthur or Crystal. That's why you came to him rather than to one of them, remember?!

He took a breath, then confirmed:

"Yes. We've been... friends, or let's say kinda *close* for the last months. He is a classmate of mine at college, we met there and we've been working together on a group project for engineering class. One thing leading to another, we... bonded."

Jonathan approved silently, and it felt like his eyes *scanned* him.

What was kinda disturbing, but relatively usual, so Edward didn't notice. Or at least he tried not to let this distract him too much.

"I know him.", Jonathan stated shortly afterward. "And I don't say that just because all of Gotham knows the Wayne name. I *met* him some time ago.", he specified, smiling when Edward opened wide, stunned eyes.

"You... met him? When?!

"When he was a child.", Jon answered simply, well aware of his effect. "He was... seven years old the first time, and I was a student in psychology."

"Why did you two meet?!", he asked, already in *need* to learn more. "What happened?!

Jonathan seemed satisfied with the way Ed focused on him and wanted to hear more from him. Loving his storyteller role, he narrated:
"I heard one of my teachers was in contact with his parents, over some pretty odd affair, so I investigated on my own. At some point I obtained an interview with the Wayne couple. Very awful people, while I'm at it."

Apparently this week was placed under the 'confusion time' title, because between his father who showed something like the beginning of remorse three days ago, Bruce who turned out today to be a suicidal, violent boy even more scary than Jon and Jon who knew Bruce when he was a kid, plus acted surprisingly nice with him, all of his benchmarks were upside down.

If the Matrice had been reprogrammed around him, he thought he would have been able to feel it. He should have payed closer attention to the computer bugs in his surroundings...

"You have been one of his psychiatrists ?!", he asked with disbelief.

In the end, it was not impossible, and it even matched with Jonathan doing all his schooling at Gotham, plus being sixteen years older than Bruce. It was not an astounding scenario to picture that Crane and him might have been in contact. But it still was... disturbing, from Edward's point of view, to think the two of them... knew each other in some way, even if it was a long time ago. May Bruce didn't even remember him, or chose to forget about him like he did with many of his education-related memories.

"An interesting case.", Jon approved. "My favorite one if I'm honest, and I remember it like it was yesterday. Deliciously... twisted.", he completed with a -relatively normal from him- creepy smile.

"What are you alluding to ?"

Jon considered it quickly.

"I am not supposed to talk about my patients.", he said then, however it was clear he doubted of his willingness to observe the rule. "I may not be a practicing psychiatrist since I became a teacher for the last years, I followed and treated different persons during my active time. And officially, I can't break the bond of confidentiality between a doctor and his patient."

Edward pouted, very displeased by the prospect of a suspense that would last and an answer to his numerous questions that won't come.

He expected better from the professor, especially after the revelation of him having been Bruce's doctor.

"I won't repeat what you tell me.", he tried to persuade him. "And I am looking for a way to help him. So that won't be betraying anything if you tell me more about him, but rather showing support to a former patient of yours."

"I have no interest about being supportive for a boy I treated during a few months more than ten years ago.", Jon desabused him about the reason of his refusal. "I am talking about a regulation of confidentiality I should observe because of the job I chose, not a personal reason linked to a nonexistent affection for a child who doesn't remember me. I only found him interesting because of his peculiar brain functioning, there was nothing else back then. Consequently, I don't feel like I have any obligation towards him, or that I should try to help him now."

Such a declaration indeed suited nice old doctor Crane. Edward refrained a sigh.

"Please.", he required, his tone coming out more weak than planned. "I want to know. I... need to. And you are the only one who can help. Please Jon... do it for me."
Jonathan seemed at a lost now, teared between rules he didn't believe in and the request formulated by someone he... maybe cared about ? Even if just a little ?

"... I disapproved of the way his parents looked for a *cure* to give him yet refused at the same time to hear the truth about their son's condition.", he finally decided to reveal.

From there, he chose to rapidly continue to answer Edward's demanding attitude. Better let it all out fast, before he changed his mind.

"They wanted a treatment, but they contested the diagnosis and couldn't bring themselves to fully acknowledge their son is schizophrenic.", he went on accordingly. "A treatment, coupled with an appropriate monitoring and psychological follow-up would have been essential to help the boy fix a few things in his mind and habits when growing up, and keep him from turning incapable to behave in society. But the way his parents introduced that fact was the *worst* possible manner.", he pursued, keeping it matter-of-factly and not getting too involved into his storytelling, even if that was a bit difficult both because of the subject and the reactions his words provoked on Edward's face and global body language.

Not that it was breaking news for Ed, but Jon took the time to clarify his opinion on the Wayne couple's attitude and the impact it had on Bruce.

"You probably know that already.", he said so. "You are relatively qualified in psychology after all. So I'll just remind how it can have *disastrous* consequences on a child's psyche to have his parents telling him they are looking for a cure to change him and make him become 'normal'. While if they simply told him a little help could do good and enable him to stop suffering from the voices screaming in his head, I'm sure the boy would have listened to them instead of developing a real hatred for them. I felt it at the time already ; I don't think many people realized, but I had no problem figuring out how his relationship with his parents was going to turn if they didn't change their attitude towards him. Because if they kept it that way, all he would obviously remember from what they told him was that he was a problem child, a sick, wrong little thing what needs to be rearranged." "You mean... that in truth, they never..."

"What, hurt him ?", he asked, his shining gaze as piercing as a bird of prey's. "Of course they never. They were not really smart... and not very open-minded either, so all the kid associated with them were the reproaches. He never voiced any of that out loud, by the way, but I had no difficulties figuring most of it out. He... sort of reminded me of myself at his age.", he even admitted, troubled. "But for the rest ?", he redirected the focus, to distract himself from the visible confusion caused by the parralel between their childhoods. "Thomas and Martha Wayne loved their son. They were looking for a way to help him, to stop him from suffering of his differences and the way his brain reacts to situations and external stimuli. They never tried to hurt him, just to help him. But their way to communicate with him was so inappropriate, all it did has been to deepen the gap between them and increase the difficulties he had interacting with real people."

"What do you mean, with 'real people' ?"

Jonathan quickly considered his options.

"Don't bring back the 'I can't talk about my patients' deal.", Edward jeered, crossing his arms on his chest. "You just opened up about him more than I asked you to, so it would be very strange and not at all credible to pretend now you are going to religiously follow the 'ethic' and won't add another word, pretending your exchanges with Bruce need to stay between you and him."

Jonathan huffed, patronizing.
"My concept of the 'ethic' is not fully the one my colleague psychiatrists observe, that is for sure.", he ended, and Edward smirked.

"So I've noted.", he confirmed. "After all, if you had some sense of moral, maybe you'll test your experiments on actual lab rats instead of me to begin with."

Jonathan looked at him, unimpressed.

"What are you complaining about now, child? You are not my patient, neither are you a student of mine.", he justified with an absolute lack of consideration. "It means I don't have to feel remorse or hesitation about doing things with you I won't do with a patient or a pupil. Furthermore, may I remind you neither me nor Pam and Jervis forced you into doing anything? You have zero obligation towards us, the day you judge we took it too far and you don't want to see us ever again, you're free to leave, we won't chase after you. No one will beg you to stay or even notice you are gone."

Edward bit his lip, anger and sadness rising instantly.

He hated when Jon talked to him like that. Like he was... a trash on the sidewalk. Something inferior, a thing not good enough to deserve even a little attention from him. Crane, Isley, they both addressed to him that way more than once. And even though Tetch has always been the more friendly of their trio, he never argued with them about talking rudely to him, plus he had no problem either with testing his hypnosis theories on him.

"He talked to you about the Other and the Joker, then?", Jonathan took back, and an almost gentle undertone surfaced in his words.

It was impossible to read his expression most of the time, but going voluntarily deeper into the 'Bruce Wayne' subject appeared like a way to apologize for what he just told him.

And it was oh so very interesting, Edward won't waste his time being frustrated when he could learn more instead.

"How do you know that?", he asked him so, only half believing what he heard. "The Joker is a character he draws from a guy he met when he was fourteen. So how on Earth can you... know about it?!"

Jonathan smiled.

"At fourteen, hu?", he repeated, apparently very amused by the information. "Did he tell you where they met?"

"In Ireland."

It felt like he was answering questions in front of an examiner.

"What is this person's name?"

"... That he never told. He just refers to him as 'J' when he talks about him, for the rest it's... the Joker."

Jon nodded, a somehow cruel smile forming on his thin lips.

"What is your opinion on that?", he inquired, as if he tested him to verify his deduction skills.
And no matter the situation, whenever he could prove he was the best, Edward won't miss an occasion to expose his cleverness and demonstrate how his brilliant intellect was able to grasp a problem.

"I thought he was imaginary at first.", he admitted therefore, taking up the challenge of proving his worth. "However then I began to think again, because of informations he gave me about some of the habits he shared with this friend of his, and a third person, a girl, who arrived in their life afterwards, with whom he stayed a bit of time."

Jon arched an eyebrow.

"Who?", he asked, curious.

"Harley. I think her full name is 'Harleen' and he calls her... Harley Queen. Like a queen. I don't now what her last name is in real life. She's Italian.", he added seeing Jon was trying to associate the character with someone he knew.

Then the teacher just seemed utterly surprised.

"Harleen Quinzel?", he guessed, and Edward blinked rapidly.

"I... I don't know.", he said, feeling kinda scared now.

How come Jonathan knew about all that?! It didn't make sense...

"Blonde, blue-eyed, pretty lady who likes to dress in red and black.", Jon listed. "Wears pigtails, is a very energetic person, plus able to play acrobat in her free time and indeed, has Italian origins."

"That's her!", he validated, baffled. "That's... exactly the character he draws!"

Jonathan hummed to himself, half approving half... whatever that was, it was very difficult to tell.

"How can you know that, Jon?", he asked, almost desperate to know the truth by now. "I don't understand, he met Joker when he was a teen, and Harley a few years later. So if you only saw him... when he was a kid, then... how come..."

Jonathan eyed him a moment, obviously still trying to get what his best option was right now.

"I'm gonna make tea.", he decided after a silence. "And I have... little lemon cakes. You like lemon cakes?"

Edward said yes with a movement of the head.

"Great.", Jon approved, before standing up from his armchair. "Then I'll take care of that before I break to you who your friend really is, alright? Stay here, I'll be there in a minute."

Edward followed him with his eyes as he crossed the small living-room to reach the separated kitchen, not knowing what to think of any of it.

He felt like his world had been returned in a sense he was not able to apprehend anymore. Bruce and Jonathan had a lot in common, but that was just normal once looked into it, it simply meant he had a soft spot for a particular type of guys. He deduced that part already.

But Jonathan knew Bruce when he was a child, and heard about Joker and the Queen who were supposed to be representations of persons Bruce met during his teenage years?! Now that sounded insane.
Insane...

What did Jonathan say again? It had been drowned in the flow of informations, but a data stood out once he studied their dialogue more closely. Schizophrenic. That was how he called Bruce. Not autistic, not traumatised, not anything akin to a syndrome, but a proper mental disease.

Schizophrenia. Could that be an answer to his questions?

"Is Bruce really schizophrenic, or was that just a speculation you made?"

Jonathan turned back to him. Water was slowly boiling behind him, while he organized a tray with two cups, sugar, and was about to open the box of lemon cakes.

His kitchen, though being a very tiny space, was way more messy than the living-room.

"I told you to wait for me in the other room.", he stated with no apparent inclination to respond right away.

"Well I waited.", Edward retorted, leaning against the doorframe at the entry of the kitchen. "And now here I am. So, is Bruce schizophrenic or was that a speculation you made?", he repeated, his smug grin on, and Jon shot him a death glare.

"Do you want milk?", he asked back.

"... No thanks.", Edward responded politely.

The situation may was comical in a way, he was also touched by the efforts deployed by the professor to act as a good host.

It was so unlike him, Ed felt like he should be rewarded for such an involvement.

"Milk in the tea doesn't match much with the taste of lemon cakes.", he justified so, and Jon agreed.

"I think that too.", he confirmed, his gaze staring at nothing. "But Jervis often adds milk whatever the flavour of the trimming is, so I felt like I should ask."

"That was very thoughtful.", Edward complimented gently, even if he didn't get why their were debating over their shared taste of the absence of milk in their tea. "Thank you."

Jon blinked rapidly, apparently taking note of the awkward situation, and went back at opening the cake box.

"How did you diagnose Bruce? Is that because you are schizophrenic yourself? You noticed some of his reactions and linked them with your own experience?", Edward asked while watching him pour the little yellow pastries on a plate placed on the tray.

Second death glare, colder than the previous one.

