Backstitch

by fractualized

Summary

John is once again a free man, but as he seizes the opportunity to recreate himself, the risk of being re-incarcerated looms in his mind. Meanwhile, Bruce splits his time between keeping an eye on John and dealing with an uptick in crime, and both have him struggling to reconcile his longings with his fears. Inevitably, both men will be caught up in the plans of a Gothamite who revives the idea that the only way to fix the city's disorder is by taking control.

(You can probably get by without reading On the Mend, but it helps!)
Don't You See

Chapter Notes

I imagined this story for John first– but then I had to write On the Mend to properly set it up, because what's a few tens of thousands of words?

Thanks to the Batman team at Telltale (RIP) and to the batjokes fandom for getting me into fanfic again after five years. I forgot how much I love this fun, frustrating hobby.

We begin even more in media res than OtM. Linear storytelling? WHO NEEDS IT

Opening Credits

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As much as John moved around, Bruce didn't take his eyes off him. The morning light was warm against their backs, and their shadows stretched ahead on the sidewalk. Sometimes the shadows were side by side, with John changing his side as often as he'd walk along the curb with his arms outstretched, or get a little ahead and stroll backwards, or meander in circles around Bruce even as Bruce maintained his pace.

John couldn't keep his eyes off the large box in Bruce's arms. The confetti-patterned wrapping was topped with a big loopy aquamarine bow. He returned to Bruce's right side and scrutinized the box out of the corner of his eye, crossing his arms as he thought.

He raised a finger in triumph. "A guitar!" It was his seventh guess.

Bruce glanced at the size and shape of the box. "No."

John caught the look and reconsidered. "A ukulele?"

"Still no."

John pursed his lips. Dusty rose was one of his more muted lipstick choices over the past five months, but it still stood out against ivory skin. Same with the sunny yellow eye shadow, underscored with winged eyeliner that matched the near-black green of his lashes. There were probably other products involved, given the array Bruce had seen in John's makeup kit, but he didn't have cause to remember them all.

John had started wearing makeup regularly during his last months at Arkham. It had been a little jarring at first, after seeing him plain-faced for so long, but it didn't take long to get used to it, and not just because of the consistency. John seemed somehow even more upbeat when he was made up, more at ease, like there was a release. And after Arkham, his access to wider color palettes allowed him more ways to translate that release. Maybe the varied expression wasn't what Bruce could relate to, but he certainly understood finding yourself in a new face.

The pedestrian signal at the corner was lit up with an orange hand, and they dutifully waited as cars passed. Bruce hadn't expected he'd need to park a few blocks from the bar, but it gave John
plenty of guessing time.

"Ah ha!" John said now, bounding forward and grabbing the corner light post. He planted the outside of his boot on top of the base and used his momentum to spin around the pole. When he hopped off again, he said with a grin, "A cockatoo."

"It's a sealed box."

"Maybe you were distracted when you wrapped it."

"The cockatoo wouldn't be distracted."

John combed that ever-errant lock of hair out of his face; it immediately fell back down. A couple more cars whooshed by and his eyes lit up. "Ah ha! The size is a trick! Car keys!"

"You don't have a license." Just a city ID card from an incredibly awkward MVC visit, which took place after Bruce's lawyers sorted out how someone got an ID with no existing birth certificate.

"Details, details..."

"You could have had one by now."

John huffed. "I already know how to drive," he explained patiently, unlike the whine the first time he'd explained it. "They want me to take a test, then get a permit, and then get a probationary license, and– All that's for kids!"

"It's also for adults who've never had a license." Bruce could only smile at John's pout. "If you can get through the process, a car could be on the table."

John lit up again. "No take-backs!"

The light changed and Bruce continued in a straight line, while John's amble transitioned into a brief soft shoe routine. Bruce tried to picture him performing on a stage, but while John's ankle-high boots could be mistaken for dancing shoes, his fitted blue pants and oversized yellow shirt were too casual. The sleeves had been pushed up his forearms when they met that morning, but as John swung his arms around, Bruce could see the left sleeve had fallen back to his wrist.

Bruce could also see, encircled by the wide neck of the shirt, the curves of John's collarbone. He set his eyes back on the sidewalk.

Dancing had apparently generated another guess. "One of those wavy inflatable tube men!" John said, flailing his arms.

"That wouldn't even fit in your room."

"It could stick out the window."

"What if you have the air conditioning on?"

John rubbed his chin as if thinking of a solution, but suddenly he stepped in Bruce's path, bringing them to a halt. He waggled his fingers over the box, nails glittering in turquoise and silver. "I could just open it now."

"We'll be there in a minute," Bruce replied.

John threw up his hands. "That might as well be hours!" He turned with a sigh and started walking
Bruce followed his lead, and not for the first time thought about how it had been a matter of months since John was stuck with dull asylum uniforms behind locked doors in a wholly regulated life.

But now John was free, to roam and to express himself. He had a job and a string of hobbies. And just a couple hours ago, he'd been released from the halfway house, and after celebratory pancakes, they were on their way to his very own place.

And John's primary contact with Bruce was no longer in the Arkham visiting lounge. There had been restrictions on phone use at the halfway house, but once John started working, that mainly meant he just needed to turn his phone over at night. A counselor had to approve any requests to stay out past curfew, but the occasional late outing with Bruce hadn't raised a flag, especially since John had been compliant with the rest of his schedule.

So Bruce saw a lot more of John, in person and in his texts. That had gotten tiring with other people in the past, but not with John. Bruce liked seeing John explore the world in a positive way. He liked hearing John's perspective on things Bruce had taken for granted. He liked being able to help when he could or just being a sounding board. He liked watching John explore aesthetics.

The trouble was that it had become impossible to deny the core reason why he liked those things.

Bruce did not have a personal publicist, since he found his interests were best served with an unmanaged civilian image. Wayne Enterprises, however, contracted a publicity team, and now and then that team insisted on keeping the CEO abreast of the latest rumors (with an underlying message to tone things down, if not to outright discredit certain stories).

John's release from Arkham had been a matter the publicists absolutely wanted to "touch base" on, and the WE Board insisted as well, through emails and voicemails and stern eight-on-ones. Bruce had scheduled a meeting with no urgency as usual, a few weeks after John got out. He'd greeted the three-person team like he always did, like he could be doing anything else with his time but hey, at least this wasn't work, right?

The presentation had been longer than usual. Of course the greater public were at least mildly suspicious of Bruce's activity as an Agency asset and wanted a clearer explanation, but he couldn't go around disclosing sensitive Agency information, could he? And yes, he knew the public sentiment on John was more conflicted than expected, with most people feeling someone who'd killed couldn't be trusted, but a strong minority sympathetic to the nuances of his story, largely thanks to the Agency's overreaches. The comment sections on Gotham websites were battlegrounds of misinformation, though Bruce was one of the few who knew which claims were inaccurate or pulled from wholecloth.

What Bruce had not known was the speculation about his and John's relationship.

The publicists had shown him a sampling. "In what could be the weirdest Cinderella story you ever heard..." began the first article. The headline of another asked, "A Honey Trap Turned On Its Head?" He would have expected that one to use a picture of him in a spy-like tuxedo, but instead there was a candid shot from a WE picnic held on the manor grounds. Some employees' kids had snuck in water balloons and found the garden house, and Bruce was one of many caught in the ensuing crossfire, resulting in a photo of his white polo plastered to his chest.

Other commentary was succinct, like a blog that had simply shared a meme: "Get someone who looks at you the way Bruce Wayne looks at this murder clown" said a caption on a paparazzi
image of him and John at Gotham Zoo. John's mittens were curled around the bars overlooking the hyena habitat, and he looked like he was about to squeeze through the barrier, and Bruce's face plainly showed his fondness. Apparently that expression was enough for another post to fallaciously declare that Bruce was looking to adopt a couple of the animals for John, which explained the zoo's call to Bruce's secretary asking if he was interested in sponsoring exhibits.

There'd been videos, too, though the resulting animated GIFs were more widespread. John trying Bruce's coffee at a café and immediately spitting it on the ground. Bruce guiding John away from a photographer who'd asked an inflammatory question, with Bruce throwing a nasty glare over his shoulder. Through the shine of a thrift shop window, John holding a patterned shirt up to Bruce's chest. Bruce standing outside a limo at a red carpet while John, in a flamboyant and flattering suit, got out to join him.

Bruce's response to the publicists had been to laugh. The tabloids would make a buck with any straw they grasped, wouldn't they?

And at the end of the day, while eating dinner in the manor alone, he'd accepted that the only reason he hadn't expected predictable gossip about him and John being a couple was that he was avoiding the idea.

And he was avoiding the idea because it was something he wanted.

And he had no idea what John thought about it.

John was no stranger to tabloids, so he must have seen that stuff, but he'd said nothing, not even a joke. Did he not think the gossip was worth mentioning, since he now knew how many of tabloid stories were bunk, how disinterested Bruce was in discussing that nonsense?

Or did John think that the reason Bruce wasn't interested in discussing it was that Bruce didn't want to disappoint him? Because the love John had admitted to wanting from Bruce, on that awful night, had in fact been romantic?

Sometimes John being romantically interested in Bruce seemed blatant fact, but then... Well, then there were the buts. But his explicit interest in Harley, calling her the girl of his dreams even after selling her out to the Agency. But his request for Bruce to be his wingman. But his two-week radio silence while preparing for his vigilante debut. But his decision to kidnap Waller instead of checking if Batman survived an explosion, one that John himself caused.

And John hadn't brought up the L-word again since that night, now two years ago. Along with giving up on being a hero, it made perfect sense if his feelings about Bruce changed. Taking stock of Bruce's deceit, of his priorities, he was better positioned as John's friend.

But given that John hadn't always been forthright himself, and had put Bruce aside for his own goals, shouldn't Bruce feel the same way?

Bruce had tried.

Like he'd tried to shrug off Selina's casual dismissal after their night together. His hopes for a relationship echoed for a long time, but in the end he was successful; when she'd reappeared a year later and seemed interested in exploring what was between them, he decided he wanted to be friends. After all, other than a postcard, Selina hadn't reached out to him at all, and their friction about Riddler's laptop didn't help rekindle things.

But Bruce and John had maintained contact. They'd been able to hash out some issues even during
supervised visits and develop their friendship. Bruce encouraged John to get better, and even if John didn't want to be Batman's protégé anymore, he supported the mission. And all that didn't mean Bruce couldn't reassess his attachment to John; it made it easier to see what would and would not work between them.

And yet...

John giggling and waving pulled Bruce's attention to the present. Across the street, a man held up his phone for a picture or video. The woman with him hesitantly waved back, and he batted her shoulder.

Bruce sighed inwardly. It was remarkable that professional paparazzi still existed when tabloids could find plenty of material on social media. Then again, these random encounters were less pressure than essentially being stalked. He and John did have to ditch a couple of professional photographers waiting outside the halfway house that morning, but it was a minor nuisance compared to the period before the gossip mongers found a new ball to play with.

John's release was a dramatic enough story for the press to peck at him for months, but just a single month passed before a bomb went off in old-money Gotham: the divorce of Arthur and Veronica Reeves, with accusations of abuse validated by leaked hospital records. Arthur simultaneously pleaded innocence and accused Veronica of the leak, and when her plastic surgery records spread online, it reeked of retaliation. But Veronica—already back to using her maiden name, Vreeland—was no slouch in media wars. A video of Arthur cheating with a prostitute went much more viral than the proof Veronica had work done.

Rumors about Bruce and John notwithstanding, Veronica's story had a more entertaining salaciousness than John's and was likely to sell more papers and get more clicks. Not to mention, getting near her didn't present a perceived threat to anyone's safety. She won the bulk of paparazzi attention.

(Not that Bruce thought it was much of a prize. John had felt ambivalent. "I don't know," he'd mused, "I thought maybe I could turn the attention around one day..."

"No," Bruce had replied. "Those people don't make money by praising accomplishments. Anything that even looks like a misstep, they latch onto it like lampreys."

"One too many shots of your bad side, eh?")

At the end of the block, John stretched out his arms and sighed, "Ah, home sweet home!"

On the opposite corner sat All's Well, a small bar under several one-room apartments. John's unit was on the third floor, the central window of the nine visible from the street. It was a water-stained brick building, like many others in the Village, with the bar's facade painted a rusty red. The recessed front door was flanked by two bay windows, and the faded name was painted along the top of the facade, alongside a weathered cartoon of two men clinking beer bottles.

While the Village was considered Gotham's bohemian hub, All's Well was located at the western border, at the transition into the Narrows. It was the kind of area that people typically referred to as "questionable" or "safe enough."

Bruce had first become familiar with the bar as a main gathering spot for the Gotham Mental Health Alliance, co-founded by Frank Dumfree, John's friend and former Joker accomplice. Another GMHA co-founder was Rosaline Portico, who owned the bar and offered John not just the
room but a custodial job.

John had been welcome to move in with Bruce but, to Bruce's surprise, turned down a room at the manor. Maybe it shouldn't have been surprising, just more evidence that John had reevaluated their relationship. Plus John always had that independent streak, so Bruce didn't also offer a better paying job in the WE mailroom. John was enthusiastic about the life he was building, and Bruce wasn't about to knock it.

John trotted ahead to open the bar door. He bowed and gestured with his free hand for Bruce to enter. "My lord."

"Thanks," Bruce said with an amiable roll of his eyes. When he walked in, his smile faded.

He hadn't realized the Circus would be there today.

Or rather, about a dozen members, most in their twenties. The group occasionally met at the bar before business hours, because it was the venue for their "project." Sitting on the stage at the back, a lanky man focused on a laptop hooked up to wall-mounted speakers. At a table nearby, a paint-splattered man and woman worked on a wooden sign. A guitarist sitting on a bar stool plucked away. Several other people sat at the tables while cutting and stitching and gluing colorful costumes.

The table nearest to Bruce and John was occupied by two women, both with black curly hair and round faces that clued they were sisters. The younger one, Adelina, sat with a long ream of aqua fabric and hand-stitched gold thread along the hem. Her sister, Lucia, stood over her with her arms crossed, worrying her lip. Bruce had seen both of them busking on the street outside, Adelina with her sketches and Lucia as a human statue, her dark hair and tawny skin painted slate green. The sisters were the same height, but Adelina was five years younger and had graduated high school just a year ago.

They'd lived together in a room on the second floor for a couple years now, after Lucia had lived there on her own for two years before that. She'd moved multiple times since she came to Gotham from gated suburbia, where she and Adelina lived with their aunt and uncle ever since their parents' death in a car accident. Lucia left the day she turned eighteen, foretold by her denied application to become an emancipated minor. One could only assume that Adelina had joined her sister at seventeen with the assent of their family.

No one had told Bruce these details; they were all a matter of records, public and private, and he only dug further than that if he thought a person was a danger to John's new life. Bruce had done this same research on the GMHA, so when John said he was joining the Circus— "I mean, I've made a habit of being committed so why stop now? Hahaha!"— Bruce was just as thorough.

The Circus was an artistic collective founded by Lucia and some friends. They chose the name not only because many members had talents that could be seen at the group's namesake, but because they supported art in any form. Their projects had been all over the map, from gallery shows to performance art to film.

Lucia's current project was starting a revue of music, dancing, and unusual talents at All's Well, not just as an artistic endeavor, but to hopefully make money.

The Circus wasn't formally associated with the GMHA, but while Lucia and her sister weren't members, many of the performers were. (Not that Bruce saw that as an issue, unlike much of the public.) And most of them either made their way with low-paid work or were racking up debt at Gotham University.
A number of members did have criminal records, with arrests as fresh as six months ago. The bulk were, in Bruce's regard, minor charges like public intoxication or possession of pot. Some more serious charges were the kind that ended with court-ordered rehab. One person had been dealing three years ago, but there had been no offenses recorded since then and he was not participating in the revue.

The reddest flags were staked in a trio who'd been convicted of assault and battery multiple times, as recently as two years ago. On top of that, they'd been connected to the old Falcone operations. Bruce scanned the room and thought they were absent, until he spotted a blonde ponytail jutting over a table covered with costumes and a sewing kit.

Maureen Howe rose to her knees to sort through different colors of thread, then returned to her seat on the floor. Her brother, Charles, and her boyfriend, Lorenzo Feliz, did not appear to be hidden anywhere. They were among the oldest members of the Circus, approaching their forties.

They three had stayed out of trouble for the past two years— as far as anyone knew, including Bruce. He'd kept an eye on them, and at a point started to feel guilty. Setting aside his deeper relationship with John, if Bruce was giving him the benefit of the doubt, shouldn't he extend that to others?

Of course, the Maroni family's resurgence made it difficult to moderate his suspicions. When Bruce was young, Sal Maroni's operations had posed a challenge to Falcone's, enough that for a while the two families had a peace agreement to keep to their own territories. But Maroni's turf was a fraction the size of Falcone's, and he inevitably made several moves clearly intended to expand. Falcone's less-than-tepid response buried the Maronis and gave him a monopoly over Gotham's organized crime.

Years later, after Falcone died, family infighting and a surge of arrests and prosecutions reduced mob operations to almost nothing— and Maroni was ready to fill the vacuum. Batman and the GCPD were doing all they could to stop the family from securing handholds in the city again, while many old mob cronies who wanted to restore their income streams offered Maroni their support.

Bruce didn't want any of that mess influencing John's second shot on the outside.

It was bad enough that people would see John's antics in the Circus as a way of flouting his freedom. When Lucia recruited John, she'd explicitly told him that she was counting on the publicity. Bruce found that exploitative and needlessly provocative, to say the least, but John gave her points for being up front.

"It's not like people will forget what happened," John had said with a shrug.

Of course not, but... There was little point in Bruce raising objections. To Bruce, the best path for John would be building a quiet life away from all the media sensationalism so he could concentrate on maintaining his mental health. Gothamites either saw him as a crazed maniac or overestimated how much of his anti-Agency activities were about civil rights. Too high of a public profile could easily be a detriment to keeping John on track.

But John was recreating himself, and he couldn't pursue his interests by hiding away. It made total sense for him to jump on Lucia's offer to emcee her show. What was the likelihood he'd get an opportunity like that again?

Still, Bruce couldn't help but wonder if Lucia was sympathetic to his concerns, if she understood how much public condemnation she was risking and how it could affect not only John but the
collective. Bruce had managed to speak with her alone the day they met. He'd done his best to keep his questions on the right side of concerned friend versus meddling friend, but Lucia's response told him that his approach mattered little.

She'd nodded seriously, hand on her chin, then said, "Yeah, when any of those problems can be solved by choosing the right stock options or philandering, I'll be sure to hit you up."

The charm of the Bruce Wayne persona was wide-reaching but certainly not all-reaching.

(Or as John had cackled later, "Oh my god, she *hates* you."

"Why? Bruce Wayne helped fight the Agency for your freedom."

"No, see, Bruce Wayne haplessly did his best to spy for the Agency, whose operation ended with a virus in the hands of a homicidal terrorist on a bridge, and then his business 'skills' were useless for negotiating with said terrorist, so dark horse John Doe valiantly stepped in and succeeded. All the kerfuffle after that made Bruce finally realize the Agency wasn't on the level and John was in a real predicament, but even then Bruce's lawyers only provided side work in the court scuffles. His visits to the asylum were nice for beleaguered John, but it doesn't take a lot of skill to keep bringing gift baskets."

"I don't like this version."

"You're the one who created an alter ego who's only good at spreadsheets and spread legs."

"..."

"Too risqué?")

Lucia's heart did not grow fonder over the subsequent months, which was evident now, when she looked up from her sister's work. Skepticism flashed on her face when she saw Bruce, and then she ignored him in favor of John, who surveyed the room happily.

"Hey," she said hurriedly, "can we touch base on this before Rosaline gets on your case about rat traps or whatever?"

"Sure!" John said. "On what?"

"On what?" she exclaimed. She gestured at the room. "Everything! We're two weeks out!"

"And it looks great!" John said with a thumbs up. He lowered it to Adelina's eyeline, and she smiled.

"Your optimism is appreciated," Lucia said dryly.

"Did my stuff get here?"

Lucia pulled up a sarcastic smile and looked at Bruce. "Yeah, Rosaline let the movers in with your, like, three boxes."

Bruce smiled blankly back at her. Hiring movers was dumb, but it was also just the thing a mindlessly rich socialite would do.

And it wasn't like John minded. He started doing exaggerated stretches. "I gotta save my energy for the day!"
At the back of the room, the female painter called, "Mo!"

Maureen got off the floor. At six feet, she was noticeably taller than the other women milling around her, and her body was better built than anyone in the room. That wasn't a surprise; her convictions came from acting as muscle for various illegal operations. While she, her boyfriend, and her brother were purportedly finished with that line of work, all of them kept up their weightlifting regimens.

At the moment, Maureen just used her height and strength to pick up the large painted sign by the dry bottom edge with one hand and hold it over the stage. The group had settled on a name for the revue: Sideshow. It was written in a playful red font on a white background enclosed in an aqua border.

John let out an "oooh" and gestured to the sight with both hands. "See! We're that much closer to ready!"

By the look on Lucia's face, she had a laundry list of reasons why that was false.

Before she could launch into them, Bruce hefted his gift a little higher to regain John's attention. "Why don't we take care of this upstairs," he suggested, "so you can get back down and work everything out?"

John clapped his hands. "Yes! Let's see what's in that thing!"

Lucia lifted her hands in a "whatever" gesture as the two men walked off.

The serving counter lined the wall to the left, and there was a door on the far end that let into the small kitchen and the office. On the nearer side, another door led to a narrow hallway and a matching narrow staircase. The hallway lined the perimeter of the building to an exit at the opposite corner, out to the side street. Renters could come in that way when the bar was locked up. The creaking staircase led up to the rooms, three units on each floor, and John and Bruce walked up two flights to 3B.

As John rattled his key in the lock, Bruce couldn't help a smile when he saw the dangling keychain. Some street vendor was making versions of the batsignal, with the black bat insignia enclosed in a yellow circle.

The door popped open and they entered. Bruce had seen the room once before. It wasn't much bigger than a room at Arkham, though of course the lone window was covered with wooden slat blinds instead of wire mesh. There was also a bathroom, albeit one of the smallest Bruce had ever seen, in the corner to the right of the window. A sink and toilet were crowded in front of the cramped shower stall at the back.

There was no kitchen— and Rosaline was adamantly against hot plates— but John had a microwave on the low bureau in front of the bathroom. A standing closet had been pushed into the corner to the right of the main door, and to the left was a mini-fridge. Around the other side of the room were a bookshelf, a twin bed, and a floor lamp in the corner. A desk sat under the window.

The bed's wrought iron frame had been left behind by the last tenant, and John liked it so he went ahead and bought a mattress for it. A twin bed saved space, but Bruce thought a full bed could fit just fine, and John could have afforded it since Bruce had given him some money for his new start. John was strangely frugal, though, finding most of the furniture in second-hand shops and on curbsides.
Decorations so far amounted to just a large round area rug John had found on an online local market. It had a bullseye pattern, with a bright blue center spot encircled with yellow, then green, then orange; it laid in the middle of the uneven wooden floor. Bruce was curious about what else John would add, having seen how he spruced up a subterranean news stand. The small pile of moving boxes left on the rug probably had a few things.

Bruce walked past the pile and set his gift on the desk. "I think you'll like this right here," he said, stepping away.

John dove in, whipping the bow over his shoulder and ripping away the first strip of paper with a flourish. He'd revealed only half the sewing machine photo when he threw up his arms with a happy shout. "Oh, buddy, this is great!"

"It probably has more bells and whistles than the machine back at New Dawn," Bruce said.

John leaned around the desk and tore down more paper to read the features listed on the side of the box. "Ha, yeah it does!" He turned and gripped Bruce in a tight, arm-trapping hug; Bruce reciprocated by patting John's waist.

"It'll probably get through those curtains faster than Adelina," he added.

"Ooh, yeah, good idea," John said. He pulled away and looked around the room. "Finally back to unsupervised living."

Footsteps sounded across the ceiling. "Yeah, just neighbors," Bruce said.

"Well, I can't overhear anything more annoying than at Arkham. Crying, screaming, begging. Like, just dissociate already!" John started ticking off his fingers. "Your throat doesn't hurt, no headaches, time no longer matters... Can't beat it, really."

Bruce put his hands in his pockets. "Uh, in your case, if you need anything, you know I'm around. Day or night."

John patted him on the cheek. "As you've said. Don't worry. I won't be interrupting your nighttime excursions." He winked.

"Even then," Bruce said. "Don't feel like you can't call me if you feel... overwhelmed." It was hard to find the right words. He wanted John to know he was important, but John didn't like being coddled.

And John didn't seem irritated, necessarily, but he did look away and shrug. "You don't have to worry about me," he said lightly. Suddenly he looked back up with a grin, raising one finger. "Especially with all this Maroni stuff going on! Did you get any leads from the tidbits I gleaned during garbage duty?"

John's community service mostly consisted of picking up litter along and under the highways coming in from the mainland. Yesterday afternoon, he'd texted Bruce that he'd overheard two fellow defendants talking about getting in with Maroni's operations.

"It's similar to other information the GCPD has collected," Bruce said. "Tiffany and I are staying on top of those two, but John, don't--"

John waved his hand. "Yeah, yeah, I know, don't get involved. I can't help it if I happen upon information!"
"While eavesdropping."

"Picking up burger wrappers and cigarette butts isn't an engaging experience."

"You're cleaning up the community."

"Exactly!" John said as if he won the discussion. "Just in a teeny little extra way, by stroke of luck." Bruce barely got out a sigh before John changed the subject again. "Speaking of community service, are you still maybe considering taking a bit of a break from your own for opening night?"

"Of course, John. I wouldn't miss it."

And Bruce wouldn't, despite the looming threat of vicarious embarrassment that comes with any amateur arts performance, which didn't even take into account his concern about the response John would get. John was usually the one laughing hardest at his jokes, so it was hard to imagine him performing for a crowd, even if he was only announcing acts. Eventually he'd come up with his own; he'd been going through something of a crash course in art, but a few months wasn't a lot of time to make up for about fifteen years restricted to broadcast television and a limited library.

Bruce checked the time on his phone. "You better get back to Lucia, and I have a meeting."

"I've got time to open this baby up first!" John chirped, already pulling up the cardboard flap.

Bruce chuckled. "Enjoy."

John threw a "thanks, bye!" over his shoulder, and Bruce felt a tug that made him pause in the doorway. John tossed chunks of styrofoam from the box to the floor, then reached in and lifted the machine out, using it to knock the still half-wrapped box off the desk. He set the machine down again and hummed happily as he inspected it with his hands. The blinds were open, letting in the sunlight.

"Oh, Bruce!" John said, suddenly turning.

Bruce's heart stopped. He'd just been standing there, lingering for no reason, and there must have been some telltale sign on his face--

"I keep forgetting to ask about that diary," John said, head cocked curiously to the side.

Oh. That. John's lack of awareness about how long Bruce had stayed behind only helped Bruce relax by a fraction. Because of all the secrets his parents could pile onto their sordid history, why did it have to be a personal account of the time?

"I haven't gotten much further into it," Bruce admitted.

John nodded sagely. "Rough subject matter," he said, then added, "Plus where's the excitement when the anticipation is over?"

"I wouldn't call it exciting."

"People say that about a lot of things, but their heart rates don't."

"I did reach out to Alfred. I'd like his thoughts on it."

John's expression went sour. "Why? He's not here." Just as quickly he recovered, looking askance and rubbing his arm. "Uh, no, I get it. It's family business."
"I really haven't read far," Bruce said. "Like you said, it's a rough subject."

"Yeah, yeah, I totally get it," John said again with a small smile. He waved Bruce off. "Don't be late for your schmoozing."

"See you, John."

John turned back to the sewing machine, and Bruce heard a delighted giggle as he headed for the stairs.

Bruce imagined that since John was the one who found the journal, he felt he deserved to hear about it. But just the first line brought up the conflict Bruce was struggling with.

I don't know if I can trust Thomas anymore.

The line cropped up unbidden in his thoughts, even in his dreams. It was what made him shove the journal in a drawer for months, but also what finally forced him to take it out and start going through it.

His mother's turmoil was not a clean analogy for his own, but Bruce would be lying if he said his trust in John was rock-solid. He knew what John could do if he was overcome by his impulses.

And the worst of those impulses had burst through, with maniacal laughter and a slashing knife, when Bruce failed John's trust in him.

That night had come up in multiple conversations, and John always told Bruce not to feel responsible. After all, John had decided to ditch the halfway house and go to Harley. John hadn't followed through with continued therapy and medication. And, of course, nobody had input in how John's brain had been wired.

But Bruce knew he had a large part in derailing John's recovery. He'd prioritized his mission over John. He'd used John to find Riddler and infiltrate the Pact, and did nothing to maneuver John out of a situation that was a blatantly terrible influence on him.

Bruce supported John the best he could now, but all the reading and professional advice he'd consumed couldn't unburden him of the feeling that he would hurt John again. After all, maintaining mental health was a lifelong project, so Bruce had plenty of time to screw up. Failure seemed inevitable; Bruce couldn't even give up Batman for Alfred, the man who raised him. Even if John was interested in a relationship, there would come a time where Bruce would have to choose again.

A good person would have followed Dr. Leland's advice from over a year ago: if Bruce couldn't be the support John needed, he should cut ties. Not for the first time, Bruce felt he wasn't as good a person as he tried to be.

Because it wasn't that, doubts about the future aside, no one could support John like Bruce did. Put like that, it sounded like John's stability was holding Bruce hostage. No, the reason Bruce didn't leave was that he didn't want to.

Reentering the bar, he paused and took in all the activity. This was the productive outlet John needed, unrelated to either committing or stopping crime. Bruce had his concerns, but now he could only see a group of people creating something together.

One of them, or all of them, could be better support for John one day. It was easy to picture the transition. John would meet more and more people who shared his interests, who could connect
with his sense of humor, who made it easier to avoid triggers for his worst impulses.

He’d need Bruce less, see him less, but that would be better for him. Like with Alfred. Alfred loved Bruce, had been a father and a friend, but that didn't shield him from the strain.

And the same would happen with Tiffany eventually. Yes, she was atoning for her revenge on Riddler, but Bruce couldn't expect it to go on forever. In the justice system he tried to honor, murder didn't automatically result in a life sentence. Two years was unlikely, but in those two years, Tiffany had dutifully followed their agreement and paid more recompense than she could have achieved while locked up.

Taking on the mission for life was a choice Bruce had made. Tiffany was still young and had such potential outside the cave– her relationships, her work at WE, and whatever opportunities came to her in the future. When the time came, Bruce wasn't going to hold her past sin over her head.

With his choice, it seemed preordained that Bruce would end up alone... but at least recognizing that gave him time to make peace with the idea.

He left All's Well before anyone could take notice of him.

As usual, Lyle Bolton entered the dim room without niceties. He took a moment to rub the side of his head, where his military haircut was closely clipped, in an apparent effort to relieve a headache. Then he tore off his bomber jacket and threw it onto the back of his chair. He sat heavily, leaning on his forearms on his knees and gritting his teeth.

Opposite sat Dr. Jonathon Crane in a straight-backed wooden chair. It was too short for him, but he crossed his gangly legs anyway and clasped his hands around his knee.

"So, Mr. Bolton, how went the conversation with your idol?" he asked.

Bolton's thunderous expression did not change, but its focus turned on the doctor. "How the hell do you think it went?"

"They do say you should never meet your heroes."

"If pithy sayings are regular in your practice, it's no wonder you ended up in a dump of a clinic."

Crane's eyes went a little dull behind his round lenses, but he did not respond.

Bolton clasped his hands tightly, as if testing if he could break his own knuckles. "Weakness is like a disease. Doesn't care what your background or accomplishments are. It just sneaks up in you."

"Do you worry it'll creep up in yourself?" The glint returned to Crane's eyes.

"Of course not!"

"You just said it didn't matter–"

"In people who can't see the world for what it is. People who put on sleeping masks and float around chugging lattes and prattering about celebrities and climbing the ladder in paper-pusher offices–"

"I'm not sure where Harvey Dent falls in these categories."
"He's been subsumed into the coddlers. He just 'needs help.' He said that. That nuthouse drained the fight out of him."

"He tried to convince you that his rampage was wrong," Crane assumed.

"It wasn't a 'rampage.' It was a revolution. It was eye-opening." Bolton sat tall. "Disappointment aside, our conversation was eye-opening, too. Somebody else has to take the reigns."

Crane attempted a companionable smile. "Mr. Bolton, while we have our differences, you have admitted that I have useful skills. It seems you need assistance, and I would be very willing--"

"Ha!" Bolton leaped to his feet. He curled his fingers in the chainlink fencing between them, rattling it. "You really do take me for a numbskull! I'll get all the help I need from you right outta there!"

Crane wasn't bothered by the outburst. He hadn't moved at all since the conversation began. "I urge you to reconsider. Our interests have crossover with such potential, and surely you don't think you can trust simpletons to handle my work nearly as well as I can. I can give you the surest results."

Bolton was silent for a moment, and Crane's smile turned smug.

Then through clenched teeth, Bolton spoke. "You fuckin' tried to gas me. After picking through my brain. You put on a homemade Halloween mask and screwed with my head." He smirked as Crane's expression faded back to apathy. "But I turned the tables, and you're not getting a chance to try a stronger dose."

"Not at the moment, no."

"I bet what really gets to you, freak, is that you won't be out there taking notes." Bolton stepped back from the fencing. "You were just one of the roaming symptoms afflicting the people of this city. You got to use a certification as sheep's clothing."

Crane turned his palms to the ceiling in an unaffected shrug. "That accreditation told me your chances at making progress in anger management were slim to none anyway."

Bolton strode to a lever he'd mounted on the wall, connected with wires to the mesh floor of the cage. With delight, he watched Crane's eyes widen. "I know."

Chapter End Notes

My posting rate for OtM was about every three weeks, so that's what I'm going for again. That said, if it turns out I can post a part sooner, I will.

Please leave a comment, because I am not above asking for validation.
Before he was back on his own in a room over All's Well, John spent several months at New Dawn Recovery Center. New Dawn was easily the nicest place John had lived; there wasn't a high bar considering the other places were a dilapidated mental institution, an abandoned amusement park, a shutdown subway station, and a toxic chemical plant, if he'd even count those few days at Axis. He definitely didn't count the series of places before Axis, when he'd spent a night on Frank's couch or on the floor of Willy's workshop or in a cozy crevice in an alley or whatever worked at the time.

New Dawn was like a well-kept apartment building, with all the residential rooms on the upper floors and the common areas on the first floor, which had not just therapy rooms but a gym, a kitchen, and a recreation room. It was all built around a courtyard with a garden and even a pool for the warmer seasons— not that John was fond of swimming after his crash course in bridge diving.

His favorite feature was the shower, because he had a sleek stall all to himself in his private room, and the temperature responded promptly to every tweak of the lever. Arkham had one large open shower monitored by guards who wanted patients in and out, whether or not the water from the shrieking pipes got a degree above glacial.

And then when John was released, he'd had sink-and-washcloth baths, whether in the decrepit bathrooms of the amusement park or the subway station. The baths were still fast, because Harley said they should always be ready to run. As funny as it would be to get caught with their pants down and shirts off and skin soapy, it wouldn't be any good for getting their job done.

No, her job.

John had just been there to follow at her heels and wait for her commands.

Yip yip.

He stood under the spray of his very first long, steaming shower, with his hands gripping the back of his neck and his arms tight against his chest so the hot cascade could envelop his entire body. The moment was supposed to be soothing, but still Harley encroached, even though he hadn't seen her for nearly two years, even when he'd moved on to mooning over someone far better.

Ruminations about Harley should be banished to sessions with Dr. Adams, who John hadn't met yet, but she already wasn't Dr. Leland. She was Leland-recommended, so she had to be better than Monroe, but still. John didn't give a fig about Leland's concerns over dependence and boundaries. Why couldn't he just have the doctor he liked best? Did he really have to explain himself all over
again?

Explain Harley all over again.

Explain how sure he'd been.

Explain how wrong he'd been.

Plus this new doctor would be curious about Bruce, too, and there was no way John wanted to get into that. It was very unlikely she would approve of John shutting the door on his emotions, even if that was the best thing. John valued his friendship with Bruce too much to express feelings the other man couldn't and shouldn't reciprocate.

And when John wished things were different, well, those thoughts were neatly compartmentalized and saved for his, uh, private time.

Which was not now. Harley and therapy were mood killers.

He backed out of the spray to finally start shampooing, and he noticed the little icons along the top of the shower head. He reached up and twisted the face, and the water pressure decreased, the spray coming out only the edges with a lighter touch. Two icons the other way, and the hard spray came back, but now with rapid shots of water out the center that banged on his chest. John laughed, and while he played with the rest of the settings, he didn't think about anything else.

New Dawn was in the Heights, one of the nicer sections of Gotham just over the bridge from the mainland quarter of the city, where Bruce and other fancy people lived. While the staff was prepared to serve residents transitioning from prison life or mental rehabilitation, John was currently the only one who fell under those categories. The other residents were coming back from bouts of drug or alcohol addiction, for the first time or the dozenth time, and most of those same people were either rich or had rich parents.

And by the way the other residents looked at John, Bruce must have used all the Wayne charm to get him in here, on top of the rent (and probably a hefty donation). It was funny, though, because the wariness worked in John's favor the same way it did at Arkham. No one wanted to give him grief, so he wouldn't find himself in tricky situations.

Finding tricky situations would be harder at New Dawn anyway. Unlike at Arkham, where Dr. Leland was in charge of dozens of patients and split her time even more with prisoners in Blackgate, John's counselor here only had a few other "clients." He had plenty of time to create a schedule for John, including weekly off-site sessions with Dr. Adams, daily group therapy, life skills classes, and the court-ordered community service.

Then there were rules, of course, but John was no stranger to following those. Plus New Dawn's rules were ultimately more lenient versions of Arkham's, the obvious difference being that he was allowed to leave and finally see the batcave (and Bruce's house) for the first time.

The only rule he found a little painful was the restricted phone access. Staff wanted to ensure you focused on your treatment and not, say, texting a buddy to sneak you meth. But that rule did change if you had a job, just because of the circumstance.

As part of John's plea deal, getting a job was another rule, but that was fine. The fuller his schedule, the more distracted he'd be from his anxieties. "Idle hands" and all that.

Of course, actually finding a job was tricky. Even if John hadn't killed several people, his resume
was sparse, so it was no surprise when his applications over the first few weeks were rejected with fearful smiles or form emails. The counselor suggested asking Bruce for help, which was hilarious. Not that John thought Bruce wouldn't help him, but Bruce had already used a load of social capital for John's benefit, not to mention gifting John a bank account with... not a rainy day fund. More like a monsoon— no, a diamond-storm-on-Jupiter fund.

But even if boatloads of money were nothing to Bruce, even if Bruce could find John some out-of-the-way position, there was a point when John wanted to take care of himself. He was not helpless. He'd handled worse circumstances alone. Besides, Bruce was John's best friend, but not his only friend.

"Funny you should ask," Frank said when John called. "I was actually just chatting with Rosie about you."

"You were?"

"Sure, I know those places get on you about employment. Rosie needs someone for upkeep at the bar, cleaning and making repairs."

John felt skeptical. "Cleaning, sure, but handyman stuff? Doesn't she have you for that?"

"You got the skills to learn. Willy made those boomerangs, but the gas pellets and grapple were mostly you, with some trial and error." Frank laughed, though there was no telling which close call he was remembering. "It won't be as exciting as working with Batman, but you could start out as my apprentice."

"A blue collar guy, huh?" John said thoughtfully.

"Rosie'd pay you in discounted rent, when you get out of that place. You'd need to make up the rest of your expenses with odd jobs, but—"

"That sounds great!" The financial side was no worry. "Aw, Frank, you're a real swell guy, you know that?"

"Hey, no problem," Frank said. Even over the phone, his cough sounded self-conscious. "Us and Willy and everyone, we all went through a lot, even if we... if we got carried away. I know my girl has spent a lot of time on your case, but I wanted to do something too, didn't want to leave you high and dry."

John swiped a thumb under his eye. "You certainly didn't!"

"No problem," Frank said again. "You know, it's not popular, but I think there are more people in your corner than you think."

Oh, John had already seen that in all the noise online and on TV. His urge to correct the record wasn't as bad as when he was accused of murdering Riddler, because this time the argument wasn't really about what John did. The hubbub was about the why, and that was harder to explain. There was no straightforward reason; there was a string of preceding events and John's illness and state-sanctioned violence and lies and panic.

And John didn't try to explain that, because it was pressed upon him by Jo, Bruce's lawyers, and Bruce that John shouldn't try to explain anything to anybody. He should leave the facts as accepted by the court. Everything else was between him and his therapist— or him and Bruce.

People weren't looking for an explanation, Bruce said. They were either looking for blame or for a
story to sell. The most John could accomplish by trying to show the layers in his story was threatening his own freedom.

That threat was easier to understand once he got back online. He immediately caved to his curiosity and poured over comment sections on stories about his release. The ways strangers talked about his story fell into two categories, the first and largest being the upsetting comments, that said John was just an animal, he wasn't worth keeping on this planet, he'd be lucky if someone only shot him in the street. The second category was more pleasant to read, but also not quite right. John was just misunderstood, he was pushing back against the Agency when no one else would, even that he didn't commit some or all of his crimes. That group liked John, but they talked with a weird arrogance, like they knew him. But they didn't. At first it was funny, but eventually it irritated him.

The noise was overwhelming; it made him feel flushed and sent his heart racing. And there was no good way for him to turn the noise off. If he did try to make his case, all the same would be thrown back at him. Dr. Leland had reminded him time and time again he had to take responsibility for recognizing his triggers.

So the limit on phone use was not so bad after all.

His time had been limited when he was busy doing Harley's bidding, too, but he did have a CamEra account. He didn't share selfies because of Harley's policy of keeping their heads down, but he did post a few things. The ring of folding chairs from the therapy circle, at its exciting start. A line of hangers along the rack at the thrift store, the fabrics creating a chaotic rainbow at the bottom of the frame. A brief video of a slushie machine dispensing its delicious wonders into his waiting cup.

John had thought he could at least get back to sharing pictures, but when he logged in again, he'd found scores of messages and comments. People had figured out the account holder's identity not long after he was arrested. The locations were good clues, but the big one was a flash of his white hand in the slushie video. The users invoked all the same sentiments as commenters anywhere else.

So he'd started a fresh account. He'd just have to try harder at anonymity.

Then while browsing Gotham-area feeds, he'd come across one with pictures of him and Bruce.

Trashy magazines had already floated the idea that he and Bruce were secret boyfriends during his second stint Arkham. At the time, John was in denial and his reaction amounted to a chuckle, and he only saw the claim a couple times. Now that he was out again, and he and Bruce had gone on quite a few outings, the theory sprouted.

In the photos from the outings, he and Bruce looked so comfortable, so happy spending time together on the outside. John could see what the account followers saw— and that's what made the pictures actually not so nice. They were misleading, because John and Bruce's relationship wasn't like that. All the supportive comments were just oblivious strangers making up stories in their heads for whatever reason. It wasn't real, just like John's silly fantasies.

John had blocked the group, but the pictures kept popping up in other feeds, and he found he got fewer stomach aches if he stayed off social media altogether.

And thank goodness Bruce never mentioned those kinds of stories. John didn't know how he'd hold it together if Bruce laughed.

John rearranged his schedule with his counselor to accommodate work, and his parole officer had no objections. Working at a bar just meant extra scrutiny to make sure he followed the sobriety
rule. (Another rule John didn't mind, considering the last time he drank had... negative associations.)

During the week it took for the bureaucratic nonsense to go through, John pored over online tutorials on plumbing, electrical work, and whatever else he could think of. He bought Frank's recommended set of tools, and he found a uniform at a thrift store. He was as ready as he'd ever be on his first day.

"You can just wear jeans and a polo or something," Frank said after John got in the truck and opened his coat to show off the blue coveralls.

"I think this really looks the part!" John replied. He fingered the stitched nametag. "Though I don't know if I look like a 'Joe.'"

Frank shrugged. "Whatever you're willing to get dirty. We're gonna be checking the pipes down in the basement."

John had passed All's Well before, but he'd never been inside. It was about the size of the Stacked Deck, but in place of the pool tables were a bunch of two-tops, and in place of the rear booths were a small stage to the left and a couple tiny restrooms to the right.

When he and Frank walked in, Rosaline was cleaning the bar. John had met her a couple times at the Stacked Deck, when she met Frank for drinks. Her initial reaction to John had been one he was accustomed to: a raised eyebrow and wary greeting. Today, she offered him a smile and reached over the bar.

"Happy to have you, John," she said.

"Thanks, Ro!" he replied with an enthusiastic handshake.

She pulled away and looked to Frank. "Before you get downstairs, you know those forms from Joanne?"

Frank nodded, and they got to talking, something about permits for a GMHA event. John was more of a satellite member than anything. While the group supported him, he didn't make the fluffiest mascot and he wasn't much for humdrum politics. His attention drifted around the room.

Close to the stage sat a young pair bent over a notepad— or rather, the man was, and the woman had swiveled her head around to stare at John. The man noticed and coughed. When she turned back to their notes, he shot John a nervous glance.

It took a second to recognize the woman. John had seen her working as a statue outside. He'd tried really hard to get her to break character, but even his best jokes didn't throw her off. Now she was in street clothes and her curly hair was black and unpinned.

Another young woman— or girl?— sitting at a catty-corner table had a strong resemblance, though her hair was woven into a braid. She focused on a large paper pad, working with colored pencils scattered over the table. John set his toolbag at Frank's feet and made his way over to take a look.

"I don't want this to be a one-time thing," the first woman said.

"Lucia," the man replied, "we have the talent to sell, we just have to sell it." He leaned back in his chair. "Ladies and gentlemen, behold the great Fire Breather!"

"We need the attention that brings people to start with."
The girl was coloring a rendition of the bar stage that had more flair, with curtains and a backdrop. The curtains were a bold turquoise, but the ropes tying them back were still white. Her hand hovered over the pencils and she chewed her lip, until suddenly she looked up. She regarded John with big brown eyes, surprised.

John tapped a gold pencil and smiled. She looked at the pencil, her drawing, then him again, and she nodded.

"I think a fire breather gets attention," the man said insistently.

"Owen," Rosaline said tersely, interrupting her conversation with Frank. "What did I tell you about fire in here?"

Lucia tilted her head back to reply. "It's a controlled spray."

"I'll keep that in mind when I get nailed for code violations."

John jumped in. "Don't bars serve drinks a la flambé? I'd sure come to see a fire artist." He laughed and drew himself up. "Ladies and gentlemen! You think you're hot to trot? Well, shield your eyebrows as you prepare to be awed by the amazing Human Flamethrower!" He made a sweeping gesture toward the stage.

Lucia attempted to drop her head back all the way before turning in her seat instead. She didn't smile, but her eyes were wide, and she whipped her head back to Owen. "What did I say!" she said.

Owen's jaw visibly clenched and he slowly shook his head. "We all talked about this--"

She waved him off and spoke to John. "You're used to a lot of attention, right?"

"Because half the city wants him in prison!" Owen exclaimed.

"And the other half doesn't." Back to John. "I don't suppose you know much about performance art?"

"Oh, yeah," Owen said, "he wants to be a freakshow spectacle."

John scratched his head. "I'm already a spectacle."

"And why not use that as an advantage?" Lucia asked. "Uh, if you wanted."

"If I wanted to what?"

"I'm sure Mr. Doe is very busy," Owen said. He looked to Frank for help. "He just started this job, right?"

"What, are you kids talking about your circus?" Frank replied.

John frowned at that.

Lucia was still staring at him. "We're looking for an emcee," she said.

Owen's face went blank. "I'm the emcee."

She made a sheepish face. "Sure," she said over her shoulder, "but we've talked about your, like, lack of presence."
By Owen's expression, that was the worst thing she could've said. He glared and slapped his hands on the table. "How about this for 'lack of presence': I am done!" He grabbed a backpack under the table and stood up. "Go fuck yourself!"

Speaking of spectacles! John giggled as Owen stalked out the door. The sketching girl was less amused; she didn't go running after Owen, but she visibly cringed.

Lucia shrugged, leaning on the back of her chair. "He never liked your designs, Adelina. No big loss. So..." She brought it back to John again. "Performance art, you know any?"

Performance art, because of this... circus? John's mirth faded and his fingers twitched at his sides. "I don't..." There was no way this had just fallen into his lap. This was just the kind of conduit for his energy that he'd talked over with Dr. Leland, the kind of thing he'd thought about when he started doing novel readings for other patients. It was too good to be true. It had to be a trick. "A circus," he repeated bitterly. "Who put you up to this?"