"This is not something I like being reminded of.", he accused him grimly. "And if someone heard about that, I could loose my job.", he said through gritted teeth, a phrase he repeated every time the topic of his condition was broached.

"Well there's just the two of us in this mess you call a kitchen.", Ed observed, lightly mocking. "And I am not recording our exchange, neither do I have any intention of telling anyone about your illness."
"You are very talkative about your friend Bruce.", Jonathan argued after a short reflexion. "And I am not sure he would be pleased to know you open up that easily over his secrets with someone. How can I be assured you don't talk about mine with others as well?"

"Because I gave you my word!", he exclaimed, vexed by the suspicion. "The day you told me what your pills were for, I promised you I'll never repeat it. And I would never break a promise I made to you, I..."

He blushed noticeably.

"... I care about you.", he corrected, hoping his embarrassment won't be misinterpreted as a lie. "A lot. And I know you don't feel the same about me, but trust me on that, Jon. Even if I wanted to, what I don't, I could never betray you."

No matter what you put me through., he added in his head but didn't voice out loud. You will forever remain the first person I fell in love with. That's not something I could ever betray.

Jonathan looked at him with frowned eyebrows, apparently getting something else was implied that he didn't comprehend, but not figuring out what it was.

They stayed like this, staring at each other, until the teapot arrived at the fine temperature, and Jon poured the hot water in the mugs, flowing it on the two tea bags before putting back the teapot at its original spot.

"You can go back to the living-room.", the doctor suggested. "And I'll tell you what you want to hear about your friend."

Edward obeyed without another word. He didn't know where the husky tone in Jon's voice came from, what provoked it and what he thought of him right now.

None of that mattered anyway.

Jonathan Crane was not someone who could ever love a bratty child like him, so better not think too much about what his veritable opinion was on him. Since it must more likely be what a sadistic person thinks of an ant before squeezing it under their shoe. Okay, he was conscious he overexaggerated there. Jon never wanted to kill him, but... he does treat him like trash and uses him as a test subject.

What was wrong with him? Why was he in love with a man like that, and why had he... switched the feeling on Bruce for the sole reason he reminded him of Jonathan? Was he really that much of a masochist? Did he truly feel like he must suffer while he could simply... let go of these people without a second thought, and go back to the persons who sincerely loved him without keeping this burden on his shoulders of getting attached to violent, dangerous, psychotic and unpredictable social disasters?!

"What are you thinking about?", Jonathan asked as he put the tray on the low table, before sitting back on his armchair facing him.

"My... 'questionable choice of friends'.", Ed answered, taking back Crane's words from earlier with a strong pang of audible self-mockery. "And don't worry my dear, you'll always be number one in that category.", he ended, more bitter, before extending his arm and grabbing a little lemon cake he started to eat angrily.

Jonathan studied his movements a short moment, then he analysed:
"You shouldn't be mad at me, child.", he told him seriously. "Remember I am not the one who punched you, but the man you asked an *advise* from to know what you should do now ?"

Edward sighed.

"Right...", he conceded. "Sorry."

For a moment, they only stayed like this, not knowing what else to say.

"Harleen Quinzel was one of my students.", Jonathan eventually offered as an explanation. "The best I ever had actually. A very smart, clever person. She was in my class when I was a young teacher with only a few years of experience. She almost became... a friend. She was very interested by my classes, and at the end of the year I provided her with the best letter of recommendation I ever wrote for anyone."

Edward felt strangely warmed up to hear that. So despite his issues, may Jonathan's life in the professional world was not that terrible in the end ? He apparently even *enjoyed* himself here and there, depending on the years.

"Have you kept contact with her ?"

Maybe that was a little inquisitive, but Jon answered nonetheless :

"We haven't talked recently. But we kept in touch during years after she graduated. That's why I know she met Bruce Wayne.", he focused back on their origin conversation subject. "She was his psychiatrist a few years ago, so we discussed about him. I never saw him again though, I just... shared some of my professional experience with Harley, as a colleague to another."

It seemed that neither Jon nor this Harley were very respectful of the rule of confidentiality between a doctor and their patient. But it somehow matched with the picture Edward now had of both of them, so he found it more amusing than anything.

"He drew the Joker already.", Jonathan told him later, his tea mug now between his hands. "Harley saw him, along with apparently a few other background representations. But he was drawing his Joker protagonist since boyhood, so I've been introduced to it."

Edward looked back at him expectantly, and he went on:

"The Joker and the Other. That's how he called his two characters at the time, and he had no other alter egos. He talked about 'the voices', but he created only two proper protagonists from what he heard in his head. A green-haired clown who changed of design depending on his mood, and a second figure, a quite dark one I must say, of a human bat he called 'the Other' because that was the only name he found to avoid saying 'me'. Sometimes he said 'the other me', but when he wrote down the character's name it was strictly under 'the Other'."

"He called Batman 'the Other'?!

"Batman?", Jon repeated, almost amused. "That's how the character's name evolved?"

"... In a way.", Edward confirmed.

Then he realized he couldn't hide that from Jon anymore, not now the professor revealed so many valuable, supposedly secret informations.

"What's your point on video games?", he asked therefore, and Jon arched once again a skeptical
He took a sip of his tea, then responded, detached and clinical:

"That it's one of the worst ways society has found to make teenagers addicted to a screen and shock or deprive them of their innocence by confronting them to violent stories that will then destroy whatever little brain ability they possessed before they started to become obsessed with silly, uninteresting, unrealistic and savage stories. Why?", he asked, frowning. "Don't tell me you are one of these kids who play such awful things?"

"Nope.", Edward grinned. "I never played a video game. But..."

He leaned forward, smirking.

"I am currently finishing the last details about the one I design with Bruce since the beginning of our collaboration. A detective and superhero story in the one you might... recognise a few characters if you pay close attention."

He winked at him to conclude this sentence, and given Jon's expression in return, the doctor knew something was going to happen he might regret he agreed to be a part of. Now they were at it though, so it was not like they could take it back or stop the process in mid accomplishment.

Jonathan was way more involved already than he thought he would have been.

So now, time to take him fully into the confidence.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

"Memory... is the diary that we all carry about with us."
- Oscar Wilde

Chapter Notes

I suppose a general warning for Bruce's mental state is required, so... I point it out here.

There was no Joker. There never had been.

It was crazy the number of things one is able to find via the Internet when one is a bit skilled and knows how to conduct precise researches.

Two weeks passed since the graveyard scene, and Edward and Bruce didn't see each other again. Neither at the Manor nor outside, but not at school either. Bruce apparently disappeared, because he didn't show up at any of their shared classes for the following two weeks. This was starting to worry Ed a little, but he had too much pride to take the first step and go talk to him or even call him first.

Bruce was the one to blame, not him. It was his responsibility to call or send a message or do... anything, really, just to try to apologize and allow them to restore contacts together.

Except that, Edward was clever enough to figure it out, they were both way too proud to take that first step. And as the days passed, it became more and more difficult to be the one who would do the first move, because it would be like admitting their defeat and letting the other win.

Nevertheless, he held his positions : Bruce was at fault, not him. It was to him to reach out first, not the contrary. Needless to say, with that kind of attitude they risked to stay stuck like that a bit of time.

In the mean time however, Edward took advantage of every little piece of information he was able to gather via precise, intense researches on the Bruce Wayne topic.

It was not that difficult, once focused on the goal, to find informations and pictures related to his travels. It was a bit of a detective work, and Edward had always been skilled with a computer. Like, very skilled.

As a result, he could now confirm the strong suspicion he had before : Bruce traveled alone. There was no reference to any companion of his who would have been on the road with him. Every hotel booking, every flight in a plane, everything that had been collected at some point in a numerical register was for a single person, Bruce Wayne. No other teenager accompanied him.

After more precise researches though, Edward had been able to find that there was a boy he indeed met in Ireland, with whom he stayed over a full year. Jack Napier.

The said boy was apparently a troublesome child. Ed had no difficulties finding a few police reports
about him being caught for stealing in supermarkets, multiple times, and drawing on buildings some very... nice messages and innocent scenes. Emphasis on the sarcasm there.

But that was it. He was not... the Joker, not as Bruce depicted the character anyway. He just had a few issues with authority, but nothing too mean compared to what some teenagers are able to exercise.

A boy having conduct problems, with whom Bruce obviously sympathized, and with the one he apparently made the turn of Ireland and some trips in England and Scotland, as Ed found out making a few connexions. They stayed together during about sixteen months if he got the calculation right. Then one day Bruce left Ireland, and this 'Jack' behind. But what happened between them? What was the exact nature of their relationship? Edward wasn't able to find a valid answer to these questions.

Although Bruce and him have undoubtedly been very close friends during the months they lived in each others' company. Boyfriends? Given Bruce's issues, it seemed unlikely at the time. Maybe their bond would have evolved if they stayed together for longer. Maybe they even discussed the topic, yet never went past only evoking it.

Or maybe it was the exact opposite.

Maybe they were a couple, and they had little adventures together. No trips around the world like what Bruce let him guess when he referred to their time together, but in a more restrained geographic location. What didn't exclude the possibility of them dating during that time, and ending up parting ways, while they were back in Ireland after a visit in London apparently.

Anyway, no matter their relationship had been a romantic or strictly a friendly one, they shared a relatively long experience together, and at some point they broke up. Either they quarreled and separated, or they simply grew tired of each other. A fight seemed more probable, since Bruce obviously cut every communications with Jack, and they never saw or talked to each other again after his final departure.

But that was it. Pursuing his searches, Edward found out that Napier was currently a student in a cinema school in Dublin. Ed fished a picture taken last year, of him entering the school. Physically speaking, he was far from being Bruce's creepy clown, too. This guy was on the contrary... attractive, he must concede it to him. Kinda tall, quite well-built man with dark blond hair falling past his shoulders, black eyes with long eyelashes. His clothing were a bit eccentric, as it seemed he had a liking for flashy colors, he wore earrings, and as Ed could see in some pictures taken here and there, he had a few tattoos on his arms and back.

But again, that was it.

Just a good-looking teenager one year older than Bruce who became his friend, lived with him in Ireland, and they did a few trips together to the nearest locations.

Not a green-haired psychopath hysterically laughing with whom he traveled around the world and with the one their story ended in a tragic way. Because Bruce may never told Edward how J and him got separated, from what he let him foresee Ed concluded they parted ways after an event akin to an accident.

He thought something happened. Maybe not leading to the death of the other, but something... bad enough for that Bruce would feel so guilty and so shocked he came back to Gotham seeking for Alfred's help to move on.
Yet nothing like that seemed to have occurred. Only... a friendship with a pretty Irish guy, that ended in a rupture of contacts before they parted ways.

Just like people do in real life all the time.

Not that Edward knew much about this from his social interactions, though. He never lost a friend, either in an accident or because they parted ways like that. He was aware nonetheless that it was relatively common, to meet someone one day, to become good friends with them, maybe even start a relationship in some situations, and then break up because of multiple possible reasons. He may had no experience in the field for himself, he knew these things happened every day around the world.

So no, no tragic ending for this Jack Napier; no travels around the world with him either; no traumas caused at his hands or anything of that kind.

Just a guy Bruce knew and loved, would that be as a friend or as a lover, and with whom he parted ways after they shared a slice of life story together.

It was almost... strange, to arrive at such a normal, ordinary conclusion. After all the mysteries Bruce made around this character, finding out he was just a man in the end felt almost disappointing.

Almost.

Because Edward felt also sincerely relieved to find out Jack was alive and had, in a way, a human origin. So whoever was the Joker in reality, there was indeed a teenager Bruce met, whose name started by 'J' and with whom he had been friends (he was probably his first ever friend, by the way). And he was also glad to learn Bruce had never been found carrying a dead body that would explain in a... definitive way, the reason why J and him broke up.

But none of that happened. Jack Napier was an alive student. Not a man Bruce saw die before his eyes. No accident, and even less murder, (Edward admitted the thought crossed his mind) that would have caused Jack's death. He was not in a hospital either, or damaged in any apparent way.

So... why was Bruce suggesting the contrary, while the evidences proved there was nothing tragic or wrong with this boy's current situation?

Was Bruce even... convinced his J-guy was a victim, or was he playing some sort of act? Or did he really forget about Jack Napier being an alive person, and replaced the truth with dark scenarios? And if he has done that, then... why?! What would be the point of changing a reality that was normal, maybe even a bit boring, with a tragic accident Bruce would, as he strongly implied more than once, be responsible for ?!

Edward didn't get it.

He was not able to deduce why Bruce preferred to accuse himself over something he hasn't done rather than facing a truth that was far less violent. If their break-up resulted from a fight, then he should be angry at this Jack. Angry, but not... guilty like that, in this disproportionate way that turned the truth into something monstrous.