Lucia shrunk a little, with no immediate response.

But Frank spoke up. "Nah, John. It's just a name. Group's been around since before you and I met."

Frank had never lied to him, but... "So what?" John said testily. "That touchy guy was right. Why would you want a known killer in your art club?"

Lucia regained her confidence and replied, "Publicity, obviously."

That was not what John expected to hear.

Same for Rosaline, who burst, "Are you kidding?!" Frank's face didn't disagree.

"I wouldn't dance around it," Lucia said, chin tilted up. "And I don't see him hiding away in that rehab, so I don't think he'd want to."

"So you'd plaster posters across the city, 'come see the madman'?" Frank said tersely.

Lucia's obstinence softened. "Uh, no, but good to know you think I'm an asshole, Frank. I'm asking a genuine question here: do you want to perform? I mean, when someone's run around the city in a costume, I think it's a far bet the answer is yes."

"You're acting like this is a simple—"

"I want to," John said, his smile creeping back.

Frank's mouth clicked shut. Rosaline leaned heavily on the bar, head down. Adelina clapped quietly.

Lucia raised her eyebrows. "So you're okay with leveraging your notoriety?"

John chuckled. "It's leveraging me just about everywhere I go."

"People will expect the GMHA to comment on this," Rosaline said. "What are we supposed to say?"

"What we said already," Frank said. He still seemed uncomfortable, but he'd never pushed back on John's aspirations. "He has the right to have a life. Art's a part of that."

She looked up. "This is different."
Leaving the bar with Frank a few hours later, John felt like it had been a very constructive day. Besides being on the cusp of an artistic endeavor, he knew how to fix minor pipe leaks, repair wonky door knobs, and caulk windows.

Then, when they were a block away from Frank's truck, they stopped. Two uniformed officers leaned on the hood. The cop facing John and Frank nodded to his partner, who turned.

"Hoo boy," John said under his breath, but he strolled onward, and Frank followed. "Good day, officers!" he exclaimed when they reached the truck bed.

The first officer was younger, and his nametag identified him as Ramamurthy. Despite his casual pose, his wary eyes did not stray from John and Frank. The other cop, Benson, was older and had a more cutting gaze. The corners of his eyes crinkled from wrinkles and not his disingenuous smile.

"Lookie here," Benson said, nodding toward John's tool bag. "Joker playing at normal! Better hope a hammer doesn't end up in your skull, Frank."

John's smile vanished. "I would never--"

"No, we understand, don't we, Ramamurthy?" Benson said over his shoulder. "Sometimes things just get 'out of hand.' We wouldn't want you to take too much responsibility for a dozen corpses."

John opened his mouth with little idea of what would come out, so it was probably good that Frank grabbed his shoulder.

"He has responsibility," Frank said. "He served time just like me, and we're both still in the system."

"Bet those families are soothed by the thought of him spending a few hours picking up trash," Ramamurthy said.

"And what's it gonna help to harass us?"

"We're doing our jobs and keeping an eye on our neighborhood."

"And just happened to take a break at my truck."

"Word gets around," Benson said. "We like to verify who's coming and going, be on the lookout for troublemakers."

"Then you should be glad there aren't any here," Frank said.

"Until your pal snaps again," Ramamurthy said.

Benson smirked. "Or maybe we'll get ahead of that, find illegal contraband in your bag."

John felt a familiar combination of indignance and rage rising. He snarled at Benson's stupid smug smirk, then turned the look on Ramamurthy. But the younger officer's eyes were on his partner and narrowed slightly.
Frank stayed vocal. "Now look here–"

"Sure, we'll look!" Benson replied.

John's heart pounded. Were they really going to plant something on him right now? But of course, why not? What was stopping them?

*The neon lights of the funhouse. Hands up. Echoing shots.*

Ramamurthy pushed off the truck, his thumbs stuck in his pockets. "Benson, I'm not in the mood for bullshit. He's gonna screw up. We'll nail him then."

Benson looked annoyed, but then the smirk returned. "Yeah, I bet Wayne's lawyers could help him wriggle out of an airtight jar."

"Exactly." Ramamurthy nodded at Frank. "See you around."

The officers didn't look back as they walked away. John breathed rhythmically and listened to the thudding in his chest slow. Frank stood very still beside him. After a minute, he reached over and took John's bag. He tossed it and his own tool box into the truck bed. They got into the cab, and Frank rested his head and arms on the steering wheel, staring through the gap at the speedometer. John slumped on the other end of the bench seat.

He wanted to make a joke, but he couldn't stop thinking about the curling path of the funhouse and the swirling light projected on the wall, how he'd lost his footing and grabbed a rail and heard a bullet whiz over his head.

Frank sat up. "At least they're right about Wayne. Keep your nose clean, and he should be able to get you out of trouble."

John snorted and hunched forward. "They could get me for jaywalking." He brought his fist down on the dashboard. "I don't want Bruce to have to take care of me!"

Frank hummed in agreement. "Still, not sure what you can do. Cops are definitely not going to like you as a spectacle."

John could think of lots of messy ways to handle people who couldn't let well enough alone– but that wasn't who he was going to be. He was better again, and he had to keep being better, and he couldn't go back to a cage. He wasn't noble and compassionate like Bruce, but he could think of his own nonfatal solutions. He'd done it before.

"I'll think of something," John grumbled, filing away Ramamurthy's spark of reticence.

---

Bruce was not as excited as John about Lucia's offer. He was especially not excited to learn how up front she'd been about wanting publicity, but John and Bruce never really had the same standards for propriety.

John did not tell Bruce about the encounter with the cops. Like it would have been news anyway. You didn't accidentally kill a few men in blue and expect the favor of their peers.

He started a second ongoing training montage with Lucia, alongside the one with Frank. She wanted to see what his interests and potential were art-wise, other than drawing attention to himself, and help him expand. He had her added to his visitor list at New Dawn (much to the receptionist's surprise), though they'd mostly see each other at the bar.
The weekend after they met, she visited for the first time. In his room, John showed her an assortment of projects he'd started in the activities room: a crocheted potholder, a knitted hat, and a framed cross-stitched quote. ("Fortune favors the grave.")

"We did a lot of crafts in Arkham," John said as he opened the closet. "I mean, if you were okayed for safety scissors." He pulled out two dress shirts, one teal with a white scalloped pattern and the other solid eggplant.

Lucia took the teal one. "You made clothes?" she asked, examining the sleeves. John had switched the shirts' cuffs.

"Well, we made little things, like dolls or potholders. We just fixed clothes, but this one instructor told us she made all her dresses, and I thought that sounded great!" With a smile, John held the purple shirt up to his chest. Then he looked up earnestly. "The Arkham dress code gets stifling after the first two or three years."

"I'll bet."

"Right, so I'm definitely working up to full outfits."

Lucia fingered the stitch work. "Adelina makes fun of me 'cause I can barely mend a popped hem. Were you thinking of making your costume?"

"Like from scratch?"

"I mean, worse comes to worst we can ditch that idea and fix up ready-made clothes like this. Everyone already does that based off Adelina's ideas."

There was about four months before the revue opened, but given John's schedule, making a full outfit in that time— for the first time— bordered on ludicrous. "I'll give it a try."

"Go for it," Lucia said. "After all, an emcee is the centerpiece so you should look as unique as possible." She looked up at his face. "Though you're most of the way there."

John snickered. "It's a natural talent."

She handed the shirt back. "The Circus is meeting at the end of the month, so you can meet everyone. Some people aren't part of the revue, but you'll get a fuller picture of the local art scene."

"I'm already getting some of that!" he said excitedly as he stuffed the shirts back in the closet. "For Bruce's birthday, we're seeing that show opening at the Aoide Theater, the touring one."

"What, Hamilton?"

"That's the one!"

She rolled her eyes. "I'm sure everyone and their dowager mother will be there."

John cocked his head. "Isn't it supposed to be good?"

"I'm not saying it isn't. I just... There's all kinds of other shows infused with just as much talent that get ignored."

He grinned. "Because they're bad?"

Her shoulders went tense, but after a second she sighed. "Fine, yeah, they can be bad. But there are
gems out there most people miss because they don't make it to Park Boulevard."

Even before the limo rolled to a complete stop, flashes went off beyond the tinted windows. Barriers held back the crowd on either side of the bright red carpet stretching from the theater doors to the curb, underneath the lights of the wide canopy. Each time someone wandered from the herd into the street, security urged them back on the sidewalk. A town car had just pulled away after letting out a snazzily dressy couple, who posed for the cameras with glowing, practiced visages.

John watched them, leaning forward to look out the window on Bruce's side of the limo's rear seat. "Is this really a big deal?" he muttered.

"It's a beloved show, drawing the Gotham elite like moths," Bruce said. "You should get used to this if you'll be in a show yourself. People are going to... react."

"They'll react in a minute," John said. Bruce usually brought a lovely lady to events, so the appearance of his "ghoulish green-haired friend" (one of the least rude descriptions John had read) was going to be a surprise.

Speaking of usually, Bruce's birthday usually called for a ridiculous, scandalous party at the manor, with people ending up half-naked in the front fountain even though it was almost midnight in the middle of February. This would be the second year Bruce decided to skip it. Last year, he'd told John that while Alfred always hired a party planner to handle the event, there was still a lot of decision-making that Bruce didn't want to be bothered with, which John was one-hundred-percent sure meant "I'm already dealing with too many reminders that Alfred left."

John assumed this year's lack of party was for the same reason, though it seemed short-sighted. The parties were supposed to be part of the socialite smokescreen that kept Bruce Wayne off the list of suspects for Batman's true identity. Sure, Bruce probably didn't look forward to spending a lot of time with people who barely knew him, but John had been looking forward to seeing a real extravaganza. When John was less distracted next year, he'd convince Bruce to have one.

The driver had gotten out, and now he opened Bruce's door. "Showtime," Bruce said.

He stepped out of the limo in a smooth movement, waving to the shouting reporters and lookie-loos. He looked back at John with that tabloid smile, too at ease, too harmless. John couldn't do the same; everybody knew he wasn't harmless.

John ran his hands over imaginary wrinkles in his suit, much more polished and fitted and colorful than what he'd worn to court. Since this was a Society Event, Bruce had taken him to a tailor. Auguste, a bespectacled man in shirtsleeves with measuring tape draped over his neck, hadn't been nearly as leery of John as most people. He'd just gone through the motions, showing an array of suits in black and navy blue. After a brief discussion, Bruce naturally went with black in a glossy wool, with a black belt, bowtie, and shoes to match. The one-button jacket had a shawl lapel and a single vent, and would go over a crisp white shirt.

The ensemble would look perfect on Bruce, of course, but then the clothier had asked which of the selection John preferred.

John's response had been, "Uh... got anything you couldn't wear to a funeral?"

Bruce had that slightly anxious look on his face that signaled John had said something awkward, but Auguste lit up. He asked them to wait and dashed behind a linen curtain. Over the sound of
hangers squeaking along metal bars, John reassured Bruce that the black was totally fine, and then Auguste reappeared with bright, plastic-sheathed options slung over his back.

He'd hung them up for John to see—bird's egg blue, a bold plaid, a deep plum—and it was a floral-patterned cashmere that snagged John's attention, mostly pale pinks blended with purples and burgundies. Auguste seemed even happier when John said he'd wear the pattern for both the pants and the jacket (notch lapel, single vent, two buttons), and they decided on an orchid shirt and white accessories.

When Auguste prepared to take John's measurements, he'd murmured, "Maybe you could get Mr. Wayne to take a few fashion risks."

Maybe if Bruce had that party...

"You look great."

John came back to himself with a start. Bruce waited outside the car, one arm pressed along the top of the door as he leaned down, the opposite hand in his pocket. His debonair smile was encouraging and bright and aimed right at John. The black suit fit him as perfectly as expected, following the lines of his broad shoulders, pulling in at the waist to hint at his sculpted torso, hugging his powerful legs just right. This must have been how Bruce looked on dates.

But this was not a date, John admonished himself as he slid across the seat and onto the carpet. John was here because he was Bruce's friend and had never seen any stage show, and all the cameras were flashing because not only was Bruce famous but John was a notorious surprise. There was a swell in the noise when he appeared, and he tried to act casual as he fastened the top button on his jacket.

The red carpet only went a short distance, but Bruce ambled and paused to call kind words to a reporter he recognized. John scanned the onlookers and saw a wall of phones and cameras, some people leaning toward each other to say things he couldn't hear under the din, others yelling for Bruce and John to look their way.

Bruce turned John to the left and gestured to the reporter he'd singled out. "How about a picture?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure," John said. He was all dressed up after all. He'd gelled back his hair and done what he thought was a great makeup job. He'd picked an icy pink eye shadow and—after a nondebate with Bruce, who was no help at all—decided against cat's eye and kept his eyeliner natural with his mascara. That was all to balance out the boldness of his burgundy lipstick, which was on the list of things John was definitely not nervous about.

Bruce posed casually with his hands in his pockets, and it really was ridiculous how he could be so effortlessly cool. With a chuckle, John mimicked him, openly trying match that self-possessed air, the way Bruce held his head and shoulders. The ripple of laughter from the crowd was unexpected, and John's smile faltered, but only for a moment. The laughter wasn't mocking; it had a knowing tone, recognizing what John was doing. It was unusual to be laughed with, but absolutely welcome.

Bruce laughed too, and he patted John on the shoulder and they moved on. They paused at the theater threshold while an usher scanned their tickets.

Then a photographer standing at the end of the barrier on John's right asked loudly, "Hey, John, in fighting a greater power, what do you think you accomplished over Hamilton?"
And this tone was clearly mocking. It wasn't the worst question a paparazzo had thrown at him— to get a reaction, Bruce had explained, for a better selling picture— but still, it was rude. John was supposed to just ignore it, but where did this squash-faced jerk get off trying to screw up the nice moment he just had? John could feel apprehension radiating from Bruce, but it didn't temper the need to lash back.

First of all, there was an obvious answer. "He's dead!" John responded with a bright smile, one that was about to get a whole lot brighter.

Because second of all... John forgot the second of all, because laughter sparked around the crowd again. A couple of people nearby flashed the pap smug looks, like he was the foolish one, because John had retorted so quickly.

Bruce urged John along, and John made sure to stick his tongue out at the rude man before they passed into the lobby. They merged into the theatergoers, some who did double-takes and proceeded to pretend they didn't see John at all, and others who were apparently oblivious.

"He was a charmer," Bruce said, "but all things considered, that went well."

"You were worried?" John asked as they headed for a carpeted flight of stairs on the lobby's left side.

"Sometimes at these things, you get--" Bruce cut himself off, thinking for the first few steps up up. He finished, "Very intense people."

John chuckled. "Don't worry. If the 'crazies' show up, I can handle them. They're my people."

"I wouldn't use that word."

John shrugged. "I can deal with it."

"Not from me."

The urge to trap Bruce in a hug on the second-floor landing was strong, but John managed to resist. Instead, they followed the arc of the hallway toward their private box.

Bruce suddenly put his hand on John's arm and pulled him aside. He leaned in and said quietly, "At ten o'clock, that's Veronica Vreeland."

John leaned in, too, feeling delightfully conspiratorial. He spotted Ms. Vreeland right away, not just because he'd seen her picture. A tall curvy redhead, she was dressed to kill in a white, high-necked mermaid gown with her glossy hair pulled into a French twist. Her flirty gaze evaluated three men vying for her attention; with a bell-like laugh, she patted one's shoulder, and the other two visibly wilted.

John let out a low whistle. "Well, at least it took a bombshell to blow my story away!"

"She looks eager to move past her divorce," Bruce said.

Veronica suddenly perked up, stretching her arm high in the air and waving. "Bruu-uuce!"

"I think she wants your help," John said, waggling his eyebrows.

"She has enough right there," Bruce said through a fake smile in her direction. He waved back and tapped an imaginary watch on his wrist before leading John through the curtains to their box.
The box sat four, but Bruce had bought it out. They sat in the two forward seats— or rather, Bruce sat and John stood at the railing to look around the theater. The stage was framed by wooden scaffolding accessible by staircases on either side, and in the floor, the circular outlines of the specially designed turntable were visible. The proscenium arch and the rest of the theater were decorated in marble and gold, and the seats were upholstered in red velvet, mostly obscured by the crowd. There had to be more than a thousand people down in the orchestra, on the mezzanine, and higher up in the balcony.

The mezzanine was level with John and Bruce's box, but the only people who'd noticed him so far were two teenage girls in the closest seats. They managed to stare at him and feverishly text at the same time, and John thought about asking what they were saying. Then the house lights dimmed twice, drawing his attention upward.

"The show is starting soon," Bruce explained.

"Oh, I have something for you!" John exclaimed as he plopped into his seat. He reached inside his jacket and unveiled a greeting card.

Bruce should be getting tired of cards, but once again that small pleased smile came onto his face— a real smile, not the light and airy one for the cameras.

"This one definitely needs to be kept to myself," Bruce chuckled. The front featured a drawing of Batman, arms out to unfurl his cape, perched in the lighting rig over a stage. "Today someone else will be waiting in the wings!" went the caption, and the inside wished him a "Happy Birthday." (John's signature was preceded by the usual hyphen, after struggling to decide if he should switch to "love," because friends loved each other, but...)

"And a surprise," John said, going into his pants pocket this time. He turned away and put the gift in his left hand, cupping his right hand over it. The he turned back and lifted his hands in front of Bruce's face. "Ta da!" He popped his right hand like it was on a hinge, revealing a bowtie with a gold paisley design over a gradient of dark to light blue.

Bruce shook his head, but he chuckled. "Great, you're conspiring against me with my tailor."

"Not conspiring! Suggesting!" John put on an indifferent air. "I can always return it."

"No," Bruce said, taking the tie from John's hand. "I can take criticism." He undid his black bowtie with a tug.

John watched with delight as Bruce put the new tie on— though it took a couple minutes. John could have done it for him in a snap, but it was funny to watch him struggle.

Finally Bruce turned his collar back down. "How's that?"

"It's... fine." Okay, it wasn't fine. John finally reached over to fiddle with it.

Bruce's expression went wooden. "Somehow I can never get it right, not like Al could."

Alfred should still be the one doing this, in John's opinion. Bruce said he wasn't mad about Alfred leaving, but he was definitely hurt by it, which made it a weird move on Alfred's part. Being Batman was who Bruce was, and weren't parent figures supposed to support who you were? It didn't seem like Alfred really understood Bruce, but Bruce said Alfred understood too well, and that's why it got too hard for him to watch Bruce go out each night. Well, it wasn't too hard for John; he'd do his best to pick up the slack.
John pulled back with satisfaction. "Well, now it's just right! Which means..." He reached into his jacket again.

"I can't imagine," Bruce said.

"Birthday selfie!" John cheered, holding his phone in front of their faces.

They leaned shoulder-to-shoulder, and to John's relief, Bruce's smile reappeared. He snapped the picture just before the house went dark.

"Are you okay?"

John blinked, now registering the brightness from the streetlights and business fronts trying to pierce the darkened limo windows. He turned to Bruce, whose eyebrows were drawn together in concern.

"What?" John said.

"It looked like you enjoyed it, but... I know the ending was rough."

The ending? Oh, sure, it couldn't have been fun for the lead sucker to get shot, but what a way to go! Surrounded by darkness in a cone of light, an audience struck silent by your soliloquy, relating your hopes and regrets. Wow.

And that was just a few minutes. The preceding hours had built up to those minutes, with other hushed moments flowing in and out of commotions of dance and song, in swirls of costumes and swells of light, buoyed by the audience's laughter and cheers.

The weightlessness in John's gut was like what he'd felt when he joined Bruce's crusade. The second half of that night was a wash, but the part where he'd been subsumed into a role, a purpose, had cleared away his uncertainties. Those doubts were still in play when he'd joined the Circus, but now he was reminded how much of an opportunity it was to find that free feeling again. And this time it could end with applause.

If he worked hard, of course. If he could navigate the consequences of the night that ended in bitter, wild laughter. But he had time to learn, to gather inspiration, to prove himself.

And, while he was at it, to come up with costumes as fantastic as that magenta satin tailcoat.

Bruce was still looking at him, and John finally answered, "I think that was everything I ever wanted."

John's mind was still abuzz with possibility over a week later, as he and Lucia stood at the head of a bare-walled room in the neighborhood rec center. About thirty people sat in rows of metal folding chairs. A card table against the wall was scattered with cases of soda, bags of chips, and some hummus.

"I can see we're down some people," Lucia said. "It's worth repeating: this isn't a debate. If you're uncomfortable with John, you're free to go."

After a moment, one, two, three people stood. They seemed to expect a larger exodus, and when no one else got up, they left awkwardly. Apparently they were no one Lucia cared that much about. She moved right along.
"Alright, since we're considering the lineup for the All's Well show, let's kill two birds with one stone. Everyone come up and introduce yourself. Let's start with people not in the show, then everyone doing backstage work to explain what you're doing. Then everyone who wants to perform can give us a demo."

John hadn't expected a whole presentation, and it was quite fun. He and Lucia sat off to the side while everyone came up. People who sat out the revue included a pair working on a ginormous mural in Otisburg, a ceramist whose wares were popular at the Robinson Park market, and a graphic designer in charge of the Circus web presence. Then Adelina came up with a few others and explained in the briefest terms that their primary job was costumes, though most everyone chipped in. It was the first time John had heard her speak, and her voice was soft and careful. Then there were a couple more painters who'd be working on set pieces and flyers.

Then came the third group in a mini recital: dancers, singers, acrobats, a contortionist, a juggler, and of course the fire breather, Lian. Unfortunately there had been a "prior incident," and Lucia had promised Parks and Rec that Lian wouldn't demonstrate indoors again. He did show off some twirling tricks with his unlit torch, though he was in the show by default. A four-person band—consisting of a saxophone, drums, keyboard, and bass guitar—was also already in, to supply live music.

John provided the loudest applause for each act (except when he moped after watching Lian). Lucia wrote on a notepad throughout, starring some people and striking out others, penciling what looked like the potential set list on the side. At one point, John yoinked the pencil and switched the places of the juggler and a singer. She seemed annoyed but didn't change it back.

The last performers were a woman and two men who John had noticed right at the start of the meeting. The trio had clustered in the back corner and repositioned their chairs so they could sit together more comfortably, but their bulk still made them look crowded. Their muscles didn't rival Bane's, but their builds were still larger than Bruce's.

The woman introduced herself as Maureen, who had been a member for a year, and then she introduced the men, who were new. The one on her right was her brother, Chuck, who shared her blonde and blue-eyed coloring. The man on her left was her boyfriend, Lorenzo, brown-skinned and shaggy-haired. They were happy to serve as gofers, but of course they knew an array of strongman stunts.

For instance, Chuck removed his belt and secured it around his chest just under his arms. His sister faced him and slipped her hand under the strap at the center of his chest, then bent at the knees. With her arm locked straight, she steadily stood and turned the rest of her body, lifting Chuck up behind her shoulder.

That act was definitely John's favorite. With the recital ended, there was some open time during which Adelina would pass out costume ideas and Lucia would ask certain people to tutor John. John probably should have followed Lucia around the room, but he instead made a beeline for the brute squad. They'd returned to the back corner to stretch.

"That was super impressive!" John said, marveling at their physiques up close.

"Will we be asked to start weight training with you?" Lorenzo asked.

John's laugh sputtered. "I don't have the time to keep up!" He noted Lorenzo's arms. "Though, uh, I bet you have no trouble keeping anyone up, heh."

"He does not," Maureen said pointedly.
"And neither would you!" John snickered, putting his hands behind his back and bowing a little. "Just an observation."

"But in other ways," Chuck said deliberately, "are our talents what you're looking for?"

"Oh, they'd be great for the show!" John exclaimed. "Lucia has the executive decision, but I'm sure you'll make it." He winked.

The three looked at each other, then over at Lucia, then back to John.

"Yeah," Chuck said, more quietly now, "but we were curious..."

"If you had any plans," Maureen said.

"Plans?" John repeated.

"It's not really a secret," Lorenzo said, "but we used to be muscle for not very nice people."

"Not nice at all," Chuck echoed.

The three continued, talking in a round.

"We could do better tricks than that because of the steroids they'd sell us."

"Nasty stuff."

"But we're long done with that."

"And with some distance, we see the real damage."

"Not just to us."

"We thought, wouldn't it be great if the city was done with it, too?"

"Especially with Maroni coming back."

"Batman's been out there doing something more."

"Hard not to wonder if you could be doing something too, you know?"

"So if you and Batman--"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" John interrupted, and half the room turned to stare. John waved them off nervously, then beckoned the muscle closer. They formed a tight circle, Maureen between the other two. "There is no 'me and Batman,'" he said, which was kinda true. He hadn't seen Bruce caped and cowled since the summer abduction. "Vigilantism and I did not mix well."

Chuck shrugged. "Yeah, things ended sideways, but that doesn't mean you didn't do any good."

Maureen punched his shoulder. "Sideways?" she hissed.

"We don't gotta dredge up the whole mess," Chuck said defensively.

"Yeah," John said, "because good ol' Officer Benson is already on it! So my 'plan' is to keep my head down and him off my back."

"Benson?" Lorenzo said. "He's a nasty guy. He doesn't have business picking anybody up."
"I don't think I met that one," Maureen said.

"I'm surprised he didn't get swept up when the commissioner cleaned house."

Maureen rolled her eyes. "There's lots who didn't."

John waved his hands for attention, looking at Lorenzo. "Waaaiiiit waitwaitwait. What do you mean?"

Chuck snorted. "He means you gotta be an Enforcer blowing up city blocks to get fired from the GCPD. Anything else, the union and Internal Affairs can sweep under the rug."

Lorenzo nodded. "Benson's got an old rep. He got bought off often in the Falcone days, only to lose his payments to his gambling habit. And habits stick. With the mob gone, he had to get creative in paying off bookies, and now with Maroni on the upswing looking for favors... Let's say I wasn't surprised to hear about those failed GCPD raids on the news."

John rubbed his hands together contemplatively. "So you think Benson is in contact with Maroni goons..."

Maureen's eyebrows went up. "We have lots of inside tidbits, if you want help stopping--"

"I just like a good story," John said quickly. "That's why I joined this art collective." He gestured at the trio. "Isn't that why you joined? You're out of the game and into being responsible citizens!"

"Sure," Maureen replied, "but when I heard you were emcee..."

"We wanted to meet you," Lorenzo said. "I mean, you're easier to get in touch with than the Bat."

"And you obviously know how to take the lead," Chuck said almost morosely. "That's not really our forte."

John couldn't help a cackle. Take charge for barely more than two weeks of your life, and apparently some people would think it was your nature. Sheesh. He managed to collect himself while the three exchanged confused looks.

"Ah ha... look, my colossal companions," he said, patting Chuck and Lorenzo's shoulders and winking at Maureen, "I'll lead you– in making this revue the best it can be! Understand?"

They seemed disappointed but nodded.

John retrieved his phone from his back pocket. "But I do enjoy stories, so give me your numbers for when I'm in the mood for more local history."

Chapter End Notes

Yup. John is just looking for a regular ol' civilian life. Nothing to see here or in chapter 3.
... In So Many Pieces

Chapter Notes

I had to finish this chapter off on my phone, so here's hoping nothing got wonky.

Also, not every update is going to be this long. So I say, knowing that this and chapter 2 were originally supposed to be one part.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Before the forecasted snowpocalypse at the start of March, Frank had taken John through a checklist to ensure All's Well and the residents above would make it through the storm just fine. So when the storm hit, John got his first snow day from work!

Unfortunately, instead of playing in the blizzard, John had to revert to a day of standard New Dawn programming. That included a typical phone schedule, which allowed an hour before lunch, which John naturally used to call Bruce and complain — and to check up on how his buddy was spending the day, of course. (Down in the cave, naturally. Crime didn't take snow days.)

As the hour neared its end, the conversation took a turn that had John staring out his window at the whiteness engulfing the courtyard. He tried to imagine the swirling snow drawing away his disappointment and embarrassment.

"Honestly, John, I would love to have you there," Bruce was saying. "You would be a breath of fresh air. But it's not the same as going to a show. We're trying to get investment from these people, and they're the type who prefer the idea of altruism to confronting the realities of the causes they support."

The Wayne Foundation was planning a June gala to bring in partners to invest in Gotham's social services. Bruce wanted more help not just for Arkham, but for expanding support for outpatient health clinics, transitional living programs, and other community services. It was important that Bruce wasn't the only one leading the effort, for longevity and to neutralize suspicions that he was up to his dad's hijinks.

And Bruce had always been charitable, but he'd noticeably upped his efforts when he got to know John better. So wasn't it obvious that John should be at the gala? He could wear another tailored suit, and his makeup would be even more on-point, and maybe all those hoity-toity jerks would see...

"I get it," John said tightly. "It was silly to assume anyway."

"No, it wasn't," Bruce said quickly. "You're my friend. I'm sorry about this."

"It's not your fault people are... are stupid," John said. "Especially those people. They mix with criminals all the time, you know? But they're the right kind of criminals, the right breed."

He rested his forehead against the cold glass. The snow was just a blur now.

"Councilman Hartford beats his girlfriends," he said bitterly, "and he's still a man about town. One of the police captains pushed for new tasers, because he was invested in the company selling them,
and they were faulty and fried people. Superintendent Jeffords, she embezzled school funds for years while ignoring complaints about abusive teachers. Those aren't people who black out. They aren't trying to do better."

"Are you trawling news archives?" Bruce asked. "The taser scandal was years ago."

"And Captain Montgomery just retired with his pension intact. People should write about those things, shouldn't they?" Instead, there were countless headlines about the ReeVree divorce, and still quite a few articles about John, most wondering if (when) he'd go on another spree.

"They should," Bruce conceded. "I know it's unfair, but people can still make positive change in the face of it. Don't let it distract you from your progress."

"Yeah, yeah, focus on what you have control over, not what you don't. Thanks, doc."

"If I'm echoing Dr. Adams, that's fine with me. But really, John, don't get bogged down in the negative."

"I'm not the only one bogged," John said. "Chuck said when he used to work down at the docks, it was one of his buddies who got zapped and died."

"Oh, the docks, huh?" Bruce said curiously.

"Oh, huh?" John mimicked with a chuckle. He pulled away from the window and hopped up onto his bureau. "Don't act like you haven't checked up on all my new compatriots, Bruce."

"I, uh..."

"So bashful! I'd do the same thing if I were you. You know how many weirdos are in this town. Hahaha!"

"Well... yeah."

John wasn't happy about the gala, but it was nice to be reminded that Bruce did care. He swung his legs a little. "Don't you worry. Everyone in the Circus is highly interested in keeping to the straight and narrow! Legally, I mean."

"If I worry, I'll let you know," Bruce said dryly.

John checked the time, then brought the phone back to his ear. He pouted at the window. "I hope I can make at least one snowman before this melts."

"That'll take a while, so I don't see why not. Maybe next time you're over."

"How many snowmen would it take to surround the manor?"

"Way more than we could build before I had to get you back to the Center."

"Hmm, plus it's a matter of priorities. I did want a closer look at your library."

"No late fees."

"Say, what about your reading? My subterranean discovery?"

"The journal," Bruce acknowledged uneasily.
"I thought I would've gotten an update by now, and been back to your house." John sighed. "I can't wait until I make my own schedule."

"I'm sure we can arrange something soon."

"We never got to the attic. You can't tell me there's no attic."

"You didn't see it because it's an attic."

"We can look under the floorboards for more secrets! Like the one you're avoiding right now, hoping I change the subject."

"I put the journal away. I'm pretty occupied with work right now. I need to give it my full attention."

Ah, one of those true-enough lies.

There came a rapping. At John's cracked door, a smiling attendant tapped her watch.

John rolled his eyes when she slipped away. "I gotta turn in my phone and get to the kitchen."

"More life skills?"

"Eggs three ways! When I come over, I'll whip you up a breakfast buffet."

Lucia followed through on taking John to offbeat theater. He didn't realize she'd been speaking literally.

The show, at a midtown blackbox theater, wasn't really a musical, but it wasn't just a play, because there was singing involved but not actual songs, at least not to John's ears. The protagonist was... dead? Or dreaming? Maybe both, and he was stuck at his funeral where he lamented over all the lamentations. He seemed upset that no one understood him in life, but to John it just sounded like a severe communication problem, especially since the protag's complaints sounded like a dying whale over the smashing of a solitary drum.

John wasn't sure if the show actually ended or if Lucia had pulled him out because he wouldn't stop laughing.

She was a positive thinker in her own way. On the train back to the Village, she tried to get him to identify parts of the show that could maybe be considered not terrible.

"The lead did have good control over his voice," she said.

"You call that control?" John launched into his best imitation, pressing his gloved hand flat to his chest and stretching out his opposite arm. A couple non-headphoned passengers turned to stare at him.

Lucia ducked in her seat. "Oh my god, that's worse!"

John stopped and crossed his arms. "I never had a future at the Met, but you don't have to be mean," he said with a glare.

“Oh, come on,” Lucia said, getting up as the train pulled into their stop. “You've been busting on that guy for the past fifteen minutes.”
Grumbling, John followed her out and down to the street. The season had been in full gear after the storm, and they were bundled in coats, scarves, and gloves. Mounds of snow lined either side of the cleared sidewalk. They started back to All's Well; John needed to grab his tools there before making curfew.

"There's always talk-singing," Lucia offered. "You've got other talents anyway." She looked him up and down. "You show this look to Bruce yet?"

Bruce wouldn't have been surprised by John's puffy insulated coat, colored with blocks of purple, orange, and blue. It was the peachy skin and mud-colored hair that would've taken him aback.

It took almost a couple hours' work to get the makeup to look right, catching details like the crevices of his ears. The hair color could look better. It was more of a brown paste than anything, but John could pull it off as a thick gel swiped through natural brown hair.

He'd actually been working on a natural make-up for himself, blending white face paint with this and that to create something the same shade but less pasty. Even the palest commercial foundations didn't work for him, but he used them for research. When he put some "warm ivory" on the back of his hand, it occurred to him that he could wear it if he needed to. Like if he wanted to decrease the risk of being kicked out of anywhere with a low level of "Joker"-friendliness.

"This is my test run," John said, "but I don't need to wear it around Bruce. There are usually palms that want greasing when he's around."

"That's all it takes?"

"So far. Maybe I should save him the cash and do this all the time."

"No."

Lucia's response was quick and aggravated. John looked over and she glared back, not at him really, but at what he'd said. Then she coughed into the confines of her scarf and looked away.

"It's your life," she said more casually. "I'm just saying... We all fall into whatever roles, but you should play yours the way you want."

Just another clue about the chip on Lucia's shoulder. He suspected her aunt and uncle wielded the axe, but while she was more talkative than her sister, she wasn't much for disclosure. The one time he'd asked how the fam was, she'd wrinkled her nose, thrown a pretzel at him, and asked how his costume was going.

But there was another subject he'd been meaning to dig around in.

He had no good segue, so he drove the spade right in. "Sooooo are you still dating Lauren?"

Poor little jailbird. Lauren's recordings helped get John out, yet she was still serving time. He should really write her a letter or something.

"What?" Lucia said, annoyance returning.

"Frank said you guys dated."

"Yeah, past tense, as in over and done with."

"But you stayed art pals."
"What does it matter to you?"

"It doesn't." They passed under a bodega awning, and John knocked down some icicles and watched them break on the sidewalk. "A guy just gets to wondering how those clips got released."

Lucia huffed. "Yeah, those Agency creeps had a lot of questions about Lauren's video habits, but I'm not her keeper, and they're an omniscient entity. Obviously they could get into her apartment and analyze her computers just fine."

"Except nobody found out who sent those videos to the press."

She shrugged.

He hummed thoughtfully. "Lauren had strong anti-authoritarian inclinations. She worried it was closing her off from the world, but we had some good talks about how skepticism can be healthy! Besides, a lot of people in this town have the same ideas. I bet that was something she looked for in a lady."

Lucia looked at him in her peripheral. "Maybe." She rolled her eyes. "There are varying degrees. Some people, it feels like they hope they'll see police brutality so they can catch it on tape and be a hero. So they film almost all the goddamn time." A pause. "That's not fair. She was also trying to get B-roll, or film day-in-the-life kind of stuff. But that kind of person has contingencies so they don't lose their footage."

"And she did get something good," John said, thinking of Waller's incriminating words.


John shrunk into his coat. "We weren't our best selves that night."

"That's saying the least."

He stopped walking, frustrated, trying to think of what to say. He wasn't supposed to get into "what happened," but obviously it bothered Lucia. Was he just supposed to act like he didn't notice? Then what would she think? "I was angry, and I didn't... I'm not going—"

She turned and gave him a bored look. "If I thought you'd murder me, I would've ran out of the bar as soon as you showed up. I made my assessment of all the stories about you just like everyone else in this town."

"Okay," was all John said, because she still sounded a little upset.

Her expression did give way to something uneasy. "You and Lauren and the others, you paid a price. It was obvious that you would, even before I thought to check her cloud. And yeah, I saw the full recording. I sat with it for a long time."

Six weeks, John remembered. That's how long it was between his arrest and the broadcasts.

"I had that, and the official reports in the press, but there was more. Lauren mentioned you to me, when you were hanging around the Stacked Deck. She said you were good listener, that your perspective gave her some clarity. And after everything went down, other people passed around stories. Some of them wrote you off as a lunatic, but a lot thought you were just a weirdo who got in a bad scene, and got pushed too far, even before the virus stuff came out." She burrowed into her coat. "And it's strange, but the more I watched that video, the more I could see what they saw, and"
what Lauren saw."

John had long wondered if Lauren kept filming after he absconded with Waller onto the higher catwalks. The clips on TV had all been from the bottom level of the plant, but that didn't mean there wasn't any action or yelling caught from below that had been edited out.

He had his answer. With how that night spiraled out of control, how he'd let it, there was no way someone normal like Lucia could have seen that part and still want to be around him.

Lucia went on. "I knew that after everything, the Agency would just get paperwork, and yeah, that pissed me off. And maybe I reached out to Lauren's paranoid hacker friends, and things were taken care of." She narrowed her eyes. "And maybe the cloud account is nuked, so if you blab to anyone, they'll still have to prove it."

"Why would I tell anyone?" John laughed.

"For all I know, you've still got some kind of connection with Batman, and he seems the hardliner type."

It was safest to shrug at that, at all the things she didn't know, and give her a smile. "Well, Lauren isn't here to say it, but you certainly have my thanks for throwing Waller off her game!"

"I didn't do it for Lauren. I did it for the truth."

He giggled.

Lucia exhaled loudly. "Sometimes you get stuck on people, even if it'll never work out."

She didn't notice his smile vanish; her gaze was drawn to the left, to the alley across the street. John moved forward and could better see a familiar scene within reach of the streetlights: a shifty man fumbling in his pocket while a more confident one surveyed the area.

Lucia tugged John's sleeve to urge him onward. "The drugs are only going to get worse," she muttered.

"Because of Maroni?"

"Yeah." The return of mob operations to the city had been a steady drumbeat in the news for months. "And I bet he learned from Falcone's mistakes."

John stopped again. They were just two blocks from the bar.

"What's up?" she asked, looking back.

John crossed the street and headed straight for the alley, ignoring her hiss to come back.

"Good evening, gentlemen!" he greeted with outstretched arms.

The buyer, a lithe young man with dusty brown hair poking out from a ski cap, shrank against the wall at his back.

The seller, broad and bald, stood his ground and looked John up and down. "One transaction at a time," he said.

"Oh, none for me," John said, "or anyone." He made shooing gestures. "Move it over a few blocks, kiddies. You don't have to buy drugs at home, but you can't do it here."
The dealer barked a laugh. "Are you serious?"

"John," Lucia hissed again. She lingered at the alley mouth. "Come on."

John ignored her. "Final warning!"

"What are you gonna do?" the bald man said, shoving John's shoulder. "Who do you think you—"

John's forearm slammed into the dealer's scarf-wrapped throat and smashed him into the wall. Then John grabbed one of the scarf tails and wiped it across his own face, from his left cheek up over his right eye. The dealer's eyes went wide as they followed the white streak.

"You know exactly who I am," John said, letting his eyes go bright with his best smile. "And when I nicely ask you to do things, I'd appreciate if you'd hop to it."

"H-hey," the man choked out, "I just—"

"I'm low on patience. You're gonna get out and stay out, and so are any of your entrepreneurial acquaintances."

"Gotta be kidding."

"Depends." John snapped his knee into the dealer's groin. "Is that your funny bone?"

The bald man collapsed to his knees as John stepped back and cackled. He glanced back at the buyer to share the joke, but the skinny man seemed frozen. The dealer struggled to his feet, already heading toward the other end of the alley and escape.

John giggled as he watched the man stumble, then turned to the other one. "You too, bucko. Get your fix somewhere else."

The buyer was a bit of a mouse, but those little buggers had teeth and this one suddenly bared his. "C-couldn't wait until we were done?" he said. He trembled, probably not from the weather.

"No time to act like the present!" John replied cheerily.

The man shook his head. "You have no... no idea. It's all I have."

"Then you're worse off than I've ever been. That's pretty sad."

The mouse lunged with a wild swing, and John ducked and chortled. Another swing and John ducked again, but then the man's hands grasped the front of his coat. Lucia shouted when John's back hit the wall.

"How's this feel?" the mouse sneered, as if he had the upper hand. "Is this funny, too?!"

John erupted into laughter all over again. "Absolutely!"

The man faltered, his grip loosening. Really, it would have been easy for John to knock his block off, but the guy was so entertainingly clueless.

"Oh, if I must explain the joke..." John gestured accordingly as he spoke. "On the one hand, you're helpless against this drug that's gotta be rotting your insides, but on the other hand, you're so mad that you've got the cojones to attack a cuckoo killer over it. Imagine if you could switch those compulsions around!"
The mouse shook his head. "It... It's not that simple—"

"I didn't say it was simple. I said it was funny," John reminded him.

Then he abruptly twisted the mouse's wrists and freed himself. The man recoiled, rubbing his sore skin, then squawked when John reached out. John only patted the mouse's shoulder.

"Now run along," he said kindly, "and don't bring scum like that around here. It's ruining my vibe."

The man watched John dust off his jacket and walk away. Lucia gaped as John passed her, heading back across the street.

She quickly caught up and finally said, "Lauren didn't mention anything like that from the therapy circle."

"That wasn't therapy. It was a comedy lesson."

She looked back over her shoulder, but no one followed them. "Kneeing a guy in the balls certainly is. Are you... Are scenes like that going to be a regular thing?"

John stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Maybe." He'd acted on an impulse, but it sprung from logical problem he'd been wrestling with. "The more crime around here, the more cops sniff around, and the more chances that I'll be roped in."

"Yeah... but maybe you should leave the Batmanning to the professional before it gets you put away again."

A surge of frustration sped up John's steps. "First of all, why can't people take care of their own neighborhood? We don't need to blare a signal in the sky to chase off some punk trying to distribute poison. Second of all, Batman pursues crime. This came to us. I just performed some... neighborhood watch! It might as well be self-defense, which I know quite a bit about, thank you."

They came to All's Well's facade, and Lucia glanced up at the apartment windows. "It would be nice to keep that shit away from my sister." She looked back down with a raised eyebrow. "But if you 'neighborhood watch' too many times, don't be surprised if you do get arrested."

"I've already had something in the works to avoid that."

"Something?"

He nodded.

"That was a prompt for a description, but you know what? It's probably better if I don't know." She paused with her hand on the bar door. "Whatever happens, please don't leave me with an emcee behind bars."

"We have the same aim!" John said as they went inside.

The room was maybe a third full, which seemed normal for a weekday night. John pulled up his hood to obscure his ruined makeup and checked his phone. His ride would be here soon.

As Lucia took off her scarf, John leaned in. "So, uh, we both benefit from your secret," he said quietly, "but when Bruce gets here, I don't think he'd benefit from knowing about that little detour."

"I have no interest in blabbing about your extracurriculars," she replied.
"Great!" He pointed at his face. "I'm gonna strip this off in the bathroom, but feel free to introduce yourself when he gets here!"

"I'm having palpitations," she deadpanned.

Once upon a time, it took John just a couple weeks to develop some snazzy fighting skills. He'd been good enough to coordinate with Batman beautifully, without even a moment of training together. He'd never forget how it felt, that understood rhythm between them.

He should forget.

The point was that John knew he could learn to dance. Coordination, timing, stamina… much of the same skills for fighting also applied to dancing and to performing overall.

Then again, for fighting he'd had Bruce as a model, plus the very motivating need to impress him. In extending himself in multiple artistic directions, John had no clear marker to reach. He had loads of examples, sure, mostly streamed on his phone: music and musicals and dance pieces and comedy shows and every other performance art. Somehow he needed to take all that inspiration and come up with... himself.

But Dr. Adams (like Leland— and maybe Monroe but his voice was boring) said that evaluating and building with disparate parts was still better than the shortcut of copying one person. Considering John's attempt at just that had led to harsh disappointment all around, it was hard to disagrees.

"Even without your disadvantages," Adams said, "many people spend decades trying to figure out who they are. It's okay to take your time."

John understood, but it was hard not to be envious of people like Fredelle. As a dancer, she'd had background parts in several shows on and off Park Boulevard, and she was creating a routine for the Circus revue. And of course she was a dancer; her jumper showed off long elegant legs, and even the simple movements of her arms had a grace as she clicked around the All's Well stage. The sound of her tap shoes merged perfectly with the ragtime rhythm coming from the speakers plugged into her mp3 player.

Fredelle also taught dance classes, which showed in her patience as she demonstrated simple steps for John to imitate, and as she corrected his timing or his posture or the weight of his steps. Her method was all steady encouragement, like when Bruce taught him to throw a batarang.

And both were in contrast to his driving lessons, when Harley's praise had been dispensed in a weird blend of exasperation and relief. He'd finally got something right, finally followed her directions (as if he hadn't been trying all the long). Geez, puddin', looks like you're as bright as that smile after all.

Fredelle stopped after a shuffle. "You okay? You look tired."

"I'm fine," John said shortly. Why the hell was he thinking about sour memories when he had a good teacher right in front of him?

Lucia was sitting at the table with the music, and she turned the volume down. "You look like crap," she said. "Take a break."

John was ready to protest, but Fredelle took a seat. With a grumble, he plunked between the two women. Lucia had brought some glasses of water from the bar, and Fredelle drank from one as
Lucia pushed another at John.

"Hydrate," she said.

"I'm fine," John repeated.

"It's good for your skin. You wanna get all flaky under your makeup?"

He glared at her. He swiped the glass and drank.

"We talked about spreading yourself too thin," she said.

She was supposed to be impressed when John told her about all his research, how all at once he could be plotting out his costume and watching an old movie and jotting down intro lines. She did say she appreciated his hard work, but then assured him that she didn't expect him to become a pro at anything quickly, especially when he had to keep up with a job and the halfway house. She didn't want him to get frustrated.

But John enjoyed all the new skills he was learning. The stress came from other plans for the future, not so much the occasional definitely-not-patrols that Lucia didn't want to hear about, but more the experimental reconnaissance she didn't know about. He had to carefully fit the investigations into his schedule; slim slots of time between tasks could be used for calls to Mo and her guys, and larger chunks of time when he finished things early could be allotted to quick trips on the train or rideshares.

But while subterfuge could be tiring, once it paid off, he'd feel fancy free. And besides...

"If I don't show I'm more than just... just what people say"— and they said a lot— "then it could mess up everything, and then what?"

"The show doesn't only depend on you," Lucia said, looking like she wanted to roll her eyes. Then she cracked a smile. "We fail as a team."

Fredelle started laughing. "Failure? Surely not."

"Ugh..." Lucia covered her eyes.

John had never heard of any failures, though of course the Circus website chronicled only successes. The list was long and ranged from serious to almost pointless. An original short drama performed in Robinson Park. A musician on the street encouraging passersby to take up extra instruments and play with him. A sculpture of an angel installed outside Gotham Central Hospital. An exhibition of watercolors painted by a dog's wagging tail. Someone even stuck bat symbols up around in the city— by fire escapes, outside high windows, on skyrail supports— to prompt people to think about the ramifications of "surveillance." John didn't like the tone of that one.

"For our very first project for the city," Fredelle explained, "the Art Council let us create a mosaic on this staircase in midtown, some surprise color for pedestrians. And of course the day before we started, the project leader got sick, but Lucia was like, 'We can handle it! We have your plans!'"

"He said the plans had everything," Lucia said.

"He had a fever. So on day one, a bunch of us spend hours tiling like twenty risers, and it's looking great. But the next morning, we bring the Art Council rep to see our progress, and half the tiles have fallen off because we didn't glaze them."
"Turns out unglazed tiles absorb grout. And apparently we weren't supposed to be using grout anyway."

"I think somebody shoulda been clued by how the word ‘grout’ never appeared in the instructions."

Lucia ignored Fredelle's wry look and concluded, "The point is, we looked like idiots collectively, and when the project was axed, we took stock of our mistakes and plunged ahead with other work — though eventually the Council gave us another shot. So the revue could close after one night, and we'll just move on to the next thing, whether it's a group project or a bunch of personal ones." She leaned toward John, resting her hand on the table between them. "But do not add thinking of a project to your crushed schedule right now, alright?"

The past few months, John had been thinking he was recruited into the revue only, that when it was over, he'd need to move on or re-audition. But here was Lucia saying he was part of the team, done deal. She'd decided to dive right in, and so had everyone else. Fredelle wasn't the only person who'd stepped up to give John lessons. The band's keyboardist, Wilhelm, was going to see how John did at piano. Adelina gave him pointers on his costume. Jeff the juggler had started training him with tulle scarves.

Sticking together, failing as a team... The Pact had paid lip service to the first and preferred the blame game to the second. John had supposed most people were like that. That's what Harley'd said, after all. *Keep up yer guard, puddin',* around Bruce, around his Stacked Deck pals — but not around her! He could tell her anything!

And who was at John's side today?

"What did I say?" Lucia burst. Her eyes were wide and she'd gone still. "Are you gonna cry? I'm not good with crying." Fredelle stared at him mid-sip.

He wasn't crying and wouldn't. He downed the rest of his glass and pulled on a smile. "Let's go a little longer," he said, standing and turning the music back up.

Fredelle seemed hesitant, but she agreed and followed him back onto the stage. "Alright," she said, "shake it all out!"

John did so, like a wet sheepdog. His smile felt less forced when she laughed.

Members of the Circus weren't that different from other Gothamites, in that their regard for him was based on whatever they believed about his entanglement with the Agency. He wasn't going to reach Bruce-level friendship with any of them, and it was unlikely anyone else would join Lucia at Frank-level. But after he worked with them for a time, they'd have real things to share.

Maureen walked with John through the wide alley. All the way down on either side, murals created a cacophony of color on flat brick and stucco.

"This is ongoing," she said. "A different artist is responsible for each wall, whether they want to maintain their first painting or start over. If the artist leaves, the section is handed off to someone else. We don't own the property, but we have permission from the residents. We're working on agreements in other neighborhoods."

Right now they were still in the Village. Lucia was busy waitressing and had asked Maureen to take John to Proclamation Alley. The succession of murals spanned different styles, from cartoon to realism to abstract, some plainly amateur and others majestic. The edges between them were rarely defined, and often paint had spread to the ground in bursts and spatters. Some murals took up
only narrow strips of wall, vertical and horizontal, bordering other murals.

John had painted a little bit at Arkham—with nontoxic paint, using his fingers if there'd recently been a shanking. He liked it okay. Drawing cards for Bruce had been more fun.

Hey, that could be his own project, a line of greeting cards! Then again, he wasn't sure what message he would send to anyone who wasn't Bruce. Still, it was an idea.

Chuck and Lorenzo returned from the far end of the alley. Their puffy, segmented black coats matched Maureen's, and they all shrunk into the warmth, as much as the muscularly endowed could anyway. John couldn't say that he wasn't also hoping April would draw in warmer weather.

"Somebody definitely pissed back there," Lorenzo commented.

"That's an unambiguous review," John chortled. In a painting to his right, an enormous crimson rose blossomed. A bird with rainbow-colored feathers burst from the petals with its wings spread wide. John appraised it for a few moments before realizing Chuck had come up on his left.

"So," Chuck said, "I heard a few of Clarence's guys got roughed up."

John turned to look at the painting on the opposite wall. "I don't know who that is."

Chuck turned, too. "He's one of the last big drug traffickers post-Falcone, and I guess pre-Maroni."

"Oh," John said, "I should have clarified: I don't care who it is."

"But you don't deny it was you."

"Why are those whiners even complaining?" John asked. "They just need to set up shop a few blocks away."

"That's not exactly how people think of territory," Lorenzo said from John's other side.

John furrowed his brow and looked at him. "What's the big deal?"

Lorenzo shrugged. "Seems like no one has paid you a visit yet, so maybe it isn't one."

"Maybe because of the rumors," Chuck said.

"The tabloid stuff?" John asked.

"No," Lorenzo said, "the stories thugs tell each other. They say you'll kill anyone who looks at you funny."

John's hackles rose. "Except I didn't kill the whiners," he said pointedly.

"No, but why remind anyone? The stories give you, you know, a retaliation buffer. I might've told some people that those punks are lucky you didn't bite their noses off."

"The key thing," Maureen broke in from behind John, "is you said you were done with vigilantism."

John turned and stepped back to face them. He folded his hands behind his back. "It's not vigilantism. It's neighborhood watch, and it's actually something I wanted to circle back on with you guys."
The three brightened immediately.

"I called it," Chuck said. "I knew you were asking for information for a reason. Are we going after Benson?"

John waved his hands. "No no no, put all that out of your heads! My friends, we don't need to run off and stop crime. We just need to keep it off our doorstep."

The trio looked at each other and nodded thoughtfully.

"Alright," Lorenzo said, "so we just keep a few blocks of territory clear."


"I get it," Chuck said. "We don't own it. We just protect it. Keep out drugs, muggers, that kind of thing."

"So if it's a neighborhood watch," Maureen thought aloud, "we should spread the word for other people to help push back, or to come let us know about problems?"

"I guess, if they want," John said hesitantly, but not sure why. He'd only planned on asking these three for help, expanding on his recent epiphany about working as a group. But surely other people around All's Well wanted to live somewhere a little nicer, so inclusivity made sense. "Of course, you know, you don't want to do anything that scares people."

The trio nodded again and voiced their understanding:

"Like avoid violence, right?"

"Makes sense."

"Got it."

That all went more simply than John expected... which was great! Less to worry about. "Glad we’re clear!" he said.

"So if we're on defense instead of offense, what did you want all that info for?" Lorenzo asked.

John strolled to another mural. "Just getting the lay of the land..."

This one gave him a chuckle. A shadowy but cartoony Batman loomed over a crowd of caged criminals— John could pick out Tricky Vicky and Cobblepot among them— but behind him was a scene of active crime, including shifty characters outside City Hall exchanging cash-stuffed envelopes, a long line of bedraggled figures starting at a man handing out needles and ending at a clinic, and police officers knocking people around with batons.

YOU CAN DRAG A CITY TO JUSTICE was written over the scene, and below it finished, BUT YOU CAN'T MAKE IT DRINK. Yeah, Batman was a hell of a disrupter, but plenty of the age-old systems were still moving along, in the same old song and dance...

A new idea sprouted, one that John could harvest sooner than greeting cards.

"Keep the stories coming," he said slowly while staring at the painting.

"You got it, boss," Chuck said.
John blinked out of his reverie and laughed. "Don't let Lucia hear you say that!"

Lucia and Adelina's room on All's Well's second floor was a preview of John's room, at least in terms of space. He'd rather not have a bunkbed, and Ro said one of the center units would be free, so he'd only have one window.

It was a busy Friday night, so they couldn't use the bar for Circus stuff. Adelina had a costume station on a desk in the back corner, and next to her on the floor, Lucia sat with a notebook and her phone. John took up the bottom bunk with Wilhelm, who'd adjusted his keyboard's stand so it hunkered low enough for their third lesson.

John was very interested in the piano, the twinkling play of fingers across the keys. For the past hour, Wilhelm had been trying to get a clean rendition of the first few bars of "Ode to Joy," but John's attention kept wandering to a tune he'd conjured in his head.

"Does the band write new songs?" he asked, fumbling for a note to match the one in his mind's ear.

"Sure, sometimes," Wilhelm replied, holding back a sigh. "And the more you learn, the more we can help you with one, if that's what you're getting at."

"Talent is a pursued interest," Lucia agreed.

John glanced over, then did a double-take. She was filming him on her phone.

"For the Circus CamEra," she explained. "About time we confirm you're running the show." She shot him a look around the phone. "On stage, I mean."

He laughed. "Are you trying to get ahead of the anniversary?"

They'd hit April; in a few weeks it would be two years since his arrest.

"Not exactly." She awkwardly avoided his eyes. "There's really no best time to announce."

With a start, John asked, "What time is it?"

"Almost seven."

"I gotta go."

His tool bag sat on the floor with a gray hoodie draped over it. He grabbed the hoodie and pulled a rolled-up pair of jeans and a makeup pouch from the bag.

"What? It's way before curfew."

"I got a thing."

He shut himself in the bathroom to change out of his coveralls and put on a coat of peachy makeup. This time he was only doing his face and neck. A skullcap from the hoodie's front pocket hid his hair and covered his ears. With the hood pulled up, the disguise looked convincing enough.

When he came back out, Adelina and Wilhelm looked him up and down with muted surprise.

"A thing," Lucia repeated. "Where else have you been going like that?"

John tapped the side of his nose and grabbed his coat from the back of Adelina's chair. "Nowhere
you need to worry about, per your request."

"Yeah, well, now I worry I was too cavalier."

John slipped on the coat and retrieved thin gloves from the pockets. It was still chilly, so they wouldn't be that odd to wear. As he pulled them over his white hands, he watched Adelina, who'd returned to work. On the desk sat a pink contraption that looked like an oversized stapler, but with a tall hinge and a nozzle at the end. She slid a shirt under the nozzle, then pressed it down. When it popped back up, she pulled out the shirt and a shiny rhinestone was embedded in the neckline.

John leaned down to look her in the eye. "Ads, what is this and how much do ten cost?"

"You can't use ten at once," Lucia said.

He didn't have time to argue. "Text it to me!" he said to Adelina, throwing in a "bye!" as he hurried out.

In five minutes, he hurtled into a skyrail car just before the doors closed, and after another five, the train pulled into the Bowery station. His window had a view of the cross street, and at the far end of the block, he could see a cluster of dark blue uniforms. He adjusted his gloves and hoodie and exited the train.

A thread of adrenaline pulled his ribs tight around his lungs as he descended to the street. Even as he got closer, the mass of uniforms reminded him of a bruise. There were so many ways for this to go wrong, but wouldn't be be exciting if it did?

Well, unless it was the mundane kind of wrong and the officer John was looking for wasn't here. Corrigan's was the best bet, based on his research, but there were other bars in the vicinity that he could try.

The cops on the sidewalk were too busy smoking and palling around to pay John more than a glance. He walked into Corrigan's in the nonhesitant manner of a regular. Cops swarmed the place like bees in a hive. He pretended to read the chalk-scrawled specials above the bar while he surveyed the faces.

And there was his man on a stool at the corner of the bar, with an empty stool on the corner's other side.

John immediately went over and sat, placing his gloved hands on the counter in full view. "Hope this seat is free, officer," he said with a smile.

Ramamurthy glanced over with a congenial nod. Then he looked again. He frowned. His mouth fell open.

"What's good here?" John asked.

"In this cop bar?!" Ramamurthy hissed, leaning forward as if to hide John from the room. "You really are a maniac!"

John's smile widened. "See, now I know you're a good guy, worried about the welfare of a maniac."

"What are you doing here?"

"Would you rather I approached you on a dark empty street?"
"There's other— What do you want?"

"A friendly chat."

"Fine, just get out of here," Ramamurthy said through his teeth. "I'll meet you a couple blocks east, at the back of the Swift Stop."

"Gotcha," John replied with a wink. "Man, it's almost like you don't trust the judgment of a mob of cops."

Ramamurthy's eye twitched.

John's exit was as noticed as his entrance. When he got to the Swift Stop, he took a post by the dumpster at the rear, under a harsh white light. The smell of garbage didn't temper his sudden craving for a slushie.

He certainly would have had time to grab one. It took Ramamurthy fifteen minutes to appear, hunched in his bomber jacket with his hands in his pockets. John would bet his Bruce-funds that a gun was at the ready.

"What the hell do you want?" Ramamurthy asked coarsely.

"A fresh start between us! Your partner made things a little, uh, hostile, don't you think?"

"For good reason."

John tried to suppress a dark look. "That doesn't mean I should get put away for things I didn't do."

Ramamurthy shifted a little. "You haven't had trouble from us in weeks. Benson just talks a lot of shit."

"Awww, how long have you been telling yourself that?" John ignored the glare that came his way. "You're a newbie, right? The Academy website says you were at the top of your class, has a recording of your graduation speech. You know, the one where you talk about compassionate policing."

"Compassionate, not stupid," Ramamurthy said. Definitely had the gun.

"I bet you came on the force all idealistic, only to be assigned to Officer Corruption. Maybe someone thought you could balance each other out, like a buddy cop movie! The bright-eyed greenhorn and the—"

"If you don't have a point, I'm leaving."

"Is Benson the partner you want?"

"What the hell does that mean?" Ramamurthy snapped. "Is that a threat?"

John held up his hands and laughed in a nervous chatter. "Oh, no no no! I come only to help the cause of justice!" He pointed toward his hoodie's pouch. "I have a video on my phone for you."

Ramamurthy was quiet for a few beats, then said, "Keep your hands up. I'll pat you down."

"Sounds fair." Well, not really, but at least this guy didn't seem like a groper.

Ramamurthy was efficient and quick, and he indeed only found John's phone, ID, and SkyPass in
his pockets. "You didn't even bring money for cover at the bar."

John gave him a look. "I'm not supposed to drink right now."

"Yeah, but—" Ramamurthy shook his head and held up the phone. "Unlock this and show me your video."

"Can do!"

With a few swipes, John brought up a week-old recording from the Narrows, shot from the broken third-story window of a condemned building.

"There's your dogged partner," he narrated as they watched a plainclothes Benson tromp down the narrow alley below. He stopped at a rusted metal door and knocked. "He's paying someone a visit. Perhaps his grandma?" Benson waited several seconds, and then the door swung out, opened by a slender man in a silvery gray suit and a partially unbuttoned red shirt.


"Still at the top of the class!" John exclaimed. "I'm sure I don't have to remind you that Smaldone is a leader in Maroni's drug operations, and the GCPD has had two failed attempts on raiding their warehouses."

"Benson wouldn't..."

John skipped the video ahead. "Yeah, maybe he and Smaldone just trade pastry recipes." Benson left the building with a rolled up paper bag clutched in his fist. "Must have some tasty zeppoles in there!"

Ramamurthy cursed. "Why are you showing me this? You could report it anonymously."

"Or you could report it," John said. "Get all the credit for putting away someone who wouldn't hold the blue line." He shrugged. "And I'd be happy to let you know of any juicy, non-law-abiding gossip that comes my way, so you can handle that, too."

John could tell Bruce those kinds of things, sure, and he would if the situation called for it, but Bruce already liked him. John needed Ramamurthy to find his presence in the Village useful, not threatening.

"And informing makes it easier for you to do what?" Ramamurthy said sharply.

John rolled his eyes. "To live." Ramamurthy's expression didn't change, and John sighed with exasperation. "How the heck could I expect you to let me commit crimes? You'd get commendations out the wazoo for catching me. You said it yourself: you haven't hassled me because there's been no reason to. And it'll stay that way."

Ramamurthy started the video over and watched it through. John bit his lip to keep silent, one of his legs bouncing in agitation. When the video ended, he smiled, because Ramamurthy hit the share button to forward it to his phone.

"There's no way of knowing how this shakes out," Ramamurthy said. He handed John's phone back with a warning look. "But whatever happens, I will be watching you."

"I invite it!" John proclaimed. "Especially at All's Well this summer. Check the Circus website for dates!"
By the anniversary of his no-good, very bad day, everything was looking up.

On the first anniversary, things had been way, way down. John was still in Arkham, subsisting largely on Bruce's visits. Multiple TV stations ran commercials for specials "looking back" at the chaos of the night, though he hadn't been able to watch. Dr. Leland said he needed to keep focusing on his own retrospection like any other day.

But anniversaries had a way of bringing issues to the forefront, and John had found himself focused on Tiffany's freedom versus his captivity. It was one of the few things he couldn't talk about with Leland, given she couldn't ethically hide the identity of Riddler's murderer. John had to work the dilemma out for himself, the unfairness and the differences, in a protracted process "helped" only by slices of censored conversation with Bruce.

The week of the anniversary had been Bruce's worst visit for sure. John zig-zagged from icy silence to seething anger. Bruce had a calendar, of course, and knew what was going on. He'd kept an even keel and, while he cut the visit in half, spent a pretty long time withstanding John's radiation.

Ultimately, fuming was all John had done, which was supposed to be a relative accomplishment. He got through the week without "acting out." But it was less because of some breakthrough of understanding and more because he didn't want to lose visiting privileges.

Because he still needed to see Bruce's stupid symmetrical face.

John's anger had cooled in the year since. Wrath had its uses, but it wasn't productive in therapy and came close to re-wrecking his life during the Freeze misadventure (during which Tiffany expended a lot of effort to help Bruce find John). The second anniversary needed to be different—dare he say, hopeful?

It seemed less of a dare as he watched his plans pay off. Benson's suspension (pending an investigation) was big news. Ramamurthy was lauded in the press and got a new beat partner—and that beat was an easier job now. In the police blotter, the listings for the All's Well area shrunk, and John had fewer encounters on his citizen patrols, which he went on less often with the Trio on alert. Even they reported less illegal activity when they gave him rundowns, though they did have a tip about carjackers that John passed on to Ramamurthy.

The anniversary came, and Bruce did not ignore it. He had John over for a special (delivered) dinner at Wayne Manor to mark the progress John had made. And it felt good that Bruce saw how well John was doing, that John had more room to breathe and focus on the remaining ten weeks at the halfway house.

Then at the eight-week mark in mid-May, John's counselor broke the news: John had such exceptional compliance, New Dawn was authorized to release him early, in just two weeks.

And John agreed, because if he was doing well, he was doing well. (How would it look if he disagreed?)

So it was good news.

He checked with Rosaline, who said his room was already open.

It was good news.

Bruce was surprised but said it was great, said he was proud.
It was good news.

Lucia asked if that meant they could get a drink after they saw Little Shop of Horrors.

It was good news, because John could get a drink, he could do whatever he wanted. He wanted to be free again, and here it was, just a little early.

The difference was a matter of weeks. It wasn't a big deal.

He had stayed on track this whole time. He only needed to keep to the track, keep doing what he'd been doing.

_The track isn't real, puds_, Harley taunted in his nightmares, her wild eyes pulling him in. _Yer not a goddamn train. You can go off the rails any time ya want, right off the bridge again, make a big splash!_

But nightmares weren't real either. What was real was that Harley was mean, and she didn't really care about John, and she was wrong. If he believed in himself, he would be fine.

("Every time ya see that shiner in the mirror, you oughta think about how I keep tryin’ ta do right by ya, and all I get back is a useless coward!")

John believed in himself. Early release was good news.

Affirmations held him together, like clear tape and tacky glue, for a week before he fell apart.

But Bruce was there, of course. He gave John a piece of himself to help the reconstruction. John took it, because as much as he'd made progress, as much as he wanted to take care of himself, he always, he needed Bruce. The intensity of that need spanned relief and embarrassment, and happiness and frustration, over a pit of fear that was impossible to fill.

"Independence can be a strong urge," Dr. Adams said evenly, "but even the most self-reliant have the support of loved ones."

She was a pale, wizened woman with silver hair drawn into a bun. She had a private psychiatry practice, so she had no need for a labcoat or charts. John saw her only once a week; there was no cafeteria or hall where they'd run into each other.

On the chaise lounge across from her chair, John didn't lie back on the curves like he normally did. He sat in the middle, curled up with his arms wrapped around his knees.

"It's not like when a kid needs rides to soccer practice," he muttered at the wall.

"You've said you would help Bruce with whatever he needed. Shouldn't he be allowed to do the same for you?"

"What if he gets..." John swallowed and corrected. "What if I hurt him?" Again.

"There is that risk," Adams said, "but he is aware of it. And don't dismiss that this time, you didn't hurt him, and he did help you. It didn't go perfectly, but worse outcomes were possible."

He made a small, acknowledging noise to the wall.

"These doubts are normal. In our sessions until now, you've been outwardly optimistic. That isn't bad, but it's made me wonder how you're moderating your expectations."
"It's not that I didn't expect to never... get upset. I didn't want it to be so soon."

"Of course. How would you say you faired with the tools you were prepared with?"

"You mean what would have happened if Bruce wasn't there?" He thought for a minute. "I don't know."

"Alright, then we'll add to your toolbox. But John." She waited until he looked over. "I can only help you as much as you let me."

John made a face. He'd been coming every week as ordered.

"This is the first session where I've felt you were really present," she went on. "Our past talks struck me as you trying to convince me that your release was valid, but I'm here so you can talk to someone freely."

"I don't have to tell you everything," he retorted with a burst of petulance.

"No, but I hope I can gain enough of your trust that I can hear more."

If Adams wanted to match the rapport John had with Dr. Leland, she had a long way to go—about ten years. It took that long for John to know Leland understood him enough that he could tell her anything, the nastiest averted impulse or most vicious, violent dream, and her only concern would be to dig up the root of it. Adams's threshold for reporting to the police was a big unknown. It didn't have anything to do with this particular session, but it had a lot to do with trust.

Whether or not they ever got there, right now his reluctance was a good thing. If John was telling Leland about his breakdown, he would have said more. He wouldn't have glossed over Bruce talking him down; he would have admitted that Bruce held him, and it was the safest John had ever felt, only for terror to creep in later. What was John supposed to do without him? What if one day Bruce wasn't there?

All that would have spilled out, because Leland had suspected John's feelings when he was in denial, and there would be no hiding from her.

The thing about denial, though, was that it was keeping a secret from yourself, and he'd learned in Arkham that secrets were important for survival. The patients certainly weren't comrades in arms, but even John was part of a web of agreements, spoken and silent, to keep things from staff. Concealed cell phones, dirty pictures, fermented booze, they all played a part in making Arkham a little more bearable, even if they were a threat to treatment and order.

So Adams might say John repressing his feelings instead of expressing them wasn't "psychologically healthy," but neither was facing another rejection, another sock to the eye—except Bruce wouldn't be cruel. He would be nice. He would eviscerate John gently, and the friendship John clung to, in all its unlikelihood, would fade away. Who stayed friends with someone who confessed undying, unwanted love?

And John had established with himself months ago that he had no business making a confession like that. His self improvement could never make him good enough for Bruce. After everything that happened, he was lucky they were even friends.

John would happily maintain that tie at the expense of his deeper feelings. They were a fitting payment for something he didn't deserve.
Unseen cars rushed by on the highway overhead. John wished he could wear headphones, but they were prohibited so everyone could hear the supervisor scold them for lollygagging or blow his whistle after two hours.

Other days, the noisy soundtrack wasn't so bad. Picking up garbage gave John lots of time to think about his costume or plans with Bruce or lyrics to match the tune in his head.

Today he could still only think about his... lapse in confidence. That was all it was, and it was over a week ago! He'd already recommitted to the plan, and he just had to follow through. Not just with the schedules and guidelines he could carry on from the halfway house, and his consistent work hours, but the earlier plan to keep his friendship with Bruce going like it always had.

*Just a lapse in confidence,* he repeated. An assemblage of ratty fast food packages had rolled up against a hill of dirt left over from construction, and he crouched to gather them. *Just a lapse in confidence.*

"Feh, just a driver."

No, just a lapse—

"Being 'just a driver' is what got me here," continued the irritated voice.

John went still. The voice came from the other side of the hill, and another one responded.

"You think I believe you're gonna go straight?"

"There are other options. You hear word of this guy online? With the secret website?"

"Aw, Christ, don't go for that internet rage machine bullshit. What the hell is some punk probably living over his ma's garage gonna do for you?"

"I dunno, I only just heard of it."

"Forget it. Maroni is tried and true, and we can get in on the ground floor."

The whistle shrieked in the distance. The two men emerged from behind the dirt mound with their trash bags, and John scrambled around the opposite side. He leaned out far enough to watch the blabbermouths go, waiting until there was enough distance to follow back to the Corrections van.

What a help for John's efforts! Maroni was out of Ramamurthy's purview, but Batman would definitely appreciate these two idiots leaving a trail right to the rat nests.

Soon enough, the two men were out of sight, and John got to his feet and started to jog to home base. With a "whup!" he turned back and quickly collected the remaining food containers into his bag. If he was going to recommit, he had to mean it.

In the following forty-five minutes, he'd texted Bruce from the van, hurried from the parole office back to New Dawn, speed-showered, and then made his way to the rec center for another all-hands Circus meeting. He was going to be a little late, but Lucia already knew.

On the way, he ran through the rest of his schedule for the day and the plans for the morning, his last at New Dawn. He was going to give himself plenty of time to savor his final shower there. He'd still have his own bathroom in his new digs, but it was definitely not as nice.

In thought, he walked into the meeting and registered only that the seats were packed and Lucia
stood in front of them as usual. He walked around to the first row to sit, and he finally registered the silence and stares. Still on his feet, he was held in place by the most perturbed look he'd ever seen on Lucia's face.

"I said I'd be late!" he exclaimed, but as he looked around he realized that wasn't it.

He'd planned to take an empty seat to Lucia's left, next to Maureen, Lorenzo, and Chuck. The three all looked vaguely guilty, like dogs confronted with a gnawed shoe.

On Lucia's right, a cluster of half a dozen new faces in the first two rows beamed. Three men and three women, all with blue diamonds painted over both eyes.

"Our influx of new members have something in common," Lucia said as John came to her side.

John greeted them with a cheerful "Hi!" Wasn't an increased membership good news?

"The muscleheads counseled them all on the street, and now they want to take up the neighborhood watch," Lucia finished. She gestured to the skinniest new man, who had light brown hair. "We've already met Michael."

The man got to his feet with stilted nervous movements. He coughed. "Hello, uh, Mike is fine—"

John snapped his fingers. "Oh, it's you!" He exclaimed, finally recognizing the addict from the alley.

"Yeah, me." Mike lifted a hand in greeting and meekly let it fall when Lucia cut in.

"Oh, yeah, hey!" Sarcasm dripped off her voice. "What's up!"

John reflected her glare. "That's not very hospitable," he said.

She pointed at him accusingly. "I tell you I don't wanna know about whatever you're doing, and today it waltzes in my door!"

"Hey, I didn't ask them here!" John responded.

"What's wrong with asking them here?" Chuck spoke up, folding his arms. "We got an open membership."

"To an art collective!" Lucia said. "Not a Joker fight club!"

"We're helping the neighborhood," Maureen jumped in. "We don't go around fighting."

"We did have to fight some people," Lorenzo confessed almost diffidently.

"Just a few." Maureen gestured to Mike and the others. "We helped them."

One of Mike's companions shot up at his side, her twisted hair bouncing. "Chuck saved me! A crew tried to jump me, and he chased them away!"

"And then he urged you into a rehab, I know," Lucia said in a dull tone.

"Excuse me," Maureen said testily, standing up. "Don't we support people recovering from addiction? Using art as a tool?"

"Of course, but the cosplay tells me this isn't about art."
"Sure it is!" burst the girl with the twisted hair. "It's an expression of how we're all unified in our inspiration."

"Inspiration?"

"John Doe is keeping this area clear and bettering himself. Why can't we do that?"

Mike's nerve returned. "Yeah— yes," he said, straightening up and speaking like he was at a job interview. "Rehab helps, but we need new environments to help break old patterns."

"Okay," Lucia said, "but the Circus and the watch are not the same thing."

"Aren't they?" came another voice. Lian, from the middle of the seats. "I mean, we do create art in this neighborhood. We're already on the defensive."

"How long has the neighborhood watch been going on?" asked one of the dancers in the back.

Lorenzo turned in his seat. "Couple months now."

The dancer smiled. "I've felt safer walking to the train. I thought it was in my head."

"Who else has felt safer?" Lian asked, raising his hand.

More than half the room raised their hands. John noticed several grateful smiles directed his way. He clasped his hands behind his back and grinned proudly— though he hadn't thought much about the collateral benefits. He'd take the positivity, though.

He looked to Lucia. She bit her lip and stared into middle distance— no, at Adelina, sitting near Lian. She let out a long, soft exhale, then planted her hands on her hips.

"Look," she said, "if anyone here wants to take care of the neighborhood, the most I can do is tell you not to be an idiot about it. But this right now is an art club, so if you're here, you're either going to make art or help make art."

"Yes, absolutely," Mike agreed as the other newbies nodded eagerly. Then, a little nervous again, he turned to John. "And I— I want to thank you."

John guffawed. "For what? Laughing at you?"

Mike nodded seriously. "What you said to me, it really clicked."

Lucia said held up her hands. "I am not signing off on the idea that that whole... scene was some kind of magic addiction cure."

"It helped me," Mike said defensively.

"That's lovely, but I'm not gonna have people showing up here like they're looking for a faith healer."

"I guess that's fair," John grumbled.

Lucia twirled her finger around her eye. "And all this is really off-putting."

"Like Anica said," Mike replied, "we're showing unity."

"Like Frank and my other pals," John said with a nostalgic smile.
“Right,” Anica said proudly, “that's where we got the idea.”

John came out of his reverie and scowled. "It's a terrible idea! The cops are going to find that suspicious as all get-out!"

The newcomers’ enthusiasm instantly shrank to sheepishness.

Lucia pointed toward the hallway. "The bathrooms are out to the left. Go clean that stuff off."

The group quickly left their seats, Mike leading the way. “Thank you for the opportunity!” he said over his shoulder.

“Hurry up!” Lucia responded as they exited. “We're voting on a show name before we go over a draft John sent me."

John clasped his hands under his chin. "Ooh, did you like it?"

"It needs a little work, but yeah, it's good." She was still a tad salty. "Please focus on that instead of recruiting extras.” She threw a stern look at the Trio. “You too!”

"We didn't have to look that hard for them," Lorenzo said.

"Everyone wants a safer neighborhood," Maureen agreed as she finally sat back down.

"Yeah," Chuck said. "Word gets around."

Wearily, Lucia spoke to the whole room. “Just don't let that word get people thinking John’s turned this into a street gang."

John snorted. Imagine him running a gang!

Chapter End Notes

In case it was not explicit enough via Lucia: I do not believe there is some magic pill to resolve addiction. These fictional characters are working within their fictional experiences within the structure of this plot.

Proclamation Alley is a poorly named reference to Clarion Alley in San Francisco.

Comments of any sort are always appreciated!
Indications All Point Away

Chapter Notes

Decided to throw this one up a few days early.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Living independently took John another step away from Arkham. Bruce, however, had attached himself to the asylum indefinitely, to monitor the ongoing renovations and upgrades.

Not on his own, of course. It was not a good look for a Wayne to be the primary overseer of anything going on at Arkham. Bruce participated in tours and meetings alongside a Wayne Foundation representative selected by the Foundation board, plus representatives from a couple of partner organizations.

The asylum visits were rarely pleasant; even the improvements were reminders of the days when the place was on the edge of being condemned. Today was no exception. Bruce had seen John happy and free just twenty-four hours ago, and now he stared at an electroconvulsive therapy machine. He couldn't shake the image of John lying on the nearby table, getting electrode pads taped to his forehead.

"ECT is a practice with an notorious history," Dr. Bartholomew said, as if in response. He stood beside the machine as he spoke to Bruce and the reps. "I won't ignore that Arkham is among the facilities that overused it in the past. That said, its use is absolutely more regulated now."

"That's why we've replaced the old machines with just one?" asked a rep. "Even with almost two hundred patients here?"

Bartholomew nodded. "ECT is primarily used as a second-line treatment for patients who are not responding to preferred treatments for, say, catatonia or major depressive disorder. While it's a needed tool, it won't get much use from week to week."

One new machine to replace four sorely outdated models. If this new machine would barely be used, why had Arkham ever needed four?

Did Bruce's father ever "recommend" this treatment for sordid purposes?

Was that really a question?

"I'll be right back," Bruce murmured to the Foundation rep.

He left the group, rounding the corner in the direction of the bathrooms. He stopped halfway down the hall to collect himself, leaning back against the wall and looking at the ceiling.

If he could change the past, his father's crimes would be just one item on his list of wrongs to right. But time travel was still impossible, even with all the money in the world, and that's why Bruce was here now. He couldn't change things, but he could revise practices and push for accountability. The past was educational, but he had to remind himself to stay grounded in the present.

The ceiling kind of proved the point. During Bruce's brief stay, the cold stone had been cracked
and dripping. Now it was cleanly painted over in calming eggshell, and there were no water spots because the pipes and roofs had undergone inspection and repair.

Ensuring the staff competently served their functions was more complicated than a service order, but that was why he needed to focus.

"Hello, Mr. Wayne!"

Dr. Leland approached from the other end of the hall. If he could replace all the doctors with clones of her, he'd have much less to worry about.

Bruce straightened up and put on his smile. "Good afternoon, doctor," he greeted. "How are things?"

The corner of her mouth quirked up. "You know we're always preoccupied around here."

He knew in more ways than she was aware of. Batman kept a closer eye on Arkham records than Bruce Wayne, watching for signs of any nefarious behavior behind the scenes—plus his particular interest in Jervis Tetch. When a man was capable of manipulating another person's mind to do his bidding, it was important to ensure he wasn't revealing blueprints to shady visitors or overly curious staff.

But since the summer, Tetch had been happy to analogize his days in Arkham to life in Wonderland, even insisting that Leland was the Duchess. He spoke of tea and time, not neurons and brainwaves—for now.

And per a conversation she had with Batman, Leland was happy to keep her own knowledge of her patient's technology to herself.

"I'm sorry I'm unable to make it to the fundraiser," she said.

"No need to be sorry. Family comes first."

"Dr. Fielding is better at public-facing events anyway, but please know that all the staff appreciates your support."

"Hopefully the gala increases that support exponentially." Bruce stuck his hands in his pockets. "Did you know John left the recovery center? Just yesterday."

She nodded. "I'd heard. I'm glad this experience is such a change from his last."

"I think that's an understatement," Bruce chuckled. She seemed hesitant, and there could be multiple reasons why. "I don't mind if you ask about any of the rumors. There are about a thousand."

"I prefer not to indulge them." Of course not. Leland was ever mindful of professionalism.

"I understand, but if you have a real concern, I wouldn't want to leave you stuck with it."

"Hm." She folded her arms. "Have you met this art group?"

"Sure," Bruce said. "John's definitely learning a lot from them. They seem eccentric, but harmless." Or rather, harmless enough.

"I'm glad he's pursuing the outlets we discussed." That was evidently as far as she wanted to delve into the gossip. She next said, "I was actually on my way to speak with you, to see if you have time
"Sure." He preferred anything over staring at the ECT machine. "I think we're about finished."

A touch of nervousness leaked into her demeanor. "If you're up to it, Harvey Dent has asked to see you."

"Now?" The machine was no longer so daunting. "I… If he wants to talk, I can do that, if you think it's okay."

"He's shown marked improvement in recent months. This is an opportunity to see just how much, but he was also very insistent. I trust that you'll be mindful of your words."

If she knew how Bruce had let himself be baited the last time he talked to Harvey, maybe she wouldn't trust him. But if Harvey was better now...

Bruce had come to the visiting lounge at least once a week for twenty months straight to see John. Not seeing it for the succeeding five months hadn't managed to make it alien again. No, it was Harvey who seemed alien, his dark hair and linebacker's form replacing John's brighter and leaner shape. He'd happened to choose what had been Bruce and John's regular table.

Harvey faced away from the door, reading a large magazine. Bruce walked between the rows of tables, past three other visiting pairs, and coughed lightly when he was close. Harvey looked up and watched him sit in the chair opposite.

"Bruce," he said in a cool tone, closing the magazine. He laid it flat and rested his hands on it.

"Hello, Harvey," Bruce said.

Awkward moments passed. Bruce analyzed the details of Harvey's expression and posture. The other man took in a breath as if to speak, but only let out a sudden exhale. He looked at the table more than he looked at Bruce, and when he did look up, his eyes seemed to flicker with regret.

Of course, Bruce was probably projecting.

Still, as far as he could tell, the darker personality was absent.

"I appreciate—" Harvey started, as Bruce began, "Whatever it is, I'm—"

Bruce coughed. "Sorry, you first."

"I appreciate that you're willing to talk with me."

"That's basically what I was going to say."

"Well, nowadays most of what I do is talk. Talk and think." Harvey paused. "The monthly surveys are something of a break. I don't remember those from our hospital plans."

"The Foundation reached out to patient advocacy groups for the new initiative," Bruce said. "It's a mistake to try to help people by excluding them. Not that you and I were trying, we just..."

"We were used to single-handedly fixing things, as men of means and power," Harvey said dully. "Frequent topic in my therapy."

Bruce didn't know what to say to that. He felt hyper-aware of Dr. Leland watching from the head of
"Collaborating is a good change," Harvey went on, looking at his hands. "I'd like to think that in some little way I helped inspire you."

"You and everyone in here," Bruce said, "it's important that you have the tools--"

"But I know"— Harvey flipped the magazine back open— "that the timing of your advocacy doesn't correspond to me." He held up the paper— the tabloid, the Gotham Post— folded around the spine to show one article. "It's about him."

The headline was "Doe, a Dear?" Bruce had already seen the online version; it was from last week. The article was an update on Gothamites' split view of John, now that he'd been free for several months without causing trouble.

The accompanying photo was from a chilly April day, when a photographer got a picture of Bruce and John leaving a popular food truck, Gouda Stuff. They both had cups of mac and cheese, Bruce with the truck's signature plain recipe and John with a mound covered in bits of potato chips and bacon. John had his fork in his mouth and looked like he was in complete bliss. Bruce was just holding his own cup and looking at John... fondly. That's how Bruce would describe it.

At least it wasn't the picture of John feeding Bruce a sample of the chips and bacon flavor.

Again, Bruce didn't know what to say, but this time he spoke anyway. "He had imitation cheese most of his life. It was... endearing."

"Endearing." Harvey dropped the paper. "Funny, I was so sure he had something on you. Then again, I guess he does."

"You asked me here to needle me about gossip?" Bruce said coarsely.

"No, someone just happened to leave this behind. A timely reminder of Bruce Wayne's fickleness."

"I don't know how else to apologize so you believe me."

"I don't want to talk about Selina," Harvey said sharply, hands curling into fists.

"Then what is it?" Bruce asked with the same tone.

Harvey took a sudden breath as if to start yelling, but suddenly stopped. He looked to the side, as if remembering Dr. Leland was across the room. He closed his eyes and took another breath, this one slow, inhaling and exhaling. His hands relaxed.

Bruce realized he'd leaned forward on the table. He eased back.

Harvey opened his eyes but didn't make eye contact. "I had a visitor yesterday. He... It was not a good visit."

Bruce frowned. "I'm sorry about that, but--"

"He praised my 'work,'" Harvey pressed on. "Not when I was DA, but when I was mayor. He wanted to pledge loyalty to my 'cause.' He said he would help start it over, that I could direct things from the inside, or that he'd even break me out."

"Jesus."
"I told him that was over. Innocent people got hurt and died. I didn't have a cause; I lost control. I need to be here. He didn't like hearing that, and he left."

"Did you tell Leland? The police?"

"Half the police joined my crusade," Harvey said, voice cracking. "I don't want to end up spreading the guy's message. Or maybe it would go the other way, and they wouldn't even believe me. But I thought maybe you..." He looked up. "Will Gordon still talk to you? He could– or Doe, does he still have contact with Batman? Batman will look into it."

The insistent look in Harvey's eyes edged on haunted. Maybe Bruce hadn't been projecting after all.

"I'll get the message to him," Bruce said. "What can you tell me about this guy?"

He’d tried to speak reassuringly, but Harvey seemed more agitated and spoke quickly. “He told me his name was Rupert Cumberland, but that’s obviously fake. White, black hair and brown eyes– a big guy, built like me. The security video, he’ll be on it, from the morning. He’ll have signed in like everyone else.” He tapped the table rapidly, his eyes flitting around as he searched his brain. “Younger than us, but not by much, and he’s gotta be local. He talked about defending the ‘homestead,’ that kind of thing.”

Bruce nodded, mentally logging the information, but something nagged at him. “Anything else?”

Harvey’s hands disappeared under the table and his gaze fell there, too. “I, uh… I think that’s all...”

“Patients have to approve their visitors. How did he see you?”

Harvey had already started to pull into himself, shoulders hunched.

“Harv–”

“I didn’t ask him to come!” Harvey snapped, eyes locking on Bruce again. “It wasn’t– I mean, it was, but– the other guy. He did it.”

Bruce swallowed. He didn’t need to ask who Harvey was talking about. “Why?”

“Rupert’ started sending letters not long after I was put in here. He was careful, didn’t say anything that would be flagged, and only sent a few– until that mess with the Agency. Then the letters got real consistent. They still didn't get flagged, but something in his words just– just clicked”– Harvey snapped his fingers by his ear– “into place, like when you know just what someone really wants to say. I got more than one admirer like that, but he– he saw something in Rupert. I didn’t put him on my list; he did, a couple months ago.”

Bruce nodded again. “I understa–”

“No!” Harvey slammed his fist on the table. “I know what everyone thinks, and they’re wrong! That was months ago! I didn’t want to see that guy yesterday! He just showed up! I’m better now!” He rubbed the left side of his face, as if trying to massage an ache. “I’m better...”

(John’s hair sprouted between his fingers. His eyes squeezed shut. “I can’t do this...”)

“It’s okay,” Bruce tried again, keeping his tone amiable. Leland was making her way down the aisle. “I know you want eyes on this guy. Do you have the letters?”
Harvey shook his head. “I let them go with the trash.”

“Okay. Thank you for telling me all this. I’ll do what I can. You can—” You can trust me is what Bruce almost said, and he couldn't think of anything to replace it with.

Looking at the table, Harvey replied with a tense “thank you.”

Leland placed her hand on her patient’s shoulder. “It sounds like you and Mr. Wayne are done talking.” She raised her eyebrows at Bruce.

Bruce got up. “Yes, I think we’re done.” He gave Harvey one last look. “If you’d like me to follow up with you, I’m fine with being added to your list.”

Harvey didn’t look up, his bandwidth for the conversation spent.

Leland removed her hand and gestured toward the door. “Harvey can keep that in mind,” she said. “Thank you for visiting him on such sudden notice.”

Bruce knew she didn’t blame him for the outburst, but it was hard not to feel a swell of guilt. After all, Bruce’s ignorance and recklessness helped land Harvey in the asylum to begin with. And the same had happened with John. And here Bruce was, wagering that he could still inflict himself on both of them without further harm.

It didn’t help that, unlike Harvey, John welcomed Bruce’s company with ridiculous enthusiasm.

As if Bruce’s selfish enjoyment was an excuse.

John's first visit to Wayne Manor had taken a week for New Dawn to approve. He'd just started his residence, and the staff wanted to emphasize the therapeutic aspects of his schedule. Once they were satisfied with his orientation, Bruce was finally able to pick him up.

John hopped into the car and clicked his seatbelt, all without taking his eyes off his phone. “Morning!”

“Good morning,” Bruce said back, and he waved his hand between the screen and John's face. He didn't regret giving John a cell, but sometimes the other man could be as bad as a teenager.

John held up the phone. He scrolled by several photos of the manor's charred exterior just days after Harvey had tried to burn it down.

“I was just thinking how I wouldn't get to see the ‘before’ in person,” John sighed. The extensive repairs (guided by restoration experts) had finally been completed a few months ago.

“On the other hand,” Bruce said as he pulled away from the curb, “it smells a lot better now.”

“If only you lived in a sugar factory! Ooh, do you know that story? When the Sweet Tooth Factory in Otisburg caught fire and it smelled like creme brulee for weeks?”

John went on to recount a surprisingly extensive list of fiery disasters in Gotham's history. Eventually Bruce found a pause for a more personal subject.

Halfway through the question, John cut in. "Of course I want to celebrate my best bud's birthday with a night out! Unless you want to make the Arkham lounge a tradition."

Bruce glanced away from the road with a lopsided smile. "No, I think we've seen enough of that."
"Ha, yeah." John tapped his lips, pale pink today. "What do people wear to the theater?"

"Almost anything, but with this crowd, opening night calls for black tie. I was thinking I'd take you with me to the tailor." Bruce glanced over again. "Or we could buck the trend."

"Oh, come on. Just because we common folk don't live the VIP experience doesn't mean we'd skip an opportunity." John leaned back with his arms behind his head, but one look at the passenger-side mirror brought him up straight again. "Wow, the shutterbugs are still following us!"

He twisted in the confines of the seatbelt to look out the back window; Bruce barely paid another glance to the rearview mirror. The two sedans and van had been tailing them since the halfway house. John seemed too distracted to have noticed, but of course he had.

"Restraint is not a prerequisite for that line of work," Bruce remarked.

John giggled. "Too bad none of them know that with a flick of a switch, they'd be following the biggest story of their careers!" He added with too much innocence, "Which one is the Batmode button, out of curiosity?"

"I'm the only one who can activate it."

"But it would be so fun!" John complained.

They had just crossed the northern bridge into mainland Gotham– Crest Hill– where the lone road wound throughout the green acres to the estates of Gotham’s wealthy. The road was well kept and not often traveled. Bruce's car and the tailing vehicles were the only ones on it now.

"You can have other fun." Bruce checked the mirror again. "Like back when I'd just gotten my license. You'd enjoy it more than Alfred did."

"Uh, enjoy what?"

Bruce floored it.

John yelped as the momentum threw him back into his seat. The paparazzi shrunk in the rearview and the grassy terrain zipped past the windows. John braced a hand on the ceiling and his exhilarated laugh rang out over the cry of the engine.

The hook in the road came fast, the first in a pair of hairpin turns up the hill that were meant to be taken leisurely, not at breakneck speed. Bruce cut to the left, yanked the emergency break, and felt the the car start to slide before hauling the wheel right. John cheered as the car drifted through the turn, then cackled when Bruce accelerated onto straight road again.

They flew across the stretch in no time, and Bruce mirrored the maneuver for the second turn. The seatbelt had locked up and pressed into his chest. He kept his eyes on the road no matter how much he wanted to look at John’s face, but it was easy to visualize the gleaming eyes and broad grin that went with that laugh.

The car straightened out again, now on the high road that crossed the unused acres. The outline of the manor jutting into the sky grew larger as they closed the distance in a matter of seconds rather than minutes. The road passed close to the perimeter wall, so it was difficult to see if the wrought iron gates were opening at the car’s approach as designed, if the programming compensated for this speed. Bruce felt a flicker of doubt, but the brake remained untouched, and John’s whooping never stopped.
They reached the perimeter, and the tips of the gates could be seen just along the top of the wall, opening steadily inward. Bruce felt another thrill of satisfaction when they came to the entrance; he made the ninety-degree turn abruptly, jolting the e-brake and counterturning the wheel to maintain control. They flew into the grounds with hardly a loss in speed, between the gates opened just enough for the car.

With another yank of the brake and the wheel, the car slid sideways around the fountain through the fine gravel. They stopped right at the manor’s front doors.

“Do it again!” John cried, hands balled into fists under his chin.

Bruce was already returning John’s smile. No doubt the display had seemed reckless to the paps, but Bruce knew what he was doing. Other than the driveway, what did it hurt to give John some excitement?

“One time thing,” Bruce said as they got out of the car. “For my image.”

John rolled his eyes and pressed a hand to his heart. “Oh, I could tell how it tore at you to be so irresponsible.”

The further part of the road could be seen just over the eastern wall. As Bruce came to John's side, the dots of the other vehicles were doing a poor job of catching up.

"Losers!" John shouted through his cupped hands, then raised them for a double high five.

Bruce obliged, of course, before unlocking the front door.

Inside, they shrugged out of their coats. Unsurprisingly, while Bruce had thrown on a gray cableknit sweater because it was the first thing he saw when he opened his dresser, John had gone with something more colorful. With plain denim jeans and green sneakers, John wore a knitted crewneck sweater of a mess of colors in wavy stripes, vertical on the body and horizontal on the sleeves. His eye makeup, blending orange to green to blue, suddenly made sense.

John looked around the vast room. "You just walk into a ballroom?"

"It's an entrance hall," Bruce said as he draped John's jacket over his own on his arm.

"Uh huh," John said, following him to the coat room in the corner. "How many parties have you had in here?"

"It's still not a ballroom." Bruce slipped their coats onto hangers and said casually, "So we could start with the house--"

"Cave!" John exclaimed, eyes wide. He clutched Bruce's sleeve. "Please."

Bruce smiled. "Alright."

He led the way into the parlor, to the grandfather clock against the wall. John giggled when Bruce opened the glass cover and adjusted the hour hand. When the wall panel swung open, a tight noise seemed to wring from John's chest.