He should be just angry. And if they parted ways after a dissenting opinion or a mutual agreement, then he shouldn't... feel anything about it. At most he could be a bit remorseful if he judged that they still had unsolved business. And he could perhaps miss the way things were. After all, this guy appeared to be his first and best friend with the one he stayed more than a year. He had the right to miss him, whatever was the explanation behind their break-up. But he had no right to... change the events in his head, turn them into something dramatic and end up blaming himself over something
that never happened!

Jonathan actually answered his best the questions he had over the topic. They saw each other a bit more regularly over the last weeks, the doctor being surprisingly willing to help in the end.

He was also impressively aware and remembered *everything* related to his patient cases. What made Edward mock him a little and he commented that Jon had to "find an activity or a distraction, because if you are able to answer *that fast* with so many details to questions about patients you treated *years ago*, that means you really need to find a meaning to your life."

A remark what provoked a slap on his head from Jonathan's notebook, as if he was a naughty brat being scolded by the teacher. That just made him laugh, furthermore it was a gesture Selina often did when he played provocant on purpose with her. It was a sorta... friendly contact, he somehow liked it.

And as Jonathan went on with his explanations of some particular aspects of the human psyche, Edward found himself learning a lot about the reception traumas had on the brain. It was an area he had a solid knowledge on already, but Jon was definitely very qualified and more capable to perform precise analysis, from both his studies, his experience as a psychiatrist and his own personal luggage on traumas from various forms, causes, and representations.

Ed enjoyed playing student in psychology with the professor. It felt way different from the science experiments they realized at the laboratory, here it was like entering in a sphere more... appropriate and closer to Jon. Sure, he taught the subject to his classes, so it was not like they were doing a complete immersion into a private area. Yet it held... a deeper meaning, Ed saw it that way, given how they shared data and bonded over a mutual interest on a topic, dedicated to figure someone's brain functioning out.

It was a... refreshing experience.

"This is more common than you seem to think.", Jonathan told him two days ago during one of their psychology lessons. "And very often linked to survivor guilt : the subject has a tendency to overdramatize a situation, what reinforces their guilt over surviving. I can't guarantee it, but I am convinced that for example Bruce Wayne invented many scenarios around his parents' death, to make it even more horrible in his memory than it already was in reality."

"What could be 'more horrible' for a child than to see his parents murdered in front of him ?", Ed asked back, not getting it.

Jon scanned his reaction while he answered :

"The act itself was frightening enough. But now imagine what could have happened *before*. What the murderer said, what has he... done, with his victims before killing them ?"

"Nothing.", Edward objected mechanically. "The police reports have been spread out as soon as the GCPD closed the case, and all the town talked about it from the night it happened. The confrontation in Crime Alley lasted only a few minutes, and there was no other damages on the bodies than the bullet wounds. The killer didn't... torture them or anything. I'm not trying to minimize, but everything happened... quite rapidly."

Jonathan conceded him a grave nod.

"Indeed. Everybody knows that. But now *imagine.*"

He leaned a bit on the desk to move his face closer to him. Despite himself, Ed felt the beginning of
fear forming in his organism under the unhealthy glimmer in the psychiatrist's blue eyes. The sentiment increased when Crane narrated:

"You are a nine years old child who doesn't see the world like everyone else, talks to the voices in his head, and has a natural tendency to see everything as more dark than it is. What do you see that night? A man shooting your parents? A monster devouring them? A fight? A human killing two strangers with the one you never felt like you had anything in common? What do you think he could have seen in that alley?"

"A man shooting his parents.", Ed repeated, categorical. "How could he have seen anything else during the mere minutes the action lasted?!"

Jon's very disturbing smile grew wider.

"Indeed.", he approved again. "I suppose the night of the event, he didn't interpret it differently, since the reality was shocking and scary enough. But during the aftermath? Over the months that follow? My bet is that not only did he live the scene over and over, but that he transformed it even more. Added events that didn't happen, words that weren't pronounced, maybe he created something else entirely, or imagined his parents talking to him after they were shot, or the murderer telling him 'you're welcome', or..."

"What?!"

Edward instantly clenched his fists, anger rising.

"What 'you're welcome'?!", he almost screamed at Jon. "What on Earth are you saying?!"

Jonathan only kept his disturbing attitude, and replied matter-of-factly:

"He didn't like his parents. He didn't hate them though, and he would never have wished anything to happen to them. But that doesn't change anything to the fact he didn't like them. So what could have been his thoughts post-reflexion, after the weeks, maybe the months, following the accident? That a criminal took away people he never loved. Don't you think this can only add to the guilt? The fact that even though he was sad, traumatized, and would have done anything to change what happened, the truth remains the same: a man walking in that alley murdered two strangers who never gave him anything else than insecurities, disastrous life habits and serious self-esteem issues. How do you think he felt about it once he figured that fact out? Do you honestly believe it would have resulted in him developing something other than self-hatred?"

Edward felt like he had been punched, once again.

"Of course I have... no guarantee.", Jon ended, feeling awfully pleased by the evocation of such a morbid subject. "After all, I only talked to him before the murder, and never saw him after. But since I've been so... seduced, by the way he thinks, I imagined all of this quite precisely."

"Why didn't you go back to him, then?", he asked back, trying to let aside the unsettling way Jon's interest over a child made him sound and look way creepier than the usual. "If you found him so... attractive."

Again, talking that way about a child made Edward feel sick.

He never saw that side of Jonathan before, but now he caught a glimpse of it, the professor suddenly lost a lot of charms to him.

"I would have loved to.", Crane only confirmed, not getting he shouldn't at all be using a few
expressions to refer to a kid like an attractive curiosity.

Edward firmly commanded the nausea to stay put.

"But his legual guardian refused to let me see him again."

"Alfred pushed you out?", he asked with disbelief.

"He... didn't approve my methods.", Jon simply responded, a cruel sparkle in his cold eyes. "At the time the Wayne couple hired me, he was always sneaking around, and telling me I should try to treat the boy, not to encourage him feed his demons."

"... You were doing that?"

"What else could I have done? If you don't conquer fear by facing it and making it your ally, you can never progress. Besides, this boy was more afraid of the real world than of his psychotic impulses. I helped him understand what he felt and where the need to hurt, both himself and others, came from in his mind. I would have been the best help he could have been provided, but unfortunately his parents disapproved of my diagnosis about his disease and the fact he is, mentally speaking, a potential psychopath who then needs to be oriented to keep him from committing acts he would regret. But they preferred to look for another explanation, and after their death the butler never wanted me around again."

"... Right..."

Better not imagine what Bruce could have turned out to be like if he had been raised by the good doctor.

Good doctor who was not only spooky, but now became... Edward didn't even know how to call that. One thing was sure at least, he began to have serious doubts about Jon's real motivations for being a teacher. He liked psychology? Check. He wanted to study people? Check. But why did he go from psychiatrist to professor? What line had he crossed with one or many of his patients for that he had to find an other alternative to practice the subject area he loved? Did he... push it too far with someone he treated? And if so, what happened? With who?

Oh and, Ed preferred not to think too much about what he must think of his students then. At least they were not children, because given how he spoke about young Bruce as if he was a... piece of tender meat, Ed was glad his pupils were all teenagers or young adults. And that Jon had no kids either. Yerk, these thoughts started to become gross...

And suddenly, the doctor didn't at all feel attractive anymore.

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His phone buzzed next to him, and he turned to the origin of this disturbance.

Unknown number.

"Edward Nashton.", he introduced formally when he picked up.

An unknown number was most of the time a professor, or an university-related call. And since the registration period will soon open for next year, Ed expected it to be linked. So he was surprised to hear Alfred's voice answering:
"Edward.", the butler greeted, apparently a bit disoriented and not knowing what to do. "I... are you... I hope I don't interrupt anything, but I need to... have your version of what happened between you two."

He raised an eyebrow, half believing what he just heard.

So after... three weeks now, of zero contacts, Bruce asked his butler to call him?! He had not even the nerve to do it himself?!

"Hello, mister Pennyworth.", he replied, not even erasing the sarcasm. "How have you been? Long time no see."

No immediate response, proving Alfred had no more clues than Bruce about how to interact.

Edward sighed loudly. Apparently it was his job to do everything in this family too. He didn't get paid enough for dealing with stuff like he was doing. In fact, he didn't get paid at all, but he felt like he deserved it and could ask for a cheque from Bruce at the end of the month, because after all socializing with Wayne and Pennyworth was a real work sometimes.

And every work should get paid, that would add to the poor salary he managed to extract from his school schedule by working at the restaurant every evening.

"What do you want?", he relaunched, trying not to be too openly bitter. "And before that... Bruce asked you to call me, or you stole his phone to have my number?"

"... I didn't 'steal' it.", Alfred dithered. "I simply borrowed it while he wasn't looking, in order to... indeed, take note of your number."

Despite himself, Ed smiled a bit. This man was both intriguing and funny.

"What did he tell you?", he invited the answer in a more friendly manner.

Alfred worried over his son, that was not something Edward had the right to be dismissive about. He had no real reason to be mean with the butler, either.

"Nothing.", the British man responded, both disappointed and quite... sad, too, it was audible in his tone. "Just that you two had a fight at the graveyard and you... parted ways without an explanation."

Edward frowned.

Okay, he could make an effort, but that didn't mean he liked being taken for an idiot, especially not in that kind of delicate affair where he was the injured part.

"Well that's not exactly what happened.", he denied so, frustration rising immediately. "We didn't 'fight', he just... scared the Hell out of me, then punched me so hard I almost blacked out and concluded this lovely interaction when he run off without giving me the chance to say anything and had the time to gain back my composure. He left while I was still on the ground. If I made a bad fall or if I bumped my head on a stone, I could have a concussion, but he didn't check that out, he was too busy leaving. And if he punched closer to the jaw, given the impact, he could have damaged my teeth. That was by no mean a fight, neither verbal nor physical, that was an adult weighing twice more than me, build-up all in muscle and being much taller and stronger than I am who threatened me and wanted to beat me up! I don't have a good experience in that field... not that anyone could have, really... But there, having someone I call a friend acting like a bully had been a very unpleasant experience. Yet he dared to tell you we 'fought' and 'parted ways', as if we were both involved and behaved as violent brutes ?!!"
Too late, the anger button was pushed, so no way it would cool off now.

"Are... are you okay ?"

That just added to his growing wrath.

"Damn right I am !", he vehemently retorted. "I always loved getting beaten by people for no reason, it reminds me of very sympathetic memories ! You can tell Bruce I'm even grateful, he managed to make me feel like I was back in my childhood's home !"

"... I'm sorry."

"And why is that ?!", he accused him directly. "Because your boy would have needed an education not to become a savage ?! Yes, in fact you can be sorry for that, it was your responsibility to raise him after all ! It's your fault he turned out that... person I made so much efforts for during the past months for nothing because in the end he is just like the others ! He ends up using strength against me the day I say something he doesn't like, all to remind me who's in control there and the only option I have is to shut up, nobody wants me around anyway !"

"... I am truly sorry.", the butler repeated, his voice more sad than ever. "I really am. I thought he... could have changed with you."

"It's not something you had the right to count on !", he reinforced the provocation, while being conscious himself he might be pushing a bit too far by now. "I am not responsible for your boy, I'm his friend, not his dad ! I don't have to... make his education, or teach him how to behave ! I can help if he lets me, but he crossed a line by acting like my father, and since then what ?! Not even a word ! Not an apology, nothing, during almost three weeks ?! Does he... does he even remember me, or is he already back at playing with his imaginary friends and inventing a story over why I 'let him down', when he is the one who acted wrong !"

There was no point to deny that. Nothing to deny there, to begin with. Bruce was the one who screwed up, he had the responsibility to make the first step and reach out to him. It worked like that, not another way around.

And Alfred must be well aware of it too, because he simply sighed at a response.

"You have the right to be angry.", the butler said after a time, not finding a correct way to defend his boy. "But... you know Bruce. You know he is not... mean. He didn't hurt you on purpose or..."

"... He didn't 'hurt' me.", Ed corrected, his voice and temper softening mildly.

He knew his rage was legitimate, but at the same time he didn't feel like he could stay angry for too long. He simply needed to let it all out for once, and that's what he just did. But now he had done so, he heard the despair and the miserable tone of Alfred's voice. Sure, he didn't feel guilty over it, since it was Bruce's fault, not his. But he... felt like he must be honest rather than blaming. He did the blame already, and it felt oddly satisfying to say what he had on his mind. Now, time to recognize the truth and find the appropriate reaction to make out of it.

"He... gave me a blow.", he pursued so, his voice considerably calm in comparison to what it was.