"If you're this excited now," Bruce said, "I'm afraid you'll have a heart attack if we keep going."

John grabbed Bruce's wrist and dragged him through the passage to a square elevator platform, surrounded with a metal railing and lit by a single round light above. A panel with two buttons was
mounted on the railing by the entrance gap. It was intuitive for John to press the lower one, but it only made a square on the right side of the panel light up.

Bruce pressed his hand against the square. There was an affirming beep. "Try again."

John jabbed the button once more, and this time the elevator whirred to life and began its descent. His giggling started up again.

"If the housekeeper messes with the clock," Bruce said, "I'd rather not reward her curiosity too easily."

John nodded, watching the rock walls slide up around them. "Yeah, I guess you can't hire fatherly confidantes from a service."

Bruce's smile faded. "No, that wasn't among the options."

"I, uh...

"I, uh..." John's hands were behind his back, one hand clutching the opposite wrist. "I really appreciate this, Bruce." He looked up with a close-lipped smile. "I've been so curious about your HQ for so long. I mean, I thought I'd get to see it before all the, you know, bad stuff happened, and then I thought I'd never see it, so to be here right now is just... It means a lot, that you still want to share it with me."

Bruce clasped John's shoulder. "Of course I do. We're best friends, right?"

John beamed, in that way that made Bruce suddenly aware of his heartbeat. Then John looked away and squealed.

The elevator had finally lowered out of the shaft, and the cave came into view. Among the pits and stalagmites, the catwalks and platforms lit up. In the lingering darkness above, bats shrieked and swirled.

John clapped. "A literal cave! Talk about committing to the bit."

"In my defense, it was already here."

With an approving tone, the elevator stopped, and John burst through the railing gap. Bruce took a couple steps forward and watched John bounce around, from the expanse of the towering computer, over to the armory to see the old suits, then oh wow, does the car shoot right up this ramp? Where does it come out? John didn't wait for an answer; he shot back over to the armory to look at the rows of weapons and gadgets. Then he zipped back across the computer station because he'd noticed the line of displays on the adjoining platform.

Nervously, Bruce finally joined him. Selina had been so put off by the displays. John stood in front of his own, with the elaborate belt buckle, the toothy grapple launcher, and the jokerrang, and only looked at the others from that spot. He didn't say anything. After long moments, he looked back at Bruce with a curious cock of his head.

"They're memories—reminders. Of past cases," Bruce said, feeling defensive even as John had little reaction. "It can be easy to get caught up in moving from one investigation to the next. It's good to remember accomplishments— and failures. Maybe things that could've been done differently."

"Like what?" John asked.

Bruce regarded him for a moment. "I should have gotten you away from the Pact."
John chuckled. "How?"

"I don't know." Bruce didn't have any good ideas. He couldn't imagine that, at the time, John would have loved being torn away from Harley and... what? Locked back up in Arkham? Sent to jail for aiding and abetting? Sequestered in the cave?

"It's okay, Bruce," John said, upbeat. "We're here now, aren't we?"

That was another way of looking at it.

As John turned back to his display, Bruce said, "If you want to take any of that for yourself— to reflect on, I guess— I won't stop you."

John's posture slumped. "No. I don't need much help on reflecting."

No, Bruce supposed he didn't, after all the talks with Leland, and all the talks with Bruce.

("Are you sure you want me to visit? After..."

"Why not?"

"Because I... You said everything you believed in was a lie."

"Heh, yeah. I was pret-ty upset, right?"

"..."

"I said what I felt. And I still... I'm still processing everything that went wrong, but I think... I think the biggest lie was what I was telling myself." John smiled. "It's hard not to believe in you when you're sitting right there.")

John sighed loudly, glaring at Harley's display. "Can't we... I dunno, throw this one into the pit over there?" he suggested.

"That certainly sounds cathartic."

John turned with another sigh— and noticed the record player setup. "Oh jeez, do you have an abacus down here too?" he said, going over. He pulled out the pile of records on the shelf below the player and flipped through them. "What the heck is 'ambient'?" he muttered.

Bruce chuckled. John seemed so at home...

Two years ago, in the aftermath of their fight with the Agency at the water tower, Bruce had found himself visualizing bringing John to the cave, successfully training him as a partner. Even after John was imprisoned, the images recurred: John learning to fight or helping with research or— of course— just making himself a distraction, all in costume. Bruce would have helped him improve the original outfit over time, with armor and a mask, and some answer to how they'd handle his already exposed identity.

Of course, Bruce never came up with an answer. It was all a forlorn what-if.

(A new version of the idea cropped up when Bruce learned that it was John who'd remastered Freeze's cryogenic fluid. He nixed it when John revealed his chemistry technique was highly play-it-by-ear. Bruce preferred keeping John not accidentally asphyxiated and the cave intact.)

"You need some, I dunno, purposeful marches in here or something," John said, replacing the
record stack. His gaze wandered to the monitors and he walked up the steps to the computer. Bruce followed.

John let out a long breath and flopped back into the command chair. He pivoted the seat around, looking at the whole cave. "So this is where the magic happens."

"Where reasoned deduction happens," Bruce corrected. "Also medical treatment, frustration, usually dinner."

John looked up. "Well, it'd be rude to leave the bats to eat alone." He paused. "Or I guess you eat with Tiffany."

"Only sometimes. She's still supposed to be a vibrant, outgoing young person, after all."

John's smile was strained. "I guess I should be relieved I don't have to keep up a double life."

Bruce didn't know what to say to that.

But John bounced to his feet and said, "It's chilly down here! I should've kept my coat. How about you show me what a larder is?"

On the way back upstairs, Bruce let John push the button again. As the platform ascended into the enclosed shaft, John tried to keep the cave in view as long as possible. He bent his body to the side, then crouched, then leaned down on one arm, his head parallel with the floor.

"You'll see it again," Bruce said.

"Darn right," John said. He stood back up. Not even a sliver of a view was left.

They returned to the parlor, and Bruce secured the clock. He used his sleeve to wipe off a smudge on the glass, and he nearly yelled when he turned to find John right in his face.

John had risen a little on his toes so their eyes were level. "So, Bruce," he said lowly, "now that it's just you and me, alone in this big old house, I think you can be honest with me."

Bruce felt his throat close up under the intensity of John's eyes.

"Just how haunted is this place?"

The tension evaporated as Bruce exhaled. "Not at all," he answered, poking John's chest to regain some personal space. "And if you want honesty, I don't think ghosts exist."

"Ah, a skeptic." John waved his hand and took a few wandering steps as he gazed around the room. "You've probably dismissed everything as a trick of the mind or the 'house settling,' all that hooey."

Bruce led him back to the main hall. "So you do believe, I take it."

"After so long in Arkham?" John snorted. "Of course I do! Talk about spirits thriving off negative energy."

Bruce headed up the stairs. "I think that's the patients, not spirits, unfortunately."

"Well, the spirits are definitely no help to the patients."

"So you experienced...?"
John grimaced. "Oh, jeez, I'd never sleep again. I just heard stories, unexplainable ones, you know?"

"Sometimes things are unexplained because we just don't have enough information."

"Then let's gather more information!" John proposed. "With a seance! I mean, aren't there bound to be souls with unfinished business around here?"

"I had the grounds examined last year. There were no signs of anyone buried here."

"Ol' Tom didn't like to take work home, huh?"

"Thankfully. I think we would've noticed a mess in the study. That's where we're starting the tour."

Bruce's father's study was a deep alcove in the library on the third floor, flanked by the bookshelves lining the walls on the bottom level. His mother's office was across the hall.

(Really, Thomas should have taken the office. He liked the library’s atmosphere but rarely went to the shelves, while Martha constantly came in to peruse fact and fiction. It was one of Bruce's lasting flashes of memory: playing with Gray Ghost action figures on the faded rug, hearing the rustle of his father's papers, looking up to see his mother reaching for a thick tome on the top level. Rain pattered on the skylight, glowing with midday light.)

John commented on the noticeable dust. Alfred used to keep these rooms tidy, and now that he was gone, Bruce couldn't bring himself to ask the cleaning service to touch them. Soon enough he'd finally do it himself, before covering the furniture with sheets, as in so many other vacant rooms.

Bruce skipped over those, or at least most of them. John wanted to peek at almost everything, perhaps thinking at least one of the sheets could be a ghost mimicking an antique settee. Of course, the only “ghosts” were the faded memories flickering across Bruce's mind.

They worked their way down, the tour including all seven bedrooms– the guest rooms, Alfred’s old room, Bruce’s childhood room, and the master– and then the entertaining area with the taproom and the small movie theater. On the first floor, the gym held the basketball court along with all Bruce's other fitness equipment. A connecting rotunda held changing areas for guests and the door to the closed pool just outside. On the other end of the manor, the main feature was the conservatory for sun-bathed breakfasts overlooking the gardens. Nearby were the gleaming, expansive kitchen and the stretch of the grand dining room.

Their last stop was halfway back to the entrance hall, down a narrow staircase between more sheet-draped rooms. A smaller, mostly subterranean kitchen and adjacent scullery were lit by a few narrow hopper windows along the ceiling. It was one of the few parts of the house that Bruce still used regularly, despite his meal deliveries and laundry service.

"Two kitchens," John said, remembering.

"Some people have one for 'show' and then one like this for daily living. The upstairs kitchen is mostly used by caterers. This is the one we– I actually use."

John nodded as he walked around the center island, dragging his fingers on the marble countertop. "Much more love down here than the demo piece upstairs," he said as he passed the stove. It and the other appliances, as well as the counters and cabinets, were clean but had lost their shine with years of use. Even when Alfred maintained them to his meticulous standards, he hadn’t been able to magic away every mark and scratch.
Standing over the sizzling pans, Alfred glanced back over his shoulder with a raised eyebrow at the island. It was too late for Bruce to crouch out of sight.

"Instead of picking off the mise en place, young Master, kindly fetch me more oil."

Bruce walked to a door in the corner and pulled it open. "And finally, I present the larder."

With a little gasp, John trotted over. When he got to the doorway, his shoulders slumped. He looked up at Bruce with a glare of betrayal. "There's just food in here."

"Yup, it's a pantry." Shelves lined the walls, though nowadays only the ones near the door were stocked with boxes, cans, and jars. "They would use it as a fridge in the early days, since it gets so cool down here." Out of curiosity, Bruce asked, "What did you think a larder was?"

"It sounds like it's full of lard!" John said. "That didn't seem likely, but I was hoping for something less humdrum."

Bruce sidled past John. "Sorry, just a boring closet."

John's eyebrows lifted at his tone. "Is it?"

Bruce stopped in the back right corner and reached to the back of a waist-high shelf. He pressed the flush panel that undid the hidden latch, and the entire section of wall swung outward. With a loud gasp, John dashed over.

"I didn't build this," Bruce clarified, looking into the dark, chilly tunnel. "Secret passageways like these used to be for servants to get more easily from one place to another." He realized that John was standing partially behind him.

"Oh, wow," John said quietly, peering over Bruce's shoulder. Then he wrinkled his nose skeptically. "Even this isn't haunted?"

"Even this." Bruce pulled out his phone and turned on its light. It shone just a few yards deep. The passage had been lined with horizontal wooden slats, but they had broken and cracked in places, exposing the dirt beneath. He looked back at John, who rubbed his arms as if he felt the larder's chill only now. "If you want to go back upstairs..."

With sudden bravado, John strolled into the tunnel, taking out his own phone for light. "So where does this go?"

Bruce followed. "Out to where the stables used to be. You'll feel the floor slanting up."

"So it's for escape?"

"My parents used to talk about how our family assisted the Underground Railroad." Bruce paused. "Now I have to wonder if even that was true. Tunnels like these are also used for smuggling."

John and his light turned around. "Could have been for both!" he offered cheerfully. He examined the walls. "Sure this is still up to code?"

"It's pretty stable."

"Let's hope so," John giggled, tapping a cracked slat with his phone. It promptly fell off, and John froze, like maybe everything would crumble around them.

"I think it would take more than that."
"Yeah, yeah, of course," John said, picking up the slat. Before Bruce could tell him not to bother, John dropped it again and cooed, "What-oh-what is this?"

Bruce stepped forward as John pulled a book out of a crevice dug into the dry dirt. "You got me," he said. He'd thought he and Alfred had uncovered every nook and cranny of the mansion. Leave it to John to find a treasure by accident.

John held his phone in his teeth, the light pointing downward while he brushed the book off. It didn't look very old; the brown leather cover and binding were undamaged, and the pages were only slightly yellow.

"Looks like a journal!" John said when his mouth was free. He turned off his light and put his phone in his pocket. "Shine that here."

Bruce lifted his light as John held the book in both hands. He opened to a random point and tutted when the binding let out a crack and the stiff pages strained upward. He carefully pressed them down.

"What does it say?" Bruce asked.

John let out a guffaw then read, "Even at eight, he's reserved like me, not drawn to people like his father. He was the same when he was a toddler hiding behind my leg, growling when I tried to introduce him to friends."

The cold sunk into Bruce’s chest.

"He'll have to learn Thomas's sociability," John continued, "if he wants to lead the boardroom." He giggled. "Well, Brucie, you can do that, and you can growl at people!" He finally caught the look on Bruce's face. "Uh, yeah, so, I guess you did not know this existed." He looked down at the pages, face suddenly guilty, and closed them up. "Obviously this is a private thing, hidden away down here," he said, handing the journal over.

For long seconds, Bruce didn't touch it, wished they never found it. There may have been times he wondered if there were more deeds by his parents that the police never uncovered, but there was such relief in the idea that he could never really know, that there would never be more to process.

Was this journal filled with more pain?

"We could put it back?" John suggested.

Bruce shook his head. He took the book and shone his light on the deceptively plain cover. He opened to the first page, noting the date. He'd been eight years old. He read the first line:

I don't know if I can trust Thomas anymore.

John waited quietly, watchfully.

Bruce shut the journal back up and tucked it under his arm. He caught the time on his phone and said, "I think time may be up for the tour. I don't want you to be late."

"What do you mean?" John said. "It's only—" A jaunty tune started up, and John retrieved his phone. "It’s not only. Heh, my reminder for the parole officer. How did you know?"

"Just a feeling," Bruce said, heading back to the pantry’s light.
They returned to the entrance hall. Bruce left the journal on a side table to grab when he got back home, not that he was looking forward to it.

"So what do you think of the place?" he asked as they pulled on their jackets.

"It's fantastic!" John appraised with one last look around. His pleased expression faltered. "And big. Almost as big as Arkham, except you're the only batty one in it."

"Clever," Bruce said as they went outside. He locked up and continued, "Since it is uselessly huge, that means there's more than enough room for, uh..." He put the key in his pocket. "After you leave the halfway house, you're more than welcome to stay. To live."

John blinked a few times. Then he bit his lip and looked away. "Oh, geez, thanks, Bruce." He rubbed the back of his head. "But I mean, it is so far from the rest of the city, and considering how much time I'll be spending there, uh..."

"I do also have a penthouse uptown."

Bruce wasn't sure why he said that; John clearly wanted to decline and only became more uneasy, fumbling for words as he walked to the passenger side of the car. Bruce had thought John would jump at the offer, but he'd obviously miscalculated, and John obviously didn't want to insult him.

As much as Bruce wanted to do John a favor, he certainly didn't want to make him uncomfortable. "Well, it's an option to think about," he said as he unlocked the car and walked to the driver's side. "No need to decide now."

John relaxed. "Yeah, I'll let you know." He cocked his head. "Why don't you live in the penthouse?"

"Most of my resources are here."

"Ah, right," John said. He smirked. "But I'm guessing the penthouse has backup resources for emergencies."

"It might," Bruce said as they got in the car. "And before you ask, it also has no ghosts."

"I wasn't going to ask," John insisted unconvincingly.

"You know, I am open to extraterrestrials."

"Aliens?" John shook his head. "Sheesh, you did belong at Arkham."

---

John never accepted the offer for a place to stay, and considering what Bruce accepted about his own feelings not long after, it was probably for the best. It would be a torturous conflict of interest, even if John went for the penthouse. Bruce would be happy to give John a place to live, but it would be hard not to feel like he was "keeping" John like... like the worst rumors in the media.

But he didn't have time to focus on his personal dramas, real or imagined.

"Here's what I got," Tiffany said, standing at Bruce's side in front of the batcomputer. She transmitted the display on her tablet to the big screen.

Bruce had sent her all the information he'd gotten from Harvey that morning. While he addressed his responsibilities for Arkham and Wayne Enterprises, she performed some preliminary investigation. Tiffany had her own work at WE, but she was as proficient at multitasking as Bruce.
"I pulled the surveillance footage from the Arkham network to confirm Dent's description. Check this out."

The three-month-old WE security system took high-resolution, color video of multiple areas of Arkham, including the lobby. There, the receptionist, Delilah, interacted with a couple visitors, what looked like a mother and son. She directed them along to be scanned, then had a chat with an orderly. After a few seconds, she looked toward the front door.

The video scrambled.

"This interference occurs with multiple cameras along the path from the parking lot to the visiting area," Tiffany said, flipping through the snowy feeds. "You can see Dent sitting alone when the interference starts, and alone again after it moves back to the parking lot. The guy must've been carrying a jammer."

"This seems more serious than some crank."

"It does," she agreed. "I don't see any indicators that he's involved in other cases, including the Maroni stuff, but someone with this kind of tech and making those kinds of proposals is sure to pop up again."

"I'd rather not wait for that."

"Well, I don't have many ideas without more data to cross reference. His handwriting sample might ping something, but I wouldn't call that a reliable hit. If he is local, maybe you could bring Harvey a yearbook from every high school in the city in a ten-year span?"

"That's… a suggestion."

"There's not much else to do but be on the lookout and advise Gordon. The GCPD is swamped, too, but he could send the sketch artist."

Dead-end situations were already frustrating, but they felt worse in times like these, when both vigilantes and cops were occupied by the mob. Even with all of Tiffany's algorithms looking for red flags, it'd be easy for "Rupert" to stay under the radar until his next move.

"Speaking of the Maroni stuff, I noticed something." Tiffany brought up a map of the city, overlaid with hundreds of red dots. "I was plotting all mob activity across the city. Each dot is a report from the past six months. Notice anything?"

The map was swathed and patched with red. One of the clear sections of the city, however, cut noticeably into the border of the red Narrows, right around All's Well.

Bruce frowned. "Well, I'm glad John isn't in the midst of everything, but I'm not sure what this says about Rosaline."

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking at first, but there's no other info indicating she's benefiting from the Maronis. There's no sign that they've even contacted her, or that she wants to be contacted."

Rosaline Portico, bar owner and former fiancée of the late Pino Maroni, Don Maroni's youngest son and known abuser. A younger Rosaline got away from the family by refusing to testify against them in exchange for being left in peace, according to the word on the street at the time. No one was interested in pursuing the rumor after the Maronis were blown away by the Falcones.

"Maybe Maroni is honoring the old agreement," Bruce pondered aloud. "Avoiding her."
"That'd be 'honorable,' but I don't think the data suggests that." With a few taps, an overlay of blue dots replaced the red. "These are other crime reports. There are more of them, but once again the area around the bar has significantly fewer incidents."

"So you don't think this is about Maroni," Bruce said, more sourly than he intended.

"I don't know what it's about," Tiffany said evenly. "I'm just showing you what I'm seeing."

Bruce folded his arms and considered the map. “People could be avoiding the ‘Joker’s’ new hangout.”

“Sure, especially with the videos still circulating. And there are a lot of rumors spreading."

"Ridiculous ones. John still has the virus and plans to poison the river. Sideshow is intended to lure in fresh victims. Batman turned Joker into a vampire and they hunt the wicked.”

Even the rumor Bruce heard within Arkham’s walls, that there was no record of when John was first brought in, had gotten traction on the outside.

(Dr. Leland rolled her eyes. “Is that still going around? I’d just started as an intern when John was brought in, so to say ‘no one’ remembers his admittance is patently false. That rumor started after a fire in the records room severely damaged many files, including John's. So they're incomplete, but not missing. Sadly, the fire is the reason Arkham finally got the funding to digitize records.”

“It's a cruel story in a way,” Bruce said, “like he's a specter, not a person. I know John wasn't popular, but…” He frowned, because Leland was smiling a bit. “What?”

“I'm not convinced John isn't the one who started the rumor.”

“Plenty of stories are on a believable level,” Tiffany pressed. “I mean, I wouldn't blame anyone for biting off some creep’s nose in self-defense.”

“John is occupied with building his life. The halfway house let him out early after he got a string of gold stars.” Literally– John had pressed his counselor to start utilizing motivational stickers.

Her expression moved from patient to stony, and she ended the transmission from her tablet. "Look, I understand you want to be fair to John, but I reserve the right to be skeptical."

"I'm not saying you can't."

"No, you just get all pissy when I show you something that’s kind of weird. Can you admit it's weird, at least?"

"Sure, but it doesn't mean anything. He's been working hard--"

"I didn't say he--"

A triple beep sounded, and the computer screen announced: INCOMING VIDEO CALL.

Bruce went ahead and answered it. "Hi, Al."

Alfred sat in his study as usual, softly lit by a floor lamp next to the long bookshelf in the background. He'd used his hard-earned savings and assets to get quite the cozy countryside cottage in Kent, a comfortable alternative to Gotham.

After a smattering of letters and phone calls, Alfred had suggested they finally move to video calls.
Bruce had wondered why they'd been so sluggish to get to that point—until the first call. Actually seeing Alfred's face hit Bruce hard. Al wasn't in the manor where he belonged; he was thirty-five hundred miles away. Bruce did his best to not to let the pangs show on his face, but he'd probably done as good a job as Alfred.

Eventually it got easier. Tonight Alfred had a warm smile. "Good evening, Bruce," he greeted.

"You know," Bruce replied, "if you wanted to be in pajamas at your time of night, I wouldn't mind."

Alfred scoffed lightly. "I know I raised you to be more presentable than that."

"Be happy you saw me sparingly during college."

"I'll do myself a favor and not think on it." Alfred's gaze turned to Tiffany. "I didn't know you'd be joining us, my dear."

"Hey, Alfred." She put the tablet under her arm. "I've gotta run, actually. I promised Mom I'd have dinner with her and Luke."

"Ah, tell them I said hello."

"No problem." She stolidly turned to Bruce. "Same time for patrol?"

"Right."

"If I find any more interesting information, I'll let you know."

"Of course. See you later."

After she disappeared up the elevator, Alfred said, "I sense some tension."

"Don't worry about it," Bruce said. He tapped in a code to unlock a drawer under the console, and hit another key to summon the chair from under the floor. He retrieved his mother's journal from the drawer and sat.

Alfred entwined his fingers. "So we'll get right to it?"

"Might as well."

"You said you would send more entries as you read through them, but I never received any beyond the first."

"That's because I haven't gotten any further," Bruce admitted. "The lawyers are still seeking settlement with all the patients and families affected by my father. There are so many... I can't... The idea that I might find out anything more is difficult."

He followed the swoops of his mother's handwriting, not reading the words. He'd already gone through the first entry multiple times.

I don't know if I can trust Thomas anymore.

That statement is wrong. Of course I know. I've started keeping a journal in a place he never goes.

But shouldn't I have known long before now? From when he first told me that meeting
with Falcone is just a matter of "management," that their association has to be kept secret lest the public get the wrong idea? That Falcone is a violent man, and we have to placate him so he doesn't hinder the operations of the company, with all the ways they're interwoven with the city and keep everything going. Hill has to placate him for the same reasons.

Hill "placates" a lot of people.

It would be better if I was just stupid, not willfully ignorant. I don't want to think badly of my husband. I want to think of his love and support, of his attentiveness as a father. I want to focus on the Foundation and all the good it does. So I just ignored my doubts. Told myself Thomas is just doing what he has to. We all have to cope with the world as it exists.

But it doesn't just exist. There are decisions and actions behind everything. And I've noticed the unexplained influxes of money. I've noticed that Thomas isn't merely tolerant of Falcone and Hill. How long does he think I'll pretend I don't?

Alfred leaned back in his chair. "Reading that brought back many memories of Martha. She was ultimately complicit, but while I was no confidant, she often indicated to me she was unhappy with your father's 'business' dealings. They were not a couple cut from the same cloth."

Bruce thought back to his last encounter with Falcone, when the mobster fondly recalled his mother's "human touch" after Bruce took pity and administered his morphine. From what Bruce had pieced together from unearthed records and witness statements, his father would not have been merciful with someone who had something he wanted.

"Still," Bruce said, "she was complicit. She let his actions pass her judgment. After a while, she might have decided she could justify bad actions on her own part."

"Or there may be nothing more than the horrors we already know about," Alfred pointed out.

Bruce nodded.

"You could burn it," Alfred suggested only somewhat facetiously. "It's your family history to do with what you wish."

"It's your family history, too."

Alfred shook his head. "I stood by. I don't deserve a say."

After a long, quiet moment, Bruce sighed. "If there are other crimes in here, they deserve to be investigated."

"Your impulse toward justice is the family history I'm proud of," Alfred said with a smile, "our disagreements on the methods notwithstanding."

"I'll read more and get back to you."

"Alright. Is there anything else you wanted to discuss?" His tone had a familiar hesitance.

("I can't give up on him, Al. There's still a chance I can bring him back from the edge."

"You're not—"
What, Al?"

"... Nothing.")

Bruce shook his head. Even if Alfred had been keeping tabs on local gossip, there was no value on bringing it up. "No, that's it, unless you want a ticket to the gala."

"Bit of a short notice. I was thinking the fall."

The implication took a moment to register. "You mean for a visit?"

"If that's all right."

"Of course it is," Bruce said automatically. Of course he missed Alfred, wanted to see him again, wanted to hug him (like he should have in the parlor on that last night).

But the bolt of elation faded, because he wanted Al to regret leaving, wanted to convince him to stay. Neither would happen. As always, Bruce had to moderate his expectations.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter has bowling in it!
Cling to Light

Chapter Notes

Just gonna stop telling myself I can write shorter chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bolton's black balaclava, made of a thin, breathable elastane, had only two small windows for his steely eyes. The neck tucked into the collar of his shirt, worn under a tactical vest modified with steel shoulder guards. The guards were connected by thick lengths of chain across his chest and back. He sat tall with his shoulders squared; his image on the screen projected strong, straight lines.

Projecting strength to engender respect from your men was as important as it had always been. In the livestream's chat window, he could already see enthusiastic comments. He spoke at a lower register, with the authority he knew his followers craved.

"The time is near when we'll take back our city," he began. "For a time, it looked like the Batman was the one who'd eradicate the scum from our streets, until his self-imposed limitations became clear. Now the Maroni family is slithering its way back to power, into the gutters once filled by Falcone.

"Batman doesn't go far enough, and neither do the police. They are beholden to the systemic weaknesses that plague our lives. Even our progenitor is infected. The manipulations of the asylum, funded by the elites, brainwashed him into equating his beliefs with delusions.

"They tell him that his unleashed self is dangerous. Of course it is. The truth is always dangerous to those who are comfortable with the status quo. So long as they are untouched by the menace in our streets, why disrupt their comfort?"

The mask was only slightly distorted by the curl of his lip as the chat feed rapidly scrolled: DISRUPT DISRUPT DISRUPT

"At all levels, the 'authorities' show what a muddled mess society has become. The bureaucrats at City Hall are exposed in disgrace after disgrace. We pay the police for protection, yet we fend for ourselves. We expect the Agency to bring order, and instead they cause chaos. The media are complicit in cover-ups and treat scandals and pain like entertainment.

"All that stops now, because you and I will take the helm. We will not enact half measures. We will not show weakness. We will show this city what true direction and strength means.

"With your dedication, I will bring the orderly society this city desperately needs. And the parasites who have dismissed us for so long will finally feel our desperation."

The viewers fed him silent raving cheers.

"I would be proud to have every one of you join the fight, but we must be tactical, especially in the initial strike. Those of you I have not contacted, know you are an untapped resource for the battles thereafter. When the first shot rings, cheer on your brothers— and enjoy the show.

"Until my next broadcast. Stand tall."
Bolton shut down the feed and pulled off the mask. He wiped the sweat from his brow and rolled his eyes as Crane’s voice came from the next room.

"Criticizing the Agency, who also hold criminals prisoner and use them to their ends."

Bolton snorted. No lunatic would understand, much less one as disturbing as Crane. The first time Crane heard Bolton talking to his followers, the doctor had screamed for help in near hysteria. Bolton had laughed and told him that no one listening would call the police. They knew Crane was part of the problem— and would be made part of the solution.

Bolton had felt such satisfaction at seeing Crane’s cloak of calm finally tear away, but when Crane realized there were no sympathetic ears, the terror dropped. All an act.

But of course. All the vermin in this city had to play at being human in order to take advantage. Bolton had learned the lesson years ago: give them an inch and they'll take a mile. Keep them squashed under your boot no matter how they squirm and squeal.

He entered the cage room. The doctor sat in his usual chair behind the fencing, examining his nails. A thin blanket lay on the mesh-covered floor on the right side of the room. The other side had a card table with a few scrawled sheets of paper and a box of crayons.

"Are you done the instructions?" Bolton asked.

"Perhaps," Crane replied. "I still insist, for ideal results, that my toxin be produced by a professional, not the ‘elite’ of your rabble."

"I barely trust you with crayons, and this isn’t an experiment. The results I need have nothing to do with precision."

"Your peons still need enough gray matter to create a toxin that works at all."

"If you write actual instructions," Bolton snapped, "I'll get what I need. If you write a bogus formula or something that kills the men mixing it or some other trick, you are not gonna like the consequences. Do you understand me?"

"Threats are simple concepts, yes," Crane replied with mild agitation. "Did you collect the Convolvulus arvensis?"

If Crane had any human qualities, being a pretentious windbag was one of them. "That weed?" Bolton replied.

"You could at least use the full layman’s term so I know you’re not just grabbing any grass that ekes its way out of the sidewalk."

"I’ll get everything once you finish the instructions."

"Collecting field bindweed is a simple enough task to cross off the list now, given its abundance, and I should verify you have the correct plant."

Bolton fixed him with a dark look. The doctor could be surprisingly mouthy for someone electrocuted with frequency, and for someone not actually necessary to carry out Bolton's plans. Bolton could go any number of avenues, but Crane’s weapon was effective, and it was too tempting to see it used for a noble purpose.

"It’s good that you’re trying to be useful," Bolton replied. "It is the only reason you’re still
breathing."

I'm afraid Alfred wants to leave. Not because of anything explicit, but every morning now, when he serves our tea, I can feel a tension, like he's gearing himself up for an announcement. But he says only the usual pleasantries.

The tension is gone by the time he brings Bruce down to join us. Then he has his corny jokes and nudging reminders: elbows off the table, sit up straight. He always remembers the school projects or trips I've forgotten. My mind is cluttered with work—or lately with Thomas.

Alfred has always gone above and beyond, but when Bruce was born he became a godsend. Everyone recommended we bring on a nanny, but Alfred was so attentive and knowledgeable when I was pregnant, there just wasn't a need. And bringing in someone new always poses a risk to privacy.

That seemed to be Thomas's primary concern, looking back on it.

I think Bruce is what keeps Alfred from leaving. Bruce is why I still don't ask too many questions. I won't like the answers, and once I have them, there'll be not a shred of deniability left to shield myself from taking action.

The doorbell rang, and Bruce felt a sliver of gratefulness at being taken away from the journal. That sliver was overwhelmed with suspicion. A doorbell was innocuous only if your property wasn’t elaborately monitored by a system set up to warn you the moment there was any motion on the perimeter.

He stowed the journal in a drawer and left the parlor. As he walked through the entrance hall, he brought up the camera feeds on his phone. A motorcycle was left at the gate, and at the front door...

Bruce opened it. "You could have called ahead, Selina."

With a sly smile, she slipped her hands into the back pockets of her slim jeans. Her black hair was the shortest he'd ever seen it, in a tousled pixie cut. Her eyes gleamed with pride. "But then how would you get the free security systems check?" she asked.

"So you're going to tell me how you got through?"

She strode past him into the grand foyer. "Maybe, if you're nice to me."

Her playful tone prompted a sideways smile. Even after a couple years' absence, she wasn't one to allow let's-be-friends get in the way of flirty banter. He'd at least gotten a few more postcards this time. But...

As he shut the door, she noticed his smile had dropped. "What?" she asked.

"No offense, but when you show up, it turns out you're working for someone who tries to kill me."

Her eyes flashed. "It's not like I..." She shook her head and crossed her arms. "Hard to be offended when you're right." Her smirk returned and she poked him in the bicep. "But shows what you know, smart ass. I'm in town to meet with friends."
"All pleasure, no business?" Bruce replied skeptically.

"I wouldn't say no business."

"Oh?"

"See? We have a clear departure from our last two rodeos. You have no idea."

Bruce went through his mental catalog of recent cases. "I can't think of any burglaries with your finesse."

"Maybe because any illicit acts I may or may not have committed wouldn't be on your radar. Or would that be sonar?"

"Funny." Bruce gestured to the parlor. "Come sit down."

"Sure," she said, but she craned her neck toward an open door at the back of the hall. Sheet-covered furniture was visible. "I was kind of hoping you'd say Alfred was back."

"No, that hasn't changed," Bruce said. "He is visiting in a few months. If you'll still be around, I'm sure he'd love to see you."

She followed him into the parlor. "That would be nice. I hope I can."

"You want a drink?" Bruce offered as she sat on the couch.

She looked up at the portrait over the fireplace. "Water's fine."

He poured two glasses. He handed her one as he sat beside her. She took it with a glance, still staring at the painting.

"Are you wondering why I still have it?" he asked.

"No," she replied. "It's your family, and I know how you think about your mementos in the basement."

His family hadn't posed for the painting, but for the photograph the painter used. Bruce remembered his mother fussing with his suit before sitting down, remembered his father's sure hand on his shoulder. "Stand up straight," his father had said. "Let everyone see what a great man you'll be."

And what was Thomas Wayne's idea of greatness?

"Yeah," Bruce said, "it's certainly a reminder."

Selina set her glass on the coffee table. "I, um..." she began, folding her hands in her lap. "I've thought about the past a lot myself while I've been away. I try to be more mindful, about who and what I get involved with."

"That's good," he replied carefully.

She snorted. "Yeah, it's good. I'd rather not lend another hand in uncovering a biological weapon."

"Probably the least pleasant surprise of your career."

"That and the explosive collar." She looked him in the eye. "I'm still no pristine citizen, but I didn't
want to turn around and use my freedom in a way that gets people hurt. Not because of the debt thing—though I still hate debt—but because…you got me thinking. A lot." She let out a short laugh. "Too much."

"What do you mean?"

"I suspect anyone who's encountered your ridiculous selflessness finds themself soul searching."

"I'm not a saint."

"Closer than anyone I know."

Bruce swirled his water. "But not enough to get a full heel turn from you."

"It’s enough of a turn that I feel…better. And I thought you should know. As my friend."

Plainly uncomfortable, she couldn't hold his gaze, but it only made her come across as sincere. The occasional postcards were just one example of Selina's wariness—a way to reach out while offering no way for someone to reach back. But she had made contact, and now she was here to confess that Bruce helped change her. It was touching.

Not that he was unbothered when she admitted that she was involved in something. It could very well be harmless, but they certainly had different ideas of what that meant.

At this moment, though, sharing even a nonalcoholic drink was much better than wondering where in the literal world she was.

"I’m glad to hear it," Bruce said with a smile. "So it's only jaywalking from here on out?"

"Oh, yeah. And rolling stops at corners." She picked her glass back up. "Enough about me. You've been busy lately," she said before drinking.

"Yeah, the Maronis haven't been shy about their comeback."

She swallowed and shook her head. "There's that, but I meant shepherding John back out into the wider world."

"That's gone much more smoothly."

"Given where he was before I left town, that's good."

"I can't say I wasn't worried, but he's been doing well."

"You would know. By the gossip, you see him every day."

"Almost," Bruce said, then caught her curious tone. "Most everything else in the gossip is ridiculous speculation."

"Most."

"Yes." He felt caught.

She shrugged casually. "I'm a friendly ear, if there's anything you want to divulge."

It would be a while yet before he was comfortable talking to her about relationship issues. (As if there was anyone he was comfortable with.) "There's nothing to divulge," he said patiently.
"Can't blame a girl for wondering." She leaned forward, putting the glass down again. "Alright, what else is going on? Still flipping Arkham?"

"Through the Foundation and some other organizations. We're actually looking to bring in more partners with a fundraiser coming up. It took a lot of political back-and-forth to make it happen, so I just hope it goes smoothly."

"Ah, right, at the Butler Museum of Art."

Bruce raised an eyebrow, unamused. "You already knew about the gala."

"My ears twitch at the mention of any place that has so many supposedly priceless displays…" She batted his arm. "Come on. I'm just teasing."

He was skeptical, but he played along. "I hope so. I'll be too busy petting egos to worry about you running around the back halls."

"Oh, you don't think I could snatch something from the gala floor right in front of everyone's noses?"

Bruce held up his hands. "I am not putting you up to the challenge," he chuckled.

Her smirk fell away. "I know you've done hundreds of those things, but now that I know you better, it's hard to imagine you schmoozing with those snooty assholes."

"They're not all bad. I avoid inviting the terrible ones."

"I heard. You invited Ronnie Vreeland and snubbed her ex."

"I've snubbed him for a long time. He's an infamous creep. He used to be a lawyer for the Falcons."

"So it's not about taking sides in the split?"

"I wouldn't say that. Veronica can be a little much, but she's alright. We went to the same private schools."

"There's the headline. Old classmates reigniting the flame."

Bruce flashed back to the night of the musical and Veronica's flirty greeting. "I hope that's not what she's thinking…"

"A woman forever in her prime on the rebound, with a well-known wealthy bachelor in her sights? Yeah, who knows what she's thinking." Selina didn't hide her amusement at his discomfort. "You can hire some sort of reverse wingman."

"Do you want the job?" Bruce asked offhandedly. "For some honest money?"

"Never in my life has my presence caused less drama."

But the joke was sprouting into something earnest. "If you did want to come as my guest, it would be nice, actually," he said, turning the idea over. It bugged him that Selina had flagged the gala. If it was anything to worry about, he'd rather have a closer eye on her. And if it wasn't, it seemed an appropriate gesture to maintain a friendship. "Not just to ward off Veronica, but to have someone real to talk to."
She gave him a look. "As your guest."

"Yes," he said quickly. "The whole thing would be a lot more tolerable."

"Gee, when you put it like that, how can a girl resist?" Selina chuckled. She tilted her head contemplatively. "Sure. A night in glitz and glam sounds fun— and honestly, I'd love to see how that crowd reacts to John."

"Oh, uh, he won't be there."

"No?"

"He's... still working on his social graces. And patrons are more responsive to the idea of helping people with mental health problems. The actual patients make them nervous."

Selina's nose wrinkled. "That gets more gross the more I think about it."

"I can't do anything about it." Bruce didn't like the stigma, but he knew how the people in his economic circle operated. "And John understands."

"I remember him as a touch more sensitive."

"He's improved. Do you want to know what really happened with Freeze last year?"

"Do tell."

The beer kegs at All's Well were kept in the basement, connected to lines that ran up through the floor, into the counter, and out the taps. The few on-hand soda syrups, however, were kept in one of the bar cabinets just under the ice well.

John was replacing the empty lemon-lime box when he noticed the cracked connector on the tube. A lot of Ro's equipment was used until its last legs, and this was no exception. Among the supplies on the other side of the cabinet was a roll of electrical tape, and he used it to secure the tube for now.

A square shadow fell over him and he looked up. Adelina's sketchbook tilted on the edge of the counter. A series of simplistic sketches showed a faceless green-haired figure in a series of pink suits. The main difference was the length of the coattails, from modestly short to ostentatiously long.

Still crouching, John rubbed his chin. "Still not sure..." He caught Adelina's frown. "I know, clock's a'tickin'. Leave the management to your sister."

Rosaline returned from the office. She smiled at someone over the counter, then looked back down at John. "All done?"

"One of the attachments is cracked," he said as he got up.

A stifled squawk drew his eyes to two women in tight dresses sitting at the end of the bar. They looked from him to Ro, clutching their knockoff handbags like shields. One had straight, bleached hair, and the other's brown hair was pulled into a bun.

"Soooooo..." John looked back to Rosaline. "I taped it, but you'll need a new one."

"I'll add it to my list," Rosaline said, still looking at the customers. "You ladies alright?"
"We, ah, didn't know anyone was down there!" the blonde said.

The brunette fumbled, "Shouldn't maintenance be done in, you know, off hours?"

"That'd be stupid!" John giggled. "Things break at all hours."

"Really, Rosie," the brunette said with a tight laugh, "wouldn't it be appropriate to limit… exposure?"

"Anyone who doesn't like my business practices is free to go elsewhere," Rosaline snapped.

"Ohhhh," John said in realization. "You're being jerks!" He planted his hands on his hips.

The blonde managed to clutch her bag tighter. She tilted her head back to look down her nose. "Just expressing our opinions."

"Your opinion," John declared, "is rude and unappreciated!"

"We've patronized this bar for years--"

"Which doesn't mean you run it," Rosaline said sharply.

"Well!" the blonde said, as both women indignantly slung their purses over their shoulders. "We'll go where our money is wanted."

"A place to fix that awful bleach job?" John chortled.

Making aghast sounds, the women turned and headed for the door. John grinned at Rosaline, and she patted his shoulder with a sigh. He looked back in time to see the women literally run into Lucia and Lian, who wore their server aprons. The women pushed past without another word.

"Excuse you!" Lucia yelled after them, loud enough to be heard through the door. Lian led her inside by the elbow, and they took two seats by Adelina. "Can I get a beer, please?" Lucia asked.

As Rosaline retrieved a bottle, Lian said, "I thought you were set on more rehearsal time?" He sat facing the room with his elbows on the counter.

"I am," Lucia said. She muttered a thanks when Ro placed an open bottle in front of her. "But this city has been on my case all week, so I need this first."

"We all deserve a break. It's Saturdaaaayyy!" Lian briefly did jazz hands.

Lucia took a long swig before responding. "We have a week to lock down the show."

"All this pressure is bogging down the show. Some fun will juice us! Plus we have all day tomorrow."

"And we could also have tonight."

"A movie?"

"Or rehearsal."

"Night Market in Robinson Park?"

"Or rehearsal."
"Even if we just grabbed a table and played cards."

Lucia gestured to John. "This one gets in fights around cards."

John bristled. "Lorenzo started it! He said I was cheating!"

"You're fighting with Lorenzo?" Lian asked.

"No," John said, folding his arms haughtily, "because he apologized, as he should have." He smiled. "And then I taught him the tricks, because I do know them!"

"Noted." Lian looked around the room, evidently for inspiration. His eye caught some flyers posted by the door. "Bowling?"

Lucia snorted. "Yeah, of all those things, *bowling* will get me."

"Is it not fun?" John asked. "I always liked the sound on TV." He imitated the crashing noise of falling pins.

She practically slammed her bottle on the counter. "You’ve never bowled?" she asked.

"No, they got rid of the alley at Arkham because the pins kept turning up--"

"Scratch whatever upsetting thing you are about to say," Lucia declared, "because we are going fucking bowling!"

"Works for me," Lian said, pulling out his phone. "I'll let everyone know the new plan."

Lucia finished off the beer and smacked it down again. She wagged her finger at John's outfit. "The sooner we get outta our smocks, the sooner the night begins."

John was still processing. All his time with the Circus had involved the show in some way. Tonight, they were just hanging out. Having fun. And he needed no one's permission and had no curfew.

"What’s the hold up?" Lucia asked, returning his stare.

"Nothing." It was five, and he was now only on-call. "I just, uh, don’t know what to wear."

"Shower and figure it out," she said with claps of her hands. "Let's go, Doe!"

Bruce sat at the batcomputer, mindlessly eating one of the prepared dishes delivered to the manor every few days. Without Alfred to mind his nutrition, he instead relied on an overpriced meal prep service that catered to fitness buffs.

His attention was less on the taste than on the reports displayed across the screens. Over the past couple nights, a hardware store and a computer parts store had been burglarized by someone who’d hacked the security system. Both systems were from Serac Security Solutions, a competitor of WayneTech's middle-market products.

Given the timing, Selina did cross Bruce's mind as a suspect, but this job seemed too easy, too pedestrian. None of the stolen merchandise was valuable or unique enough for her typical payoff. For this kind of job, any number of people had the hacking skills. Tiffany flagged other Serac clients and their respective trades so Batman and Spectrum could be on the lookout.
That was assuming all their time wasn't monopolized by Maroni underlings. Now that Alfonso Smaldone’s GCPD mole was out, the drug operations had gone deeper underground– but that didn’t mean they were invisible.

As Bruce brought up a map of likely storehouses, he faintly registered a beep from his phone. He’d look at it once he decided which locations he and Tiffany should target that night. Tiffany’s choices were indicated with pointedly flashing circles, and Bruce mostly agreed, but there was a spot near the river that would provide an alternative getaway route.

Another beep.

The question was, was Smaldone more likely to–

A third beep.

He reached up and grabbed his phone from the top of the console. The texter was no surprise.

JOHN: Bruce!
Bruce
bruuuuce

BRUCE: Yes?

JOHN: I'm going OUT.
With Lucia & co, bowling. :D
Come with us!

BRUCE: I'll have to pass.

JOHN: :(  
Aren't you supposed to be a socialite?

BRUCE: Bruce Wayne overdoes it with models and actresses at overrated trendy places.  
He doesn't go to bowling alleys.

JOHN: What about when the tabs got a pic of you meeting ME at the Stacked Deck!  
Oh but you were undercover.  
Ooooh maybe they'll think you're undercover again.  
It could bring attention to the show!

BRUCE: You want Gotham to think the show has something to do with terrorists.

JOHN: well  
This is why you're the details man.

BRUCE: There is a lot going on right now. It'll be a late night.

JOHN: :(

BRUCE: Have fun. Let me know if you get a strike.

JOHN: You're supposed to hit people?

BRUCE: It's a scoring term.
JOHN: Yes I knew that. Let me know how many strikes YOU get.

Bruce put the phone back. When was the last time he’d been bowling? College? The memories were fuzzy. It may have been high school, dragged out by Veronica. In any case, while a heavy projectile was involved, it seemed a harmless enough.

After all, Bruce couldn't miss the opportunity to investigate real ongoing crime to supervise John, who had no incidents for the past six months and wouldn't strengthen his ability to navigate the world if Bruce was always there.

Yet it still felt like Bruce's shortcomings in action: prioritizing Batman over John.

Because it was also true that, at any time, John could once again be caught in just the right storm of events and knocked off his axis. John had said it himself barely more than a week ago back at New Dawn, when Bruce talked him down from what-ifs.

And Bruce had said he knew John could handle it. He shouldn't go back on that pledge of confidence.

He turned his attention to the map again. It was bowling, for god’s sake. It was fine.

After consulting with Lucia, John ended up in black jeans and a long-sleeved white shirt with neon green and pink stripes. Over that, he threw on a nylon blouson jacket covered in overlapping stars across the color spectrum, and he stuck with his green sneakers.

At the bowling alley, he realized why Lucia had been super insistent on the shirt. Under the black lights over the lanes, it was a beacon in the dark.

And his ivory skin glowed faintly.

"You're a one-man rave," said Mike as he tied his bowling shoes.

John was getting quite a few stares from nearby groups, but what else was new? The lighting effect was no surprise to him; he found out years ago at the funhouse.

("As if ya weren't spooky enough."")

He shooed Harley's voice away. He was here with new friends, taking up a pair of lanes near the far end of the alley. He, Lucia, Lorenzo, and guitarist Tharaka were on the left, and Mike, Anica, Lian, and Fredelle took the right. The others glowed, too: Tharaka's yellow nails, Anica's lavender lipstick, Mike's newly blue hair, and everyone's teeth.

Lucia got up from the center console between the lanes. "Alright," she said over the pop music, "me and Anica will go first, and John can watch and learn."

John scoffed. "What's there to figure out?"

She shrugged. "I just figured--"

"I've negotiated interactions with the unstable and criminal," John said, popping to his feet. "I survived swimming in the Gotham River!" He lifted a bright blue ball from the return rack. "I stalked the night with Batman!" He stepped up onto the lane and stood tall.

He paused. Dozens of people in the neighboring lanes had stopped to watch. So had several non-
glowing others on the opposite side of the raised concourse, where a long bar ran along the wall. The right end curved into an open area with table service, and people near the entryway looked over too.

Lucia made a sweeping arm motion like when she coached him in rehearsals.