Poor Alfred, he needed to hear an encouraging veracity, not being shouted at. Therefore he gave the first explanation he thought of to justify his previous wrath/accusation session :

"I often act as a drama queen, you certainly noticed that already.", he said, controlling himself to sound calm.
It came out frustrated, but not blind with rage, so the feeling was similar to the state of his mind right now.

"I never thought he actually... planned to beat me up or anything.", he developed. "But as for do I know him?", he quoted, incredulous. "I have no idea of how to answer that."

"... I guess, yes. He is not an... easy mind to reach."

Anger now shutting off, slowly but surely, Edward relaxed slightly.

"I've been doing... researches.", he told the older one on a relatively tranquil tone of voice. "About him, what he did here and there, and what kinda qualified people think of his... peculiarities."

"What do you mean?"

He could hear the frown in Alfred's intonation. That made him smile a bit.

"I mean I want to come by the Manor.", he answered using his project manager voice. "But I didn't want to be the one who would ask for it, since I feel like he owes me an apology before anything else."

"... Sounds fair.", the butler agreed.

Then he inquired on a much weaker voice, almost... pleading:

"But you are going to tempt something, right? Bruce is not a bad person, he just... desperately needs company. And you are the best company he found his entire life, I don't want him to loose you."

"... I don't want to loose him either.", he confessed in a much more emotional intonation.

It was true indeed.

He wouldn't have been searching for stories, clues and informations, he wouldn't have been investigating during the past weeks if he planned on just letting his friend down and cutting contacts with him. He had no intend to dump him, he just tried to clear the field before stepping back on a ground that became a bit too slippery for his liking.

"Tell me when I can come by.", he concluded, way more friendly than before. "I have a few things I need to see at the Manor, and some serious questions I stored in mind to ask him."

"Of course.", Alfred agreed immediately.

From the clear desperate undertone, Edward felt like he could ask the man whatever he wanted. He had a feeling that if he accepted to talk to Bruce again, Alfred would give the world to him without a second of hesitation. That just confirmed his affection towards the butler. The man needed a hand to take care of his young adult who was so troublesome and difficult to deal with, because on his own, and even if he did his best, he struggled too much reaching to this boy he considered his son.

That was just touching, once looked into it.

They ended the communication rather soon after that, the essential having been exchanged.

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"This is a bad idea."

"What are you referring to? You aren't being very specific there, Lina."

"I'm referring.", she huffed at his usual sassy attitude. "To basically everything you do when you walk out of this house to go meet one of your psycho buddies.", she ended with a serious nod, and Edward glared at her.

Stephanie concluded by a firm "Dah!" sounding like she gave her opinion to back-up Selina's point of view, and the young woman smirked, letting shine all her white teeth, in a smile looking closer to a shark's than a cat's.

What was kinda funny.

"See?", she insisted smugly. "Steph agrees."

"Thanks, Stephie.", Eddie sighed, looking down to the beautiful creature secured in his arms he currently held in a sitting position against his chest, her head at his shoulder level, whom looked up to him with big curious blue eyes. "I appreciate you teaming-up with Lina to defy me."

She answered by a happy chirp, rising her small arm to his face. Her left hand touched his chin in the movement, what made her laugh, the contact being apparently truly funny. He smiled broadly, before bending his head just a little to put a light kiss on the top of her head.

"Whatever you say, my super girl.", he concluded softly at the baby's enthusiastic reaction. "I will always agree with you. Even when you disagree with me... That's what you call a paradox. Doing or thinking two things that seem opposite; yet you manage to reconcile them, completely or in a partial manner, related to a situation, a moment, a thought or an action. I love paradoxes, they are always a very interesting subject to create riddles and enigmas about."

Selina's predatory grin had turned into something fond when he looked back at her after Stephanie gave her thought over the definition by a few 'words' translating the increasing joy she felt at the terms. As ever when she was being simply talked to, she seemed to find everything both interesting, funny and open to discussion.

She was perfect. And as ever when he arrived, -daily-, at this conclusion, Edward felt so proud of his daughter.

"I won't be long.", he assured later at his sister's attention when she broached back the topic of his planned excursion to Wayne Manor. "There still is a possibility for that he doesn't want to see me at all, so may I will simply do the round trip. And even if I stay a bit at the Mansion, I'll be back before the end of the afternoon. So don't worry, you'll have plenty of time to get ready before going to your date. I'll stay with Stephanie in the evening and tonight, no complications on that point either."

"It's not exactly a 'date'.", she relativised, while looking pleased he included her recent personal business in his schedule. "But Kate is... intriguing.", she developped. "Moreover she is the one who wanted us to try going out like... actual girlfriends, instead of just drunk folks who met in a bar last week and have been making out without knowing much more than each other's names. I'm interested, I want to find out if this can evolve into more than a one-night stand. The night itself was great, so I kinda wish it could turn into a... two-nights stand? Something like that."

What granted her a reproving look from Ed, whom half turned his back to her with Stephanie still nested in his arms.

"We set up the rules.", he lectured her over the subject once more. "No dirty jokes or talks about sex
Selina got rid of the argument with a wave of her hand as he fully turned back to her, grinning at his frustrated expression.

"Steph grows up with you and me being her role models.", she jeered, amused. "So she will be, among other things: a fighter, a talkative smart ass, and a flirting machine. That's established, there's nothing you can do against it."

"The first two qualifications are actually both true and very profitable.", he agreed with dignity. "As for the rest, we are gonna wait until she's in her teens to attest this, okay? No need to rush things on that area."

Stephanie shared her opinion on that point by a powerful "Kriyysta!", and they both laughed fondly at her, as ever, overexpressed enthusiasm and cheerful participation.

They just loved their shared family life.

"Tell your psycho boyfriend that whatever excuse he prepared, the day I see him again there's a blow waiting for him.", Selina concluded later, when he handed Stephanie to her to get ready and leave the Browns house.

"Noted.", he validated with a smile, and they shared an accomplice glance.

He knew what he wanted from Bruce, and what he was looking for at the Wayne Manor. If his... friend? refused to access to his demand or acted wrong again, then he will be done with him. Or at least, he won't take the first step a second time, and won't forgive him unless he had a very good reason and a precise and coaxing speech to serve him.

But for the rest... he still was the one who made the effort in the end.

Time to see if that will pay, and from then, what his relationship with Bruce Wayne might look like in the future.

"I want to see your comic books."

"My... my what?"

"Comic. Books.", Edward repeated slowly, separating the word as if he addressed someone who had difficulties understanding the language. "I want to see everything you drew, wrote and... tempted, related to 'Batman'."

Bruce just stared at him wide-eyed.

"What... you want what?!

Edward crossed his arms on his chest and looked up to him, unimpressed. Alfred just drove him to the Manor, apparently Bruce wasn't aware of his visit, and he needed a few minutes to acknowledge the fact Ed was really here. He looked like a tramp, his black hair tousled as if he hadn't combed them in days, he obviously hadn't showered either, probably didn't sleep much given the state of the dark purple circles around his eyes and the way his entire allure appeared... neglected. He didn't
smell of alcohol, but that was just because he was a junkie, not a drunker. Otherwise no doubt an alcohol odor would have floated in the air around him.

The drugs he used had no smell, so the olfactory sense was not active there, but no doubt he spent most of the time having recourse to his own copying mechanisms to shut himself from the world.

Despite his anger, Edward felt truly bad at the sight. He felt like he must... help him, as much as he could.

And these words were the first they exchanged, in a corridor of the Mansion, with Bruce apparently half taking him for an hallucination half acknowledging he was real.

"This is my request.", Ed specified with a stern gaze.

Better go straight to the point, and he'll see how his friend will deal with that and what his reaction was going to be. He went on accordingly, chin in the air :

"You showed me your cave and revealed it was your heart, right ? Well know I want to see your brain. So if we're trying something, anything together again, if you still want to count me as a friend, this is what I ask you to do : show me everything you created around Batman. Drag me into your world and explain to me how much of a reality it is to you, because I need to figure out a certain number of elements, and I can't investigate more from the outside. So either you let me in, but if you do so you go through with it, you don't stop at a half-truth ; either you let me go."

Bruce frowned mildly, but then he nodded weakly.

At least he seemed now convinced he was not hallucinating anything. And this realization caused him to use back his low tone and a, very inappropriate, cold glare, when he observed rather than agreeing :

"I 'let you in' as you say, more than you did. I let you into my house and my... secrets, some of them at least, before you even began talking to me about yours.", he stated, and it came out as a resentful accusation. "I don't know what you're trying to prove here, but don't reverse our roles, please. You are the secretive boy you doesn't want of a friend, I've been way more open with you than you've been with me ! So maybe you call it under another way in your language of perfect model pupil and in your neat, structured, organized little life, but contrary to you who are in control of everything and doesn't have to deal with any complications anywhere, I'm kinda struggling on my end, you seem to forget about that pretty easily ! I have issues yet I let you in, while you still consider me a stranger in your perfect, lovely little world inside the one everything is pure, shining, beautiful and the sun is bright all day and the birds sing all the time !"

Edward glared furiously at him, his fists clenching violently.

"How dare you say things like that ?!", he aggressively retorted. "What are trying to do now ?! A competition ?! Well on that point I present the victory to you if that makes you happy ! You're right, you showed me your 'heart' before I told you about mine !"

The sarcasm was more than audible in that last sentence, and it kept filling every syllables as he went on :

"Except that your precious heart is a cave made of stones, while mine is a baby girl ! Don't you think there is a little gradation here ?! That the reason I waited so long to introduce Stephanie to you is because I protect her, while you just... I don't even know why I'm trying.", he sighed, feeling kind of tired by now. "You really don't see any differences between you proposing a trip inside a cavern
and me being the adopted parent of a baby, whose family was tearing apart when I met them! This is what you describe as a ‘perfect’, and easy situation?! Well let me tell you the reason why things are looking fine by now, is because I worked hard for it! Not only did I become their newborn's mother, but I also kept the adults from falling apart! Do you honestly... who do you think I am? What do I... look like to you?"

He was not planning to get that emotional so soon in their discussion, but now it was a bit too late to keep his feelings for himself.

"It has not been easy every day.", he took back, his anger cooling sensibly. "And I'm still struggling between being a college student who needs to graduate with the most perfect results possible, having a job for unique way to pay my schooling and zero assistance from my father who is an abusive bastard who cast me out of his house after years of hitting me. Plus bringing a couple back together, teaching them how to be parents as I learn it myself, and being, with Selina's help, a baby's caretaker. You really think it's easy every day to reconcile everything? You really think I'm... what, a kind of superman?"

His chin shook just a little when he ended, throat tighter than he would have liked:

"Well there again, let me tell you I am not. And I... didn't need to have to deal with your problems as well, I am overworked on my own and I'm doing my best to face everything the better way I can. And I... I know I'm doing a good job of it. This is no self-praise, it's just... facts. Results. I have high grades, I'm not living in the streets, Arthur and Crystal grew closer again, Art is able to play father with his baby, and Crystal can hold her more than a few seconds without having to leave the room. They're... progressing, and they won't be if I wasn't there. They would turn... like my parents, if I wasn't there. And no way I let Stephanie go through the same I have, I will never allow that to happen. So okay, things are looking up recently. That's right, and I'm very proud of it. But don't think I don't have my own difficulties as well, and that I don't know what it's like to fight to reconcile everything and having duties and responsibilities that sometimes feel like they weight too much, and are too difficult to face."

A moment passed during the one they just stared at each other, none of them sure of why the debate evolved that way and how they arrived at this conclusion.

Then Bruce extended his left arm in front of him, and said quietly, his expression pacified and much more friendly:

"Come over, I'll show you the rest."

Not feeling like he must stay angry anymore, Ed took his hand. Just before he started to guide him across the manor, Bruce added on a very soft tone:

"And... I was not trying to minimize what you do. On the contrary, I... look up to you. And you may don't feel like you deserve the title, you are a hero in your way. I'm certain this is how Stephanie will grow to see you, that this is how Arthur and Crystal already consider you as well. Selina, too. And I do, too."

Edward blinked slowly, ever trace of rage now absent from his feelings of the moment.

"That's... a very nice thing to say.", he whispered, sincerely touched.

"It's just the truth.", Bruce assured, confident.

They shared a little smile, and Ed felt the pleasant, lovely warmth blooming in his chest.
"Thank you.", he said lovingly. "Now, Batguy.", he pursued playfully, because he couldn't help himself, it was in his nature : "Let's do a romantic escape together inside that mess that is your mind, and see what universes it created."

Bruce shook his head fondly, and didn't loose any more time to drag him to their immediate destination.