He lifted his arms, the one holding the eight-pound ball half as high as the other. "I went toe-to-toe with the Agency! This simple game of yours is nothing to the likes of John Doe!"

He turned smoothly on his heel, strode forward, swung his arm, and let go of the ball. It rolled down the lane fast, hooked left, and managed to nick the end pin.

John turned and lifted his arms. "I got one!"

The response was sporadic laughter from the onlookers and Mike's hesitant claps.

Lucia smiled. "I'm very proud." She gestured to the score screen overhead. "And honored that you've taken my name for the night."

John looked up and realized she'd plugged in a play order. "Whoops."

In the right-hand lane, Anica nervously glanced around at the persisting stares. Then she drew herself up like John had, holding her ball in front of her chest. "Here goes!"

After a few long strides, she released the ball a little late, given the clunk when it hit the floor. It rolled slower than John's but straighter, and she took out a few pins on the right.

She hung her head back and sighed. John looked at the scores again. He just got the one, but she got three, so already…

"You're in first place!" he exclaimed, raising his hand high.

She brightened at that, and echoed his cheer when she slapped his palm.

Some of the spectators had already returned their own games, and the resumption of normalcy seemed to break the spell over the rest. They turned away, their laughs and mutters drowned out by the music, rolling balls, and falling pins.

Hand over his face, Lian peeked at Anica and John from between two fingers, but Lucia pointed at the ball return. "You get two bowls per frame, J."

A second shot? This game really was easier than John thought.

After about fifteen minutes, when he'd made it up to third place in their lane and sixth place overall, Lucia tugged his sleeve. "Have you had a drink yet?"

She meant since the halfway house, and he hadn't. He was used to going without, given he'd only ever drank when he was with the Pact, which was only semi-fun.

But he wasn't going to let that period set the standards for the rest of his life. He was having a good time, and he'd have more of it. He followed Lucia into the glare of normal lighting to a clear spot at the bar. The music was lower here, and they didn't have to talk as loudly.

"You a beer guy?" Lucia asked, looking at the specials on a clipboard left on the counter.

"I want something new," John decided.
"Do you like ‘girly’ drinks?"

"Like what?"

She pursed her lips as she scanned the rows of bottles on the shelves. "Oh, I know!"

She waved down the bartender. John turned to the man sitting a few stools away, who’d been watching them ever since they walked up.

"Staring is rude, sir!" John proclaimed. He flicked the errant lock of hair over his forehead. "Even if I am an attention-grabbing specimen."

The bleary-eyed man kept looking, bent over the half-empty glass in front of him. His short black hair was messy and could use a trim, and he'd skipped shaving for at least a couple days. Tattooed on the back of his neck, a black-and-white skull rested in a bed of roses.

"I’d call your glass half-full," John said, "but you just call the bartender, am I right? Haha!"

Humorlessly, the man replied, "You were real close."

"Uh, what?"

"Everything's muddled. They didn’t have any authority. They wanted to shut the city down, but we should shut them down. Disrupt. We can, with the will."

"Where there's a will, there’s a way?" John said, by mere word association. What were they talking about?

The man nodded. "You get it. I knew you’d get it. I can tell them… him…” He trailed off, eyes losing focus.

Lucia’s arm came up around John’s shoulders. "Okay, sir!" she chirped in what must have been her waitress voice. "You enjoy that drink!" She turned John back to the bar and slid a glass over. "I’ve started a tab."

"Wait!" John stopped the bartender with a flailing gesture and pulled out his debit card. "Use this instead."

The bartender took his card and handed Lucia’s back to her.

"Aren’t you a sweetheart," Lucia said, sticking it back into her shirt. She smiled big at the drunk man again. "Have a good night, sir!" He didn’t seem to hear.

John examined his drink as they walked away. "Ooh, it’s pretty."

"It's a tequila sunrise."

It certainly was. Bright orange juice transitioned to near-red at the bottom of the glass. Plus it had a cherry and an orange slice! Tasted pretty good, too. Lucia had an amaretto sour, which was a dull yellow and didn’t have an umbrella or anything.

Back at the lanes, Lorenzo and Fredelle talked over the ball return. Lian sat scrolling away on his phone. Anica, Tharaka, and Mike had formed a huddle near the steps up to the concourse.

Lucia eyed them warily. "What’s going on?"
The three parted and stood side-by-side with their arms around each other. Anica drew a flourish in the air with a stick of black eyeliner. "Ta-da!"

They had moved for better light. Each of them had lined their eyes in black, then added vertical lines on the left eye, one from the top lid through the eyebrow and another down the bottom lid to the cheek. The lines ended in fine points. A pared down version of clown makeup.

"You guys are really stuck on this," John said around his straw.

"It’s more subtle," Mike said. "Like you suggested."

The music masked whatever Lucia muttered; she walked away to sit beside Lian. The makeup squad didn’t seem to need her input; their expectant enthusiasm was trained on John.

He didn't love the lack of color, but who was he to criticize an homage to himself?

"I like it!" he said, raising his glass for a toast– except only he had a drink. "Hey, everybody to the bar! My treat!"

Spectrum had a promising development at her surveillance site in Gotham Heights. The residence was a meeting point for Maroni goons, including one of the men John had flagged from his community service. Eliah Adkins, known getaway driver, left the house and took a nighttime walk. A few blocks away, a black town car waited, and Eliah had a window meeting with Smaldone. Tiffany's drone didn’t record any explicitly incriminating dialogue, but Smaldone mentioned "moving a lot of merchandise" within the next couple weeks. Combined with other leads, tracking Eliah would bring Bruce and Tiffany that much closer to finding the storehouse.

Tonight, though, the Maroni front seemed quiet, with just the regular street operations that were handled by the GCPD. Batman instructed Spectrum to meet him at Old City Welding & Glass Supply, the Serac client closest to the Heights. He wanted to test her training by having her "case" the building, to identify the perpetrators’ likely methods of infiltration. Then they’d move on to the other possible targets for the hacker (or hackers).

The idea would have been more prescient had they arrived an hour earlier.

Bruce watched over the Welding & Gas storefront, with two police cars still flashing their lights in the lot, from the roof of a gym across the road. He’d sent Tiffany over to confer with the officers and store owner inside. Now he heard her coming up the ladder bolted to the side of the gym.

"Same story as the other two robberies," she said as she came to his side. "Alarm was disabled, but the owner says he came by after drinks to take some paperwork home."

"What’s missing?"

"Welding tools and supplies. This gym has an outdoor camera for the parking lot, so that might’ve caught something."

They could get that from the GCPD later. "So assuming this isn't a coincidence, it looks like whoever is hacking these systems is building something."

"Hardware supplies, computer parts, welding…” Tiffany pointed to an invisible lightbulb over her head. "A giant gaming rig for VR."

"You’d have very innocuous goals as a thief."
They could pursue this later in the cave, once the GCPD sorted their information. Bruce checked the other police activity on his gauntlet, and he noticed a flashing dot by his personal feed. He opened it and found two texts from John.

JOHN: it's impulse which is very me but then cant change it which is not

BRUCE: What's "it"?

Bruce waited for a reply with a frown on his face. John was usually more articulate.

JOHN: tatoo
tattoo
too

Bruce started a quick reply, but aborted it after tapping a few keys. He initiated a call instead.

Tiffany had been fiddling on her tablet, but she noticed his agitation. "Something wrong?"

"I just—" He turned off his voice modulator. "I need a minute," he said, turning away and walking a few paces.

Too many rings passed, but just as he thought it would go to voicemail, he heard:

"Wrong number. This is not a tax evasion service."

Perfect. "Lucia, where's John?"

"He's busy!" she said with her usual curtness, but then her voice slurried into curiosity. "Did they have air hockey at Arkham? He shouldn't be that good. Or maybe Mike's had a few." Abruptly, she added, "I'm not drunk."

"Tell me you're not getting tattoos," Bruce said. Air hockey indicated they were not at a tattoo parlor, but an amateur artist could be offering their services at the bowling alley, or at a bar if John and his friends had gone elsewhere.

The volume of the music in the background got louder. It sounded unpolished, live. "What?" she yelled. "What kind of tattoo?"

"Don't get any!" Bruce said louder.

"How many is many?"

"Not any."

"Who's Jenny?"

Now she was just screwing with him. "Put John on," Bruce said.

"We're out having fun," she said, "and I didn't even tell him to ask you to come, but you didn't anyway, not that I care, but now you wanna tell us what to do." Her slur got worse as she spoke. "We, sir, are adults, and we decide upon what legally available amusements we shall– goddammit, Lorenzo, don't wrestle in the middle of the floor!"

"Just get John."
"You can't just call and expect me to do your bidding."

"I didn't call you," Bruce retorted. "Where are you?" Several bowling alleys in the city, hundreds of bars...

"Somewhere looking for the nearest place to get inked," she said petulantly. Her tone shifted again. "Think I spotted my next girlfriend. Gotta go."

Then silence. Being dismissed by a civilian while wearing the batsuit was not a feeling Bruce was accustomed to.

"Uh, John having a fun night out?" Tiffany asked.

"Probably," Bruce muttered. Of course they ended up drinking. They were adults. They could do what they wanted.

But the last time John had been drunk, people died a few hours later. Alcohol wasn't the cause, but it couldn't have helped John's judgment. All of John's recent progress with self-control had been while sober.

Of course, John had seemed very sober by the time Bruce found him pleading with a corpse. But he'd lost control under life-or-death circumstances. A night out certainly wasn't that, nor did it resemble the circumstances of the night at Axis.

Yet Bruce again remembered John panicking after weeks of commendable behavior.

And he had no idea how a drunk John would react to being jabbed with a tattoo needle.

"I'm going to check on him," Bruce said. It couldn't hurt.

Tiffany raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"I'm not worried like you're thinking," Bruce lied. "He's just having fun, but I'd rather he avoid a year of laser removal."

"You're going to stop him from having fun, got it."

"We don't have any promising leads here, and nothing urgent is on the police monitor." He checked the time: about one-thirty. "Start a patrol. After I see him, I'll meet back up with you." He turned and headed for the ladder. The batmobile was parked along a utility route in the trees behind the gym. "Call me if anything goes down."

"Alright," she said, then added dryly, "It might be a cool tattoo."

It was possible, but still not his primary concern.

"Like a big bat symbol over his face."

Bruce skipped the ladder. It'd be faster to glide off the back of the building.

John had soooooo many favorite new drinks, not that he could remember their names.

He probably lost at bowling, but by the end of the game, it was a challenge just to keep the ball out of the gutter. Then everyone went to the bar for another round of drinks, and Fredelle's husband showed up, and a live band started playing in the table area, and the happy couple wanted to dance.
John wasn't going to miss out on that; he was a better dancer now for sure, but he hadn't learned any just-for-fun dancing, and now he had two teachers, even though Virgil wasn't a teacher. Virgil was a dog groomer and there were definitely some jokes in there, but every time John tried to ask if he worked with Shih Tzus, he couldn't stop laughing.

The dance moves went the way of the drink names, but it didn’t matter because he felt loosey-goosey and it was easy to just move how he felt, at least until he had to go to the bathroom. He meant to keep dancing after that, but then Mike, who boringly didn’t dance, less boringly asked if John wanted to play air hockey over in the arcade, and John had never gotten the chance, so duh, yeah! He had to focus super hard because of the drinks, so much that when his cell rang near the end of the final round, he handed it off to Lucia to answer it, and it worked because he kicked Mike’s butt and he made sure the whole arcade knew it!

But wait, Bruce needed to know, and maybe that call was Bruce, but Lucia still had John’s phone. He spotted her back at the bar, laughing with a pretty lady, but then Anica found him and she was super excited because a different band was playing and they were really good and didn’t John want to dance some more? And he had– he did! It really was more fun than air hockey, but it was also very hot and sweaty and he was starting to feel sleepy.

A break sounded good. He stumbled past Tharaka, standing a chair to play air guitar with the live guitarist. At the bar, Lorenzo and Mike sat together, Lorenzo with his eyes scanning the scene and Mike looking like someone who sucked at air hockey.

John mimicked Lorenzo by crossing his arms and putting on a grumpy expression. "So serious!" he grunted.

Lorenzo just got up and gestured for John to take his seat. "Just making sure everything's cool."

"Why wouldn't it be?" John asked, hopping onto the stool. "Everybody's having a ball!"

"You never know," Lorenzo said. "I'm not much for dancing anyway."

"Me either," Mike said. "You're definitely having a good time, though. Like, from appearances—not that I was watching. I mean obviously I kinda was, 'cause we're sitting right here and you—all you guys were just over there, but, you know." Arms straight at his sides, he gripped his seat.

John stared as he processed the rambling, then came to the obvious conclusion: "You need another drink."

"Nah, I'm good."

"It's last call, uh, sir." The bartender had come up behind John. "Do you have any other orders, or are you closing out?"

Drinks had not failed John yet, so clearly another one was called for, if he could remember what to call...

Lorenzo leaned over and said, "I think everyone is winding down, boss."

Phhbbt, the muscleheads had turned that nickname into a habit. John was no boss; he was one of the people! He knew, because he’d just been dancing with them in a colorful mass. And included in the people were his friends, now taking over a couple of tables for their own break, looking tired and sweaty, and he remembered that he was tired and sweaty.

"I'll have the close out," John said. As the bartender turned away, John poked Lorenzo and pointed...
to the part of the bar along the concourse. "I think Lucy is winding up, though."

Lucia was still chatting up her gal pal, who had a wavy black-to-brown ombre and a coy smile. Both their smiles flattened when some blond guy in a polo shirt sidled up to them. He leaned in close with his beer, and neither lady looked very pleased with whatever he was saying.

The bartender placed John's card and a long bill on the counter. The card went back in John's pocket, and John's printed signature went at the bottom of the receipt, along with a big number for a tip. If he had Bruce Wayne money, he might as well throw it around in Bruce Wayne style.

John sat up straight and tossed the pen. "Phone!" he said. He twisted to slide off the stool, and his feet weren't in place fast enough, but Lorenzo grabbed the back of his shirt. "She has my phone," John explained earnestly as he righted himself.

Reflexes aside, Lorenzo was distracted, looking back toward Lucia. John looked too, in time to see her dump her glass on Polo Shirt's head. She grabbed her lady friend's hand to run off, but they ran into a wall of more polo shirts.

"Uh oh!" John giggled.

Lorenzo was already on the move, and he put himself between the girls and Polo's friends. John's approach lagged a little. Polo said something snide to Lucia, who pushed Ombre Girl behind her. John didn't hear; his laugh was too loud. Polo still had beer dripping from his ears into his soaked shirt.

"Looks like you're all wet when it comes to personal conduct!" John snickered as he slid into the confrontation. He swung around to Lucia. "Hey, gimme my phone."

"Is now the time?" she hissed.

Polo had visibly swallowed at the sight of John, but he summoned a tough guy voice and sneered at John's back, "I knew we shouldn't have come to this trash neighborhood."

"Nobody asked you to come," John muttered, trying to get into the pockets of the open shirt Lucia wore over her tank.

"And you weren't so disgusted a few minutes ago," Ombre Girl shot off.

"I didn't know you were buddies with this psycho!" Polo replied.

John whirled around. The tough guy held his ground, but his eyes glanced over John's head for backup. But oh ho, John certainly didn't hear any coming. In his head, though, he could hear the satisfying thwack of a creep's skull hitting the bar.

A jerk on his arm– Lucia's locking hand– brought him back to now, to the sudden awareness of a crowd gathering, closing in. Not just Lian and Mike and the rest, but strangers.

A Lorenzo-sized man loomed up at Polo's side. A long, shiny scar zig-zagged along the side of his bald head. "There's a lot you don't know about this neighborhood, asshole," he growled.

Polo looked around nervously. "If you– My father–"

"Your daddy," the man said, "didn't teach you to watch your mouth."

Polo's jaw clenched. John checked on the Polo Subordinates and chortled when he saw just a few
left, slouched under the glares of the crowd. He did a double-take. Over the past few hours, his friends apparently gave out makeup tips; several strangers had drawn black marks over their left eyes.

"Hey, J-man," Scarhead said, "you want this walking trust fund to learn a lesson?"

Sheesh, this neighborhood watch had really taken on a life of its own– except for the part where Scarhead looked to John for an answer. People sure asked him a lotta questions lately. Why did Lucia like that kinda thing? Why was anyone ever in charge, come to think of it? Making decisions took up time and brainspace and was kind of annoying, but right now it was really annoying because he'd been enjoying the lazy swimming feeling in his head–

Scarhead smacked his fist into his palm. "Just say the word."

Oh, right, John better answer. Well, it would certainly be a joy to see this jerkwad get knocked around– but Lucia's grip tightened, and the look on her face reminded him that she was pretty skeptical of this group defensive idea, which reminded him that they were supposed to avoid the fun violent stuff, which was because fun violent stuff would get him in deep trouble, which was his impetus to try new resolution methods and get creative, maybe not in the Bruce way, but in his way.

Bruce! That was right! The faster John resolved this, the faster he'd get his phone.

"Certainly--" John paused to muffle a hiccup. "Certainly what we need from this gentleman is some humility." He gestured to the beer-drenched man. "Is there something you’d like to say to Ms. Palmera for wasting her hard-earned drink?"

"What?!" Polo exclaimed, but he must have sensed Scarhead's eyes boring into his skull. "I, uh, I'm sorry. Miss. Won't happen again."

John looked to Lucia, who looked to Ombre, who nodded slowly.

"Great!" John declared. "I think that about settles it."

"It does?" Scarhead said. Murmurs bubbled around the onlookers.

"Yes," John said, inwardly gathering himself before lunging out of Lucia’s hold. He snatched Polo’s popped collar and jerked him down so they were eye to eye. "I’m sure our friend appreciates being let off with a warning."

Polo tried to sputter a reply, but John pressed a finger to his lips. He kept his grip on the shirt and pulled Polo around in slow circles, moving through the crowd, who made way. "Isn’t it nice? Alllllll these people don’t give a damn if there are consequences for putting a few dents in that handsome face, and they’re letting you go instead!"

John released the shirt, and Polo only had time to snap upright before John shoved him into his lingering friends. The crowd parted as the interlopers stumbled back.

"I trust you’ll find a neighborhood better suited to your taste," John said with a smile. He wagged his fingers. "Say goodbye, everybody!"

In his peripheral, he could see people mimicking his wave, and a chorus of farewells sounded behind him. (Sadly, no one said, "Goodbye, everybody.") The polo club didn’t run, but their speed walk was close enough.
John giggled as he turned back, but then his face fell. "Aw, that would’ve looked cooler under the blacklight."

The crowd looked at John like he was about to make a speech or something. Before any words floated to mind, Lucia pulled Ombre forward and snagged him with her other arm.

"I think I’ve had my fill of this place tonight," she said.

Their other friends broke from the crowd to follow. Virgil and Tharaka seemed perturbed, but the rest were laughing and walked tall. John made sure to wave at all the happy helpers left behind and throw out a cheery "thanks!" He got several waves back.

He didn't realize how uncomfortably warm the bowling alley was until he felt the crisp night air. He looked at the sky, feeling the chill on his neck as they walked. There was some faint cloud cover, unmarked by a bright, bat-shaped signal.

He disengaged himself from Lucia to tug at her pockets again. "Give it."

"God, you have a one-track mind!" She batted him away and found the phone in her pants pocket. She handed it over and re-linked arms with Ombre.

Sadly, John had no notifications. He pouted. "Bruce didn't reply." To his message about… a tattoo. He vaguely remembered...

"I think you’ll survive," Lucia said.

Ombre looked over. "Is Bruce Wayne, like, cool?" she asked.

Lucia replied first. "He's a womanizing uber-capitalist who got his fortune from a torturing mobster."

"Yeah!" John said. "What a backstory!" He clutched his phone to his heart and spun around. His balance spun away, too, but he managed to recover before he could take a dive into the gutter. Mike had moved to help, but John waved him off.

Of course Bruce wouldn't have replied. He was busy defending the city. Why would he stop to learn that John won some dumb game? He would hear later, though, because he always asked about John's day, and John was happy to say anything as long as those eyes were looking at him.

He gave his head a little shake. No, no, couldn't get too deep into those thoughts. He was still holding the phone to his chest, and he put it in his back pocket. Self-control was important even for nonviolent things.

But he couldn’t get much of a grip on his drifting brain, and he found himself dancing for the rest of the walk home. He vaguely registered Fredelle and Virgil breaking off to head to their apartment.

When the remaining group got to All’s Well, there were a couple patrons at a corner table and one slumped at the bar. Rosaline was sweeping the floor.

"Roooooooooo!" Lucia greeted, drawing it out so long that everyone joined her.

Rosaline wiped her forearm across her brow. "We’re past last call. You have fun out there?"

"You could say that," Lorenzo said, plopping down at a table. "Mind if we hang out a bit?"
"No problem."

Lian pushed another table against Lorenzo's and sat with Anica and Tharaka. Ombre forewent a chair and sat in Lucia's lap instead. John sat facing the stage, Mike beside him.

"You, uh, handled it really well back there," Mike said, "giving that asshole a scare."

"That method's worked well enough so far," John giggled. He felt a need to check his phone again, even though he hadn’t heard a sound. Across the table, Lucia and her lady were nuzzling and laughing. John felt a little queasy. He’d done a lot of things since his release he'd only dreamed of. So couldn't that cuddly scene be another? Bruce was off limits, but what about someone else? Was he really never going to look elsewhere?

"If the method ever doesn't work," Mike said lowly, "if things ever go bad, I– I'll be there to help."

John looked over and realized Mike was leaning close, resting his arm on the back of John's chair. The blue hair really suited him, made the deep brown of his eyes stand out.

"I've noticed something about you, Mikey," John said.

"Yeah?"

"You've got a crap sense of personal space."

A hand fell on John's shoulder, and when he looked up his mood brightened. "Bruce!"

It was about two-thirty, which was All’s Well’s closing time, but the OPEN sign was still lit. A barfly stumbled out the door. Bruce grabbed it before it closed and went in.

John sat with a bunch of Circus members, minus an unfamiliar girl in Lucia’s lap. He had his back to the door and was talking to new member Michael Killian, recovering drug addict (other priors for graffiti). Michael had his arm draped around the back of John’s chair and leaned in unnecessarily close.

Bruce didn't hear what they were saying. He just wanted to make sure John was okay. Nothing looked unusual, except maybe that Michael and two of the girls had decided they wanted matching makeup. Bruce touched John's shoulder to get his attention.

John's head tilted back, and his grin was instantaneous. His blue eyelids sparkled. "Bruce! You made it!"

"Fashionably late?" Michael said sourly.

Bruce shrugged. "Thought I could end a late night with a drink, but looks like you're winding down."

"Ohhhh," Lucia said, "I guess the responsible adult figured because it's soooo late, we must be soooo worn out that we're finishing up at home base."

"You are at home base," Bruce pointed out.

Lucia stared for a second, then drawled, "Touché." Her girlfriend giggled.

He looked John over. "So where's this tattoo?"
John scrunched up his face. "What tattoo?"

Bruce let out a breath. "That's the answer I wanted." Lucia met his annoyed look with woozy apathy.

"Hey, the party doesn't have to end!" John said, jumping to his feet. Simultaneously he knocked his chair into Michael and fell into Bruce. He burst out laughing against Bruce's chest.

Bruce steadied him by the shoulders. "I think the party is ready for bed."

"Agreed," Rosaline called from the bar. "Closing time."

Lian stood and stretched. "We do have rehearsal tomorrow."

Lucia froze in the middle of brushing a lock of hair out of her girlfriend’s face. "Right. Shit."

"See, rehearsal is tomorrow," Bruce said. "Say goodnight, John."

"Goodnight, John," John giggled, hanging off Bruce's shoulders as he was steered away.

They proceeded through the door to the stairwell. Since the staircase was so narrow, Bruce followed behind and kept John on track with a hand against his back.

It did not help that John let his head fall back, and his body tried to follow the movement, as he tried to look at Bruce and ask, "Did you have a good night?"

"'Good' is too relative a term for my night work," Bruce said, pushing him up. "You seem like you had a good night."

John regained a proper sense of direction. "Oh, yeah! I knocked down lots of pins, and I won at air hockey, and I danced to music, and--" He suddenly stopped talking.

"And?" They reached the second floor and rounded to the next flight.

"And thaaaaat’s it," John said decisively. "Except for the drinks. Tequila mama and Bahama sunrise and… wait…"

"Too many to list, sounds like."

"But not too many to drink!"

"You'll feel differently in the morning."

At the apartment door, John took a couple minutes to find his keys, then decided it was best to hand them over to Bruce. Bruce got the door open and felt for the wall switch. With a flick, it wasn't the lamp in the corner that lit up, but the multi-colored string lights along the edges of the ceiling.

"Home, teeeeeny home," John giggled as Bruce dropped the keys on top of the mini-fridge and brought him in.

The mottle illuminated the ways John had made the room his own over the past few days. A philodendron with heart-shaped leaves sat in a basket hanging from a hook over the fridge. The bookshelves were filled end to end, with the overflow in stacks obscuring the rows. On top was the picture of John and Batman, one of his few belongings from Arkham. Another was the purple blanket hanging over the iron rail at the foot of the bed, which was covered in polka-dotted sheets
and a rumpled patchwork quilt.

Next to the microwave on the dresser sat another framed picture, of John and Adelina giving their best duckface while Lucia focused on a clipboard. On the wall between the dresser and the standing closet was a canvas image of a lone balloon drifting in a cloudy sky, a mass-market "painting" with a tear in the corner, probably a curbside find.

The makings of John’s Sideshow suit hung from a hook attached to the exterior bathroom wall. The pants and vest were done; the dress shirt was store-bought because of time constraints, John had mentioned. Pieces for the jacket were laid out around the sewing machine.

John pulled away to slip off his nylon jacket. Bruce watched for another loss of balance. "Need help?"

"Phhhbt, I'm fine!" John insisted. "You think this is bad, ask Frank and Willy how I met them."

Bruce knew it was at the Stacked Deck, but they'd never gotten into specifics. "Or you could tell me."

"Hmm." John flung the jacket at the desk chair. It managed a partial landing on the seat. "I was puking in the alley behind the bar."

"Lovely."

"I was newly freed and entitled to a binge."

"What did you drink that time?"

"Drink?" John toed off one shoe successfully and went for the next. "I-- oop!" He almost fell over, and Bruce caught him by the waist and shirt sleeve. John held Bruce's shoulders for the second shoe. "I had three pints of fudge swirl for dinner."

"John, that's not..." That experience did not portend anything about being drunk now, was what Bruce was trying to say, but instead he just started laughing.

In stocking feet, John pouted. "It was a very important learning moment." He still clung to Bruce's shoulders, as if urging him to understand.

Bruce caught his breath and patted John's elbow reassuringly. "I bet it was."

"Frank and Willy brought me inside for water, gave me pretzels to settle my stomach."

"You found friends pretty quickly."

"Well, at the time they were mostly curious about, you know," John gestured vaguely to his face. "Not like you. You got to know me before asking..." He swiped at the front of his t-shirt. "Where're the buttons..."

"There aren't any," Bruce chuckled. "Put your arms up."

With a yawn, John lifted his arms and closed his eyes, like he could fall asleep that way. Bruce pulled the shirt over John's head and tossed it into a half-full laundry basket in the corner. He kept his eyes on John’s face instead of his bare chest, which got easier when John swayed forward.

Bruce grabbed his shoulders. "Whoa, buddy!"
John’s eyes popped open and his hands pressed against Bruce’s front. His surprise became an adoring smile. "Always there for the rescue."

After a gala or party, Bruce would coax a tipsy John up to bed just like this, and this would be a moment to lean in and kiss him, a sweet end to the night before tucking him in.

John’s face suddenly went blank, and he brought up a hand to push at Bruce’s face, forcing him back a step. "Gotta get to sleep," John mumbled, turning to the bed.

Bruce’s face felt hot as he watched John settle on top of the bedding. It was inappropriate to indulge in fantasies about a friend, especially with the friend right in front of him. He had better control than that.

John laid the wrong way, pillow at his feet. Bruce picked it up and tucked it under John’s head.

"Thanks," John mumbled.

"Do you need anything?" Bruce gestured to a clear jug on the floor by the dresser. "Like water, or..."

John cracked an eye open and snickered. "Not if it’ll strip my esophagus." He yawned and the eye closed. "Ro only had weak stuff. Threw that together. Clears pipes lickety-split."

"Do you ever wonder how you know how to mix chemicals?"

John curled up on his side. "Nuh."

Of course not. "Well, good night," Bruce said. "I'll lock the door."

No response. John had fallen fast asleep.

Bruce tugged enough of the quilt out from under John to drape it back over him. He resisted the urge to watch the rise and fall of the other man’s breathing. It was time to go.

Halfway downstairs, he had to pause at the second floor landing. The Palmera sisters were coming up– or rather, Lucia moved at a sluggish pace while Adelina pushed at her back with both hands. The younger woman was in her pajamas: shorts and a t-shirt, both oversized.

"Good night," Bruce said as they passed.

Adelina smiled and nodded. Lucia threw up her middle finger.

Bruce continued down. The important thing was that John was fine. Drinking hadn’t led to him hurting himself or turning into a violent madman. Bruce should know better than that. He’d told John he knew better than that.

When he came out into the empty bar, Rosaline had turned off most of the lights, and she unlocked the front door for him. They exchanged goodbyes and he headed for his car.

At the corner, a blue-haired figure leaned against the wall, smoke drifting from his lips and the cigarette in his hand. Michael. He shot Bruce a cool look, and Bruce went with a neutral nod, intending to keep walking.

"John’s got lots of people to help him now," Mike said hurriedly, like he’d been turning over the words and needed to get them out. "People on his wavelength, not from on high. You had that time spying, but it doesn't mean you know him any better."
Bruce knew Michael was barely a threat. The guy was a dumb kid with substance issues and an obvious crush. He was also a good six inches shorter than Bruce, with a small frame that couldn't be made bigger with a jittery bravado.

But he'd clumsily trod on a fresh sore, and Bruce felt a rare flare of pettiness. He crossed just into Michael's space and looked down at him.

"Only John and I know what we've been through," Bruce said with little inflection, "and it’s not important if you understand it."

He didn't wait for a reaction. The impulse was sated, and he walked on.

He felt no better. He and John may have repaired their stitch, but they both knew the strength of the thread brought no guarantees.

Chapter End Notes

Drink responsibly, kids.

Last planned flashback is up next.
When John called Bruce to announce his early release from the halfway house, Bruce was at the office, reviewing reams of paperwork summing up recent Enterprises operations. The bulk of the attention he paid to his family's organizations had shifted to the Foundation, but he had no intention of slacking on the business side again. The budget for Tiffany's sector of R&D had to be maintained, and he was watchful for any signs of the company being used for illicit ends.

He set down the eighty-seventh page of a footnote-laden proposed contract and rubbed his fist against his forehead, wondering if he could reasonably cut back even more on sleep. His cell, halfway under a stapled list of new hires, lit up and beeped repetitively. The notification bar over the selfie from his birthday announced the call was from John.

"Hey, buddy," Bruce answered, spinning his chair away from the mess on his desk.

"Hey, buddy!" John echoed, but the enthusiasm sounded forced.

"Everything okay?"

"Of course! Why wouldn't it be? It's great! It's happening again!" John coughed. "I mean, New Dawn is letting me go a little early."

Bruce raised his eyebrows, but while the news was unexpected, it wasn’t as surprising as when John got out of Arkham again. Since Bruce had sponsored John's residence at New Dawn, the staff would have contacted him if John’s behavior got out of hand, but they never did. And he'd witnessed how John was capable of moderating himself more often than not.

This news called for positivity. "That’s great," Bruce said. "You really impressed them."

"Right! I've been an A-plus resident. They say there's not much benefit to me staying longer. Unless I can think of a reason."

"Well, if Rosaline isn't ready for you--"

"The old tenant is gone."

"That's good, that the timing works out." Bruce expected a response, but there was silence. "Hello?"

"Yeah, I better start shopping for guest towels," John finally said with a distracted laugh.
It made sense that John was anxious. This was another big step in living out in the world— the right way this time.

"You said it yourself," Bruce said. "They're releasing you because you're doing well. You have everything under control. You have the tools, and you can modify the schedule you already have. I'm sure it's nerve-wracking, but you got this."

Bruce expected the pep talk to spur at least a little optimism. Instead all John said was, "Uh huh, right," and before Bruce could say anything else, he added, "I gotta, uh, go fill out some forms."

"Okay. I'm really proud of you."

"Thanks."

In the next week, John texted less than usual, and he seemed distracted the couple times Bruce saw him. But he was dealing with the stress of impending independence, and maybe he didn't want to hear a broken record of optimism. Bruce tried not to press him too much on the subject, while being sure to check in.

There were a couple days when he nearly forgot, caught up in action against the Maroni glut. Batman and Spectrum had helped the GCPD finally nail a human trafficking operation, culminating in the arrests of a dozen ringleaders.

The arrests were a win, but the day after, Bruce's sense of triumph was joined by inescapable exhaustion. He had to attend a wide-ranging board meeting that spanned the morning and pushed past noon. In his office afterward, he read through his afternoon itinerary with relief. It would take about an hour to get through more paperwork, but he could blow off the rest of the day’s appointments and crash at home for the afternoon. Hell, he'd crash on one of the office couches. It wouldn't be the first time.

His cell beeped at him, and he quirked an eyebrow at Lucia's name. She'd probably have a more severe look if she knew Bruce had her number.

"Hello?" he answered.

"Hey, it's Lucia," she said, sounding harried. "Stole your number from John’s phone. Have you talked to him lately?"

"Every day. We're having dinner tonight."

"Okay. Good. He's been weird, right? For him?"

"He's been preoccupied, moving on from the recovery center."

"Yeah, but..."

"Did something happen?"

"No. I’m not sure. We saw a show last night, and he..." Her tone sharpened. "Look, we've seen all kinds of art with, you know, 'questionable themes' or whatever, and I even asked him if he needed trigger warnings. I'm not ignorant."

"The show upset him?"

"He was just... quiet. Really quiet. Everyone has the right to be quiet, but this is John. It's been
bugging me, especially since Rosaline said he called in sick."

John had been quiet after Hamilton, too, so that part didn't seem very odd. But, Bruce realized, it was almost noon and John hadn't texted yet, which was unusual. For John, "first sick day" was a novel experience he'd mention to Bruce immediately, setting aside how he'd need to cancel on dinner.

"He seemed healthy last night," Lucia went on, "and you guys have plans, so it sounds like bullshit. He's not answering any of my texts or calls, so I figured..."

"I'll call him now."

"Okay, great."

"Thanks for...." She'd hung up.

Bruce dialed John right away. He heard several rings, and the grub of worry in his stomach started to burrow.

Finally, John answered. "Hi."

Bruce did his best to sound casual. "Hey, buddy. Just checking we're still good for six o'clock."

"Six? Oh, right. Yeah."

"You okay? You sound distracted."

He expected John to brush him off. Instead, with abrupt urgency, John asked, "Have you ever seen Little Shop of Horrors?"

"I think I saw the movie back in college?"

"The movie, right. I saw that, too, in Arkham. It was on one of the basic channels. You know, during one of the phases when they didn't watch us too closely."

"A musical was objectionable?"

"Uh, yeah, when it’s about a plant that eats people and murder and domestic abuse and–""

"Right, I get it." Not conducive to recovery, as Arkham staff would say.

"Lucia and I saw the stage version. It was different."

"Stories tend to change from medium to medium."

"But this... it..." John audibly swallowed. "On TV, Seymour realizes what he did, and he stops the plant and saves the girl, and they get married."

"Sounds like a happy ending."

"The musical is not happy, Bruce. Everybody dies. The world dies. Seymour realizes his mistake too late, and everyone dies."

There was an edge to John's voice that Bruce didn't know what to do with. "I mean... stories often have bad endings to make a dramatic point. It doesn't... Are you thinking--"
"I mean, that's what real life is like, right? More often than not, people fail. There are no idyllic picket fences– or there are, but you trip and fall onto the stakes and–"

"You are not going to fail just because… Real life is about your choices. It's not idyllic, but it's not doomed either." Bruce didn't know how John had gotten to this point and was equally unsure how to guide him away from it. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I know that– I just… It's fine." John's voice went dull. "It's stupid. See you later."

He hung up before Bruce could say it wasn't stupid at all. Bruce’s thumb hovered over the redial icon. Would that be badgering? John didn't want to talk anymore, but it sounded like he needed to. Communicating in-person would be better. John was so expressive that Bruce would get a slew of other signals. So he could leave John be for now and bring it up later, when they met for dinner. Something in his friend’s voice bothered him, but he didn't want to push too hard. Unless he needed to. Should he?

Twenty minutes passed. Bruce abandoned the paperwork and let his secretary know he was leaving for the day.

Normally John had to be in the New Dawn lobby to sign in a guest, but mild flirtation got the receptionist to let Bruce do it himself. Guests were also supposed to be accompanied by residents at all times, but the receptionist winked and said that if Bruce was confronted by staff, he should just say he forgot and was checking the board games in the rec room.

Luckily, Bruce didn't run into anyone on the way up to John's room. He passed a few residents in the second floor hall, but they just smiled or ignored him. He waited until no one was around to knock on John's door.

A minute passed. Bruce knocked again.

Finally John opened the door, just a few inches, but that was enough. He was still in wrinkled pajamas– plaid pants and a t-shirt– and his face was bare, a striking sight since Bruce hadn’t seen him without makeup for months. His hair was unwashed, too shiny with pieces sticking out at messy angles.

John's scowl slipped into mild surprise. "Oh."

"Hey, uh," Bruce fumbled, "how are you?"

"You're way early."

"I know. I'm worried."

"Why, when everything is just grand?" John said tightly, letting Bruce in.

The blinds only let in slivers of light. The bed was unmade; it looked like John had just rolled out of it. Clothes laid rumpled on the floor by the dresser, on top of which sat a napkin with an untouched donut next to a pile of papers and pamphlets.

"You didn't eat your treat," Bruce said awkwardly. He wondered if the donut had been made by another resident, or brought in by staff.

It didn't cross John's mind to mention. He glanced over and muttered, "Probably stale now."
Small talk wouldn't lead anywhere. "I didn't say the right thing on the phone," Bruce said.

John looked askance. They stood in the middle of the blank-walled room. Bruce wasn't sure if it meant anything that he wasn't being asked to sit.

He persisted clumsily. "I'm trying… I don't want you to feel like you can't talk to me."

When John lifted his gaze, he chuckled hollowly, "We passed the two-year anniversary. That one is cotton, right? You should've got me some nice sheets."

He'd been so much brighter at the anniversary dinner, when Bruce wanted to commemorate how far he'd come. They'd stayed in at the manor to eat tacos and burgers, but John had still put on a full face of makeup, smokey-eyed and blue-lipped. His pressed gray slacks balanced out a ridiculous pink shirt with ruffles at the collar and cuffs. His nails had been freshly painted silver.

Now John picked at the chipped polish on his thumb. "I thought I was handling it okay. The first anniversary, I... I handled it, but that was in Arkham. When they said I was getting out of here early, it hit me just how much I'm not in Arkham. Again.

"The first time they let me out, no one was really watching me until that last week. Harley came closest, but not as close as I wanted." Another fake laugh. "This time... lots of people are watching, waiting for me to mess up. The cops, my therapist, the staff here, the Circus, all those tabloid sheep, even you."

"I'm not waiting for you to mess up," Bruce said. "No one wants--"

"But you'll see when I do." John stared into middle distance.

It was natural for John to worry about the possibility that he'd break again– Bruce worried himself– but to suddenly act like it was inevitable after so much success, it was too fatalistic. Maybe Bruce was missing something– or maybe John was.

"Have you been consistent with your medication?" Bruce asked. Missing a dose would explain a swing in mood.

Then he saw John's whole body tense up, a tendon pressing against the flesh of his neck. With a nasty glare, John moved toward him.

"My medication is with the nurse!" he growled, shoving Bruce toward the door. "I have to make sure I am at her office, on time, every day, and she takes her little popsicle stick and checks under my tongue and around my gums." As Bruce stumbled into the hallway, John shouted, "So why don't you take a gander at her record?!"

He slammed the door in Bruce's face.

Bruce knew about the medication protocol, he had just forgotten, had just been trying to… It didn't matter. He'd implied that he thought John's fears weren't valid, that drugs would obviously wipe them away. That wasn't what Bruce thought at all, but he certainly hadn't spoken like it.

"I'm sorry," he called.

"Go away!" John yelled back. His voice cracked.

Maybe Bruce had made a mistake in coming over now, but retreating still felt like he'd just be compounding the error. "I'm not leaving."
"Enjoy waiting!"

Bruce leaned against the wall by the door, and exhaled silently. Across the hall, another door opened. He caught barely more than a peeking eye and a flash of annoyance, and it shut again.

Loitering alone in the hallway until John cooled down was a little too inexplicable. Bruce had name recognition, but so did families of the other residents. If he flouted the rules too much, it could start a battle of annoyed entitlement.

He modified the receptionist's advice and took a walk across the building to the kitchen. Included in New Dawn's rent was an array of allegedly wholesome snacks, and Bruce grabbed some (artisanal, naturally flavored) sodas. If asked, Bruce would say John had a stomach ache and could really use some ginger ale.

No one did question him, which made it easier to take his time, throwing in more flirting both times he passed the receptionist. Overall he was gone maybe fifteen minutes. It was enough. When he rapped on John's door again, it opened.

"I can't believe you're still here," John said miserably, looking at the cans in Bruce's hands. He disappeared back into the room.

Bruce went in, setting the sodas next to the abandoned donut. "Of course I am," he said, returning to the door to close it.

John paced back and forth, from the bed to the wall, rubbing his temples with the heels of his hands. "I don't know why."

"Because you're my friend," Bruce said for perhaps the thousandth time, but meaning it no less.

John's fingers wove into his hair and pulled. "I can't do this…" he said, closing his eyes.

"You're doing it right now," Bruce said evenly.

"For how long?!" John's eyes shot open. "She was right. I don't belong here. I'm-- I'm just playing a game, playing house--"

Bruce was confused for a moment, then recalled their last conversation inside Arkham. "It doesn't matter what Waller thinks. She doesn't know you."

"Who cares about Waller?" John kept tugging his hair. "Harley, she knew, all the dark places, where to dig..."

"Harley only knew how to hurt people."

"So do I. I had quite the lively demonstration."

"You're more than-- than a bad day--"

John threw down his hands and laughed. "Oh, wow, that's a heckuva thing for you to say!" His eyes lit up and his mouth twisted into a cold smile. "Are we pretending you're not just a little boy running around in a playsuit, crying for Mommy and Daddy?"

It was shock that silenced Bruce at first, then the deliberate clench of his jaw. Some equally callous and demeaning retorts flashed in his mind, but he knew they were knee-jerk and unfair. He’d only regret letting them out.
John visibly did; his face crumpled. "This is exactly... I'm not good. I can't keep this up."

Bruce took a deep breath. "Everyone says awful things sometimes."

John wasn't listening. "Someone will be rude or-- or honest or wrong or anything, and I'll just lose it, go out of my mind, off my rocker, right off the deep end..." His voice slid into nervous giggling.

"You've worked with Leland and Adams so you know how to handle those situations."

Still giggling, John looked at Bruce with an eerie gleam in his eyes. "You saw how I handled it before. I bet you remember it better than I do. You know what I remember most? The laughter stopped, and he said quietly, "I felt free. I could do whatever I wanted, because what did anything matter? It's just so much easier if nothing matters..." He burst into titters again and covered his face.

The twist in Bruce's stomach wound up to his voice. "But it does matter. You know that."

John shook his head and replied into his hands. "Sometimes it seems so obvious, but other times... And I don't-- I don't feel it. You haven't missed that, have you? Not sweet, conflicted Brucie."

"Have you... have you been thinking you want to--"

"It's not about what I want!" John revealed his face, and Bruce felt a strange relief at seeing the weary frustration had returned, wiping away the gleam. "It's about what-- what just surges up, past filters and stopgaps. What really stops me from losing control again? Anytime, anywhere, around anyone, even everyone in the show..."

"Being worried about them shows that you do feel--"

"I'm not like you. I'm not enough. The animal is back in the cage, but drugs and talking don't mean it's going to stay in there if-- if something happens, and the lock breaks, and I do something awful and bloody and exciting, because that's what I feel. The doctors can call them 'manageable impulses,' but if they're just my nature, they're going to come out and everyone will see-- you'll see--" John released a rattling breath, and his eyes were wet. "And then you'll leave," he said, voice straining, "and I know you should but I don't want you to."

Bruce carefully took hold of John's shoulders and looked him in the eyes. "I am right here."

The reassurance seemed to work, because John was looking at him, acknowledging that reality-- then his expression twisted and he knocked Bruce's arms away. He ducked his head and beat his fists on his skull.

"Stop that!" Bruce reached forward, but suddenly the fists were flying at him and he dodged. John kept swinging. "Why don't you just hate me?!" he exploded. "This would be so much easier--"

Bruce grabbed John's wrists and struggled to hold him still. "I am not fighting you again," he said through gritted teeth.

"You don't get to decide!" John spat, but his attempts to yank free were erratic, with no thought into breaking the hold. "You can say anything, but--"

He snapped his head forward. Bruce jerked his own to the side, unwilling to let go, and their temples collided. Bruce ignored the pain and pulled John to him, bracing one arm around his body and getting the other around his head. Bruce held tight, pressing the other man's face into his
John worked his hands between their chests and tried to shove away. He failed and let out a long muffled scream, and Bruce braced for teeth.

Instead John's arms wrapped around Bruce's waist, nails biting through his shirt. Bruce felt wet spots growing on his shoulder and the tension in John's body wilting. He let his arms relax but still held the other man close.

"It's okay, buddy," he said into John's hair. "It's okay."

John didn't say anything, didn't move. Bruce didn't either. The stillness was sudden, but it was good, and it seemed important to just exist in it.

Then John started to sag, giving up on standing. "Let's sit," Bruce gently suggested, pulling him to the bed. "Come on."

He intended to sit side-by-side, but John's arms were locked, and Bruce didn't want to force him loose. So he sat on the mattress with his back against the wall and John curled sideways on his lap, face still buried in Bruce's shoulder.

Bruce knew this was not how friends held each other. He knew it was more than a friendly gesture to stroke John's hair. He did it anyway.

After a while, John turned his head away to speak. "You beat your blood," he said, "but I can't."

His voice was raspy but Bruce couldn't tell if he was still crying.

"What do you mean?" Bruce asked.

"Your dad was awful, and you're the opposite. I'm... I hurt people, and–"

"We have... wildly different circumstances. You know that. I know sometimes it feels like that doesn't matter, but it does. It takes you more work– but you are doing it. You've got a job and you're learning a lot of new things, and you have new friends and no one is hurt. You're not roughing it in a subway station with a mad scientist and a grouchy luchador and... and Hair-Dye VonHammer."

John didn't react at first, but then he snorted. Bruce took it as a sign he was on the right track.

"It's not all about the bad day. It's about the days after that."

"You process everything better than I can," John protested softly. "You're… stoic and measured and..."

"You don’t think I walked out of Crime Alley like that, do you?"

Quiet again. Then: "I hadn’t thought about it."

Bruce just let out a "hm."

"Tell me?"

After a moment, Bruce said, "I’m here to help you, not–"

"Tell me a story." John's arms tightened.
Bruce sighed. "Okay," he said, thinking of how to start, how much to say... The hand in John's hair stopped and lowered to his shoulder. "You've asked about those overseas years after college. All the rumors that I spent that time slumming it or in sex tourism or on meditation retreats with gurus."

"And you really were meditating," John said, "but also training and planning."

"Right. Meditation became a focal point, more than I'd expected when I was younger. The 'Bruce Wayne' mask really started back then, in middle school, because I was so angry. I didn't want anyone to know how affected I still was, because I wanted to be left alone. Angry kids got in trouble, they got sent to guidance counselors, to therapists. Alfred already tried a couple therapists, but I didn't want to... dissect my feelings."

"Patient is resistant to treatment," John muttered.

"Very. I didn't see the point letting go of justified anger. It took a long time to realize that clinging to it instead was... not the best way to handle those feelings. Alfred encouraged me to take martial arts classes to help vent them, but... it just helped put me on the path.

"I learned a lot about control over my body, which only emphasized the lack of control over my mind. I went to many meditation teachers here, but I could never find the clarity I wanted. More and more I felt like I needed to get away. I’d been wanting to leave for a long time, to... I didn’t have a real plan then, just the idea, that I needed to stop what happened to me from happening to anyone else. Mastering mind and body were obvious steps to becoming indomitable.