Goosebumps appeared on his arms, back, shoulders and up to his neck as he stepped inside.

The room was huge, looking like a dance hall or a place to host a reception. Old wooden floor, boxes of paintings, shelves full of notebooks that contained hundred of stories, sketches and ideas everywhere. The aspect 'artist's atelier' was kinda catchy, and the number of representations in this room very impressive.

If it had stopped there though, Edward won't feel... scared, in this ambiance.

Because there was something else inside this room.

Over-represented, appearing on most of the giant paintings hung on the walls everywhere. Practically all these pictures were images of Batman gazing at the town in a dark night, or representations more and more frightening of the Joker. Laughing, looking deformed, moving... there were situations everywhere, of Batman and Joker fighting under the stars or dancing, covered of their own blood, lighted by an almost magical light in a grim part of the city.

All the huge paintings, colored or in black and white with the blood of a crimson red standing out, seemed to invade the space, spreading a dreadful feeling or absolute terror for whoever would enter the place.

Ed won't be surprised if a horror movie was filmed in this room.

"Is this... your definition of a boudoir ?", he tempted, far from sounding confident.

Jonathan really found his match with Bruce over the all 'fear' deal.

"I know.", the young adult acknowledged, because he followed the way his comrade's worried gaze looked over the room. "It's a bit creepy."

Eddie forced himself to smile in return.

"Yes it is.", he approved. "And not just 'a bit'."

But they shared a smile at this.

As Bruce invited him to reach the living-room part of the place and its comfy carpet and pillows thrown all over, he congratulated himself he came by during the afternoon and not at night. Because even like that, the Joker was going to haunt him, so he preferred not thinking about what it would have been if they were in the middle of the night and no light entered by the large windows.

"I think I just understood something.", Ed said as they took place in the middle of what felt like a world of comic books.

"What is it ?"
"The reason why you prefer Riddler over Batman in our game.", he answered, grinning. "Tell me if I'm right: our version of your protagonist turned out to be... not dark enough for you, so you reported your preference on our villain, because our Bat is too much of a hero and not enough of a mad man and/or a damaged soul for you."

Bruce didn't even deny it.

"Exactly.", he rather confirmed. "My version of... Him, is an in-between of a psychopath murderer and a violent vigilante who kills to get revenge; while in our game he ended up becoming... way softer than what I always had in mind."

'Soft' was not exactly the adjective Edward would have chosen to describe their character, so he found it amusing in Bruce's reflexion. But looking at the various drafts, finished works, scenes and complete stories around him, it became quickly obvious that indeed, Bruce's Batman was not a hero. Sometimes not even an anti-hero either, but a real... criminal. A mentally ill, sadistic murderer. Not every pictures were like this luckily, but some were disturbing enough for that Edward was convinced he would see them again in his nightmares some time soon.

"It's weird to see a... Batman with guns.", he commented, eying one of the many situation where the caped crusader had two guns at his belt and a range of bullets crossing his chest diagonally. "After we spent so much time thinking and designing a Batman who's a ninja, it doesn't match with the picture I now have of the character to see him... holding guns."

Bruce smiled at his confusion.

"This is the original, however.", he opposed. "My Batman was a sniper before a master of martial arts, and even though I always liked thinking of him as a karate expert, that never kept him from using firearms. I feel like he is... incomplete, without these."

Such an amusing irony. Edward smiled, loving already getting a closer look at all that, and diving farther into this world of his.

"What happened to J?"

A bit of time passed in that room, and Edward found out that an all gallery of characters, some almost as scary as Batman and Joker, were born here and there in Bruce's universe.

But his two main protagonists stayed the more represented, under various forms and in multiple situations, so he felt like he had the right to ask at some point. And Bruce must see his curiosity as legitimate, because he didn't hesitate for too long before opening up about it:

"We... had an accident.", he explained quietly. "It started with a stupid thing furthermore, and I was the one who set up the plan that ended up... backfiring on us. Big time. Except that I exited it with no damages, while J..."

"... went back to Ireland live a peaceful life and become a college student.", Edward completed, mildly sarcastic. "What's so terrible in that?"

Bruce frowned immediately.

"No, he..."

"He's what, dead?", Ed asked with suspicious eyes, ready to hear whatever macabre fantasy Bruce
made out of a banal and innocent situation.

"... More dead than alive.", the billionaire said, his frown deepening at Edward's unexpected reaction.

"I'm afraid the definition is not clear enough for my liking.", Ed jested. "What does that mean? He is a zombie? He's in a hospital? Maybe amnesic? In prison?"

Bruce stared, before concluding on a detached, clinical tone from the one no emotion showed:

"... His back is broken, his spinal vertebrae and his skull suffered permanent damages. He will never walk, move, talk, think... and be who he was, again."

Serious deal. Ed quickly thought of how to bring the rest of the subject without being too brutal. Then he realized whatever way he settled for, the confrontation between Bruce's dreamed world and the objective reality will always be violent.

So he just asked cautiously:

"What's his name?"

"J.", came the quick reply.

"No, that's a nickname.", Edward refuted, patiently but firmly. "What is this boy's full name, Bruce? And don't answer 'Joker', please. I want you to pronounce his real name."

"... He doesn't like it."

Bruce took a breath.

"It's 'Jack'.", he finally said. "But... he prefers being called J."

"Jack who?"

"What?"

There was the part of memory lost.

"Doesn't he have a last name?"

"... No. Not... really."

"Seriously?", Ed mocked. "That's your answer, 'this boy has no last name'. You are right, this is a very common characteristic... Zeus, Perseus, they don't have last names either. Poseidon... and a few others of that kind."

Bruce shot him a murderous glare, but didn't contest the sarcasm.

He really doesn't remember his name., Edward realized when he saw his friend was now searching for something internally.

It seemed like Bruce's personal issues about a family name followed him even in his representations of people he met or invented.

"Jack Napier.", Ed proposed gently not long after. "Doesn't... ring any bell?"
Bruce just stared at him, as if he spoke an alien language.

"Who ?"

And there was his confirmation. Jonathan was right, dramatizing a situation and replacing it with fake, far worse memories, seemed to be something Bruce practised daily. Edward took his cellphone out of his pocket and quickly showed him a recent picture of the man. He had no Facebook account for himself, but he used Selina's to find the guy posted quite regularly over the social network.

"He doesn't really look like your Joker.", Edward tried to light up the mood because Bruce was now looking at the picture wide-eyed, his brain apparently on fire as he tried to make the right connexions and struggled to understand what was happening. "But he is the man you met in Ireland and who you've been friend with."

He wasn't being very careful with this, but after all he was no psychiatrist, and he wanted to make the light around what truly happened. So he simply went on, keeping his tone soothing yet getting to the point :

"The green hair, the bloody smile and whatever 'accident' you ended up believing you lived, are things your mind created to protect you from reality. That's what happens in some cases as an interior defensive mechanism, to keep children from terrific events they see. Except that your defensive mechanism works reversal : because you witnessed horrors in your childhood, and since you already have a more fragile psychological stability, it left a strong sprint on your mind. So now, instead of covering facts to protect yourself from them, your brain intensifies whatever little inconvenient you are faced with, make it grow into a literal horrific scenario and ends up making you believe the worst thing you imagined over a situation is what truly happened. It's... a serious issue, it really is. And it's... a problem you must be aware of, and if you are not then you need to wake up over it and find a way to stop reacting like that before it's too late. Did you... did you really forget about Jack Napier and replaced every moment you lived with him by... Batman and Joker fighting together ? If we take a trip down memory lane, what do you remember about Jack ? Jack and not the Joker."

"I..."

Was currently having the biggest emotional crisis of his life ? Undoubtedly.

Feeling way more patient and caring suddenly, Edward moved closer to him.

"I also talked with someone you met.", he told him nicely.

"Who ?"

"The Sarecrow in our game. I realize I never gave you my colleagues' names, and the designs don't look like the originals, the only instructions I gave you about the characters where Scarecrow's scrawny frame, Ivy's blood red hair color and the fact Mad Hatter had to wear a hat. For the rest you never saw them. So... Scarecrow's name is Jonathan Crane. He has been your psychiatrist during six months, when you were seven then eight years old. He... kind of opened up about that when I asked for precisions. He was the one who... wanted to know more about Joker and the Other, not to fight them but rather to... make you understand them fully. From what I've understood, he's the only one who tried this approach."

"... Rorschach."

"What are you..."
"Scarecrow is... Rorschach, then.", Bruce cut. "Yes, I remember him. I... liked him, even. Contrary to the others, I felt like he... understood me."

And he brought closer a heavy box of comics. It wasn't long before he found the character, wearing a trenchcoat and a beige hat, his face entirely covered by a white mask on the one was drawn a rorschach test picture looking -as often with these...- like a deformed butterfly.

"..."

Honestly, Edward was rarely speechless, but Bruce definitely was a subject he struggled to grasp and who managed to surprise him in more than one manner.

"That's... your first version of Jonathan.", he ended up saying, looking back at him. "So in your universe, from a spooky weirdo hanging out with a rorschach mask on his face, dear old doctor Crane became... a demon-like scarecrow obsessed with fear."

They eyed each other after this, then they lost it. They bursted out laughing at the absurd situation.

And oh dear, it felt so good to be back at laughing together like that.

"Who is this?", Edward asked, eying the boy on the comic on his lap.

Not all the albums were complete stories, most of them were short sketches, mostly of fights. Bruce hesitated when he saw the character he pointed at.

"The one you have in hands is the second version.", he eventually answered. "Here comes the first one."

He fished another colored comic, showing a very similar young boy, dressed in the same uniform. The only differences lied in the facts his black hair were combed another style, more neatly, and he looked a lot... sweeter, than the boy on the pages Edward held. But for the rest they were the same.

"And there, the third.", Bruce fulfilled the list, showing a third black-haired boy, whose costume was completely red this time, with no green on it and no exposed legs, his pants covered his skin from the thighs to his boots.

Contrary to the previous ones, his cape was yellow only on the inside, the outside was black, and it was a little longer on his back.

"I preferred this design when I found it.", Bruce explained. "But this third Robin was a failure. I tried to create something new, with a different approach, but I ended up hating the character and being disgusted by his attitude, so I gave up on 'Robins' after him. Although contrary to him, the first two ones are... good, I can say it like that. I love them."

Trying to understand what was implied, because as often with Bruce, there was necessarily more than meet the eye, Edward asked carefully :

"So at some point, your Batman had... sidekicks?"

"It was an experiment.", Bruce responded with a small smile. "And just like for the other persons, they don't have a civilian identity, just their character persona. Their eyes are blue, though.", he added as for himself. "We don't see it behind the domino mask, but they are blue. Blue-eyed, dark-haired boys."
"... Are they a version of yourself, then? Like... Batman is you, but Robins are the 'child-you' of... before?"

Bruce lowered his gaze.

"I actually like this explanation.", he said quietly. "But... that's not Robin's origin."

"Where does they come from?"

He looked back at him, hesitant.

"I think you can tell me.", Ed encouraged him delicately. "We are... past the 'secret' state now, aren't we?"

"True."

He smiled a bit, then forced himself to talk. The words clearly weighted a lot when he conveyed them:

"I wanted it to be a boy."

"... What are you talking about? Can you be... a little more specific, please?"

He kept his tone caressing, but he needed Bruce to be more precise otherwise he won't understand anything about what he'll tell, and as a consequence this will last way longer than the original explanation would have.

"Sure.", the young adult agreed nervously. "I... would have been happy with a girl too, of course, but... I wanted a boy. I wanted..."

He hesitated some more, then looked back at him.

"I wanted a little brother."

Oh. Unexpected.

"So I...", he took back before Ed had the chance to comment the information. "I prayed it would be a boy. And that... he would be the perfect son my parents wanted, while being my friend at the same time. That I would be freed from my parents' demands, and will win a confident I could play with. I... Robin is the name of my hero, Robin Hood. It's the name of a bird, too... it's both strong and sweet, original and appreciated. I... if I could have chosen his name, I would have wanted my little brother to be called Robin. And when I drew the character, I couldn't help but... give him the same physical traits as me."

"That's actually very sweet.", Edward told him gently. "You wanted to become a big brother, that's something many only children wished at some point. Why are you feeling guilty or... awkward over it? It's kinda... normal, once looked into it."

For sure, it was true that the 'I want to become a big brother/sister' was a frequent wish in an only child family. Not systematic, but recurrent nonetheless. Although of course, nothing was that simple when it came to Bruce.

That's what he revealed when he asked after a silence, his expression troubled and sounding almost pleading:

"Was my mother pregnant?"
"What ?!"

"You... you know a lot.", he justified, and although his face was deprived of visible emotion, in his tone it seemed that he was on the verge of crying. "About 'Jack Napier', and 'Jonathan Crane' and stuff... while I forgot what is real and what is not. So... was my mother pregnant when she was shot, or did I... invent that too ?"

Edward's eyes opened as wide as saucers.

"You..."

For a second, it felt like his mind was blank and he couldn't reason over anything anymore.

Then Jonathan's words echoed in his head, repeating that Bruce would have recreated the scene of the murder to turn it into something even more terrible than what happened. So there was the answer. This was what Bruce invented over an already horrific event. He turned it into something even worse, even...

"No.", he said, making an effort not to cry himself now. "No, she wasn't, Bruce ! The... the reports circulated, the pictures, everything. You just have to... go on the Internet and google your parents' names to find your mother was not pregnant when she died ! My God... This... this is..."

Find your words., he ordered to himself. Bruce needs explanations, he is not here to hear you stutter.

"She was not pregnant.", he assured so, his voice more steady. "If she had been, it would have added to the tragedy and the information would have circulated, even if she was just of a few weeks and the bump then won't have showed up yet. If you lost an unborn little brother or sister that night with your parents, all of Gotham would have known about it, will your mother be only at her first month or farther into gestation. Somebody would have known, somebody would have talked, and the autopsy would have checked this out either ways. We... we just have to watch a few reportages or read some reports about the accident if you want. If you... feel like it. You will see. I promise, Bruce. Your mother was not pregnant when she died."

Bruce nodded with a shaky movement.

"I think I... could use to see a few things like that, yes. To... try getting back in working order what happened that night. And... you... You'd watch them with me then ?"

"Of course."

Eddie offered him a warm smile, and took his hand.

"I'm sorry.", Bruce said softly before he added anything else. "For... the cemetery. For not calling you after. For... for thinking you didn't want to see me again and concluding I should get back at being alone rather than trying to reach out to you. I'm truly sorry."

"It's okay.", he assured. "You're all forgiven."

Edward didn't know how that happened, who initiated the movement, or why, but next thing he knew they were... hugging, for the first time, gripping each other tightly and not wanting to let the other go.
You don't love someone for their looks, or their clothes, or for their fancy car, but
because they sing a song only you can hear."
- Oscar Wilde

In the end, this looks like a conclusion. Even if I still have... mixed feelings about this
story. But since you are here now, it means you liked or were curious enough over it to
read until the end. So let me just thank you for following, and I hope you had a good
time at least here and there reading it!
<3

"They better give us the best grade possible and become fans of our project, otherwise I'm gonna
take it as a personal affront."

Bruce shook his head, amused.
"There is no objective reason for that they don't appreciate. We did a far better job than anyone else
in our class, and we made the most detailed and original creation while respecting every criteria to
elaborate a software."
"Tell me something I don't know.", Edward jested.

Then he stretched, a quite satisfied smile on his lips.
"I feel like the year is over already.", he concluded. "The final exams are a simple formality now we
handed in our game."
"True."

Even if, contrary to him, Bruce needed to study a bit for said exams, so the Easter holidays won't
only be employed relaxing. But he shared the feeling nonetheless.
"Anyway.", he added though. "We won't know about the results before a while, so better not start
thinking about it too much."

Ed made a face, disappointed, then relativised :
"Given how slow examiners are to finish corrections, we indeed can't expect a word from it quickly.
However, when they will finally give us our child back, they better be appreciative."

Bruce laughed with him at the warning.
They were in the middle of April, the final exams taking place next month, and they just remitted their subject to Mrs Leland, who collected the created programs today. Edward had a precise idea of the perfect grade and rave reviews he waited from the feedback, even if it was a fact they won't hear these before a bit of time.

The air was warm, they were outside in the late afternoon, during the time just before Ed had to leave to go to his job.

"You think we can make an extended family for our boy?" Eddie taunted again. "A follow-up for a second game or... a few stories out of our universe?"

"Maybe we can start by adding voices.\text{,}" Bruce reasoned. "We put musics, but the texts are written on screen, the characters don't talk yet."

It would have been too much work, making the animated pictures talk and dubbing every sequence of their project. They would have done it with more time at hand, but they found a fine alternative by mixing musics in the background for each different scene, they were pleased with the result.

"Maybe we could.\text{,}" Ed approved nevertheless. "Selina will be glad to play Catwoman's part, she assured she wants to participate if we're doing something else with the universe."

"No kidding.\text{,}" Bruce sighed. "Since she already harasses me for that I find a way to provide her a costume like Catwoman's..."

"I wish I could say I feel sorry for that, but I would be lying.\text{,}" Eddie laughed. "You guys are just so funny when you interact, I love seeing you fight like that."

The 'fights' were more of petty arguments than actual quarrels, so truth be told they were a very distracting show. Selina indeed punched him, hard, when they saw each other again after Bruce and Ed had their reconciliation; but from then Bruce and her were back at being brats one with the other, as the good old well-known role of the big sister versus her baby brother's boyfriend.

It was amicable, it was fun and it made everyone laugh.

Therefore they could assure without hesitation: they loved the way their little family life was, slowly but surely, progressing and bringing all of them closer together.

"I don't know if I should feel flattered, insulted or just indifferent about it."

"If you want to pick a choice.\text{,}" Edward proposed carefully, keeping a safety distance between them. "I suggest you settle for the scenario in the one I stay alive and in one piece."

Pamela glared at him, not at all amused, and he took another step back. His current feeling was close to the one experienced when being inside the same cage as a tiger who hasn't eaten for days. Not that he knew much about that kind of situations, but he had no difficulty picturing the redheaded woman in front of him as a wild beast hungry for his guts.

"... So?\text{,}" he risked, his tone way too shaky for his liking. "What do you... think about all that?"

He swallowed under the merciless glare looking like daggers she shot him as a response.
"What I think., she answered on a hard tone. "Is that one day, kid, I am going to reap these pretty green eyes of yours out of your skull with my nails, and eat them in one glup, accompanied with a tasty Caesar dressing.", she ended coldly, and his legs turned into jelly under the absolute fear he felt rising inside him whenever she looked at him that way.

She took a few steps toward him, and he severely ordered himself to stay still and not run away in the opposite direction as fast as he could. He was so scared anyway, he wasn't sure he would be able to move a few inches without falling on the ground, since his legs seemed incapable to carry him anywhere at the moment.

"But that for now.," she took back, a frightening smile growing on her blood red lips. "I think your project is truly intriguing, the designs are wonderful, and the stories behind this universe itself are a smart, interesting spectrum of possibilities. I'm very curious to see what will come out of it. So I'm gonna say... you are doing a great job there. Keep it up."

He blinked a few times, not figuring out what he should respond that won't be seen as inappropriate, then eventually said, still completely terrified:

"Th-thank you... Tha-that's very kind of you..."

She smiled, in a predatory manner very reminiscent of Selina's. Except that with Selina it was charming, and made her look even more beautiful than she normally was. Pamela Isley on the other hand, although a very pretty woman -this was no subjective judgement, only persons showing an extreme bad faith could deny her beauty-, was also one of the scariest persons to have ever walked on Earth, Edward was convinced he was not exaggerating when claiming so.

Therefore, seeing her smile in a way that could have been beautiful only made her look even more chilling.

He definitely had a thing for psychopaths, would that be about 'love' or 'friends'.

Perfectly aware of her effect, Pam then gripped his chin, causing a scared little huff from him. A sound she had a great, unspeakable pleasure hearing. Then she plunged her eyes in his, and their green iris of very different shades connected. Dark almost black, like the color of a forest under the night for Isley, and light as the young leaves freshly appeared on the newborn sprouts in spring for Edward.

"I am so glad I met you, kiddo.", she revealed, looking down to him.

He felt her breath on his mouth as their faces were only a few centimeters apart, and tried to ignore the panic she managed once again to inflict him. Then she concluded:

"Life would be boring without you."

Then she let go of him and turned around, pleased with herself and certainly thinking she acted the best and most rightful way in the situation.

Edward sighed, both of relief because Pam didn't do anything to him this time, and of self-mockery over how much of social disasters and creepy weirdos his colleagues always proved to be.

"You made me a Mad Hatter !", Jervis as for him said happily after Pamela ended her little tiger predatory scene, and Ed turned to the short blond man. "This is so good, and cool, and nice, and... perfect !", he exclaimed, joyous, and gazed at him with grateful and enchanted blue eyes, before giving him a bone-crushing hug that completely cut Ed's breathing. "You are a genius ! I love you, child !"
"Thanks Jervis..."

Thankfully the scientist let go of him rather quickly, otherwise Ed was sure he would have needed a reanimation session to make air circulate again in his lungs and an x-ray radiography to check the state of his ribs after the powerful pressure that had just been exercised on them.

In the end, would his science bros compliment him or not, they always acted... anything but normally. So they did too after he showed them not only their game, but also a great share of the projects Bruce and him now had around it.

And scared or not, he couldn't help but note, smirking as the usual :

"See that, Pam. You could simply have said it's great, you weren't forced to act like a creepy ghoul slithering from the swamps what just spotted its next victim."

A remark, provocative on purpose, that caused him to try escaping from Isley in the lab, under the looks of Jonathan and Jervis whom were smiling widely. They were not at all decided to intervene in the following argument, since they had too much pleasure with staying there and enjoy the show.

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"Does that mean I'll be... giving up on you ?"

Despite himself, and even though he knew what he had to do now, Bruce was scared. No, in truth he was... terrified.

J smiled, of this wide, too wide, too... disturbing, smile of his, and extended a snow white hand to stroke the short black hair.

"You aren't giving up on me, Brucie.", he defended, using his soft tone, the caressing one which was this motherly kind of contact Bruce sought for more than once during Joker's visits. "I am you for as long as you can remember. You will never get rid of me."

"This is not what I am trying to do."

He moved closer, nesting his head on J's shoulder.

They were both outside in the huge garden that could be called a parc around the manor, in the organized part of the exterior, before the forest began. Sitting in the shadow of an oak in the warm afternoon lighted by a bright sun.

J hugged him back, and for a moment they just stayed like that, huddled together lying on the grass in the comforting ambiance of a hot end of spring.

"I don't know what to remember about you.", Bruce said to Jack asked after a while, watching him without knowing what to think about him anymore.

J smiled, then an angular finger traced the side of his jaw, ending its path on his temple.

"Everything.", he answered, his smile fond and his dark eyes wide, so wide they looked like they wanted to... devour him alive, or make him fall inside a black hole. "I am you. How could you ever forget about me ?"

"... About you, never.", Bruce approved. "But who is... Jack Napier, then ? If he is not... you ?"
"How could he be me?", the other chuckled. "I just told you you and I are the same person! There is no one else than you every time we are together, and no one will ever change that or put themselves between the two of us."

"It doesn't mean I should have forgotten about him.", he argued, starting to feel angry at Joker over that. "You shouldn't have stolen my memories of Jack Napier and replace them with only you. I had the right to keep him in mind, and you deprived me from that right."

J laughed in response, the sound coming out powerful, hysterical, and he lied on his back, his long curls pooling on the grass, looking like a crown circling his pale face and mixing themselves with the green of the grass.

"I didn't 'steal' him, Brucie!", he said when his laughter calmed enough, his eyes filled with tears of whenever he laughed too much. "You casted him out when he broke your poor little heart, and replaced him with me to protect yourself from the truth!"

And he went back at laughing and laughing again.

"You are crazy...", Bruce attested, now sitting on the ground. "You are irreparably crazy.", he repeated, the assertion articulated on a stronger tone.

J rolled on his side and looked up to him, a hand under his right cheek, his left elbow on the ground lifting the upper part of his body up.

"So what?", he asked, curious now, almost delicate when he opened the debate. "You never wanted me any other way, remember?"

"... I don't.", he sighed, remorseful. "I don't remember. And I... never wanted you any other way.", he validated the words.

Then he took a breath, and went back at what he had in mind:

"Are you going to take Edward away from me?"

Joker looked at him like a wolf about to jump and bite.

"Depends.", he answered, his wide smile deforming his red lips. "Are you going to abandon him or get scared when you realize you grow too attached to him?"

"No!", he answered immediately, determined.

It was true. He was ready, he was... convinced that staying with Edward was not only the right thing to do but also what he wanted to do. More than anything.

And he was ready to make efforts, all the efforts Ed asked him, he was going to work for it. To get fully involved, into everything.

"Then I won't do anything.", Joker assured, a malicious sparkle in his eyes. "I only come back when you need me. If you find someone else to distract you and take my role, then I am not useful anymore."

"... Why do I feel like you are being sarcastic about it?"

J laughed some more.