"An isolated monastery in the Himalayas seemed like the perfect place to start. The monks there were not only practitioners of meditation, but of martial arts, and renowned for both. I bought my plane ticket as far ahead of graduation as possible."

"Did Alfred know?" John asked.

"No. He would have stopped me, and as much as I wanted to go, leaving him was hard and telling him harder. Maybe he would’ve ended up coming with me-- but it’s better that he didn’t. He would have been mortified.

"When I got to Nanda Parbat, I was grateful the Master agreed to take me in, but I was also... obnoxious. Maybe not at first, but when I didn't see improvement after a couple months, I started demanding more one-on-one instruction. The monks were patient, even when they admonished me. They could have asked me to leave, but I guess they found value in my potential-- though I could only see my lack of progress. The setting hadn’t changed anything. I couldn’t let go."

"Wherever you go, there you are."

"The Master kept trying to tell me just that, but of course, back then I knew I wasn’t the problem."

"Until," John said as if he’d heard this story before, "a humiliating but humbling experience showed you the error of your arrogance."

"Basically, yes."

"Basically?" John said, voice pitching up with suspicion. The sudden brevity must have done it.

Bruce had meant to just give a glimpse of his dissatisfaction as a younger man, but that frustration had grown to something almost bigger than he could handle. Of course he couldn't hide it, not from John.
"The monks kept going back to that same idea, that I needed to let go of my anger, and it never made sense to me. I started to believe that if they couldn't make me understand, they must be wrong.

"So I went back to spending a lot of time alone, leaving the monastery daily to train in the mountains. It was a few weeks before Ra’s al Ghul found me."

"Ra’s al Ghul?" John repeated, interest piqued higher. "That sounds ominous."

"It translates to something like ‘the Head of the Ghoul’ or ‘Chief Demon’."

"Heh, there you go."

"He’d probably been observing me a while before we met. He was always on the lookout for angry young people who wanted to leave an imprint on the world, to take as pupils for the League of Shadows."

"Already sounds more your scene than a monastery."

"That’s what I thought. He met with me for several days to spar before he brought it up. He explained that the League trained its members to defend the region from thieves and murderers, like those who'd attacked his village and killed his wife years before. He said the Master pushed too much on detachment from anger, and there were other ways of unlocking my potential. And I explained what I was doing across the world, what had happened to my parents– but I think he already knew who I was. He later proved to have extensive knowledge of world affairs.

"But at the start, he told me everything I wanted to hear, and one day I didn’t return to the monastery. I went with Ra’s to the League compound, deeper in the mountains."

"You ran away from running away?" John snickered.

"There are always new places to fool yourself. The compound was perfect for that, because I might as well have created it from my own fantasy. Hundreds of fighters worked daily to sharpen their skills to deal with criminals who harmed society. The exercises and drills were almost nonstop, increasing our strength, endurance, and agility, teaching us how sustain on little sleep or food. I did well at it, enough that Ra’s wanted to work with me directly again. He got me to the point where I could fend off over a dozen men by myself.

"I was still no closer to mastering the mind, but I barely had time to think." Remembering those days pulled Bruce's exhaustion forward, and he settled more against the closet. "It was a relief not to think."

"It's taking a while to get to the part where you realize something’s up," John said.

"I was a lot more green then."

John pushed off of Bruce to kneel on the mattress. Bruce adjusted, too, sitting cross-legged, and tried to ignore how the loss of John's weight felt less comfortable. John’s face was dry. He still looked tired, but he managed a searching look.

Bruce caved. "Ra’s had a daughter."

"Ah haha!" John practically cheered, slapping Bruce's shoulder. "I knew it! Blinded by an hourglass figure and a sultry gaze."
"The armor hid the hourglass most of the time," Bruce said, "and the gaze was pretty cutting when she had a sword to my throat."

"Being trained to lead, was she?" John waggled his eyebrows. "Hrmn, sounds like a strong, independent lady who was emotionally removed, probably dark-haired..."

Bruce could feel his face getting red. "Talia was not like– she wasn’t entirely like Selina."

"I bet she kicked your butt, too!" John teased. At least his smile was back. "I can still hear your heart fluttering!"

"Talia was definitely more attached to me than Selina."

"And what did Mr. Ghul think of that?"

"He encouraged it. He was more fond of me than I bargained for."

"Because of the bajillions of dollars and connections?"

"That was part of it, but he believed in my abilities. When Talia took control of the League, he wanted me to lead at her side. I was at the compound for just six months, and he expected me to marry her."

John blinked. "Uh, wow. What did she want?"

"She wanted the same thing, but… She did a lot of things for Ra’s."

"But you didn’t marry her. Because you realized this was a cult? It sounds very culty."

"Culty," Bruce repeated.

"Wasn't it?"

"You’re not wrong. It’s just a glib description, with everything that…" Bruce tilted his head back against the wall. "I was so stupid," he said.

John waited.

"I was there long enough that I should have realized. I should have asked more questions. I got too wrapped up in myself." Bruce stared at the ceiling. "When the League caught criminals, they weren't brought to the compound. They were taken to a prison nearby. I thought they waited there for a trial, but they..."

"Were sent to a big open farm upstate?" John suggested with an audible wince.

"Yes, in a matter of days. I didn't know until Ra's finally brought me to the prison, for my official initiation into the League. Talia and a hundred warriors traveled with us. At the entrance of the prison, there was a walled yard, and the procession got into formation in front of a wooden platform. Raj brought me and Talia up there, and he finally laid everything out.

"It shouldn't have felt like he blindsided me. He hadn't hid his unforgiving nature, but when someone's philosophy is doled out in pieces, it's easier to ignore the parts that trouble you. But at that moment, he tied everything together. If we gave criminals any consideration, society only suffered. The best way to be rid of 'rot' was to cut it out. Then a chained man was dragged up onto the platform in front of me."
"Ra's announced it was time I prove myself worthy of initiation, of future leadership, by executing this man. I didn't know his name, much less what he did or the circumstances. Ra's declared him 'only a criminal.' He said I didn't need to know more than that.

"Talia handed me a ceremonial sword used to kill all the prisoners. The League had made a show of executions, renewing their pledge to purge the world of criminality. They impaled people through the heart." Even knowing how the story played out, Bruce's nerves felt frayed when he said, "I took the sword."

John had been listening intently, eyes wide, fists pressed against his mouth. He lowered his hands. "But I mean, you didn’t kill anyone."

"I didn’t, but… when Joe Chill was killed in prison, I was still a kid, and just felt like something else was taken from me. I wanted to feel good about knowing he was gone forever, but instead I couldn't stop thinking about how I'd never confront him. I'd never get answers or closure or…"

"I didn't look at that prisoner and instantly think valiant thoughts. I felt– in that sword– the opportunity to act out my revenge, to play through the darkest thoughts I'd had. I had the choice to do whatever I wanted."

Bruce heard the echo of John's words, of forgoing restraint, operating unleashed. Above that he heard the strength of his pulse, a flood of self-disgust at how he'd contemplated walking the League's path for any time at all. As he looked at John now, he realized the League had likely killed people who were mentally ill.

"That kind of freedom is tempting," Bruce continued stiffly, "but I wasn't a kid anymore. I'd learned enough over the years from Alfred, from all my academics, from my parents--" Past collided with present, and he amended, "From the stories about them at the time… and even from my stay at the monastery, that killing wouldn't achieve what I wanted. That man couldn't pay for Joe Chill's crimes, and killing either of them wouldn't undo what they had done. It would just be more justified murder. I'd decide I had license to take a life because of the past, and pretend it was completely unlike Chill's calculations." His father's calculations. "Pretend it wasn't part of a vicious circle that's gone on for lifetimes.

"I couldn't stand the thought of being like him, someone who could treat death like a simple exchange, for profit or to net zero. Someone who could snuff out all the possibilities of someone's life without a care…"

He'd started rambling, spewing obsessive thoughts he'd collected over the years and only ever divulged to Alfred. He took a breath and got back on track.

"I lowered the sword and told Ra's that I couldn't accept murder as justice."

John tilted his head. "So the father figure who introduced you to a wife figure wanted your total faith that offing a random guy was totally okay, and he asked you to do it on the spur of the moment in front of a bunch of peers who saw you as a future leader."

"I know, culty. At the time, I just realized how much trouble I was in. I'd broken a strict compact that I'd barely realized I’d made. I wasn't a member, but I'd gained enough standing to be recognized as a traitor."

("Beloved," Talia hissed, "don't be a fool.")

"But Talia loved you!" John said. "And she came to your defense, and oh, you're shaking your
"She unsheathed her own sword and killed the man herself."

Many years had passed since Crime Alley, and the victim was a stranger, but Bruce had still felt that same drop in his gut, the floating sense of unreality. He didn't think his reaction to an extinguished life would ever change, certainly not when it was taken by someone he thought he loved, who acted with more exacting intent than his parents' murderer.

Again his life had been altered in a flash: he had no true idea of who Talia was.

But he was even more sure of himself.

"Guess the engagement was off," John commented.

"I was surrounded by far more attackers than I was prepared for, just waiting for a word from Ra's. I had one option."

"Improvised explosives?"

"I used the sword to take Talia hostage."

A laugh burst out of John before he clapped his hands over his mouth. "Sorry," he said, voice muffled, eyes still twinkling. "Wasn't expecting that!"

"She wasn't either," Bruce said, thinking of her fast reflexes when he'd grabbed for her, the pure chance that he reacted quickly enough to knock her sword away and pull her to him. She'd barely struggled, likely out of surprise, if not because of the same numbing betrayal that Bruce felt. Perhaps Ra's had shared that feeling, but his face showed only fury. "I had the ceremonial sword to her throat, but I wasn’t going to hurt her. I just needed everyone to think I might. I may not have killed anyone, but everyone knew I was capable of breaking limbs.

"Still, I had little time until Ra's' warriors maneuvered to stop me. When I dragged Talia down the stairs, there was already movement to block off the gate, but I just wanted to get to the nearest wall. I was close when she finally broke free. She tried to grab the sword, but I knocked her away"—a kick to the stomach, a slam of the hilt into her head—"and that brought everyone on. But I just needed a sliver of space and time"—quick jabs and slashes, nonlethal moves that forced fighters back as barriers against the others—"to plunge the sword into the wall, kick off someone to jump onto it, and leap just high enough to reach the top of the wall."

The wall was constructed of upright logs, the tops carved into points he could grab onto. If he hadn't reached, he would have come down on the sword, which he'd felt fall askew already. When his body weight knocked the sword free, he would have taken it up again to keep fighting. But surely at that point the League would have overwhelmed him, unless Ra's took him on, one-on-one. In either case, Bruce doubted he would've made it out.

But he had reached, gloved hands grasping the rough wood. His armor had been enough to prevent serious injury from the points as he pulled himself over.

"I made it to the other side, and despite the sloped and rocky terrain hidden under the snow, I landed on my feet. Then it was a matter of endurance and speed. The mountains had crevices and formations I could use to hide, but that was more of an advantage against just the few fighters who managed to follow over the wall. If I lagged, the whole army would be on me soon enough.

"I ran for hours to lose them. I left a westward trail down toward the villages in the foothills before
backtracking east to the monastery. I planned to only grab some things I'd left behind, like my passport. If my presence was too noticeable, I was afraid the League would track me there and seek their revenge on the monks. I thought there would be questions after my long absence, especially since I showed up again in obvious distress, but the Master let me in. When I explained where I’d gone and why I needed to leave immediately, he didn’t seem surprised, and he insisted I at least wait for the monks to gather me some supplies. He… he wished me well. I tried to apologize, but he said he only wanted me to think about how I’d ended up with the League. How clinging to my anger blinded me from recognizing the path I'd started down."

John nodded sagely. "And you returned to Gotham a wiser, more worldly man."

"Not for a while yet. The first plane out landed in Germany. I caught my breath there, and I heard about a traveling magician famous for his great escape acts. I got into his Berlin show and ended up apprenticing for a year on his European tour."

John sputtered out a laugh, clutching his stomach with one hand and slapping the wall with the other. "Who even are you?!"

Bruce shrugged a bit sheepishly. "I did tell you I'm different every day."

"Still. I half expect you to say this magician had an alluring daughter, too."

"We were just friends."

John laughed harder.

"We were!" Bruce crossed his arms. "I wasn't eager for another relationship at that point."

(Which was what he’d impressed upon the occasional attractive stagehand, but like Zee and her father, John didn't really need to know about Bruce's dalliances.)

John's mirth died down, and he shook his head a little wistfully. "Jeez. You were all over the place, huh?"

"When your parole is up," Bruce suggested, "we could go on a trip. Anywhere you want. Germany, Italy, Greece… back to Tibet is maybe not a good idea."

"Plenty of time to think it over," John said, losing eye contact.

Because they'd inevitably returned to the present, to the reason Bruce had gone into his story. A steadily more uncomfortable silence descended.

John smacked Bruce's knee. "Right now the place we can go is dinner! It's still pretty early, but I need time to get ready"—he got up and started looking through his dresser—"and maybe we could take a walk before we eat, just get out of here. It can be so gloomy all cooped up, you know, can really warp your mood. Weird how that's all it can take to—"

"John," Bruce said, "did that help?"

The other man straightened, holding a folded shirt to his chest. He faced Bruce but examined some invisible hole or stain. "Sure, I asked for a story and you didn't disappoint."

"I made a crucial choice under intense pressure, but it was the right one. You've done that yourself with Freeze."
John looked up then, face blank. "And you believe I can keep making better choices."

"I do." Bruce hesitated. "I asked about your medication because I care. I wasn't trying to say that what you were feeling--"

"I get it," John said mechanically. "I take the meds for a reason. Normal question."

"I didn't have to be an idiot about it. I know what you feel is still real, I just-- I'm still learning. I mean, you-- you say all the time how great I am, but when it comes to this, I don't know what I'm doing."

"Oh, I still notice when you're an idiot, don't worry," John said a little meanly, but no more than was called for.

"Good. That's why, even if I helped, I hope you talk to Dr. Adams about this."

John looked away again, but he nodded.

Bruce got up. "You go ahead and shower. I'll talk to the receptionist about the schedule change."

"Okay."

John had returned to a duller mood, but it seemed they were out of the danger zone. It no longer felt like he'd do something wildly reckless. He could use a bit of alone time to digest.

In the hall, Bruce shut the door behind him. He checked his phone for the time, and saw Lucia had texted a half hour ago.

LUCIA: What’s the word??

BRUCE: Everything’s fine. Just in a mood.

That afternoon, John was less talkative, less flamboyant. He didn't put on any makeup and his dress-- denim jeans and cornflower blue shirt-- seemed to be a comment on his disposition. He'd hardly looked at his colorful starry jacket when he grabbed it from the closet.

They walked around Crest Hill, never falling into their usual ease of conversation, but John seemed fine with it as he led the way in a wide arc away from New Dawn. Bruce matched his meandering pace. After nearly an hour, they came across a taco truck that John identified as the latest food craze. His insistence that they try the fare wasn't as exuberant as usual, but it was likely that he hadn't eaten all day, so Bruce agreed. He'd missed lunch himself and ordered what turned out to be a decent burrito. He didn't ask if the tacos lived up to their fame, because John ate them mindlessly, staring at a brick wall across the street from their bench.

After that, they hooked back toward the halfway house, but John still took his time, and there was no reason to hurry him. Bruce suggested a slushie for dessert when they passed a corner store, but John didn't even pause, just shook his head.

They arrived back at New Dawn at the end of their allotted time. Near the entrance, John stopped and turned, stuffing his hands in his pockets. Bruce recognized that he wasn't invited back in. He reminded himself not to take it personally, but the awkwardness remained, and he found himself mirroring John, hands in pockets.

"Thanks for the meal, buddy," John said, "and, uh, for everything else."
"It's no problem."

"You didn't like telling that story."

"Significant moments in our lives aren't always the best memories… but they still have to be looked at."

"Heh, terrible, right?"

Bruce wanted to offer a hug, but for once he didn't think John would accept it.

John smiled faintly. "I better check in before they rescind that early release."

"If you need anything, just say the word," Bruce replied. He hated how repetition made phrases sound rote; he repeated things because he meant them.

"I know. Rest up before you go out tonight, huh?" John turned away with a half-hearted wave.

"I'll talk to you later," Bruce said—another promise meant.

Yet even with promises filled, with every resource activated, John walked on his own, and Bruce had to watch him go.

Chapter End Notes

The excerpt from Bruce’s overseas experience was cobbled together from various batmedia and my brain. (Ra’s and Talia will not be showing up in this fic, but I imagine in the future of this universe, they probably would.)

But one of John's lines was just blatantly stolen from Batman Beyond: Return of the Joker.

And some of Bruce's travel suggestions I took from chac-ozai's slice-of-life fan art over on Tumblr.

I'm doing a bit of traveling soon, so the next chapter may be delayed past the 3-week standard.
The morning after bowling didn't present John with his first hangover, but out of his few, it was
definitely his worst. He woke to a pulsing pressure trying to force its way through his skull. He
pushed himself up only a bit and his stomach lurched. He squinted at his pillow and saw bright
smears of makeup. Then he turned onto his back and came face to face with a ten-thousand-watt
spotlight directed at his window.

Or the sun, he realized. The mid-morning sun, accompanied by the jaunty island music bleeding
through the wall, playful guitar and humming steel drums.

"Some of us are–!" He groaned, because the attempt to shout only twisted the vice around his
brain. "Trying to suffer quietly," he mumbled, face buried back in the pillow.

Alright. So. He'd discovered a range of alcohol that was super tasty, but clearly he'd need to pick a
limit. That way, he could remember all the fun he'd had without these compressing consequences.
And he'd had lots of fun! He'd definitely taken up with people who knew how to have a good time.

Ooh, except for that preppy guy, he remembered. The night almost veered into a not-good time,
but John had been able to get it back on a bloodless track, despite the agitation of the crowd. He
hadn't expected that; his group project was just full of surprises, wasn't it? Though while the
unpredictability was delightful, it easily could have turned into a bar brawl. That would've brought
the kind of attention that he didn't want to deal with, even if Bruce helped smooth–

He had a flash of Bruce's handsome face, in this room and up close, arousing schmoopy thoughts
and feelings, especially with the firm pecs under John's hands. Hahaha, wowza– but that was very
concerning considering how hard John had been trying to suppress those emotions. Of course, he
didn't remember… something happening.

Though that didn't mean he hadn't said anything stupid, as in truthful, as in "I've dreamed about
you this close but in a horizontal way."

(But in vertical ways, too, and diagonal ways, not to mention the ideas after he'd searched "do bats
have sex upside-down?" purely out of curiosity.)

Confessing that truth would be worse than when Bruce saw John at one of his lowest points, crying
and lost in his own head. The low point they could get past. Though, while Bruce didn't really
bring it up again, thankfully, it did leave John wondering if Bruce thought he was weak.
Bruce wouldn't think that if he knew about the neighborhood watch.

Oh, jeez, what if John had let slip about the watch??

With slow movements, John sat up and looked around the room. He didn't see his phone anywhere and felt a rising distress—until he realized the firm feeling under his butt was the device still in his pocket. Grumbling, he took it out and looked through the recent texts between him and Bruce. There was nothing after some garbled messages about a tattoo at an earlier hour of the night.

If John had blurted out something stupid, Bruce would have said something by now, right?

… No, he wouldn't, especially if the something was feelings-stupid.

John's heart started to beat in time with his head, and he forced the aches aside. He needed to check into this. Just be super cazh, he thought as he typed.

   JOHN: hey buddy
   BRUCE: A wonderful morning to you.

On the one hand, it was good that Bruce was awake and responsive. John didn't have to stare at his phone wondering what would come.

He just had to worry right now.

   JOHN: You should be less perky
   With you being you
   And me being flattened by a street sweeper

   BRUCE: You looked 3D to me.

   JOHN: About that
   You know how the drink gets you addled.
   Might make you say or do things.
   Super out of character things.

   BRUCE: Like when you ran down the street screaming I was Batman.

A current of numbness lifted the aches. John had been too worried about exposing his own secrets to think about Bruce's! He typed frantically.

   JOHN: I'm sure it sounded like plain lunacy to anyone around!

   BRUCE: I’m kidding.

Bruce's text came just as John sent his. He narrowed his eyes at the screen. With that timing, his buddy should leave the comedy to the experts.

   BRUCE: You were very in character, just with less balance.

   JOHN: Of course!
   I could never be drunk enough to compromise your secret.
   I never will after this headache finally cracks my cranium.

   BRUCE: Drink water.
   Try eating carbs.
JOHN: I may try using a drill to relieve this pressure.

BRUCE: Ha?

JOHN: I'M kidding now.

Maybe.

The knocks on the door might as well have been on his tympana. John forced himself to his feet with a moan, then shuffled over to answer. If Rosaline had a call-in job for him, he'd have to play dead.

But it was Lucia, wearing sunglasses, a t-shirt, and sweatpants. She shoved a Burger Bonanza bag at him and spoke softly but clearly. "About rehearsal--"

"Cancelled?" John said hopefully as he took the bag.

"Delayed an hour. Eat. Shower. We leave in forty-five."

John did not thwack her in the face with the bag. "Is this what they mean by suffering for art?"

The corner of her mouth quirked up. "The show must go on."

Later, he dutifully met her and Adelina outside to head to the rec center. The food and shower did help a bit, but he still had to shield his eyes from the persistent sun. Where was smog when you needed it?

Lucia placed a second pair of sunglasses, with star-shaped lenses, over his face. They helped, and he mumbled his thanks.

"Thank you for telling off that slug," she replied, "and for introducing me to Carter."

In the background, Adelina clasped her hands over her heart, then mimed gagging.

Lucia turned around. "You're just mad you didn't get to go."

It took John that long to get who Carter was. "Oh, your cutie. Wasn't me who introduced you."

"If you knew how to bowl, we wouldn't have gone," Lucia explained, adjusting her sunglasses and starting on their way.

Heh, it was true, what little happenstances led to important events in people's lives…

With a start, he followed after her and Adelina. "Uh, you get that I never went bowling because I was locked up in a 'crazyhouse,' right?"

For the first couple hours, every drumbeat and high note chipped at the seams of John's skull. While the image of his head popping open like a game claw releasing a prize was amazing, an exploded brain was a pretty gross prize. He used that as a prompt to refocus on lines and timing and blocking, though to lessen the noise, he provided an opinion only when Lucia asked for one.

This must not have been her first time rehearsing with a hangover. She slumped in her chair, still wearing her sunglasses, but she kept everything on schedule and jotted down notes. She and John sat off to the side of the room, with the remaining chairs lined up along the wall beside them or pushed to the corners. Everyone ran through their acts in the cleared space.
Yet still Lian only ran through the motions of his act, using unlit batons. He limited his exposure to paraffin, Lucia said, not to mention the inevitable blisters in his mouth, but come on! Couldn't John have something to liven up this dreary head-pounding day?

The pounding did lessen to more of a thudding by the time Lucia's phone rang, at a point well past noon. John caught a look at her screen: Carter.

"Half-hour lunch break," Lucia announced as she got up, disappearing outside.

"Just a half-hour?" Anica exclaimed.

"I already ordered pizza," Chuck said, bringing relief to the miffed faces around the room. "It'll be here soon."

Anica mocked a swoon. "My hero!"

Chuck stuffed his hands in his pockets. "No big deal."

She smiled at him as she took Lucia's seat. John narrowed his eyes at her.

"How're you so bright-eyed?" he asked.

"Got a better handle on my limits." Her smile dialed down. "When it comes to drinking."

John surveyed the room. Lorenzo wasn't around, but from what John could recall, the larger man had held his beers just fine. Lian, however, had dropped his batons earlier and was struggling to concentrate as he repeated the motions. Tharaka was still wearing sunglasses as she picked on her guitar. Fredelle, on the other hand, was tip-tapping it up. She and her husband must've spent more time dancing than drinking.

"Guess Mikey is trashed," John said. "Not even here."

"He had less than I did," Anica said, and she gave him an unblinking look. "I think he was hoping to make a connection with someone."

"Phhbt, when? When he was losing at air hockey or watching us from the bar?"

She didn't look like she appreciated that response, but John wasn't much interested in assessing why, and even less so when Maureen showed up.

She held open one of the doors and urged a younger woman inside. The woman wore a zebra print dress that was too short and too low cut for polite society, with a tasseled shawl over her shoulders that was too thin to have any purpose. Her black bob had a plastic shine that gave it away as a wig.

Most significantly, her open-toed heels cracked sharply on the floor and on John's nerves.

Maureen led the newcomer over, saying, "I've brought some--"

John waved his hands for silence, then pointed at the shoes. "Off. Then talk."

The woman raised an eyebrow at Maureen. "Is this a kink…?"

"You can just sit down," Anica said.

"Candy has some very interesting information," Maureen said, indicating the chair on John's other side.
Just two more heel clicks before their guest sat. John rubbed his temples, summoning a little friendliness.

"Candy, huh?" he said. "Sounds dandy, I guess."

She pulled the ratty shawl tighter. "My real name is Sarah."

He leaned forward, forearms on knees. "And why are we on such an intimate wavelength, Sar?"

"I got a regular," she said, "an ex-cop. He's been talking about something big, something I think you'd wanna know about."

"In the Village?"

"Sounded like the whole city."

"We have a limited scope here, Sar. There's anonymous methods to report the bigger stuff."

"To the cops," she spat. "I know well enough not to trust them."

"But you trust strangers?"

"I trust the Neighborhood Watch. You all don't know anybody from Eve, but you've helped other girls get out of the life."

"We have?" John looked to Maureen, who nodded. "Of course we have. We're very inclusive at the Neighborhood Watch." Which had gained proper noun status at some point, by how they were talking. "Alright, what do you got?"

"This guy, Milton, he got cut from the force after the Mayor Dent rampage. He wasn't an official Enforcer, but the commissioner's investigation proved enough against him that the union couldn't save his job."

"So not doing well on the bad guy/good guy scale."

"No. Even while he's paying for time, he'll find a reason to go on about how the wrong people are in charge. This from a guy who used to have girls service him for free to avoid getting arrested."

"What does he say?"

"For a while it was just whining about losing his job and his wife, you know? But a few months ago, he started getting more aggressive about it, talking about how Gordon and bureaucrats will get theirs. Then last night I hear him on the phone talking to a buddy, saying big changes are gonna come to the city, talking about some secret movement happening online, that his friend should get in on it. But they've gotta meet in person to really talk, it's so secret."

"Some secret. He already said all that in front of you."

"After he finishes, I might as well be furniture."

John chuckled. "People are so eager to underestimate."

"So it sounds important, right?"

It did sound like good info for Bruce, if it panned out. John would have to think of a story to explain how he knew about it, but it didn't sound like something that could be left unaddressed.
"Did Milton set up the meeting?" he asked.

"Today at the docks, at six."

John sighed. "There goes my dinner hour."

Sarah fidgeted again. "So if it's helpful, can I join up?"

John gave her a confused look. "You can do whatever you want." He snickered. "It beats being furniture."

Maureen spoke up. "You and I'll talk about leaving the business."

Sarah brightened. "Thank you!" she exclaimed to John as he got up.

He waved vaguely in acknowledgement as he walked away, bringing up the skyrail schedule on his phone. He'd let Lucia know he'd be popping away for a bit later, that he wanted a change in atmosphere to punch up some lines in his ditty, which was true anyway. She wouldn't like his absence, but she was the one who told him to follow his creative instincts. This one just happened to correspond with his survival instincts.

As the dates in Martha's journal got closer to the shooting in Crime Alley, the content felt more heartbreaking.

If I love Thomas, I need to talk to him. What real good is this journal doing? It's just hiding my thoughts, making me feel only a little better for very little time.

We've been married twelve years. His activities aside, he's never betrayed me. He may shield me from the worst, but he's never outright lied about it.

He fully supported me becoming Director of the Wayne Foundation. He wants its good works to go on. I know he sees value in making the city a better place.

Don't I owe it to my husband to talk to him? He owes it to me to listen.

It was true that a married couple should be a team. By all verifiable accounts, even the ones told now, Bruce's parents stuck by each other, not just in their careers (for better or worse). Because of those careers, they planned for one child they could focus on, not wanting to shuffle additional children off on "the help" like many other families in their circle. Together they started the map for Bruce's life, donating to certain private schools, noting prestigious clubs for sports and music and everything else, and flagging the most innovative business programs. There was no evidence that either was unfaithful, and it was not a concern Martha ever mentioned in her writings.

It would have been easy to expect that bond to permeate every aspect of their lives, easy for that naivete to continue in the next entry.

Thomas and I had a long talk, long overdue. It was by no means easy, but it cleared the air. He'd already sensed my increasing uneasiness.

We went over the reasons for his relationships with Hill and Falcone, the benefits and the consequences, and of course I drove the consequences home. He could not reasonably disagree that this situation is untenable. Even if we can rationalize it with the Foundation's achievements, we are still acting in accordance with thugs. How are we not thugs?
And I told him, if he was stuck on the resources we would lose, we'll lose them all if we're dead. How safe can we be like this? How safe is Bruce? If not from the unstable temperaments of our "partners," but from the enemies we've made?

And Thomas knew this, of course. Why else does he keep all this from Bruce? Hill and Falcone's visits happen after he's sent to bed. We never discuss that kind of "business" around him. Because it's wrong. We know it.

Thomas said it will take time, but he'll find the path, cut ties, in whatever way it takes. We can pay them off, I don't care how much. Just as long as we can live clean lives.

Pure denial. No one at Bruce's father's level could just cut ties with the mob. He'd been an integral part to setting up the whole system. How many deals had he made? Promises? Blackmail? If he just stopped, the pipelines that filled the good will of his "business partners" ran dry. And after all he had done, how could his wife ever expect to feel clean?

But that was a danger of love, wanting to believe the best even when the inevitable stared you in the face.

Like thinking an intense but brief connection would get Selina to abandon the thrill that sustained her for years. Like thinking Alfred could somehow get better in the environment that made him sick. Like thinking Joker was a viable partner even with all the signs of instability.

Bruce had hoped that if he'd inherited his implacable drive from an infamous felon, he'd at least inherited something forbearing from his mother. It seemed that he had, but these last entries evoked no relief, just the feeling of foolishness all over again.

He stowed the book in its drawer and sent the day's scans along to Alfred. He'd spent too long on it anyway. He needed to tune up the car and get back to reviewing open cases.

He hoped Tiffany could bring a refreshed eye to the "Rupert" problem. The mystery man still hadn't reappeared, and they'd been unable to discern any leads from the information they had. Bruce had sent Tiffany to visit Gotham University, not only to see if Avesta had any ideas but to get a crash course in profiling.

Bruce didn't mind being alone in the cave, and often preferred it, but at the moment he looked forward to Tiffany's return. He needed to immerse himself into the problems he could solve, not the unchangeable past.

Iman Avesta had only been teaching for a couple of years, but the back wall of her small office was covered with commendations. A corkboard on the wall to her right was tacked with cards and notes from students; even a couple letters dangled from the bottom.

The reminders of the former Agent's credentials and enthusiasm made Tiffany's stomach squirm. Avesta had been on the outs with Waller when Tiffany confessed to killing Riddler, so presumably she never learned about it. Bruce and Alfred had certainly kept that information to themselves, though there was a long period during which, despite Bruce's assurances, Tiffany was sure John would tell someone. He never had. On her more charitable days, she assumed his silence was out of loyalty to Bruce. Other days, she wondered if it was more strategic, a long game. She was a good person to blackmail.

But if Avesta had figured out Batman's identity on her own, what was she missing that she couldn't pinpoint Tiffany as the executioner of her father's killer? Maybe she hadn't missed anything; maybe
she already knew.

She didn't hint either way. Certainly not in the middle of explaining how to think about Harvey Dent's visitor, beyond what they knew of his appearance and technological capabilities.

"Sussing out his motivations can point to new avenues of investigation," Avesta was saying, "and even if you don't flush out your perpetrator, a better understanding of him may help you respond to his next move. Ask the basic questions: what emotions would propel these actions? What are likely reasons for these emotions? Most interesting to me is to ask, what actions has this person not taken, and what are probable reasons for inaction?

"For example, when I was evaluating Batman, I noted that the rumors he had killed were not corroborated by any bodies. Injuries to suspects appeared to occur most often in mutual combat. Noncombatant suspects reported disclosing information in response to threats more often than force. Though Batman used unapproved methods, he strived to provide evidence or tip offs that could lead to valid charges under the legal system. So while this vigilante had decided he had the right to act extralegally, often in a violent manner, he had a private ethical code and maintained respect for the rule of law.

"So why doesn't this person, who clearly has resources beyond the reach of a large majority of the population, go all the way? Why doesn't he take on a mantle of all-encompassing authority? Batman's actions indicated that although he saw failures of the system, he wanted it to succeed. He wanted the freedom to pursue unsanctioned investigative methods, but he didn't want martial law. He wanted to be seen as someone trustworthy. He seemed to know the value of a reputation, of societal symbols."

"Sounds kind of like you're his shrink," Tiffany joked, looking up from the notes on her tablet.

Avesta got a regretful look. "Unfortunately, I was trained to use assessments like that to ensure cooperation from targets. Just blackmailing Batman with his identity wasn't enough. We needed a strong hypothesis on how he'd react to the threat." Her gaze rested on the pen twirled between her fingers. "Some people would have switched priorities to protect themselves and would have required… a more aggressive strategy. We determined we wouldn't need that for Bruce; he was more likely to maintain focus on stopping Riddler."

Tiffany waited for Avesta to look up meaningfully at the name, but the older woman's eyes stayed down, looked unfocused.

Perhaps looked inward, examining her own past. Certainly she'd worked at the Agency long enough to have more skeletons than a young college graduate whose worst sin used to be thoughtless words screamed during teenage tantrums. And Avesta must have committed those deeds for reasons that felt right at the time, justifications for not exposing herself now. So maybe if she did know what Tiffany had done, she felt it balanced out in its own way.

An "acceptable level of criminal," as Tiffany had come to think if it, very uncomfortably. They—herself, Avesta, Bruce—were the ones drawing the lines for themselves, after all. And they often drew them for other people, suspects whose motivations seemed just, or who had information that could be used to net bigger fish, or some other reason. And when a case was done, those same suspects were handed off to the city, who could redraw the lines all over again.

Justice was not as distinct as Tiffany wanted it to be.

(As she felt she could make it be, deep in her bones, as she took aim at Riddler.)
Avesta blinked out of her reverie with a worn smile. "Whatever his motivations, your perpetrator seems the type who'll call for an aggressive strategy."

Tiffany nodded. "Alright, so the obvious major question is why he feels the need to control the city, which could be for all sorts of reasons." She thought more. "I can also ask why he waited so long to reboot Dent's crimes. Why he tried to get Dent to lead first. Why he appears to be making something instead of stealing it."

Avesta nodded. "Exactly, questions like that." She gestured to a calendar beside the corkboard. "I have some summer courses, but I wouldn't mind putting my mind to work on this, if you want."

"We always appreciate it," Tiffany said. "I'll touch base with Bruce and send over the case file, though there's not much more than I've told you."

"Alright. Of course, you have my discretion."

Of course. Discretion was their enterprise.

When Tiffany boarded the train for the Tricorner Line, her car had just a few passengers toward the back. She took advantage, sliding into a bench near the front and sitting sideways with her feet up. She set her backpack on the floor and tried to relax, shift to a mood appropriate for meeting friends.

After working at WE and with Batman, it was making time for family and friends that had started to seem like a burden. Not because she didn't want to, but because despite her misgivings, her vigilantism helped keep everyone safe, and research at work so closely tied into investigation and defense. Socializing often felt frivolous and selfish compared to the progress she could be making.

Bruce insisted she do it anyway, and she always ended up grateful that she did. Time with people she loved soothed her spirit and actually boosted her motivation. Certainly when it came to her family, she remembered how important it was to stay close to them, after they'd been reduced from four to three.

Her mom had eventually left the confines of the house, but she still slept on the left side of the bed. She insisted the family go to therapy as a way of getting Luke to go without singling him out. Luke's outbursts had become infrequent, but he never reconnected with the friends he'd alienated. Tiffany couldn't become another empty space to her mother, and she had to be a consistent presence for her brother. She'd planned to move out shortly after getting hired at WE, and she still couldn't bring herself to do it. The family had to stick together.

And of course Bruce recognized that, not only out of guilt, but his own experience as a child and recently. When Alfred left, Bruce put on a composed facade, but Tiffany knew now how good he was at hiding himself. He was hurt; how could he not be, when the rock of his life shifted from under him?

She'd tried to let him know he could talk to her, like she would do for any of her friends, but obviously Bruce wasn't just any friend. He could rely on her professionally, but he did not want to talk about his feelings. So she'd worked to become the most solid mentee she could be.

Besides, John had pretty clearly stepped into the space Alfred left behind.

Bruce had filled in the gaps of the story, how he and John had managed to become friends in a volatile situation. Tiffany understood it up until the end, when John hadn't only lost it and nearly killed Waller, but tried to kill both Tiffany and Bruce. That would permanently end her relationship with anyone.
Then again, Tiffany violating Bruce's core principle hadn't ended their relationship. And Bruce blamed himself for the Agency situation getting so out of control, for John ending up in a scenario bound to challenge his stability, to overwhelm him. There were many extraordinary circumstances to consider.

Not that she was interested in seeing John herself, whether in Arkham or back in the city, and Bruce had never asked her to. He avoided bringing John up in conversation, lest the atmosphere get tense, like when Tiffany disclosed the unusual patterns in the Village/Narrows crime data.

She heard about John much more from her friends, who'd ask for the inside scoop about her secret agent boss and the city's controversial wacko. She'd told them to knock it off, but she still received the occasional link to a tabloid followed by the eyes emoji. She'd avoided getting drawn into gossip when Bruce was just a high-profile family friend, and she was definitely less inclined to join in now. As for her private thoughts, she knew what the two men's interactions looked like, but the inordinate amount of time they spent together could easily be attributed to Bruce operating on guilt. Right or wrong, his perception was that he'd played a large part in destroying John's chance at freedom, and he wanted to make up for that.

 Heck, Tiffany also spent a ridiculous amount of time with Bruce, working at his side in the light and in the shadows. Bruce was driven by guilt there, too; he certainly followed a thread from Lucius's death to Tiffany getting blood on her hands. All that didn't mean she and Bruce were in love.

Just like John frequently popping up in her mind didn't mean she was in love with the man who'd flung a "jokerrang" into her hand. She should do something to create a mental block, though. Sitting here now, she could see a man in the next car, framed by the scratched windows between them, and his long chin and pointed nose made him look like a peach-skinned version of John. He was looking down at something, probably his phone, lips pursed in concentration.

Suddenly he nodded enthusiastically to himself, and his mouth pulled into a too-wide grin.

Tiffany's breath hitched. Was that actually…?

She stood, stretching though she didn't need to. The hood on the man's sweatshirt was pulled up, and he typed with gloves on. They must have been the special conductive kind for touchscreens. She saw people in hoodies year-round, but who wore gloves in June? Unless they were hiding how the whiteness of their hands didn't match their face.

Tiffany sat and faced front. Bruce hadn't said anything about John disguising himself. It would make sense if he wanted to live under the radar, but the Circus surge on social media showed that he wasn't shying from attention.

So what situation did John think called for hiding his identity?

The train came to her stop, but John didn't get up. Neither did she. The doors closed and the train continued along.

She texted Gabby. *I don't think I can make it. Work stuff.*

She got a sad emoji in return, and a typical declaration that she was going to work herself to death. She responded that she'd call when she was done to see if everyone was still around. Then she settled in, keeping an eye on John in her periphery.

She didn't know what she was expecting. She'd analyzed the records of the Agency's time in
Gotham, and while John had happily thrown himself into the company of criminals, he didn't behave like crime was a goal. She couldn't really refute what Bruce had said about John trying to figure out his role in the world—though he had looked in the most extreme places. His upcoming variety show at some bar was definitely a tame turnaround.

He did seem to be trying to leave his crimes behind— but in their wake laid lives cut short and broken families. Tiffany knew what that felt like.

But she also knew that John hadn't plotted to hurt anyone, not like Riddler had designed his puzzle box.

Not like Tiffany had planned her revenge.

Sometimes the memory came unbidden: standing on the side of the bridge, the cold air harsh on her bare face and biting through the thick cotton of her hoodie. She could see the tiny figures of Batman and Riddler on the boat as it passed below. They were larger on her tablet screen, linked to the camera on her drone, and she zoomed in on Riddler, on his neck. Target, lock, fire the dart.

He'd jerked, and after only a moment started convulsing. She'd left then, satisfied that the drugs would do their job, eager to escape before someone came after her. The cars on the bridge zipped past the whole time, thinking her just a strolling pedestrian.

She got away with it. Riddler died.

And her father was still dead. Her family still grieved. Agony still quietly burned a hole in her chest.

When she'd offered to help Bruce, before she revealed the truth, she thought continuing her father's work could fill the hole. If she focused on the Fox legacy, killing Riddler felt like justice.

It took a while to acknowledge that the murder had resolved little. And when she zoomed out, she could see all the crimes Riddler would never have to answer for, the information that could have helped law enforcement, maybe even knowledge that would lead to catharsis to people with missing family.

Maybe she had made the right decision and stopped him from ruining more lives, but she had taken that decision from anyone else. The enormity of the choice unsettled her.

The slight inertia of a turn pulled her to the present. She glanced up to check on John, and he was standing beside her row.

"Hiya, fellow straphanger!" he chirped.

She stared at him silently. How had she let herself get that distracted? She didn't even hear the doors between the cars open.

John frowned. "You're, uh, not going to freak out, are you?" He uneasily took a seat at the end of her bench.

"No. I just... didn't expect you." With him closer, she could see he'd darkened his hair.

He chuckled. "I didn't expect to be here either." He lifted the hood slightly to show how the muddy color was only partially slicked back through his hair. "Still a pretty decent job," he whispered. He didn't need to; the car hadn't gotten any fuller.
"It took me a second," she admitted.

"You'd be surprised how many people don't know who I am even without all this slathered on," he giggled. "They must avoid the news like the plague."

She didn't doubt it. There had been a few times, usually at parties, that friends had tried to talk her up to new people by telling them she knew Bruce Wayne, and the response was a blank stare.

Seemed more crucial to know what a publicly admitted killer looked like, though.

(Of course, there was no way to know about the secret ones.)

John became more somber, maybe taking her silence as adversarial. "Thought I'd've run into you before now," he said, averting his eyes.

She frowned. "Well, I mean..." No way was she going to feel bad for avoiding him– especially when she'd still been willing to help save his butt from Freeze.

"I get it," he sighed.

Bruce had some sad puppy dog eyes, but John's eyes were even more expressive, and he really did look regretful. But Tiffany didn't think he was planning another rampage or anything; she just didn't know how she was supposed to rest easy around someone who could do so much harm in a sudden frenzied state.

"I did get your card," she said.

A handmade one passed to her via Bruce after Freeze swept through Gotham. "I won't drone on," the front said, with a crayon drawing of her drone. Inside it finished, "I'll just say thanks! ;)") with John's printed signature.

John brightened a bit. "Right, yeah, just, you know, wanted to say thanks, for a job well done! Because you deserved it, even though it's still kind of a, ha, gut punch to see you in the job I wanted– but I didn't want to hold that against you! Lost that gig completely on my own, so it wouldn't make sense to hold a grudge. It was a pretty persistent one, but I knocked it back hard, and it's better for Bruce's friends to be friends, not have petty squabbles of who would be the better sidekick if things were different."

"If which part, exactly, was different?" Tiffany said pointedly.

And there was that sad look again. Against her other instincts, it bothered her.

As a sort of offering, she added, "I hear you're doing really well now."

He didn't brighten again. His eyes narrowed. "Are you following me to follow up?"

She hadn't expected that. "I'm not follow–"

"Answer quick: where are you going?"

"Oh, I– Over to– I mean down–" She broke off in a curse.

"Don't you know you always need a cover story?" he giggled. "That's something even kids know. Well, I learned it in Arkham. I didn't 'sneak out' of my room; I had to use the lavatory. That a batch of laxatives was mixed in with the morning oatmeal was a total coincidence!" He guffawed until he caught her distasteful look and broke into coughs. "That happened when I was first brought in," he
said with a dismissive wave. "Still young, very immature."

"Uh huh. How could you tell I was following you?"

"I wasn't sure until we passed the Diamond District. Nothing much past that stop than Tricorner Yards, and I don't know what you'd be up to there in daytime hours."

She folded her arms. "Okay, what's your cover?"

He folded his arms, too. "I'm scouting for performance art spaces, naturally."

"And the real reason you're going?"

"The cover is the– it's not the cover, it's the real– I didn't say I was going– I know it sounded..."

John shot her an annoyed look. "You're a clever one yourself."

She smirked. "Thanks."

He lowered his arms and huffed. "You were gonna tell Bruce you saw me anyway."

"I definitely will if you keep being cagey like this."

He nervously looked down at his twiddling thumbs. "I'm on borrowed time with him as it stands," he mumbled.

"What?"

He gripped the seat. "Okay. So you know how you don't trust me?"

"... Yeah."

"Plenty of people don't, including people with the dispositions and positions to blame me for other people's crimes and lock me up."

"Yeah. I know." She'd seen the sentiment plenty online, if not from some people she knew. Most concerning were the comments she'd heard around GCPD officers.

"So logically, it's better if I keep criminals out of my orbit."

Tiffany struck her thigh with her fist. "I knew it!" she said way too loudly. She glanced back and saw looks from some of the other passengers, and continued more quietly. "I knew those stats weren't a coincidence."

"You knew?" John said with alarm. "Does Bruce know?"

"Well, we didn't know anything really. Just that there's a lower crime rate in your neighborhood. Bruce said it could mean a number of things."

Weirdly, John looked sad again. "He would."

She was feeling more investigative than sympathetic now. "So how are you keeping criminals away? There are pretty grisly rumors going around."

He snort-giggled. "Oh yeah! But really with my reputation, threats do the job. It's a lot easier now that almost everyone is in on the deal."
With no increase in hospital admittance, she could believe John wasn't hurting people, but he'd waved a new red flag. "Everyone?"

"It's a community effort!" John said. "I just mentioned it to Maureen and her boys, but now lots of people have joined in."

The Howe siblings and Feliz were reformed crime muscle– more reformed than Tiffany would have expected– but she wasn't aware of anyone else in John's orbit who had the knowledge or physique to clear a neighborhood of crime.

"That's not a job for a bunch of theater nerds," she said.

"It's not just the Circus. It's a whole Neighborhood Watch!" he said proudly.

"Still, it's dangerous."

He raised an eyebrow. "Uh, it was dangerous before."

She didn't have an argument for that. "That's true," she conceded. "For you, though, wouldn't it be easier to just live uptown in Bruce's penthouse?" She knew Bruce had offered. "Hell, he'd buy you any place anywhere."

"I'm not helpless," John said sharply. His hands balled in his lap. "Everybody thinks that just because he likes me and has money, I should depend on him for everything. I don't have to and I don't want to. The whole point of my release was that I can take care of myself."

"I understand," Tiffany said, because she did. When her mentorship with Bruce first started, he was reluctant to take her into the field. She thought the fact that she had killed said something about how much danger she could be exposed to, but Bruce still preferred that amount to be zero. The emergencies that came up in their line of work helped him get over his reservations, but she still had to push now and then.

John relaxed a little. "And I do take care of myself. I even have an arrangement to pass information we collect to a guy in the GCPD."

"You're an informant."

"Off the books. Ramamurthy gets the credit, and he knows that I'm not running anything on the side."

She knew the officer's name from the story of how he turned in his partner, plus police records about goings-on in the Narrows and the Village. He came across as a promising rookie who was good at getting tips; she'd never thought they'd come from John.

"And he's not the type to frame you," she said.

"Right!" John said. "On that note, I'm actually on a reconnaissance mission right now. Would you like some information yourself?"

Her hackles went back up. He was trying to make a deal with her too? For what? "What do you mean? Wouldn't you just tell Bruce?"

"Sure, but since you're already here, what do you say we make it a team project?" He held out his hand.
Tiffany hesitated. His confession wasn't great news, but she didn't have any data showing he didn't have good intentions. And it wasn't like she didn't want to know where this was going. "Alright," she said, shaking on it.

He glanced down and giggled. He pulled away and tugged his glove partway up, showing his scar. "Twinsies."

She reflexively looked at her own palm, then took a deep breath. "What's in Tricorner?"

"A secret meeting at the docks between two guys I've never met" had few specifics, but John had a picture of Milton from an old newspaper article, and Tiffany's tablet was accompanied by a miniature drone in her bag. As they walked the few blocks south from the skyrail stop, she used her tablet to transmit the photo into facial recognition software.