"Because I know you, Brucie."
His grin became so wide the flesh of his cheeks disappeared completely under the enlarging crescent of yellowish-white teeth.

"I know you can't move on from me.", he completed. "Never totally. No matter how much you love him; you will never be done with me."

"... I know."

There was no point denying it. He won't pretend he moved on or that J suddenly disappeared from his mind. But he... truly wanted to get better. To fully get into this new life he now wanted to be a permanent member of.

He was thinking about all that, not gazing at the other boy anymore, when he felt lips on his left cheek, and the warm contact of Joker's mouth on his skin.

"Take care of you.", Jack whispered tenderly right into his ear, making him... shiver in a very pleasant way. "And don't worry, Brucie. I'll be back."

When Bruce looked again at the spot next to him, the tender grass held no trace of anyone lying on it previously. J disappeared for today; and as Bruce was going to find out, his visits from there became less and less frequent, as he, slowly but surely, started to heal from being in need of his presence. Until he won't need him anymore.

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"I have no magical solution. I won't even be looking for one, that's not what I do and certainly not how I treat a subject. But I am a licensed psychiatrist and I've always been... very interested, by your case. So if you want to, we can meet over for a few sessions. Even just to see what results we can obtain from this."

"I'd like to try, yes.", Bruce answered sincerely. "Edward... told me a bit about who you are, and anyway I will always remember you as the first contact looking like a friend I had in my childhood, except for Alfred."

"I seem to have grown way more popular than I ever thought I would be.", Jonathan sighed. "I'm in a relationship, I have a best friend, I have Edward, and now... you, who apparently never forgot about me and considers me a friend. More social interactions than that, I'd suffocate."

He grumbled, and Bruce laughed. Yes, this man has been his friend once. He remembered why, he remembered how. Most of it, at least. And he was also one of Edward's pals, with the one he was determined to start a new therapy now he knew what he had to fix and found a reason why he must work on it.

The world was so small once considered.

"I was the first person to be friend with you, then.", he pointed out.

"True.", the doctor conceded, pushing up his glasses on his nose. "I believed you forgot about me, but apparently none of us did. And I may was your first friend, it works on my end too. You were a patient, and I never saw you as anything other than that over the months I spent with you. But... it felt like you were a friend during that time. Must be part of the reason why I kept... in touch, more or less, with the evolution of your case even if I was not treating you anymore."
Bruce smiled.

He felt oddly comforted in that strange man's presence. Just like when he was a kid, he recalled. The frigid looks, the dark humor, the sharp remarks and the disturbing habits were not something he ever recoiled from. On the contrary they felt... reassuring.

This was what scared Alfred, as he understood when the butler gave him his opinion about starting a new therapy with professor Crane. Alfred couldn't bring himself to see this as a beneficial impact, rather a... problem he needed to fight. While Bruce assured to him it was the opposite: talking with this man, he felt like he was not the only one being so... different and spooky. Crane was like him by many means, and it appeared comforting to attest he was not alone. Alfred and him concluded that way their discussion together, before Bruce actualized the return of the psychiatrist in his life.

And now, here he was, having a first proper second meeting with him.

"Then I liked you before it was cool.", Bruce ended at the doctor's intention, and Jonathan laughed.

The sound was held back, almost inexistant, and incredibly disturbing.

"I think I can return you the compliment.", Jon retorted, and Bruce nodded proudly in agreement, then they shared a glance of mutual understanding.

Bruce just felt like it was right, to be here right now, talking to this man and trying to take back the control of his mind. It felt like the good fight to stand for.

He now had a reason to stand for it.

Something worth fighting for.

A girl Robin ?", Bruce repeated, doubtful. "I... I'm not sure about that. It seems... weird."

"No, Batboy.", Selina jeered. "The only 'weird' thing here is you."

Bruce rolled his eyes.

"Hey there.", Edward greeted as he walked by, a wriggling Stephanie in his arms, who repeated a few syllables in '-dee'. "What are you guys talking about ?"

"Selina still wants to transform everything in my world.", Bruce complained to him.

"And in response to that, Bruce is being a close-minded macho. Again.", she argued, and Eddie smiled at their teasing.

Steph chirped pointing at both of them, somehow arbitrating their dispute, and they smiled.

"-ddie !", she chanted happily.

"Sure.", Edward commented nicely. "You certainly wish they'd..."

"E-ddie !", she repeated, looking at him with bright, luminous blue eyes and a smile so large it seemed to cover all the lower part of her face.
She raised her little arms in front of her, joy radiating from her every moves and laughing vividly, then said again, the name coming out more asserted than before:

"Diddie ! Eddie !"

The rest must have appeared as very confusing for the baby girl, between Selina who let out a literal scream of joy upon hearing her first actual word; Bruce who dropped the can of Coke he had in hands out of surprise, spreading liquid on the floor that splashed over the foot of the couch; and Edward who looked at her with an expression of pure shock, green eyes wide open and speechless for the longest time of his life.

An instant it seemed like everything was blank, or the space around them frozen itself to crystallise the moment, turning it into something eternal, a magical slice of time all of them felt deep inside.

Then Stephanie giggled forcefully at the face Edward was still making, whom looked like a fish out of water that discovered the surface world for the first time when it jumped out of the waves before diving back in the ocean. Her high-pitched, pure and joyful laugh brought them back to reality, and in the second following, Edward was hugging tightly his beautiful baby, actually crying while she kept laughing, then Selina scurried to join the hug, wrapping her arms around Ed and kissing Steph on the back of her head while she still chirped looking at him.

"I told you so, kitten.", Selina said softly, happiness filling her tone. "Little bird knows you are her mama. I am not even surprised her first word is your name."

A comment that just made him cry even more because damn, he was so happy right now, and Selina laughed, still hugging them both, then she kissed Edward on the forehead.

Bruce was watching them, a few steps ahead, just as touched but not... bringing himself to interact as a sibling would have in their family. Stephanie was Edward's baby, and Edward was Selina's little brother.

Bruce knew he belonged to another sphere. He was their friend, and he loved them, all of them, with all his heart. But he was not a brother. He didn't want to be, either. Because if that was the case, if that was how they saw him, then it meant Edward could never be... more than a bro to him. And he didn't want, less than anything, shutting the possibility of Ed growing into... more than a friend depending of how things might evolve.

Right now though, brother or not, he was just as glad to be there hearing Stephanie's first word... and even more that her first word was Eddie.

And he might be crying a little, too. But hush, if he wiped his eyes quickly, may the others won't notice... Too late, Selina winked at him with a satisfied smile, glad she could attest mister cold psychopath was in truth... a good person too.

_____________

"No Bruce, you aren't taking Stephanie to the Cave before the incoming... years.", Edward corrected, acutely amused despite his attempt at a serious face while he lectured him.

"But now she..."

"No."
"You can't deny there is..."

"No."

"Can I at least..."

"No, you can't. She's a baby, stop trying to turn her into an adventurer. You'll have plenty of time to do so in not long, but for now I don't especially want to chase after her in underground galleries or across the forest. Give it time, given her temper I'm certain she'll be the kind to drive me crazy by disappearing all around and putting herself in... complicated situations all the time, and this from the *moment* she'll start to walk and run. So no need to rush the habits."

They shared a smile.

Between Selina and Bruce whom both thought they could interact with his baby like she was their partner in crime of some sort, and him who gave her classes about... everything, for sure Stephanie wasn't exactly growing in a 'conventional' family. But what should it matter that not everything was normal? Everybody loved her, *this* was all that mattered. Oh and, he must specify how touching the meeting between his daughter and Alfred had been. The man couldn't believe he was allowed to hold her and to... enter in Edward's world like that, like an actual family member, by having contact with what he held most dear.

"Last time I held a baby was master Bruce.", the butler had said that day, emotion audible in his usually stoic tone and eyes filled with tears as he secured the infant in his arms. "I..."

He looked back at Edward, offering him a grateful smile.

"You are the best thing that could have happened to him.", he told him softly. "You really are."

Bruce being on the other room arguing with Selina over whatever, as ever between them, they currently were together with Stephanie.

"I could never thank you enough for not letting him down."

Edward smiled back.

"I won't have.", he said sincerely. "But you know... I don't think *I* am the 'best thing' he has in his life. This role is yours, it has always been. I am glad I can participate, and I am even happier to count you two in my life now. But... I am his friend. You are his *parent*, and his... everything, in more than one way. Never forget that, Alfred."

They shared a bright smile.

And yes, including Bruce and Alfred in his world had been in progress for a while, but now he was able to *confirm* it, to *attest* it. They were part of his life. They have become close friends, and they entered his sweet patched-up family universe when they met everyone and began to be part of the daily picture, along with taking care of Stephanie. His baby gained two new fans. And from the way she reacted, it was obvious she *enjoyed* having even more attention directed at her than before, and people to be there for her.

An extended, cute happy little family he managed to reconcile and bring together. He found them on his own, *created* them at some point even.

Edward was so proud, both of himself and of all of them. Even if he was also well aware he had to look not only after Steph, but after the other *adults* in his world too, and be, while he was the
technical ‘child’ of the group, the responsible party for everyone else. But he was far from complaining about it.

On the contrary, he... sincerely loved everything about the global turn his life was taking.

"I don't get it."

"Precise your thoughts, Art.", Eddie jeered at the blond man's momentary confusion. "Because 'I don't get it' is the main characteristic of basically everything about you, whatever situation you put yourself in. This could even be your life motto. So here, are you talking in general or is that your clever opinion on a specific subject area?"

Arthur shook his head, but he was smiling.

"I am not that much of an idiot, you know.", he protested, although his tone was fond, as ever when he talked to Ed, and he was very amused by the joke instead of taking it as an insult. "For example.", he justified more seriously. "I know you just mocked me, I deduced you were using sarcasm there."

"I'm very impressed.", Ed jested, grinning even more. "But I must say... it was not fully 'sarcasm', since I was simply saying the truth."

They both laughed, and Arthur didn't even try to contest. Eddie was like that all the time, he wasn't going to mind being mocked by the kid.

"I was talking about you.", he explained afterwards. "About... the new boy and everything. I don't get who he is."

"Bruce is around since a while now, and the entire summer holidays has been spent between your house and his place... so if you are wondering only now who is this boy who has been talking to you and inviting you over to do activities for the past weeks, then we should really get worried over your brain power, Art. More than the usual at least."

"... That was truly sympathetic, thank you."

"You're welcome."

He winked at him, and they laughed again.

Edward named the nature of his relationship with Arthur and Crystal friendship, because it was the most obvious and... simple, too, label to put on the Brown couple. They were friends who were the biological parents of his daughter, and with the ones his sister and him lived, with him sharing his time between their house and Selina's apartment. They were not his parents figure, they didn't act as such or at least Ed didn't saw it that way. And they were not really... siblings either, he only referred and called Selina like that.

So... friends, yes. With a few special meanings, and a particular bond he shared with them over their child. Friends. He supposed the term itself was strong enough, and he had no need to search for another label that would be more specific to define their interactions. He was fine with them being his pals, and they didn't exactly... see him as a son either. So they were more the in-between of family and friends, and Edward knew there was no word more precise to qualify this sensation.
"I can't figure out what he is.", the older one insisted.

"He's a bat.", Edward laughed. "Among other things."

Arthur nodded, even if he obviously didn't fully understand what that implied, and Edward smiled.

"A good friend.", he proposed, judging he tortured Art enough for today.

He always had plenty of occasions to make fun of the guy, so he could shorten this mockery session and answer his question. Perhaps.

"Bruce is a very good friend."

Arthur approved silently again. He was obviously searching for something to ask, and the action apparently wasn't easy to fulfill in his mind. Ed tried not to laugh as he clearly pursued his brainstorming, and finally something came out of his intense reflexion:

"So, is Bruce Wayne... your boyfriend ?"

Okay, he admitted he won't have bet Art would be the one to ask. Selina may teased him about that for a while now, it was only... jokes, and even though she seemed utterly convinced they should date, she never went past making fun of him over it. Until he concretized anything himself, she was not... involved to try having them getting together. She had way more fun being the sarcastic spectator commenting everything, rather than playing romance advisor. At least until Eddie asked for advises. He hasn't yet, but when he'll do, then she'll make sure to help him and share her experience in this area for the one he was, in the end, a novice.

But about Bruce ? They were still in the friend zone, and as summer progressed, even if they indeed... bonded, they never evoked the possibility of seeing... something else between them.

So he was a bit surprised the demand came from Arthur.

"For now, he is... just a friend.", Ed responded, however he didn't manage to erase the slight disappointment from his tone when saying this.

"But he could become your boyfriend, right ?"

Eddie smiled a bit.