The eastern side of the docks was still in use by shipping companies, but on the western side, the city was converting the area into a waterfront walk deemed Dixon Harbor Park. The concrete path was complete and open to the public, and additional plans were underway or in development: gardens and playgrounds, a weekend market, and a series of commissioned sculptures.

So far two art pieces had been installed, one of which was made up of upright metal sheets cut into wave shapes, secured to the concrete in narrowly spaced rows at the western end of the walk. Some waves towered while others peaked just a foot over Tiffany's head. She used a taller wave for cover to release the drone. It zoomed up and out over the water to scan faces from a distance. John peeked around the sculpture and rose on his toes as if that would help him discern the speck.

They weren't going to wait for the drone to get a hit, though, she told him. They started down the walkway to scan faces themselves— or Tiffany at least assumed John was looking, while he launched into a decades-old story he'd heard back in Arkham. Once upon a time, a ship nearly crashed into the port while piloted by a single man, who died before dock workers found him on the captain's deck. It turned out he was the last man alive; every crew member, with no one unaccounted for, had been fatally lanced through the eye. The chief theory was that a murderous stowaway had boarded, but no further evidence of an additional person on the ship was ever uncovered. The case remained unsolved.

It sounded like a ghost story, and as Tiffany made a mental note to look into its veracity, John swatted her arm.

"Look look look!" he said, pointing with his chin at a man in a brown jacket and cap. The man sat on one end of a bench facing the bay.

Tiffany squinted. "How can you– oh!"

John pulled her by the sleeve further inland, among a series of large garden plots. They moved around a finished square of flowers and shrubbery, then past a neighboring plot of only fresh soil. They ducked behind a municipal van and peeked around its blunt nose at their target.

"That's definitely him," John insisted. Another man in a green jacket approached from the far end of the walk. "Ooh, and I bet there's the contact!"

"Hold on, hold on," Tiffany muttered, navigating the drone back to land.

She looped it around so the two men wouldn't notice it zipping over their heads, then brought it amongst the branches of a tree behind the bench. The view on the tablet framed the two men as the second sat down, and as they angled toward each other, Tiffany saw that John was right. Facial
recognition confirmed that the man in brown was Milton. She tuned into on the audio.

"... all the way in South Bumblefuck," the man in green was saying.

"Part of the responsibilities," replied Milton. "Keep everything as lowkey as possible."

"'Everything' being another shot at actually cleaning up this city?"

"You say that like we have no shot."

With a change in the drone's angle, the tablet mapped out the second man's face, and an ID popped up in a bubble alongside him. John tapped it before Tiffany could, expanding the information into a full side panel.

"Harold Olshansky," John read quietly, "driver engineer in the GCFD. Boy, roaches get everywhere, don't they?"

Tiffany glanced at the profile while listening to the conversation. While Milton had been ejected from the police force, Olshansky was still active at the fire department. Highlights of his record included a couple overnight jail stays after bar fights and internal investigations for creating a hostile work environment.

"You all got too cowboy," Olshansky said.

"It takes big moves to break through all the bullshit," Milton countered. He rummaged in his pocket. "This guy is the man we've been waiting for. Just log on tomorrow and see."

He passed a piece of paper to Olshansky in clear view of the drone, and Tiffany quickly zoomed in. Olshansky glanced at it before stuffing it into his pocket.

"Keep that to yourself, alright?" Milton said. "We need big moves, but we don't need word spreading to big-mouthed yahoos."

"This guy is one to talk," John snorted.

After vague promises to speak later, Olshansky and Milton separated, the first heading back the way he came and the second going the opposite direction. Tiffany and John moved behind the truck body as Milton passed them.

When he'd walked a fair distance, Tiffany played back the recording and paused it at the paper exchange. She zoomed in closer on Milton's two lines of neat print.

"What's that?" John asked. "Some crypto-code?"

"Looks like an alphanumeric URL for the dark web," she said.

"The dark web?" he echoed with an ominous edge, wagging his fingers.

"Broadly, it means sites that are encrypted; you can't get to them just by typing this in your browser."

"You need this password?" He pointed at the second line of characters.

"No, that's for the site when you get to it. There's a whole other component to getting on the dark web. Olshansky must already know how." She put the tablet back in her bag. "I'll have to access and start monitoring the site now, since they didn't say when the broadcast is."
"Doesn't seem like it has to do with Maroni."

"No, it doesn't." The wording of "another shot" at the city pointed to Harvey Dent's still unidentified admirer. It was possible that Milton was that admirer, but then there was the broadcaster he referred to.

John peered at her contemplative expression. "Did you already know about this?"

"I think it ties into a case we just opened." She didn't want to get more specific. There was no way Bruce would approve of this neighborhood watch. She was wrapping her mind around it herself. She didn't want to encourage John by giving him more details to follow.

But he seemed satisfied, dusting off his hands. "Great, that's another thing off my plate. And I helped you find a brand new lead!"

"You did," she assented, "in a major way." Awkwardly, she added, "Thanks."

"Thank you for being a great partner!" John said with a thumbs up. "But of course you are. Bruce wouldn't team up with a slacker."

Tiffany wasn't sure why she said it. Just because the information was so useful, and John had been more restrained than she expected, and perhaps because it was just true. "If things were different, I think he would have preferred working with you."

He looked surprised. "Really?"

"Yeah. I've known Bruce for a long time, but you really are his best friend."

After all, who else was there? She and Bruce were more like cousins. Alfred, even if he was still around, was a father figure. Bruce had great respect for Commissioner Gordon, but Gordon only liked Batman, and it wasn't like they knew each other on a personal level. Bruce had put more effort into his relationship with John than Tiffany had seen him do with anyone else, even a couple girlfriends.

John stuffed his hands in his pockets. "I don't know if he'll feel that way once he finds out about the teensy bit"– he pulled out one hand and just nearly pinched his thumb and forefinger together–"of vigilante-like work I've been doing."

"I mean... I don't have to tell him."

John beamed. "You don't?"

"I'm not going to lie to him," she said quickly. "If he asks me about it, I'm going to tell the truth, but for now, I don't see why I can't keep this source to myself."

It seemed fair. A favor for a favor. She didn't want John withholding helpful info in the future because he didn't think he could trust her.

"But look," she added, "you have to know know that you're on shaky ground. Maroni is aiming for more territory. I think you'll start seeing real pushback, and someone will get hurt. So you need to tell Bruce soon."

His face showed that wasn't what he wanted to hear, but it wasn't like it was her ideal solution either. At least she wouldn't have to broach the subject with Bruce herself.
"I guess that gives me time," John said pensively, "to figure out how to soften the impact, more wiffle bat than metal bat...though what's the difference against a kevlar bat? Heh."

"I think he'll have to understand," Tiffany said, "with the position you're in."

He smiled suddenly. "Because you understand. Aw, Specs..." He stepped forward, arms open.

She grabbed him by the shoulders and held him off. "No hugs," she said. She let him go and stuck out her hand.

His pout switched back to a smile and he shook her hand. "Pleasure doing clandestine business with you."

Chapter End Notes

For funsies, I decided the story John recounted about the harbor would be adapted from ForDarkIsTheSuede's fic, The Tolls of Justice. If you're not already reading it, I recommend you do!
Martha claimed to believe her husband would pull her family out of the mob, but she had kept writing in the hidden journal.

Bruce wondered if she recognized the disconnect. He felt an amplified version of it in the strange nostalgia that cropped up even though he knew darkness was on the horizon.

His childhood friendship with Oz had come to feel like it happened in a dream, but the mention of Esther Cobblepot rattled it back to reality. She would bring her son to Wayne Manor, and while the boys played, she and Martha would work on Foundation business or just have a meandering lunch.

Bruce faintly remembered going to the Cobblepot estate a few times, but he and his mother never did during the journal's time period.

I haven't been to the Cobblepots' in ages, certainly not since Theodore decided to go into politics. Esther says his campaign has taken over the house and everything is much too busy for guests, but I think they were rightfully offended by Thomas declaring he'd keep voting for Hill.

Esther sets her offense aside just fine. She's always been one to focus on common causes, particularly through the Foundation, and she certainly wouldn't want to separate the boys. But imagine if she knew the truth.

Of course, Bruce's mother didn't grasp the truth either. Hill was known to send goons to threaten his competition, and Thomas was likely aware of it and did nothing. Shortly after this entry, Theodore's campaign would be cut short by his suicide. The evidence available today was too sparse to determine how directly Bruce's father was involved in that tragedy.

Months later, Esther would be committed to Arkham for a piece of land. Of course, the two women had no idea as they watched their boys play. Martha had more mundane concerns.

WayneTech may be the company's fastest growing division, but I'm managing to become a Luddite. Bruce and Ozzy ran around the garden for a couple hours before Bruce showed off a prototype for a new game system that Thomas brought from the office. So strange to see all that energy suddenly cut off as they sat and huddled over a tiny screen. It mesmerized them; I had to call them over for their snack three times.

At least they share well enough, though I think Ozzy takes unequal time.

Oz– who'd sneered at being called Ozzy, Bruce remembered– did tend to hog toys, but it was never enough that Bruce minded. After all, he had everything all to himself when their guests left.

"That game system," Alfred said, the glow of the screen seeming to come from the fondness in his
voice, "wasn't it designed by a young, promising MIT graduate?"

It had been, but Lucius's talent was quickly noticed, and multiple departments began courting him for higher level work.

"The UI handled very well," Bruce said from his seat at the batcomputer, "very intuitively, just like everything else he created." Who'd have thought those skills would eventually be used to design the maneuverability and defensive functions of a crime-fighting vehicle?

"Don't tell me when you're driving, you envision attacking space aliens?"

"They were space demons, Al."

"Ah, yes, apologies for that grievous mischaracterization."

"Maybe Mom would have felt better about it if she knew I still got the high score over Oz."

"I'd say she was hardly against technology. She just had certain biases—especially against your father's mobile." Alfred chuckled.

He was referring to another entry about a week later.

Thomas has had a cellular phone since they were bricks. They're smaller now, and more and more people are using them, but it seems awful. Who wants to be in reach at all hours of the day? Particularly by the office, when you're trying to address home responsibilities. It sounds exhausting.

At first, very few people had Thomas's number, but the damn thing rings more frequently every day. I had to make a rule that only Alfred answers during dinner, just like he does all day with the house line. If the matter is actually urgent, he can notify Thomas, but otherwise it can wait.

I've pushed back on the Foundation assigning cell phones, but the wave is coming...

"Your mother may not have been so offended by your father's if the ring weren't so shrill and clangy," Alfred said. "She would have appreciated all the customization today. As it was, the sound made it harder for her to hide it."

"What?" Bruce said.

"Not very often, just when your father was being difficult about disconnecting during family time. She made it look like the phone had just been misplaced in a drawer or fell into the couch."

A memory trickled back. "And Dad would ask me to help find it."

"I don't think you ever did, but it's hardly an engaging game for a child older than five."

As more details filled in, Bruce laughed. "Or was it that Mom would give me advice on where to look?"

A moment of surprise, and then Alfred was laughing too.

They were interrupted by a low tone. A box appeared in the lower left corner of the screen: T FOX CALLING. Probably from the office at this time of morning.

"Hold on." This was just a voice call; when Bruce answered, the box changed to Tiffany's picture.
"Hey, Al's on the line."

"Uh, hi," she said. "Sorry, but this is pretty urgent. Night shift stuff?"

The delight on Alfred's face dwindled to a polite smile. "Understood. I'll leave you to it."

It wasn't the first time criminal matters came up and Alfred chose to cut the call, and it wasn't the first time Bruce felt a burst of frustration. Alfred couldn't even hear about this intrinsic part of Bruce's life? What was he going to do when he came to visit?

Bruce kept his face impassive. "Talk to you later, Al."

"Be well."

The call cut to black, leaving Tiffany's small picture lingering on the giant screen. "That dark website finally got a broadcast," she said.

Bruce didn't like to leave Tiffany to independent patrols too often, but while she'd been on her own a couple days ago, she encountered a sex worker who had some disturbing information. One of her clients, who'd been let go from the GCPD, was allegedly meeting with another man about suspected terrorism activity. Tiffany had monitored the meeting and acquired access information for a site on the dark web. Once she filled Bruce in, he agreed there was a good chance the site was connected to "Rupert."

And now she confirmed. "We've definitely got a problem. Sending you my recording."

The file transfer was quick. Bruce opened the video, and the screen was overtaken by a masked man with a square jaw and an armored vest. His voice was deep and demanding.

"Peace is easy," the man rumbled. "Peace is compromise. Peace is subjugation."

To the right of the video was a chatroom streaming with agreement and not a few promises of violence. The viewer count totaled one-hundred twenty-nine.

"But subjugation is a choice," the man continued. "Rise with me and lift this city out of the corrupt morass!"

"Looks like we found our guy," Bruce said. "Will he know we did?"

"I don't think so. Seems like site access is spread by word of mouth with no other security method. Not everyone with feed access participated in the chat, so I didn't need to do any playacting." Her tone went hard. "Glad I didn't. Some of the background conversations were pretty disgusting."

"I can take this over if you want."

"I'm fine," she said. "I am thinking about recalibrating my stunners."

Bruce's eye caught a repeated word in the chat. "Is 'Lock-Up' his alias?"

"Yeah, figures for a guy who rants about freedom."

"Who does he want to lock up?"

"He doesn't get that specific, but there are multiple references to a plan in the works. Later on he implies that only a select few know what and when it is. Everyone else are cheerleaders. The chat didn't have any more clues, just arguments about who in Gotham is disposable. I don't think Lock-
Up screens for anything but blind loyalty and a preference for authoritarianism."

"Any ID hits?"

"Nothing on voice recognition. His outfit appears highly custom, but the mask looks like one found on multiple sites that sell tactical gear. Background is too plain to give clues. Trying to pinpoint the server sends me bouncing around to nowhere, of course. So I turned to his fans..."

Another file came through, a list of chat names and other data.

"Their IP addresses are pretty useless, too, but I've been searching the handles, and several names match or are similar to those used on other sites by some ex-Enforcers."

Many of the listed websites were notorious incubators for misogyny, white supremacy, fascism... "Shame Gordon couldn't fire them sooner," Bruce said.

"They may not be the ones to start the revolution, but they might be talking to the ones who are. I've got an algorithm trawling the posts."

Bruce nodded. "Something is bound to leak."

"Nothing yet. I'll keep monitoring the streaming site for more speeches."

Lock-Up's voice cut off as Bruce restarted the video. "I'll watch through and let you know what I come up with."

"Other than your lunch?" Tiffany said flatly.

With the debut of Sideshow less than a week away, Rosaline let the Circus spend more time at the bar during normal business hours. They weren't really taking up space from customers on a weekday afternoon anyway, and John agreed to drop everything if a maintenance issue arose.

The morning had been spent on blocking, and the afternoon was focused on costume touch-ups. The group took over a cluster of tables between the stage and the bar. John took the spot closest to the bar. He called dibs on a rhinestone setter—he'd bought two more of them—and concentrated on matching the details of the leotard draped in his lap to those of the leotard laid out on the table.

Next to him, Adelina adjusted the length of a shirt sleeve. She set that work aside, though, when Lucia came over and plopped down a cardboard box. John watched them empty it, setting out hats and a hula skirt and a pair of angel wings. Adelina put the wings on, slipping her arms into the elastic loops, then bent back over the box. She made a small noise and pulled out a blond shoulder-length wig.

Lucia stopped with a pair of eyeglasses on one hand and a soccer ball in the other. "That's not where that goes."

Adelina inspected the inside, then turned it out to show how the lace had torn.

Lucia took the wig with a sigh and lifted it high so people could see it across the bar. "This, ladies and gentlemen, is why we care for costumes!" She lowered her arm and said to Adelina, "I should just get a new one. I've already fixed it twice."

John had already put the stud setter aside and picked up his phone. "I saw a neat blue one that'll look stellar on you!"
"The part calls for this color and style," Lucia reminded him.

He sighed and altered his search. "You and your script."

"It's your script!"

"Then I can pick the color?" He held the backspace down.

"No, I just mean— Look for a blond one. We don't have time to argue."

"Yet you are arguing," John muttered. He quickly came upon a result that matched the ruined wig, but of nicer quality. "Here," he said, showing her.

Her eyebrow popped up. "Budget. Find something that's a cross between cheap and not janky."

"I'll buy it."

"That's super nice, but you must've taken a chunk out of your account at the bowling alley."

"Nah, I have plenty of money. Look, there it goes!" He sent the order through.

She frowned. "Thanks, but… I know doesn't Ro really pay—" She stopped. "The money's not from Ro."

John laughed. "Who cares who it's from?"

"I mean... Thanks for the gift, just... you don't need to do it again."

"It's a free wig."

Her gaze went hard. "I don't want to live at your buddy's behest."

"Ha, what? Bruce would never ask anything from you. He never expects anything from me."

"Yeah, that's what they tell you."

John bristled. "He hasn't said anything about it."

"You do what you want," she snapped, "but I don't want it, and I don't have to explain it to you."

John put his phone down and held up his hands. "Okay, okay, jeez." He glanced at Adelina, who was very focused on fluffing up the feathers she could reach over her shoulders. He tossed the leotard onto the table and got up. "I'm just gonna... go over here."

Lucia was probably tense because the show was so soon, but there was no need to be a grumpy goose! It wasn't like anyone was slacking. He could see that plainly as he walked through the tables, taking a gander at all the stitching and affixing and studding. Most of the band had left, but Basel had stayed behind, playing jazzy solos on his saxophone. A kid named Geoff was using the stage to juggle tools he'd borrowed from John's bag: a wrench, a hammer, and a screwdriver. John clapped as they flew effortlessly round and round.

And Mikey had returned! He sat beside Maureen and another man whose name John had forgotten, and they were all bent over a section of the aqua stage curtain, dutifully sewing the final gold details so it could go up today. John really wanted to see how the setup looked with more than a backdrop of wood paneling.
"Almost done?" he asked, excited.

All three stitchers looked up, and he hadn't expected to see each of them with that vertical black line over their left eye. John supposed it was the Neighborhood Watch insignia now, which miffed him a little. Any kind of logo really should be more colorful.

What bothered him most was the reminder that he was supposed to disclose his private activities from the past six months to Bruce. And he would! He'd essentially promised.

Buuuuuut who was anyone to say when the latest part of "soon" was?

Mike fidgeted, turning the fabric under the light so the gold thread glittered. "O-oh yeah," he said. "Just about. Looks good, right?"

John returned his attention to the fabric's bubbly color. "It looks fantastic!"

He heard the door open and looked over his shoulder. A middle-aged guy with slicked-back dark hair stood at the door, hands in the pockets of his leather bomber jacket. He glanced around the room, barely pausing on John, before heading for the bar, where Rosaline stacked clean glasses. John looked back at the curtain. He remembered Adelina had gotten gold tie backs, but where...

"Don't mind the mess," Ro said. "We're just…"

Her voice had wavered, and John turned fully. She was frozen, staring at the patron's untrustworthy smile as he slid onto the stool in front of her.

"Rosie-posie!" the man greeted with an oily voice. "How many years has it been?"

Rosaline's shocked expression turned stony. "Gabe."

"Normally people get excited seeing old friends."

"I don't."

Gabe chuckled. "You got some interesting entertainment coming up, huh?"

"They're rehearsing for the weekend."

"We'll keep the business over here, not distract them."

Oh, but the room had quieted. The few bar patrons abandoned their drinks and slunk out. Basel switched from playing to fingering, and Jeff only twirled the hammer around one hand. The costumers kept on, but they glanced toward the bar between movements. John did not play at subtlety; he openly stared. This was bad news, different from a flirty skeeve or a low-level thug.

Gabe hummed and leaned on the counter. "I'm sure you've heard that the family's back in town."

"I don't know what that has to do with me," she responded.

"Aw, Rosie, you were almost a member. In fact, we wanna bring you in now."

"Sal said-- Don Maroni made an agreement with me."

"Oh, the Boss is still very regretful of how Pino treated you," Gabe said with the sincerity of a snake, "but since both Pino and time have passed, the family considers that debt paid."
"My hospital bills still aren't," Rosaline ground out.

"Then don't make them any bigger."

John slid back through the tables, and a hand on his arm stopped him. Lucia, he thought, until he glanced back and saw it was Adelina, staring up at him with wide eyes from her seat. He tried to jostle her off and her grip only tightened.

Lucia reached over her sister's shoulder and delicately pulled her hand away. She looked at John, and she was definitely anxious, but she gave him a subtle, trusting nod. He continued on, noting Maureen and Lorenzo waiting against the wall by the empty tables.

"... been a little tough goin'," Gabe was saying, "but we're gaining back our territory, and doesn't that make you a lucky businesswoman? Maroni likes to protect his friends."

"For a price?" Rosaline replied.

"Discounted!"

"I'm not paying squat," she spat. "I've kept my agreement, and your boss should keep his!" Even though she was older, her round face always struck John as cherubic, and her sudden fierceness looked out of place.

"I told you," Gabe said with thinning patience, "that deal ran its course. A smart woman oughta recognize when being stubborn is just gonna end up getting people hurt."

Ah, there was the complete picture. Rudely drop in unwanted and unannounced, demand protection money, and threaten harm. It had been so long since John had encountered this specimen of human, someone above the bar of reckless stupidity.

He felt a familiar blood rush and breathed steadily as he sidled up to Gabe's side. He needed to keep a little cool after all. Everyone else was already so serious.

"How's it going, Ro?" John asked politely, eyes trained on the mobster's profile. Gabe ignored him.

"Fine," she said quickly. "Did you check out Mr. Zhao's air conditioning like I asked?"

"New filter put it back on kilter!" John answered, looking at a wavy scar in the other man's cheek. It probably looked more intimidating in the years before the liver spots and the stomach pudge. "I think we might have a vermin problem, though."

Gabe finally turned his head and smirked. "Yeah, alright, cuckoo." He threw another dismissive glance around the room. "It's impressive how you got a little muscle and a lotta stories to send people scurrying away, but now you're dealing with the big leagues. Boss might actually wanna thank you for doing some of the work for us, clearing out the dregs.

"But everybody knows the cops got their eye on you. Wayne's pet or not, if they haven't found reason to drag you back to the looney bin, then you're obviously no mad dog." He jabbed his finger into John's chest. "So spare me the bullshit and take a seat."

John smiled. "Okay."

Hooking his shoe under the footrest, he jerked the stool out from under Gabe. The mobster reflexively grabbed the bar, feet clumsily hitting the floor to keep him upright, but John snatched a handful of gelled hair and smashed his face into the counter. Rosaline jerked back with her hands
over her mouth, glass rattling when she knocked the shelves. John let Gabe hit the floor and righted the stool to sit.

"Hm, pretty sturdy," he said with a wiggle.

Gabe clutched the side of his face as he shakily got to his feet. His other hand dug into his jacket. "You stupid fucking–" He froze.

John aimed the gun at its owner's chest and kicked his legs playfully. "It's the darnedest thing!" he exclaimed. "I try to avoid trouble, but it keeps coming around!"

"John," Rosaline said quietly. "Don't."

Maureen and Lorenzo moved forward, splitting up to cover Gabe from either side. Gabe hadn't made it past a crouch, and he lowered onto his knees as he put up his hands. "Look, Doe, I– this is just business, okay?"

"It's Ro's business," John replied, "and you're gonna leave it to her, okay? In fact, we'd prefer not to see any of your rudeness within four... five blocks?" He looked to his muscled backup.

"We can make it five," Maureen said.

John turned his sneer back on Gabe. "Within five blocks of here!"

The cowering man managed to rally. "What kind of freaking joke are you playing at? A buncha showboating isn't gonna–"

"I don't think much of your showboating," Lorenzo interrupted. "You're here to test the waters."

Maureen nodded. "Maroni's got lots of territory that we leave be. Tell him we're not parting with ours."

John thought the gun made the point well enough, but the metaphorical guns helped.

Then others came forward, filling the space between and around Lorenzo and Maureen. Gabe seemed to shrink in the closing semi-circle, trapped with John against the bar. Most of the Circus members had nothing on the body builders, but they came together in their own mass, with glowering, marked eyes. Mike took the spot right in front of the door. Basel merged in on the left, his instrument left behind, and Lucia appeared over his shoulder. Adelina crawled onto the bar, leaning forward on her knees to watch curiously. Normally Ro would shoo her off, but she wasn't protesting anything now.

Oh, how the tables had turned, with a rush that whipped electricity into the air! John hopped off the stool, twirling the gun around his finger by the trigger. How easy to play the role of the hunter. Enter stage left to sinister music. Spot the prey and take it out with a practiced shot. Aaaaaand scene!

But that wouldn't do at all! That was a quick, dull play, with no surprises and a role that was all wrong. What was right for this churlish degenerate?

John spun on his toes, and the semi-circle parted when he strode to his table, scattered with tools. His gaze flicked across a spool of measuring tape, needle-nose pliers, the rhinestone setter, a flathead screwdriver, and a heavy pair of fabric shears.

He fixed his sharper smile on Gabe as he spun back around. He handed the gun off to Lorenzo and
reached back. "Why shoot the messenger when so many other options are on the table?"

Though Batman used the front door at many GCPD precincts if needed— to turn in suspects, hand off evidence, assist in interrogations— he preferred one-on-ones with Gordon. So if the light was on in the commissioner's office at headquarters, Batman would tap on the window, if not just sneak in.

That evening, he chose to knock. During twilight, there weren't enough shadows to slip in unnoticed, and it was probably the right choice anyway given Gordon's agitation. Spectrum had sent along the Lock-Up recording hours ago.

"So you don't think there's a link between this guy and the mob?" Gordon asked.

"You see something?" Batman replied.

"No, but it'd be easier to allocate resources," Gordon grumbled, leaning back on his desk. He removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Our intel tracks with yours. We've gotten some missing persons reports for some of Dent's old Enforcers. Hunted one of them down and found a stock of illegal weapons he's reluctant to talk about. Wife says he's been disappearing for hours or days at a time, won't tell her where he's gone. Didn't tell her he'd lost another job either."

"He may be one of the men in Lock-Up's inner circle. If I could--"

Gordon replaced the glasses. "He's lawyered up, and that lawyer says if his client sees just one of your ears peeking behind a corner, he'll hit us with a civil rights suit. But I would put too much focus on this guy. He did a sloppy job acquiring those weapons. If Lock-Up trusted people like that, I'm sure you would've tracked him down by now."

"Still, I'll see what I can find."

"I hope it's something. The last thing this city needs is a sequel to Vicki Vale or Harvey Dent."

"At least Harvey gave us the heads up that something was going on."

Gordon nodded, eyes far away for a moment. "Good to know he's making his way back." He frowned. "Still, I'm not impressed that Wayne didn't come to me with this."

"I doubt he thinks you find him credible."

"He's not entirely wrong— but his actions can be inexplicable. The lengths to which he sticks his neck out for Doe..." Gordon's eyes slid to Batman. "Then again, he's not the only one."

"Would you prefer I didn't keep tabs on him? And he hasn't stepped out of line."

"I'm aware. We've had eyes on him, too— but of course I still should've been concerned about my own men."

"At least Doe isn't adding to the mounting concerns," Batman said.

"We must be under one hell of a black cloud for you to find a silver lining."

A shadow fell across the door's frosted window and a knocking sounded. "Commish?"

"Come in, Sergeant."

Renee Montoya entered the office, and surprise flashed on her face when she saw the black figure
in the corner. Batman stared impassively back at her. She recovered and paid him a nod before looking to Gordon. "I think you'll wanna see this."

Gordon raised an eyebrow at Batman and pushed himself off the desk. "Should he come along?"

Montoya had a strange look suddenly, like she was trying to hide how pleased she was. "Couldn't hurt."

Gordon followed her out, walking at her side in the hallway. Batman trailed them.

"What are we seeing?" the commissioner asked.

"We pulled a Maroni thug out of a dumpster in the Narrows," Montoya explained.

"A body?" Batman asked.

"Oh, he's alive," she said over her shoulder.

The walk to the bullpen was short. As they approached the swinging doors, a couple of grinning officers came through. Batman had assumed Montoya was glad to have a monster in custody, but the glee on these men's faces rankled him. He'd seen similar expressions on officers encouraging him to beat up on suspects, wanting to live vicariously through him. He followed Gordon and the sergeant through the doors, apprehensive of what he'd see.

The rows of desks were all occupied, though the hum of officers going over paperwork, chatting at their desks, or interviewing civilians and suspects was quieter than usual. Everyone's attention was drawn to the desk in the back right corner. A man with shoulder-length straw-colored hair sat facing a smirking officer taking notes. His cuffed hands appeared in the space between the back of the chair and the seat.

Montoya gestured in their direction. "Gabriel Costa."

The dumpster had done a number on Costa's hair— or no, not his hair. The shiny awkward tangles were that of a wrecked wig. His clothes didn't look much better, stained and smeared and clearly the main source of the odor wafting across the room. His shoes looked odd, and Batman realized they'd been stuck on the wrong feet.

"Someone gave him a rough time," Gordon observed.

Montoya visibly fought to keep professional. "He's got some facial bruises, but that's the only injury. The wig appears to be glued to his hair, but it can be cut off. He doesn't want to talk about who trashed him, but we're holding him because he has an unregistered piece."

"We got anything else on him?"

"We're looking in his file. Lawyer's on the way."

The interviewing officer stood then, presumably to put Costa in the holding cell in the meantime. Costa stood, too, and the back of his chair no longer obstructed the glittering rhinestones across the back of his leather jacket, spelling out "KICK ME."

Batman forced a cough before the involuntary laugh could make it out of his chest. Gordon was less reserved, letting out a snort as the corner of his mouth quirked up. He approached Costa.

"Are you sure you don't want us to track down the fifth graders who did this?" he asked.
Costa turned. "I told you pigs, I'm not sayin' nothin'!"

Batman no longer felt the urge to laugh. Costa's scowl was accentuated by a bright red frown drawn over his mouth.

Costa's eyes, with false lashes lining only his bottom lids, went wide when he saw the vigilante. "Whoa, whoa," he stammered, showing that several of his teeth had been colored black. "Wh-what's he doin' here?"

"The Batman has provided a lot of assistance to the department," Montoya said. "He deserves some entertainment."

"I'm a victim!"

"I'll bet," she said dryly. She gestured to the cell. "Please enjoy our complimentary counseling while you wait."

As Costa was led, shuffling, to the gate, Gordon sternly stared at Montoya. His humor had faded.

"Where in the Narrows did we find him?" he asked.

"Eastern side. Not sure how long he was in there. An apartment resident found him."

"And does Costa's appearance bring anything to mind?"

"Of course," she said coolly, then called across the room, "Ramamurthy!"

The young officer left a cluster in the corner and approached briskly. Batman had seen him several times in passing in the precinct halls, and had deemed it a good sign when the promising academy graduate was assigned to John's neighborhood. When Ramamurthy turned in his partner, it had been a comfort to know he was as anti-corruption as he pledged. Now Batman suddenly felt the patrolman's rigid posture was overcompensating.

"Yes, Sergeant?" Ramamurthy asked.

"Repeat to the commissioner your thoughts on clownowntown."

Ramamurthy glanced at the holding cell and replied, "It's near the Narrows, sure, but it's pretty quiet. I was going to accompany Detective Zinke to All's Well tomorrow to look into this."

"Tomorrow," Gordon repeated.

Montoya spoke up. "We have higher priorities, Commissioner."

"Zinke is still investigating with the guys on the Narrows beat," Ramamurthy added. "And honestly, I don't think anything's gonna come up with Doe."

"You don't?" Gordon said with continued skepticism.

With subtle movements, Batman checked the communications line for personal notifications. Nothing. No rambling message, whether anxious or excited, that the cops were in John's vicinity asking about an assaulted mobster. It had been long enough for word to travel, and John was more observant than he let on.

Bruce thought about how happy John had been when he mentioned Officer Benson's suspension. "Another corrupt pig gone!" Bruce had worried that Benson had gone after him, but John just
waved the concern away. "Eh, barely saw him. Hey, let's check out that new sushi place. I hear they're on a roll!"

Incorruptible Ramamurthy responded to the Commissioner with a shrug. "There are punks all over the city inspired by that Joker crap." He glanced at the vigilante. "And by Batman. I'm surprised we haven't found more crooks messed up like this, or worse."

Gordon seemed to consider this. "Yeah, plenty of people have decided to take the law into their own hands."

That was true-- and convenient.

"The neighborhood is definitely responding to Doe's presence," Ramamurthy hedged. "It looks like a connection, but all I ever hear about him is that song and dance show. Not a peep otherwise."

Disperse the accountability, make room for doubt.

"Alright," Gordon relented, "but I want you and Zinke out there first thing, and be thorough. If Doe is clean on this, I want it verified in case more rumors start."

So many rumors playing on people's paranoia and imagination, creating a veil.

But only for so long.

Spectrum was spending the night in the cave, working on data analyses and drone upgrades. When Batman brought the car to a stop at the end of the ramp, he saw she'd stationed herself by the batcomputer. She was using the holographic interface for her blueprints, separating the drone components to evaluate them individually.

"You're back early," she greeted without turning around. "No update from Lock-Up yet. Gordon have news?"

Bruce walked up the steps to the computer platform. "Nothing unexpected. Some of Harvey's old followers have gone missing. One was caught amassing arms."

She sighed and dismissed a holographic plate. "Great," she muttered, pulling the insides apart.

Bruce didn't take off the cowl like he usually would in the cave. He didn't like eating crow. He liked even less the idea that he was so bullheaded that he couldn't admit when he was wrong.

"I learned something else."

Tiffany finally looked over her shoulder, lifting an eyebrow at his reluctance. "Yeah?"

Bruce went to the computer console, bringing up open case files he wasn't going to read. "I saw some evidence tonight that John isn't the peaceful citizen he wants me to believe he is."

He kept his eyes on the screen, waited for the "I told you so," whether it was explicit or hidden behind a layer of professional courtesy.

Instead, Tiffany replied in an unnerved tone, "Is that so?"

He looked back at her. She faced the hologram with her arms at her sides.

"But if your data is connected to him," he continued, "I'm not sure how he's doing it. He must be
showing up for work or Portico would have let him go, and I know how much he's been working on Sideshow."

"Remember that one story," Tiffany said with a weak laugh, "from that ranting homeless guy, that John's a god-emperor who can reshape reality?"

She still wouldn't look at him.

"What's going on?" Bruce demanded.

She turned, eyes darting around. Her intelligence and maturity sometimes made Bruce forget her age, but it was clearly on display with the look of "caught."

"I guess this evidence you saw, it wasn't presented by John," she said.

"No, John wasn't there to explain to Gordon why a Maroni associate was given a bad makeover and left in a dumpster just a few blocks from the bar."

She made eye contact then. "But the guy wasn't hurt."

"Mostly his pride." Bruce folded his arms expectantly.

"John was supposed to talk to you!" she blurted out.

"About what?" His jaw felt tight.

She uneasily rubbed her arm. "He, uh, started a neighborhood watch?"

It took a second for Bruce to register those words, and then the picture in his mind was of middle-aged suburbanites peeking out of windows, overanalyzing cars rolling down the street, conjuring the crimes committed by children playing. Hardly the kind of deterrence John would be interested in.

"That's why the crime stats changed," Tiffany explained. "He wanted a safer neighborhood, so he and his friends decided to make it safer, by pushing out criminals." She gestured to the computer. "We got to Lock-Up's site because of information from him. He brought me with him to spy on that meeting."

Bruce cycled back. "You said 'he and his friends'?"

"I don't like it either," she said quickly, "but there's not really signs that they've crossed a line--"

"There isn't?" he snapped. "You don't think the civilians John enlisted are crossing lines by confronting drug dealers and thieves--"

"Look, I basically just found this out," she retorted. "I'm just saying, from what I can figure, they haven't brutally maimed anyone. As for what they are doing, I haven't had time to figure out how to dissuade them."

"I could have started on it," Bruce said stonily, "if you hadn't hid it from me."

"I didn't hide it! I just… left the John part out."

"Why?"

"Because this!" She said, gesturing to him with both hands. "John was supposed to deal with your
reaction."

"You've been theorizing that he's up to something for months, and suddenly you weren't interested in looping me in?"

"I thought he was up to something shady! I mean, this is still shady, but it's hard to argue with his intentions. He wanted to protect himself from being blamed for things he didn't do. And I don't think he had to make anyone help him make the neighborhood safer."

"Joker didn't make Frank and the rest do anything either, and they ended up in jail."

"What do you want me to do, send a drone around with an announcement to knock it off?" She let out a frustrated groan. "You're the one who wanted me to give him a chance— and I did! I didn't totally trust him, but I didn't make up wild accusations. I acted as objectively as possible. And think about it: can you fault him for doing just a fraction of what we do every night to keep out of trouble?"

"Doing what we do is what got him back in Arkham to start with!" Bruce burst. "That is trouble!"

"So was all the crime in that area! And it's not like I could stop him after the fact!"

"We could've stopped what happened today!"

"What, some Maroni goon getting his ass thrown in a dumpster? I'm crying."

"You don't think worse could have happened? John is in treatment for a reason."

"You've said repeatedly how well he's doing—"

"I didn't know about this!"

"And," she continued, "again, I couldn't find any sign that he and his patrol have done worse than us."

"Just because you didn't find a sign doesn't mean John didn't hide anything."

"Then ask him about it!"

"I plan on it." Bruce shook his head. "I can't believe you didn't tell me."

"He did me— us— a favor, so I did him one." Tiffany turned away and dismissed the hologram with a flap of an arm.

"If we're a team, you can't withhold something like that."

She whirled around again. "Oh, because you are so forthcoming! You mentioned Catwoman's visit practically off-hand, a couple days after it happened, like she doesn't still have open warrants!"

Bruce felt blindsided. Tiffany had seemed a little miffed when he mentioned Selina was back in town, but the thief was a low-level threat at this point. "I told you, I'm keeping an eye on her. She hasn't been active here in years, and after everything that happened—"

"You're giving her a pass. You have no idea what she's doing now, but you're going to let it go because of your 'history.'" Tiffany curled her fingers into air quotes.

"What do you—"
"Alfred used real dry language in his logs, but spending the night at the home of a woman you barely know is pretty transparent, especially after you let her go after she tries to steal from you."

His face heated up. "You're out of line."

"You invited her to a party!" Tiffany exclaimed. "That's how much more leeway she gets than John."

"Their situations are completely different!"

"Yeah, John's actually been imprisoned for what he's done."

Bruce shouldn't feel cornered. "If you're insinuating that I'm letting a criminal walk free because of a crush--"

"My point is that I have no idea why, because you didn't tell me. If you want us to be one hundred percent transparent, you should practice what you preach."

"This is ridiculous. What John is doing can get people killed!"

"Yeah, Selina's never been involved in anything dangerous."

He could see, to a point, how it looked like he was favoring Selina, but John had proven to be more of a risk. How could this bizarre plan of recruiting the neighborhood into clearing crime not contribute to a backslide? How could it not end with him causing more irrevocable harm? He'd be banished behind bars again, stowed out of sight and allowed regulated contact.

(When Bruce saw Selina again, he was glad to know she was okay. With John, Bruce felt a deep relief with every flamboyant fashion choice, every non sequitur text, every carefree stroll on the streets.)

"Frankly," Bruce snapped, "I think you're reaching to cover your poor judgment."

Tiffany's hands curled into fists at her sides. "You talk all the time about how important it is to make contacts. How would John react to me if I ran off tattling to you?"

"Tattling!"

"That's how he'd see it! So why would he want to pass me information like what he gives Rama--"

"John is not just a contact!"

"Which is why I told him to tell you!"

"That worked out well."

She stalked to a table strewn with her things. "I'm not arguing in circles with you. I'll work elsewhere tonight."

Bruce watched her pack up her bag. "Maybe in the morning I'll get an apology."

She laughed suddenly, loudly, in clear disbelief of what she was about to say— and probably of what she'd said over the past several minutes. "I should apologize to John, for telling him you'd get it."

She slung the bag over her shoulder and stomped to the elevator, while Bruce suppressed the urge
to shout that it wasn't a matter of understanding John's motivations. It was about rationality, about foreseeing consequences. This "neighborhood watch" was dangerous and unsustainable, and he wasn't about to watch John's life spiral out of control a second time.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sure their conversation will go well. :D :D :D

Any and all comments are appreciated.
In the Middle of a Big Tornado

Chapter Notes

WARNING: This chapter contains a gross instance of animal cruelty. I don't consider it very graphic, but that's a subjective judgment, so FYI. Tags are updated.

Also, looks like Ivy's appearance is going to be bumped from chap 10 to chap 11. I swear she's actually in this thing!

---

Bruce did not go to All's Well that night. He was still riled from the argument with Tiffany, not to mention still processing what he'd learned about this neighborhood watch. He needed a productive patrol to wear him out and get him to a clear headspace. Then he'd decide how to approach John.

But the exertion of climbing and swinging around the cityscape, of taking out muggers and stopping assaults from East End to uptown, of interrogating contacts for any word of Lock-Up, it all played out on auto-pilot. An underlying track in his mind was locked on John, on his safety and the safety of those around him. Batman passed through the Village more than once, looking for signs of this local patrol, but it was quiet each time. John and his friends were probably lying low after attracting police attention. It wasn't like the area would suffer if they missed a night, going by the statistics.

John had to be pretty proud of what he'd pulled off right under Bruce's nose.

It was selfish, but by the time Bruce arrived home at a quarter to five, he couldn't deny he felt betrayed. He'd thought that, after everything, John trusted him completely, but clearly there was a line. John had hidden this from him for months. John didn't ask for his help dealing with the police or area crime. He just went ahead and dug himself deep, once again, and Bruce was oblivious to the descent.

No, "oblivious" was too generous. When Bruce thought back, he could probably point to hundreds of little signs that he'd dismissed. He'd just wanted to believe the best, especially after John broke down, had shown that he desperately wanted to maintain control.

But then John had been talking about something more personal, not leading this group effort. No, John likely didn't see a problem with that at all– except when it came to filling in his best friend.

Bruce tossed and turned in the churn of his thoughts through his already paltry hours of sleep. An hour before his scheduled alarm, he still laid in bed, refusing to acknowledge that no more fitful dozes were in store even as he stared at the crack of light between the curtains. He turned again and stared at the nightstand instead: his charging phone, a full glass of water, and the photo of his parents. He reached out and turned the frame to face him. He easily made out the details in the dim light, having examined them so often.

The candid shot was taken before he was born, before his parents were married or even dating. In the back of a soup kitchen, med student Thomas Wayne and perpetual volunteer Martha Kane sat on overturned crates among boxes of potatoes. "Their courtship period," Alfred had called it. Unflattering hairnets hugged their foreheads. Thomas looked down as he peeled the spud in his
hand, his mouth open to recount some story or joke. Martha had been caught glancing up at him with a small smile.

A simple hope could be projected onto that smile. She didn't know what would come of their life, and maybe Thomas had little idea himself at that point. She was just a young woman falling for a young man, thinking of the possibilities of a life together.

A thought occurred to Bruce. He shoved it away into the dark. It felt childish and pointless.

But soon enough he was sitting in the cave with the journal open in his lap. From where he'd left off, it wasn't long before Theodore Cobblepot's suicide was logged in brief, horrified terms. Then the funeral a week after that. His mother focused on Ozzy, on the pain of a young boy processing such an enormous loss.

A few more entries trying to focus on normalcy, and then there it was.

He lied to me.

Of course he did. Why not lie to me? I've stood by all these years and watched terrible things happen, told myself it wasn't as bad as it seemed, or it was the way of the world, or at least we put so much of our money to good causes.

Blood money.

Thomas committed Esther to Arkham.

It didn't hit me at first. The papers reported it indirect terms—"Esther Cobblepot has been committed"—as if by the will of an indistinct entity. So at first it was a shock, and I told myself maybe it shouldn't have been. Theodore's death was so abrupt, and my friendship with Esther is not so close that she would have shared psychological issues. Her mother raised a fuss, insisted that Esther didn't have a breakdown, demanded accountability. I thought it was so sad to be in denial like that, and after all, wouldn't Arkham just be temporary?

And then in a follow-up, the Gazette reported that Thomas was the admitting physician. A small detail, explained away by how Thomas was just the doctor on hand that night, but it still didn't make any sense. However high his standing, Thomas is a surgeon. Why would he have admitting privileges to an asylum?

Why didn't he say anything to me for a full day?

I asked him. He claimed he couldn't bear to tell me, and he recounted the story with the same regretful cadence as his interview on the news. The look in his eyes, I couldn't tell whether he was warning me or pleading with me to not ask for the truth.

Wouldn't it have been happier not to know? But I did, even before I snuck into his office and found the papers. Forms and contracts to acquire the Cobblepot land, the plot Thomas insisted was perfect centralized location for his tower, the plot that our friends refused to sell. Thomas had been upset, more upset than I thought was reasonable, but I never thought...

Thomas has been at the hospital for so many years. How long has he had these privileges? Who else has he used them on? Surely someone on the Arkham staff must know?
And now I remember the sudden deaths of the Arkhams.

Esther's mother brought Ozzy over today while she deals with the fallout. She brought him here because Thomas and I are so trustworthy. A second signature vouches for his on the Arkham forms. Plausible deniability. That's how we live our lives.

I watched Bruce and Oz sitting in the garden, just talking. I don't know how children that young comfort each other, can't remember. Bruce is a sweet boy, and he'll do his best.

He'll do better than I am, hiding underground.

Bruce wryly looked up at the stalactites.

He'd found the strange comfort he sought, despite how different the cause of his mother's rude awakening was from his own. He still liked knowing that she could have commiserated with him on some level, if she was still around.

But she would also recognize the differences between John's actions and Thomas's, the differences of degree and intent. She'd appreciate that while it was too late to stop her husband, Bruce had time to pull John back before this game of intimidation and humiliation led to blood on the streets.

Colorful Sideshow flyers plastered the light poles and storefronts along the walk to All's Well. The performance details were surrounded by silhouettes of different performers. Something about the stance of the prominent figure wearing a top hat in the upper left told Bruce it was modeled on John.

As he came up on the bar, he could hear ragtime music bleeding through the windows. The movement inside was made indistinguishable by the late morning glare. He paused for a fortifying breath. He'd decided to come after the detective's visit so he and John couldn't be interrupted, and so John would be primed for the conversation. The GCPD didn't have enough to bring anyone in yet, but that could easily change.

Bruce had to keep his cool. John wasn't stupid; he was in a tight spot. If Bruce laid out the situation in objective terms, John had to agree another solution was needed. Bruce would help figure one out.

As soon as he entered the bar, he heard a shout: "You got twenty minutes!"

He was startled, but Rosaline had yelled toward the stage.

John was up there with Fredelle, moving in sync with the music, a shuffle right, a spin to the left, dance shoes scraping the floor. A bright turquoise curtain framed them, with the Sideshow sign mounted at the top, but this wasn't a dress rehearsal. Fredelle wore a short-sleeved leotard and tights, and John wore drawstring pants and a blue tank top with a yellow graphic. Something wasn't right, and after a gesture from Fredelle, the band clustered at the side of the stage skipped back a few measures.

Scattered across the seats, the rest of the Circus performers were sitting and watching, packing up bags, or in quiet conversation. Lucia sat up front to observe while Adelina stood at the back with her phone, taking pictures or video. Bruce took them all in, John's allies. Very few fit the profile of people who'd patrol the streets looking for trouble. He had to imagine most didn't— not that they would be spared any repercussions.
Rosaline appeared at his side with a broom and dustpan. "Morning," she greeted. "Wasn't expecting you."

"I heard there was some excitement," he replied.

"Yeah?"

"Somebody beat up in a dumpster?"

"Oh, that." She broke eye contact, looking over at Adelina instead. "Yeah, over in the Narrows, but the cops came here trying to pin it on someone. No luck." Abruptly she called to the front again, lifting the broom. "All that dirt better be swept up!"

Lucia turned in her seat. "It's sand!" she corrected. "For the shoes!" She clearly saw Bruce but just turned back around.

Rosaline leaned the broom against the counter and put the pan on top. "John's on the clock right after this is done," she said with a mild warning tone.

"Got it," Bruce said. "I shouldn't be long."

As he made his way between the tables, a woman got up suddenly and bumped into him. She apologized with a smile, and he saw it was one of the women with the asymmetric eyeliner—no. This was a different person. As were the two others at the table who wore the same mark on their faces.

His observation skills were suffering from the lack of sleep; a double-take around the room proved that half the occupants had the mark, including the whole bouncer trio. Like a gang tattoo— or exactly like that, if anyone had decided to make it permanent look.

Because this qualified as a gang, didn't it?