"I admit I am... not against the idea.", he conceded. "... Quite the contrary in fact.", he ended softly, an almost shy smile, so unlike him, forming on his lips at the prospect.

Arthur Brown improved his habits, with his daughter and with his... well friends, in more than one area. Sexuality was a topic he worked on too, to... accept a few things he would never have considered possible before they, mostly Selina, opened his eyes about the fact Edward and her are not straight and had no shame about their orientation and no desire either to pretend to be something they were not or to hide it. Among many other subjects, it had been a shock for him, and something he never thought he could get past, or being friends with people... sharing that interest.

Ed couldn't help but feel proud of him. The man made huge efforts, was still progressing, and it... showed up, every time, in everything he was doing and the steps he took forward.

"How does it work between... boys ?", he asked then, because doing efforts or not he remained relatively awkward about a few things. "You know, to... ask another boy out ?"
Edward smiled.

"Actually, I don't know.", he answered, amused. "I never dated. But what I'm sure of either ways, is that there is no difference between asking a boy, a girl or a genderqueer person, would you be... a boy, a girl or a genderqueer person. The hard step to take is how to introduce the topic, and I'm convinced every teenager struggles with their first time, regardless of gender and sexual orientation. Bruce and I are not... taking our time because we are men, but simply because we are both... terribly inexperienced."

That was true. And even if he always played provocative and kinda... suggestive, he had always only been joking. He had no idea how to act seriously, what to make out of that, and he admitted it... worried him a bit.

"I love our friendship.", he confessed accordingly. "I don't want to... screw it, or to ruin something between us by asking for more from him. It... kind of scares me. I don't know what he thinks about it, but I don't want to ask either, in case it could... mess up our relationship as it is now. I value it too much to make a mistake that could be awkward for both of us and deprive us of... what we have now."

"... You are right.", Arthur smiled, and Eddie arched a skeptical eyebrow.

"About screwing ?!", he asked, vexed. "You really think I could mess things up if I... considered asking him ?! Even just to get informed of his point, without properly talking about 'dating' ?"

Art's smile increased at his now frustrated expression, and the blond man specified:

"No, that's not what I have in mind don't worry. But the way you said it, it definitely proves you are right about the fact there is no difference between boys and girls and the rest : you are just an awkward teen who doesn't know how to ask your crush out because you have never done that sort of things before. I thought it could be... different, for your kind of people, but in fact it's just like for the normal type."

Edward was about to make him notice his phrasing was highly homophobic and dismissive in the way he formulated it and that he still needed to correct a few things despite his progresses on openmindedness, when Art put a hand on his shoulder and concluded, proud of his solution:

"I'm glad it's the same. Because that means I can advise you just as if you were courting a girl. And I have plenty of knowledge in that area, backed-up by a long experience as a teenager running after pretty ladies."

"I... appreciate the offer ? Sort of.", he dithered, holding back a sigh. "So no offense Art... but there is absolutely no way I stay here any longer if you intend to give me 'the talk'.", he warned on a categoric voice that suffered no objection, and Arthur laughed.

Edward definitely wasn't blushing, and his face didn't look like a tomato right now because of how embarrassed he was by the idea of talking more in details about the topic with him, or... with anyone, really. Now that it meant something and held a deeper significance for him, he was not as prompt as he used to be to talk openly about these things. At the time when he was just joking, no problem. But now, given the fact he... seriously envisaged the possibility, he started to experience a strange form of awkwardness, one of the kind he never felt before.

And he didn't like the too strong impact it had on his behaviors. He never liked not being in control, and right now he... wasn't mastering his emotions.
"So you took it seriously in the end?", Edward attested, smirking, and Bruce approved.

"Selina insisted enough on that... And I must say, since she started evoking the idea, it... stayed on my mind."

Bruce's world gravitated around Eddie's world.

Both about the time schedules, the occupations, the activities, the people involved and everything they did together. But Bruce's world also remained real through his drawings and the universe, coming from his original one, Edward and him created and pondered over.

So the 'drawing episode' was a step Bruce must take every time he fully acknowledged the presence of someone and an event in his world. Jonathan encouraged it, he thought the habit was one he must keep, since after all it helped him develop his artistic talents, while being part of the design process required to build more of this world Ed and him had many projects for. It was far from being a bad habit, and was actually very profitable.

A lot of his drawings (not the scary ones...) actually landed on the walls of both the Browns house and Selina's flat. The family spent time at the Manor too, it was the place everyone regularly met at. But given its fringe location from the center of the city, it was not as convenient as their places so they didn't 'live' there. But the weekends and the holidays? Check, the Mansion was the best place to spend time at, for everyone.

"I love everything about it.", Edward said, eying the colored pages figuring the new character.

They reviewed Riddler too, to make him closer to an anti-hero than a villain, and they were very pleased by the result; much better than the antagonist from their game. Game which, by the way, had not only granted them a perfect grade but met a very positive feedback from the examiners, to the point they suggested they should turn it into an actual product they could sell for the public. Such praise made them both so proud, and contributed to their desire to invent more.

As they quickly found out for themselves, they needed a different Riddler. Younger, looking... more like Edward, both morally, intellectually and physically, and being a chaotic neutral rather than a criminal. It made way more sense with the persona itself, too, so they were pleased with the way their revision of the character turned out.

And right now Ed must say, he was in love with this new idea, until now half formulated but never seriously discussed, Bruce just introduced.

"So in the end.", he took back. "You are okay with resurrecting 'Robin'?"

At first, Bruce didn't want to see the sidekick back, he didn't know how to handle it. But now, he made his peace with the previous disappointment that is the third character wearing the uniform; and acknowledged it could add a lot if their Batman had a Robin.

"I may be resurrecting the idea.", he clarified so. "But this character is from a real person, contrary to the previous three. So I am convinced it could be great, and do a very good job being part of our stories. I am certain she can be the perfect Robin."

Edward smiled widely, sincerely enchanted.
"Be careful though.", he taunted. "Because if you turn my baby into your Robin, I don't want my alter ego to be an anti-hero anymore, I want to join the right side full time and stay with her."

Bruce smiled at the predictable reaction.

"We aren't sure of a timeline.", he argumented. "But if we work on that, Batman could have been present for years with Riddler and Catwoman walking between light and dark both with and against him, before Batman gets a Robin."

"Then when Stephanie becomes Robin, it would match with Riddler reforming for real.", Edward completed, just as involved in their universe as Bruce was.

"My thoughts exactly.", Bruce proudly confirmed. "You will give me your opinion on that, but I have a few plans for who a reformed Riddler could be."

Ed grinned, curious to hear a new good idea.

"Let me guess, you already found me a name and all ?", he mocked. "I want to keep a green suit, though."

"Don't worry about that.", he agreed.

"So I bet I am gonna be... a detective who works with Batman and Robin."

"Indeed. Ever heard of the role of 'Oracle' in the Greek mythology ?"

"Oracle ? Yes, it was the Pythia from Delphi, predicting the future and giving informations to the heros consulting it, about everything they needed to know to achieve their quest. Most of the time though, it talked in riddles and encrypted messages. So more than once, its answers were hard to understand for the heros asking. Fun fact: many people forget about it, but at the origin, the Pythia was a dolphin. You better not turn me into a marine mammal, however."

Bruce laughed at the warning and the categorical tone of voice used to articulate it.

"Don't worry. No dolphins.", he agreed with a smile. "And we thought of the 'detective' topic enough, so a Sherlock Holmes-like character, former supervillain turned consulting detective who helps Batman and Robin on cases sounds exactly like the kind of stories I'd love to read more about."

"Same.", he approved, already cheered by the idea.

He took the time to look back at the pages, featuring many drawings of Robin. Bruce mixed the two uniforms, keeping the third one's cape but introducing back green from his good Robins in the suit, and adding a long tunic for shirt, looking like a short dress over green pants followed by boots. He loved the fluffy look of her long blond hair, the neat shape of her face, her elegant yet strong allure. In fact, he loved everything about this vision of a teenage Stephanie, included the best way into their universe.

"She is beautiful.", he complimented again. "I love it."

They shared an accomplice glance.

"So what are we ?", Edward asked softly, putting back the notebook on the grass, and looking at his partner, deciding that Bruce who just made space for his daughter in their universe couldn't be a better time to make things clear.
His friends teased him about it enough, and he... wanted to, himself, have an answer to these questions that started to become obsessing in his mind. They were almost at the end of summer, the sun was bright, the air warm, too hot even, and they were together on the bank of the lake in the Wayne property.

Eddie smiled, and reminded:

"You know, I still... need to put a label on everything. So... what are we now, Bruce Wayne?"

The young adult smiled.

He didn't want to make a mistake but he was... sure, now, Edward felt the same. They've known each other for almost a full year. One couldn't say they rushed things on that point. So he responded with delicacy:

"An Irish author, dandy, genius and philosopher we both love said one day that 'One kiss breaches the distance between friendship and love'."

Edward tried to pretend his smile was not that large, and that his heart didn't start pounding like crazy in his ribcage.

"Why do I feel like Oscar Wilde is directing our story?", he commented smugly, because whatever the situation he almost always needed to act his bratty persona.

The people who shared his life loved him for who he was after all, so he never felt like he must try to be someone else with his loved ones.

"Maybe because we both see him as a role model?", Bruce suggested.

"He died depressed and driven insane by nightmares and hallucinations at age 46 after years spent suffering in prison, from the ones he caught disease after disease that never healed."

"... I was talking about his wit and personality.", the dark-haired boy specified with a sigh at the audible mockery about their choice of 'role model'. "Besides, in modern days he wouldn't have been arrested because he was homosexual! He would rather have grown old, loved by many and famous all around the world."

"True.", Ed approved.

"I don't... know where you stand.", Bruce pursued later, looking at the translucent green water of the lake, sounding slightly more unsure despite his will to stay cool about it and not panic. "About... us.", he went on, his tone husky in spite of his attempts, and he gazed back at Ed sitting next to him. "I don't want to... say something we would both regret. I care far too much about you to stand the idea of loosing you."

Edward felt himself warming up so much his chest was on fire.

"That's what I think too.", he admitted, his stomach in knots over the feeling he knew so little about yet that took over him with so much force very often lately. "That's what I... fear to tell, or to... concretize by... trying to broach the topic. I don't react well to things I can't predict, and I can't figure out what your own thoughts on that are."

"... I think I've just been clear enough on that point and what I want to 'concretize'."

And Edward didn't at all blush hard at the look Bruce gave him. Nope, his cheeks definitely weren't
burning so much one could cook an egg on them. Or maybe that was exactly what was happening, and he couldn't help but smile, way too happy already, at the incoming prospect.

"I just don't want to... be not good enough.", Bruce said, more distance showing in his attitude. "I am doing my best, and I know the efforts pay. But still, if you think I..."

"Shhh."

Edward put a finger on his lips to shut these ridiculous thoughts.

"Don't think that.", he ordered firmly. "Never again. Not only you are 'doing your best', but you are making a very good job of it. And I am so proud of you, and so glad to have you by my side in my life. I couldn't see myself without you being part of my family."

He removed his hand and looked at him, the apprehension mixed with the burning feeling getting even stronger.

"What I just need to figure out... is what is your exact spot on my social relationship web, and who we are to each other."

Bruce smiled faintly, and slowly moved closer.

It didn't take a genius to figure out his intention of the moment, yet despite his highly superior intellect, Edward was only half in possessions of his faculties right now, the... warmth he felt inside still directing his every actions, at both a mental and physical level.

Their first kiss was not passionate. No fireworks, no explosions. It was... light. Surprisingly soft, just a brush of their lips against each other's. It felt so natural, so... normal, to share this contact, now they achieved it it didn't feel like a huge first step to take anymore, but just like a logical evolution of their situation.

When they looked at each other after this first kiss, though, metallic blue and light green eyes shining vividly, the strength of the sensation and the implication it had on both of them from now on seemed to hit them.

"How about...", Bruce suggested so, smiling with an intense affection. "... boyfriends ?"

Edward winked at him.

"I guess it was about time this came up."

They laughed together.

If their first kiss had been a soft, delicate way to confirm the mutual agreement of their progressing feelings, their second one, that they shared without waiting, definitely expressed just how delighted they both were to finally officialize this evolution in their relation.

"I can't believe this is actually happening.", Bruce whispered afterwhat, slightly breathless, his face red and his smile wide. "I am not... imagining it, right ?"

"No Bruce, you are not.", Eddie assured fondly. "And as for believing... I must say this is in the end a very logical progression in our interactions."

Then his luminous smile shined brighter and he concluded smugly, so very proud of everything in his life :
"Because after all... we have the ground in common: we have the simplest tastes. We are always satisfied with the best."

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