Bruce felt a little numb as he reached Lucia. "You're done at noon?" he asked.

"We might be," she replied, eyes set forward.

John, of course, hopped off the stage once he realized Bruce was there. "A surprise visit!" he cheered.

Bruce could see the tank top better now. An anthropomorphized sun flexed its arms, surrounded by the phrase, "SUN'S OUT, GUNS OUT." As if John's wiry arms were signs of a gym rat— not that he'd had trouble lifting Bruce once upon a time. An ultimately bad time.

"I texted you," Bruce said.

John blinked. "Oh, I left my phone upstairs."

"I made him," Lucia corrected, "so we could focus."

John nodded. "We've been working on finishing touches all morning. You're gonna see a spectacle opening night!" He extended his arms, as if the show was too big to contain.

Bruce almost wished he'd found out about the neighborhood watch a week later. "When you're finished, we need to talk."

"Ooh, you're not asking to slip into the show at the last minute, are you?" John winked as he picked
up a water bottle from Lucia's table. "To show off those old magic skills? The set list is all locked up, I'm afraid!"

Lucia finally looked up at Bruce and almost seemed impressed. "You know magic?"

He ignored her. "I think you know what I want to talk about."

In the middle of a sip, John went still. He lowered the bottle and wiped his mouth. Bruce could feel Lucia's eyes bouncing between them.

John put the bottle back and sighed. "Let's go upstairs."

"Let's," Bruce agreed, starting back to the head of the room.

As John followed, Lucia objected, "Hold up, you and Fredelle--"

"-- know our moves backwards and forwards!" John replied, indeed shuffling backwards as he and Bruce headed for the stairway door. He giggled at the perturbed look on her face, then stopped instantly when he looked to Bruce to join in.

On the way upstairs, John was uncharacteristically quiet. Bruce thought he must be thinking of how to put a bright spin on the situation, but when John closed the door to his room, he just clasped his hands behind his back and said nervously, "Okay, you go first."

Could Bruce possibly be here about something else? Did John want to keep lying?

"When you and your friends assaulted a mobster," Bruce responded tightly, "and threw him in a dumpster with a bunch of Joker-like signals all over him, did you give any thought at all to how it could be traced back to you?"

John hesitated. "That's a more loaded opening statement than I expected." He grinned. "I guess Tiffany didn't rat me out, though!"

"No, I got to see your handiwork in person."

John pursed his lips and rubbed the back of his neck. "You talk like I was the predator. That Gabe goon threatened Rosaline. Maroni couldn't even fink out on their deal in person!"

"It doesn't matter that you weren't the aggressor. Those people are dangerous and you could be killed. This 'neighborhood watch' could be killed."

"Uh, they're adults, Bruce," John said. "I think they're aware of mortality. If they wanna volunteer, who am I to stop them?"

"You're their leader!"

"Phwah?" John waved his hand dismissively. "No! Maybe symbolically, but it's not like I went out recruiting. Not after Maureen and the boys anyway..." He folded his arms at Bruce's pointed look. "They'd already expressed interest. Everybody else, I can't help it if they agree with the thesis."

"You're letting them put themselves at risk."

"You let Tiff put herself at risk."

"She has training and resources."
"We have resources! Our muscleheads in particular. They've got the inside perspective on this stuff. I consult them all the time." John smugly lifted his chin. "See? How can I be the leader if I don't really know what I'm doing?"

Bruce successfully fought the urge to grab John's shoulders and shake him, but he had less control over the increasing volume of his voice. "Why are you going after criminals if you don't know what you're doing?"

"That's a point," John said, rubbing his chin. "Can you believe I wasted all those rhinestones when the plain studs were right there?" He scowled at Bruce's exasperation. "Oh, give me a break. He got off easy. Everyone we've chased away has."

"You could be charged with assault, not to mention intimidation, and who knows what else!"

"At least it would be for something real, not something trumped up by Bensonites!"

"Oh, well, thank god you've got Officer Ramamurthy to take care of that problem."

"Do I?" John looked genuinely relieved. "He seemed helpful this morning, but honestly, I wasn't sure how that part was going. We cleaned the handprints off Gabey's gun real well just in case." He held his hands up when Bruce's eyes widened. "We didn't use it!"

"Small favors," Bruce muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose. John seemed determined to miss the point. "So you're planning on manipulating beat cops and threatening criminals forever."

"No," John chuckled, "only until I'm dead."

Bruce's hand dropped as he burst, "This is serious!"

"Thank goodness you let me know!" John exclaimed. "Between the cops, Maroni, and part of the city waiting to hear I was shanked in an alley, I was ready to take it easy."

"How is antagonizing dangerous people going to solve any of that?"

"How is letting scumbags walk all over me going to solve it?"

"You can call me or the police!"

"If I can get to a phone, and nothing happens during travel time– which assumes the cops wouldn't take their sweet time."

"So you're fine risking being sent back to Arkham– or to prison! Not to mention Maroni's wrath."

"I don't know what you thought was going to happen. That I would magically fall into a normal life?"

"If you lived at the manor, you wouldn't have to keep up this– this contingency plan."

"Oh, I am not running away– hiding– because a bunch of slimy creeps decided this was their turf," John said darkly. "I built my life on it, with Frank and Ro and Lucia and everybody." He shook his finger in Bruce's face. "And what about them, huh? My rep is important here. You want me to just float off to your compound, signaling every thug to move back in and smash their boots in everyone's necks?"

"I'll protect the neighborhood," Bruce insisted.
John snorted. "Oh, buddy. No offense, but you were around before and things weren't improving. I mean, I get it, Maroni takes up a lot of bandwidth, but it goes to show that Batman and Spectrum are only two people– two amazingly equipped and giving people, for sure, but not omniscient. Clearly everybody around here got tired of keeping their heads down."

It was true that the upswing was a lot to handle, but that only got at another point John was avoiding.

"You think you…" Bruce paused, considered his next words before laying them out evenly. "I know managing your impulses is important to you. We had a long conversation about it very recently. How is being exposed to potentially violent situations going to help?"

"I've managed fine so far," John responded testily. "I even talked to Dr. Adams about my lapse in confidence– like you wanted– and I think I'll manage even better. I mean, I'm sure she didn't have the Watch in mind, but I've always thwarted expectations, heh."

"There's no guarantee in that!" Bruce retorted.

"There's no guarantee in anything!" John shot back, teeth flashing. "So much for believing in me!"

"Trying to help you doesn't mean I don't believe in you."

"You're throwing my weak moments in my face! You're telling me not to protect myself– and other people! How are you against that?" John let out a chattering laugh. "You're still such a hypocrite!"

"Because I don't want to see you put away?"

The laugh turned bitter. "If the alternative is living like a coward, then so be it."

Bruce fell silent, trying to reconcile those words with how… how John just couldn't have said them, because preferring a cell made no sense. John worked so hard to thrive out of the asylum. How could he be blasé about being thrown back in? Was Bruce supposed to have prepared an argument for freedom against… against misplaced stubbornness, an outsized sense of pride? It was ridiculous. There was no argument to be had.

And John was still smiling, shrugging at Bruce's distressed expression, because somehow there was a joke here. It felt like it was on Bruce.

"Hey, you might as well be in charge at Arkham now, right?" John said. He started ticking off his fingers. "You could get me back in with Leland, institute Taco Tuesdays, install a new bowling alley–"

"Stop it!!" Bruce erupted, hands clenched with nothing to hit. "Just stop! I am not going to watch you get thrown in Arkham or Blackgate or an early grave because of your– your ego! This is your life, John, and you just–" He shook his head. "The solution is right in front of your face. You go into the city for your show and everything else, but you live in the manor. That's how you avoid getting arrested. That's how you avoid a bullet in the head!"

The outburst was not helpful, he realized instantly. It barely slowed his galloping heart, and he thought his skin would be sloughed off by the acidic gleam in John's eyes.

"Have you noticed," John said stiltedly, "that you're a bit of a control freak?" He cackled suddenly, but the sound was unamused. "I decide where I live! And that stupid plan doesn't even make sense! I don't just work here; I have to go to the parole office and community service and therapy and whatever the heck else is in my phone because what human can keep track of all this court-ordered..."
baloney! Oh, but is that part of your deal, too?" He gestured to the bureau, where his phone lay charging. "Are you gonna start tracking…"

His face went blank.

Bruce's stomach dropped. "I…"

"Oh, man," John chortled, head falling back. He covered his face with both hands and sighed, still laughing. As he straightened, his fingers dragged down his cheeks, revealing his glare. "I didn't even think. Did Bruce just have a lucky guess that Johnny and his bowling pals were safe at home? And about the timing of that parole appointment? What else..."

"Those were the only times--"

"Oh!" John threw his arms in the air. "In that case I love having my privacy invaded!"

"You've been kidnapped!" Bruce blurted out.

"That definitely explains why you didn't tell me about the tracker, or ask!" John went over to the bureau and unplugged the phone. "It's a good thing you have that mask because you really need to work on pulling back the guilty face." He started dismantling the striped case.

"You can't turn this around on me. Just look what you've been up to!"

"No worse than what you've been up to for years!"

"You brought civilians into this!"

"They brought themselves!"

"And what about when Maroni retaliates?"

"We'll think of something," John muttered, turning the naked phone over as if he could see the tracker through plastic.

"Listen to yourself!" Bruce's frustration was rising to the level of panic. "Are you out of your mind?"

John flinched, his fingers tightening around the phone. He looked up at Bruce with stricken eyes.

Bruce cursed himself. "John--"

"Yeah," John said, an empty smile taking over. "Of course I am. That's why you couldn't trust me even before they let me out."

"I didn't mean--"

"Made sure to get the phone all ready ahead of time."

"You know I--"

"Made sure it looked like a thoughtful present from my best friend," John spat as he walked to the door, pulled it open, and stalked out.

Bruce followed after him. "I'm sorry--"
"My greatest buddy!" John shouted as they descended the stairs. "Unmatched pal!"

"Just– just take a second–"

John kept going on like that– "compadre, ally, confidante"– voice going lower and lower, and they burst back into the bar. Some of the Circus had left. The bodybuilders were still there, the couple conversing in the corner while Chuck swept the stage, and so were Lucia and Adelina, going over a notepad at a table. The band had just finished packing up their instruments, and a handful of others lingered. John's appearance brought everything to a standstill. Clutching the phone, talking to himself quietly, he came to a stop by the bar and looked around the room.

Bruce hovered by the stairway door. "Let's keep this upstairs," he said urgently.

Behind the counter, Rosaline came to John's side. "What's going on?"

John walked away to a nearby table. He reached underneath with his free hand and pulled out his tool bag. He plopped it on the end of the bar and fished out a heavy rubber mallet.

Bruce moved in. "Just calm–"

"Batter up!" John cried, tossing the phone in the air.

He swung the hammer and– crack– the phone sailed between Lucia and Adelina's heads and smashed into the wall. The sisters slowly turned toward where it landed.

Twirling the mallet, John announced, "Guess what, everybody? Bruce thinks we should be good little targets who wait for the GCPD to deign to save our asses!"

The previous welcoming attitude of the room was forgotten as a dozen hostile gazes, most decorated in black, trained on Bruce. He was not intimidated. The Neighborhood Watch was far more a threat to themselves than to him. They barely understood what they were doing.

Bruce kept his focus on John. He crossed his arms and set his shoulders back. "I am not apologizing for wanting you out of trouble."

"Oh, ohhh!" John looked Bruce up and down, appraising how he'd drawn himself up. "I get it!"

He clambered on top of the bar and stood over Bruce, waving his arms, mallet still in hand. The sun on his shirt seemed to join the mocking.

"Ooh, I look so big now!" John jeered. "Is it my turn to be alpha?"

Bruce clenched his teeth. He had half a mind to wrestle John down. "Will you stop–"

John thrust the mallet toward Bruce's face, nearly smashing his nose. The rigid muscles of his arm led up to his livid stare.

"Take your precious system, your leash, and your– your goddamn money," John shouted, "and get the hell out!"

His money?? Before Bruce could ask what the hell that was supposed to mean, Lorenzo and Chuck moved in to flank John's perch. A hand firmly gripped Bruce's shoulder, and he turned to find Maureen staring him down.

"You heard the boss," she said.
Bruce could take all three of them if necessary– but obviously he couldn't start a brawl just because John wouldn't listen. He had to walk away, let the conflict cool. Though wouldn't John just love it if he did the opposite?

At that thought, he looked back at John, expecting some sneering jibe– And to think, you've thrown people out of classier establishments than this!– but John just glared, arms back at his sides. The tendons on the back of his hand bulged from how tightly he held the hammer.

"We'll talk later," Bruce said and headed for the door.

"You don't get to tell me what to do!" John hollered.

Bruce turned to explain that wasn't what he was trying to do, goddammit, but his voice caught in his throat. Not because the trio surged forward to push him out, but because of John's face. Still up on the bar, posture now slumped, he looked at Bruce the way he had after Harley abandoned him in the lab, after she struck him in the eye, after he realized he wasn't the reason Bruce returned to the subway. Betrayed.

Bruce stumbled backward onto the sunlit sidewalk, and the door shut in his face.

The sun crawled toward the western treeline, the start of acres of forest. The thinner line of trees to the east hid the premises from the riverbank and Gotham's sightline. So long as no one drew attention to this spot, Lock-Up and his soldiers could complete their work without interruption.

Bolton stood on a walkway over a round in-ground tank, watching two men below. Their rubber boots trudged through two inches of sludge as they welded sections of solid steel bars to the wall. Two sections had been installed so far, going from the outer wall to the central column under Bolton's feet. In the end, the partitions would create six cells.

One of the men, Dawkins, looked up and lifted his welding mask. "You sure you want a lid on this, sir? If they pass out, they might drown in this muck."

Bolton's mask was no protection from the stench. The tank hadn't been used in years, and there had been no bother to clean it. It was likely teeming with disgusting microbes of all sorts.

"So they'll return from whence they came," he responded.

Dawkins laughed heartily and swung his mask down.

Bolton left the walkway, returning to the gravel path that cut through the grounds. On his left, two men stood on the grass at the tank's edge, waiting to lower the next set of bars. He went right, following the path back toward a building a dozen yards away, rather than taking a route to one of the other tanks. Three more men came from the building, carrying boxes of surveillance equipment. They split to either side of the walkway as Bolton passed.

"That needs to be done to the letter by sixteen hundred hours," he said.

"Yes, Lock-Up, sir!" they responded.

Bolton proceeded into the building. The interior was one large room, in the middle of which sat another set of tanks, a different type, smaller and rectangular, all in a row. Just one was probably big enough that he could have cleared it out and crammed Crane inside, but it wouldn't do for the doctor to get sick.
He was less concerned about the quality of life of the future prisoners.

Crane was contained in the far left corner by a diagonal length of fencing bolted to the walls. The high ceiling required that more chainlink be stretched across the triangular gap overhead, and of course the link also covered the floor so punishment could continue as necessary. The space was smaller than what Crane had back at the apartment, but he should just be grateful to have enough room to lie down even if he was more likely to kick over the mess bucket.

The doctor was on his feet now, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed as he watched more recruits make preparations. When he noticed Bolton, their eyes locked.

"Enjoying the new digs?" Bolton said dryly. He approached the monitoring station along the wall to the left of the cage. The bank of computers would be used to broadcast more announcements and keep an eye on the cells outside.

Crane wrinkled his nose. "The aromatics could use improvement."

"Be grateful you're not in an outer cell."

Silent, Crane raised an eyebrow. Bolton knew what he was thinking, that it didn't make sense to have captives at a distance, but they needed to experience punishment. Besides, Bolton was confident that his design was inescapable.

"Lock-Up, sir," said another man, Martin, approaching from the other side of the rectangular tanks. "We have a sample ready."

Bolton followed him back to the weapons station, though it would be more accurate to call it a laboratory. Multiple tables were set up with the equipment needed to create Crane's fear toxin—beakers and tubing and burets and all else. An end table held machines to fill and pressurize two dozen aerosol cans.

Only one can was ready now, and Martin handed it over. "Ready for testing."

If there weren't risks of putting Crane out of commission, he would be the ideal test subject. Some of the recruits volunteered with the enthusiasm of students daring each other to be tazed, and Bolton put a stop to it. Good soldiers had to treat weaponry seriously.

A different human test subject could have easily been picked up off the streets, but when it came down to it, the strays around the abandoned plant were more convenient.

Martin dragged over the covered cage and pulled off the sheet. The matted mutt inside stayed hunkered in the corner and growled lowly. The animal was too small for the size of the cage, but then Bolton hadn't bought it for a dog.

Martin passed around respirators, and the recruits secured them around their heads, their mouths and noses covered. Bolton twisted the cap of the aerosol can to expose the nozzle, then pulled up the lower half of his balaclava. He pressed a respirator to his face and felt it seal to his skin before holding the can close to the cage, at the dog's level. He sprayed for half a second.

The dog recoiled from the orange mist into the other side of the cage, the whole thing sliding an inch across the floor. The creature made a wheezing noise, stretching out its neck, and almost immediately flattened to the floor, limbs locked. Its head twitched this way and that. Bolton wondered what it saw.

Then the dog's chest heaved, and it started to whine. Bolton took a step forward, and the animal
scrabbled to escape the cage, its claws snagging on the metal wire. It moved so wildly that it fell onto its back but immediately twisted over and kept fighting.

"Seeing that bitch Gleeson like this is gonna be sweet," one of the men said, voice muffled.

Bolton hummed in satisfaction. He lowered the mask and threw the sheet back over the keening dog, noting the blood on its paws. They'd check later on its recovery, though a human was probably more capable of surviving the physical stress than a mutt.

In any case, the effect was what Bolton wanted. He turned to commend Crane for being such a good boy.

Crane had mashed himself into the narrow corner of his cage, trying to get the best look around the tanks. His expression was blank, open, taking in every detail he could see.

Then the doctor blinked, realizing he was being watched again. He returned to his casual position, but Bolton swore he could see the gears turning, taking the raw, exciting data and organizing it for later analysis. He stowed away his disgust. He'd deal with all the sickos in time.

---

Bruce's utility belt laid across his lap with half the compartments open. He'd been inventorying the contents, making piles on the table summoned from the floor, and got to the tracking devices. He stared at one in his palm.

Setting aside how John had crashed Lucius's funeral, the yearslong asylum resident had behaved the best he knew how. He didn't have enough experience to realize the flattery was inappropriate and the get-well card was off-base. It could have been worse—probably would have been, if Bruce hadn't done his best to keep their interaction low-key.

Going by his smile, John must have considered his first funeral a success as he left the church. He'd been so earnest. "I miss this... this trust between us."

And Bruce had decided against planting the tracker on him. He'd trusted John would come back with the information.

Had they backslid that far?

On the table, his cell phone lit up and vibrated twice. Bruce sighed.

After the scene in the bar, he waited until the evening to try calling John, thinking John's phone might still work. There was no answer, and he followed up with a text. By morning he'd still received no reply, so he texted Lucia. She was likely to get John to call back, if only to avoid more contact from Bruce.

Bruce received a message from Lucia's number after lunch, but it was not what he expected and definitely not from her. He replied asking if John would talk to him. The multiple follow-ups over the course of the afternoon indicated no.

The elevator started to whir. Tiffany, as expected. Bruce had messaged her that morning as well, letting her know that the conversation with John did not go well. She needed to know that the Neighborhood Watch was still very much in action. She hadn't been wrong about the importance of communication, after all. Not surprisingly, she was more receptive to talking to him.

By the time she exited the platform and walked over, he'd opened the text—the fourth that day—and found yet another link to a short clip. This one was a hooded seal inflating a giant tissue balloon out
of one of its nostrils.

Over his shoulder, Tiffany made a disgusted noise. "What is that?"

Bruce leaned on the chair arm, propping up his cheek on his fist. "It intimidates other males. I've also seen a pufferfish inflating its body, a siamang blowing up its throat sac, and a catbird expanding its feathers."

"Uh?"

"John's making fun of me."

"Ah. No gorilla beating its chest?"

"Not yet."

They watched the seal a little more. She fidgeted.

"So," she started, "I should have thought more about what I was doing when I made that deal with John. I honestly did think it would be better if you heard it from him, but you're right about the danger to the people around him. I'm sorry."

"You should have told me," Bruce agreed, but it was hard to stay righteous knowing the reason he was watching an ill-tempered seal. "You weren't wrong about John's friends, though. They're all in. They would've run me out of Gotham if he'd asked."

"It couldn't have been that bad." When he didn't reply, she said, "Jeez, did you kick the door down or something?"

The phone vibrated again. He opened the new message.

"A change of pace," he said. "The dictionary definition of hypocrisy."

"Wait, that's from Lucia, not John."

"John destroyed his phone."

"Um, wow? Seriously, what did you say?"

Bruce hesitated. "Remember when I asked you to design a smaller model of the tracking device?"

"Yeah, like last ye--" Clutching the straps of her backpack, Tiffany leaned around him to see his face. "Are you freaking serious?"

Bruce looked away and set the phone down. "I wanted to be able to keep an eye on him. Even you weren't sure how he'd do out here."

"Yeah, but I'm supposed to be the jerk! You're his best friend!" She groaned. "Bruce that just-- It's not cool."

"Yeah, John made that clear." That heartbroken expression kept flashing across Bruce's mind. He may have foreseen their friendship coming to an inevitable close, but he didn't want it to be like this.

"What else have you asked me to do that's not on the level?" Tiffany asked, voice hardening.
He moved the belt to the table and turned the chair toward her. "Nothing else, I promise. I'm telling you now because I should have told you before, even though it was a terrible idea. And I should have filled you in on Catwoman. I'm sorry, I just... I see some things as my concern."

She let out a steady breath. "Well, acknowledging your control issues is the first step," she said dryly, then pulled her shoulders back and glared. "You better mean it, about filling me in. I want to be in this for the long haul, but I am not sticking around if I'm going to be developing tech without knowing its purpose."

"That was the only thing, I swear."

"It better be. I can only work on this partnership thing if you do, too."

Bruce had the reflexive thought that it would be better if she gave up on him now, but he pushed that aside. With everything they were up against, they needed to work together.

"I can start by telling you I'm not taking Selina lightly," he said. "I am giving her a chance to demonstrate she's not here to swindle anyone, but I've tapped into the museum's security systems to keep watch during the gala."

Tiffany nodded. "Okay. I'm glad to hear it." She shifted her weight to one leg. "I maybe started keeping track of her likely targets based on her past thefts. Haven't seen any activity."

Bruce couldn't help but smile. "Glad she's risen above expectations so far."

"Have any ideas on what to do about John and his troupe?"

"John..." He huffed. "First I need him to stop acting like a teenager."

"Well, they're both people legitimately carving out their identity..." Tiffany shrugged at Bruce's look. "Just saying. But he's also not a teenager, and he did get us a huge lead. I know you don't like it, but you could still give him some credit while asking him to stop."

"I don't want to encourage him. It's not safe."

"Well, spying on him won't encourage him to listen."

"I wasn't spying! The bug was just in case. I only checked it three times: once to see it worked, then--"

"I only broke your trust three times' is a not a winner, Bruce." Tiffany rolled her eyes. "How is John going to feel comfortable asking you for help if you don't trust each other? That's not going to make him safe either." She crossed her arms. "Maybe he'll ask me, but I hope that doesn't lead to random updates about his day."

"I'll just have to regain his trust over time," Bruce said, resigned, as he started repacking the belt. "He can't stay this mad forever."

"I dunno, it's pretty enraging to find out a guy's been keeping tabs on your phone. Though usually the guy is your boyfriend."

He may have stilled, for a split second, but he dutifully filled pouch after pouch. He was sure he gave no other sign that the comment was significant, yet Tiffany was oddly quiet, just standing there in his peripheral. He swore he could feel her gaze on the back of his head.
"Hey, if–"

He talked over her, having heard the catch in her breath before she started speaking. "Have we got anything from those message boards?" He snapped the compartments closed.

After a moment, she swung off her pack and opened it. "Yeah, uh…" Tablet in hand, she corrected herself. "I mean no. I checked it this morning, and still nothing, but let's take a look…"

He swiveled around, planting his eyes on the monitor. When she projected the tablet screen, the application was still loading. She pulled a rolling chair over from the side of the platform.

"Alright," she said when the algorithm results appeared. It was a list of posts flagged for using significant words and phrases as determined by her and Bruce. "These guys like to talk a lot of shit, with violent language, which messes things up a little. I've been doing my best to optimize the search for actual threats, but the results are usually…"

She suddenly tapped on a post. Bruce had seen it too: a dozen excerpts down, one from today with Gordon's name. The full post loaded.

Yeah gordon should be careful what he wishes with this "accountability" plan. He's gonna be held accountable real soon, him and other enablers in this cesspool. Keep your eye on ball in city hall. Lets give a toast to the real heroes during the game.

"Damn," Tiffany said, "I don't have an actual ID for this guy, just the matching handle from the Lock-Up chat. But this points at Gordon and probably the mayor as targets."

"And soon." Bruce looked over the rest of the conversation. "During the game… but which day? The Knights are scheduled to play from Friday through the next week."

"An attack could be sooner than that. A toast can just wait until Friday."

"Alright, we'll alert Gordon and get protection on him and Mayor Garcia right away. We'll have to collaborate with the GCPD to determine other likely targets, 'enablers' of city policy, like the City Council. Lock-Up had quite a few words to say about Harvey being brainwashed, so I think we can add Dr. Fielding and Dr. Leland to the list, if not the asylum trustees…"

"Poor Leland's been through enough," Tiffany said. "I guess Fielding won't be representing Arkham at the gala tomorrow. Are you gonna bail on that, too?"

"No, if Fielding isn't there, I should be, at least for a while. I'll make the rounds with particular people and leave the rest to the other surrogates." From the wording of the forum post, Bruce suspected Lock-Up would move on an actual game day, and he didn't want to give these creeps a win by not doing everything he could to turn Arkham into a more compassionate hospital. "I'll leave early and join you in the field to look for our new friend."

"Hopefully he'll broadcast again soon and we can pinpoint a date and time, not to mention narrow the hit list." She looked at him out of the corner of her eye. "If Lock-Up makes his move this weekend, what about your other engagement?"

Sideshow. John's months of dedication. His personalized costume. His own "piece" that he kept mum about but plainly wanted Bruce to see. Showtime was late Saturday night, much later than the Thursday gala would start. To be ready to confront an undefined threat, Batman would have to constantly monitor the city. He couldn't take a break.

"If John doesn't forgive me before then, it's moot," Bruce said sullenly. "And if he does, I'll see
how quickly he can be pissed off all over again."

His phone buzzed. There was the gorilla.

What mattered most was that John had finished his costume. He'd decided on tapered coattails that dangled to the backs of his knees, not long enough to get in the way, but enough to look playful, fun. He was going to have so much fun with Sideshow, even if…

Adelina tugged on the jacket, testing the fit. John watched in the full length mirror on the back of her and Lucia's door. He'd gone down to their room for a full and final fitting. It felt good that he'd gotten the suit done with days to spare, especially considering all his responsibilities, whether Bruce liked them or not…

The suit felt great!! And rehearsals were going well, and he was finally going to see Lian use actual fire, and Ro had come up with a special cocktail menu. The night would be a hit, he was sure of it.

Bruce did not matter at all.

Not his hypocrisy, not his stubbornness, not his disapproval, conveyed through those stern steely eyes that could easily go soft like the quiet trickle of a stream.

Adelina poked her index fingers into John's cheeks and tried to construct a smile. He swatted her wrists away. "I'm just tired," he mumbled.

She hopped over to the bunk bed and grabbed a sketchbook lying on the top mattress. She opened it and showed him a caricature of Bruce: tall and big-headed, wearing sunglasses, a grand smile, and two tittering blondes on his arms. They headed down a camera-mobbed red carpet toward an open manhole.

Okay, that earned a snicker. Then John couldn't help but think of how he was practically Bruce's date, on that amazing red carpet night that inspired him to put his all into this show and--

And what was he even thinking?! He was not Bruce's date. He never would be, even if by some miracle Bruce asked. John had told himself over and over again that their relationship was already too close, that he'd inevitably disappoint Bruce, and-- shock!-- that was exactly what happened.

Or not exactly, because for Bruce to be really disappointed, he would have to trust John, and he clearly didn't. So he was smarter than John thought, wasn't he? And it was he who disappointed John with his deceitful trick! Even if John wanted Bruce to wise up, he still… Bruce wasn't supposed to… Bruce said he believed...

John's reflection swung toward him and he snapped back to attention, to Adelina waving her hand in front of his face. Lucia slipped in and closed the door again.

"You done commandeering my phone?" she asked, having spotted the device sitting with John's folded clothes on the dresser.

"I just had a few final things to say," John replied casually, fixing the top button of his coat, then unfixing it.

She was already scrolling through her screen. "Uh, yeah, a few."

He'd been waiting for the "told you so" since yesterday. He knew she was thinking it, especially after their tiff about living on Bruce's dime.
John hadn't thought of Bruce that way before, because Bruce had never set any rules about the money, never threatened to cut him off. Now he wondered if the bank account and the treacherous phone were supposed to keep him sated like a well-fed pet, less likely to cause trouble.

Not that John had caused real trouble, even though his "buddy" obviously disagreed. Bruce actually tried to intimidate him, like he had automatic unquestionable authority! But well, why not? Bruce already did what he wanted, in large part because of that endless stream of cash.

Well, John had closed his port on that river, so it was too late for Bruce to do a one-eighty and try to use it against him. John had scrounged a living on the streets once; he could certainly manage now, with a job, home, and friends. Though he would rather go back to having nothing than find himself in the position of a gullible idiot. Again.

("How are ya gonna get by, bein' this naive? Brucie's upper crust. Yer down with us crumbs at the bottom of the toaster.")

"Look at you!"

John jerked again. Adelina had moved off to the side, and Lucia had come up behind him. She smiled over his shoulder at the mirror and tweaked his bowtie.

"Stylish and captivating!" she declared.

He shifted bashfully. "You think so?" Captivating? He liked it, but he'd been thinking about the fit and the color scheme.

"Yup. Add a dollop of pomade, and you're ready to beckon the audience into our weird world of musical oddity."

John looked in the mirror, tilted his chin up, and gripped his lapels. He envisioned the sleek hair and a darker eye shadow. He tested a grin, bright but a little dangerous, like a friendly shark.

"There's our emcee!" Lucia said. Adelina smiled in agreement at the edge of the reflection.

He pictured himself on stage, delivering rehearsed proclamations (and some clever ad-libs) with wide and wild gestures. He'd vanish to give the spotlight to each act and steal it back just as quickly. The audience would hang on his every word.

Except for Bruce, because he wouldn't be there.

"And there he goes," Lucia sighed as John's posture wilted. She turned him around with a hand on his shoulder. "Don't let him ruin this for you."

"You mean for you?" John retorted.

Lucia was unbothered. "For me, too, yeah, but think of all the work you've put in. Did you do that for him?"

"No," John muttered, frustrated. "But I wanted him to see it."

"Well, now he doesn't get to," Lucia said sharply. "That's the point, right? He tried to call the shots on how you live here while he's isolated out in Crest fucking Hill. He set limits on your relationship, and now you know where you stand: outside of them."

"Yeah," John said, thinking. "I didn't set any limits for him." He barked a laugh. "But he can waltz
around and do whatever, because he knows best!"

"He must!" Lucia said, eyebrows raised. "He runs that conglomerate single-handedly, you know. It's not like he inherited a fortune created on ruined lives, that's so big it sustains itself."

"I should be grateful for the chance to impress him!" John went on. "But not at the Arkham fundraiser! Can't trust the crazies to not strip and start babbling in tongues, or go into a drooling catatonia."

John hadn't bothered anyone at the musical, but then again, Bruce had sequestered them to a box. God forbid his hoity-toity friends risk hearing John say something awkward or weird that made them feel awkward or weird.

Oh. Oh. What if that was the real reason Bruce didn't have a wild party for his birthday? Because it would be harder to justify leaving John out?

It made sense. Bruce had always had problems with just being freaking honest.

"It wouldn't take that much to make the upper ranks uncomfortable," Lucia said, "but with their delicate nature, isn't that the worst you can do?"

John covered his mouth with both hands. "Heaven forbid!"

"We hoi-polloi simply cannot imagine the indignity! It's almost as bad as suffering consequences for your actions!"

Lucia draped an arm over her forehead dramatically and backed a few steps toward Adelina, who'd been following the conversation silently. Suddenly the younger sister found the older nearly "fainting" right on top of her, and with a squawk, she pushed Lucia back up.

John vaguely registered the scene; Lucia's words had flicked a switch. Here he was, feeling sad, dejected, surly even, and Bruce was down in that cave (probably) sending mere texts to smooth over the crappy things he'd said, the calculated decisions, the sudden demands. He probably expected John to forgive him eventually, because John always had, hadn't he?

The corners of his mouth creaked up. "Actions should have consequences, shouldn't they?" he asked, rubbing his hands together.

"Cause and effect, yeah," Lucia said, ruffling Adelina's hair. Adelina shoved her in retaliation, then nodded.

"Real consequences," John continued, "ones that make a point!"

Lucia planted her hands on her hips. "Absolutely!"

"Consequences that are what he deserves!"

"For once!"

"What he's asking for, with his expectations!"

"Uh…"

"Maybe I should fulfill them!"

"You've lost me."
"Let's start at the thrift store," John said, shrugging off his jacket. "We'll need a wardrobe change."

Chapter End Notes

Me: Gosh, Telltale-flavored batjokes just makes it easier to explore these guys having a relationship in throwing distance of stable, even though they still have their differences, with nerdiness and fluff and....

Also me: FIGHT FIGHT FIGHT FIGHT FIGHT FIGHT FIGHT
Let's Turn the Night Into Day...

Chapter Notes

I hope you have fun reading this chapter, because I had lots of fun writing it!

NOT for the reason you're going to think at first (ha cha cha).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For once, it wasn't the vibrant green of John's hair, the rosiness of his mouth, or the pink pop of his eye shadow that stood out. It was that his clothing was dark: a deep violet button-up with chalk-striped black slacks and a pewter gray belt. In addition to tucking in his shirt, John had learned to decide on a sleeve length, but he'd left both cuffs open over his wrists. The top two buttons were also left undone, displaying a sliver of his chest, as was his wont.

(The outfit was reminiscent of what John had worn to Lucius' funeral, and Bruce often reminded himself that, at the time, he'd been appropriately focused on the loss of his dear friend. It was only on reflection that he recognized how the dark colors accentuated John's verdant hair, his snowy skin.)

They were in the manor's downstairs kitchen. Two bowls and spoons sat on the island. Bruce retrieved a carton of ice cream from the freezer.

"This isn't much of an apology," he admitted, pulling off the lid.

John shrugged. "I'm a simple man."

"This isn't the kind that made you sick is it?"

"How sweet of you to remember! But no."

Bruce scooped high mounds into the bowls; it was certainly better to be excessive than frugal. John waited for Bruce to hand a dish over— it was an offering after all— and gave no thanks before digging in.

Bruce ate just a little, preferring to watch John devour his share. He should have been thinking of the right words to say, but instead he watched John's tongue and lips clean the spoon with every mouthful. John's face didn't end up as clean; a chocolate smudge jutted off the corner of his mouth onto his left cheek.

"You have a little right there," Bruce said, pointing.

"Oh?" John lifted his chin and leaned forward. "Little help?"

A moment passed. A moment to laugh it off and hand him a napkin.

Instead Bruce took hold of John's chin with his free hand. He slowly wiped away the smear with his thumb, then pressed the digit to John's lips. They parted enough for John to take in the thumb and lick away the errant ice cream. Eyes glinting, he pressed his teeth down on Bruce's first knuckle.
Bruce tore his hand away, ignoring the scrape, and grabbed John by the back of the neck. Their bowls tumbled to the floor, the shatter and clatter unheeded as Bruce kissed John hard, free arm capturing his waist. John opened his mouth right away, clutching Bruce's shirt.

John tasted sweet, then sweeter as he moaned low in his throat, delighted to be dominated. Eager to indulge him, Bruce dug his fingers into John's thighs and lifted him onto the island. His heart raced faster as John's legs latched around his waist, and he grabbed John's hips to rock firmly against him.

John tipped his head back with a whine and Bruce went for his throat, the long line that had teased him for months. He planted his teeth, not enough to draw blood but certainly to bruise, not a punishment but a warning, because John absolutely knew that he'd been driving Bruce crazy. He always knew more than he let on.

But John didn't fear the pain, evident by his delighted sigh, by his fingers threading into Bruce's hair and holding him closer. And in truth, didn't Bruce like the tension? Love it? Because the instant he broke it, he had John lost in his arms, thrusting back against every sharp snap of Bruce's hips.

Bruce wanted to show him pleasure more than anything. He soothed the bite with his tongue, replacing the chocolate flavor with the saltiness of John's skin. He kissed lower, past John's collar bone, down the exposed V of his chest. John breathed his name desperately as the pressure between their hips vanished, but Bruce needed to get John's clothes off. He'd start by biting off the shirt buttons, one by one. John would love it; Bruce could hear his excited laughter already.

"You know me so well," John purred. "You just want me to be happy."

Yes, that's what Bruce wanted.

"Keep me safe and locked away."

What... no... Bruce stopped, breathed. He'd never...

John's voice descended to his ear. "That's right. You can't."

Bruce looked up. He was alone.

Half of Bruce's face was buried in his pillow, and his arms were tucked underneath. His erection pressed uncomfortably into the mattress.

Dreams like that were… not helpful.

Which he'd already been telling himself for months on end, because he shouldn't be fantasizing about someone he wanted to keep as just a friend to start with. He certainly shouldn't be fantasizing after John almost smashed a hammer in his face.

The dream's end punctuated the point. Even if John was interested, how could they move beyond friendship when John was so unpredictable? When Bruce's need to protect made John feel suffocated?

Not to mention how so much of Bruce's time was committed to the mission. Could he feasibly be a real partner to John? Would he ever be able to put John first? Could he handle the consequences if John had another violent break? Not just the legal mediation with victims' families, but the mental and emotional strain on an even more personal level, as he helped John through the aftermath. Was
Bruce prepared for that? Probably not, considering his dismal failure in just talking to John.

He was starting to doubt his assumption that John would forgive him. He hadn't received another text, angry or otherwise, since the previous afternoon.

But he was being ridiculous. It had been a couple days. As much as Bruce wanted to deal with the Neighborhood Watch, he could only make it worse if he tried to push John into not being upset. John would see it as more evidence that Bruce was trying to control him.

Bruce ignored the echo of you can't.

There were more immediate issues to focus on: that evening's fundraiser and his early exit. He needed to verify his tux was ready and check in with the Foundation's support staff on the preparations. He needed to compare notes with other Foundation reps to make sure they covered the right talking points. He needed to touch base with Tiffany to make a final decision on which potential targets to prioritize.

He needed to stop thinking about John— and if those were the noises he'd make.

Bruce wrapped the pillow around his head and let out a frustrated yell. He pounded his fist on the bed once, then got up and trudged to the bathroom, to get a handle on himself (in more ways than one).

The spotlights outside the Butler Museum of Art shot into the night sky, lighting up the central columns of the portico. Gotham's affluent trickled between them, coming up the red carpet from limousines and town cars to the hostesses at the front doors for check-in. Security, dressed in tuxedos accessorized with earpieces, discreetly monitored the procession.

The gala for the Arkham Asylum Advocacy Fund began with a cocktail hour in the vast entrance hall. To the sound of live string music, guests would schmooze and study various art pieces that had been temporarily moved from other sections of the museum, which were screened off. Later, everyone would ascend the central staircase to the second-floor balcony that overlooked the hall from all sides, and they'd dine under the faded tapestries mounted on the walls.

Normally Bruce would be fashionably late, but given his other commitment, he was remarkably on-time. Selina had agreed to help balance out that behavior by disappearing the same time he did, to give the tabloids something to speculate about.

Of course, they'd have a new spin on it, that Bruce was cheating on a man he'd never–

Not the time. The attendees were drifting in. Bruce took a position by the staircase, leaning on one of the bottom marble posts. To the first guests who came his way, he lifted his champagne flute in greeting. (Perhaps they'd notice it was half empty and assume he'd already been drinking, not that he'd poured some into one of the many tall narrow-leafed ficus trees around the hall). With an easy smile, he slid into his pitch for donating to the Arkham effort beyond the gala cost. He had optimistic expectations. Anyone who was fine associating with Bruce Wayne after the Agency saga and with Arkham despite the controversy around John was most likely interested in the cause. There would still be those who came for the optics of giving or for the social aspects, but Bruce was prepared to end those conversations and move on.

Surprisingly, Veronica Vreeland also showed up on time, wearing a lacey gold sheath dress with off-the-shoulder straps. Her hair was twisted into a messy but chic bun at her nape. She grabbed a glass from a server's tray as she walked over, and had downed half of it by the time she reached
Bruce, who'd just finished up with his third prospect.

"Tough day?" he asked.

"Just when I think Arthur is done playing this media game," Veronica said bitterly, "he goes and pulls a move like… like that."

She looked at Bruce as if he knew the unmentionable thing she couldn't bear to say. He hadn't brushed up on gossip like he should have, so he just nodded sympathetically as she vaguely vented and drank. Then she surprised him again.

"Ugh, that'll all pass," she said, with a little shake of her head and shoulders. "This Arkham effort, we should definitely do lunch on it. I've got no head for medical stuff, but educational programs are helpful, right? I've been reconnecting with old college friends who've piloted some ideas at other hospitals."

"Uh, yeah," Bruce said, pleased. "The ancillary programming at Arkham could definitely be more consistent."

"I thought so. I'll ring up my friends, see what we can schedule." Veronica took his elbow and leaned in with a mischievous smile. "You and I could have a prep meeting first, if you like."

Bruce leaned back a fraction. "I think we can all get right into it."

The look she gave him was somehow mildly annoyed but affectionate at the same time, and she patted his arm. "One day I'll figure you out," she sighed, going for another sip, but her glass was empty. "Just like I'm gonna find out what really happened to your ear," she threw over her shoulder as she pursued another champagne tray.

Speaking of non-dates… Bruce checked his text chain with Selina, but there was nothing new. In their last conversation, her main concern had been keeping her name off the guest list. Bruce asked what pseudonym she'd use to pass through security.

SELINA: you think I don't know how to get past security?

That kind of reply tapped into all the reasons the batcomputer would tell him if any alarms or even lights were tripped in the exhibits.

He didn't really trust anyone, did he?

Well, why should he blindly trust Selina? She would call him an idiot if he did. She even admitted she was still on the wrong side of the law, however technical that description might be. Bruce had plenty of reasons to keep an eye on her, just like he had plenty of reasons to watch John.

Even though John's current level of criminality didn't exceed his own. Even though Bruce should have more regard for him, if–

No if. All he'd meant to do was help John by keeping him out of trouble. Letting that go because he didn't want John angry with him would be more selfish than anything. Bruce would apologize about the phone, about his careless words, but nothing else.

"A penny for your thoughts, Mr. Wayne."

He'd assumed the blonde lingering nearby was a socialite working up the courage to make a pass at him. Now he got a good look at her face.
"Blondes have more fun?" he asked.

"Oh, never as much as I do," Selina replied with a smirk.

The wig was very high quality; lustrous yellow locks tumbled to her shoulders. She wore it with a classic black, knee-length cocktail dress. It had an A-line skirt, and the strapless bodice was covered by a lace overlay with a high neck and short sleeves.

A champagne server swung by to take Bruce's empty glass from the staircase post, and Selina's expression changed to a charming smile. She winked and thanked the worker as she pinched two full glasses from his tray, and he fumbled with a response before heading to other guests. She turned to Bruce, her eyes glittering like the diamonds dangling from her ears, and handed him a drink.

Selina certainly made it easy to remember why he fell for her once upon a time– even as he wondered how she procured the earrings, not to mention the rest of her ensemble.

"Drink up!" she said, clinking their glasses. "You arranged this whole thing, after all."

"I've already indulged enough for tonight," he replied.

"You can't be that much of a lightweight." She sipped her drink and moved closer to speak more quietly and freely. "But it's your nightlife. This early exit works for me. Too much time in the open makes me antsy even without prospective terrorists."

He raised an eyebrow. "If you find it so worrisome, we could use some help."

She replied with a sardonic look. "Yes, I'm sure Gordon and his officers would be so excited to see Catwoman." She swirled her champagne. "Honestly, Bruce, if I had your instincts, I'd be dead by now. But you and the other half of your dynamic duo? You've done perfectly fine going up against plenty of insecure men vying for control over something."

Bruce was disappointed, but not surprised. Selina likely still felt indebted to him for her release from the Agency, but joining a patrol wasn't really her style. She'd probably be more amenable to a one-time favor for Batman, which he supposed he should use wisely.

A phrase she'd used pinged back to him. "Dynamic duo?"

She grinned. "They used that in the Daily News. I thought you'd like the earnest flair."

"Bruce!" a voice called.

Sylvia and Ferris Boyle fast approached through the growing crowd. Bruce offered them the bland smile of someone who would never perform extensive research into GothCorp, the laboratory research firm of which Ferris was president. A capable president, it turned out. He'd enacted security practices that prevented Bruce from unearthing new information on the lab accident that preceded the disappearance of Victor and Nora Fries.

Bruce couldn't say why he suspected there was something more to the accident. Ferris did promote GothCorp as "The People Company" while employee reviews spoke of a culture that punished the use of benefits and withheld research credit, but that corporate behavior was sadly common. It was also not odd that Ferris usually shunted charity events to the purview of his second wife, Sylvia.

She clung to her husband's arm as she asked, "You remember my husband, don't you?"
"Of course," Bruce said, shaking Ferris's hand. "Glad you could make it."

"Always happy to find the time for promising ventures," Ferris said with a secretive smirk that Bruce couldn't interpret.

Sylvia's own sly expression was directed at Selina. "And who is this lovely lady?" She lowered to a stage whisper. "Forgive me, but it seems you've broken the dry spell all the bachelorettes have been crying over."

Bruce's smile faltered. He'd easily let that part of his facade fall by the wayside. Alfred used to facilitate most of his dates, no doubt hoping Bruce would eventually connect with someone. On his own, Bruce was no more eager to cause inevitable heartbreak, especially when he was coming to terms with why John so often occupied his mind.

Plus hearing that remark directed at Selina was just plain awkward.

She didn't have any appreciation for it herself. "Oh, you're mistaken, dear," she said to Sylvia with a haughty affectation. "Trixie Vanderbilt, Golden Years Cosmetics. Don't you agree that the Wayne brand should delve into beauty products? Couldn't you use a better developed hair dye?"

"Trixie" maintained an ingenuous look as Sylvia sputtered a reply. Ferris took Bruce's shoulder and steered him away a few paces.

"Let the ladies talk lipstick," Ferris said with a practiced chuckle. "I'd like a moment with you about Arkham."

Bruce nodded. "GothCorp research could make real gains in bridging our understanding of how physical health—"

"I don't need a speech," Ferris said with goodnatured impatience. "I get it. After what your father did, of course you want to make it right, show the city that it's not always apple and tree."

"Sure," Bruce said warily.

Ferris dropped his hand and his voice. "I've heard the salacious rumors about why you're so interested in the Halloween Hospital, but I've spent a lot of time dealing with medical equipment myself." He winked. "The kickbacks are substantial, right? And nobody questions it so long as you pass minimal regulations."

Bruce's skin crawled.

"Get that place maybe halfway decent, you could get the support to build a whole network and really reap the rewards." Ferris slapped Bruce's back. "Healthcare is a better cover than getting involved with the mob, right?"

Smile now distant, Bruce took a step away. "That's not the kind of partnership we're looking into at this time," he said, "but we appreciate your donation nonetheless."

Ferris, obliviously arrogant, took the distance for discretion. "Of course. We'll circle back in the future."

They returned to the women, and Ferris swept Sylvia away to hobnob elsewhere.

Selina observed Bruce's face. "Another guy for the blacklist?" she asked.
Bruce nodded, thinking how he should have looked at GothCorp's financials. He would definitely "circle back" when he and Spectrum finally made a dent in their workload. The alcohol in his hand was suddenly more appealing.

"Could probably find dirt on everyone in this room," Selina commented. She added, "You said John wasn't coming?"

"Yeah, why?" Bruce muttered as he tipped his drink back.

"Yoo-hoo!" trilled John's voice.

Bruce half-choked, half-spat the champagne back into his glass.

The crowd at the hall entrance had parted, and there stood John with Lucia and Adelina on either arm. He surveyed the guests with a shit-eating grin while Lucia blew kisses. Adelina looked simply curious, rising on her toes to peer at a painting across the room. All three were dressed for the wrong decade.

From the shapely bodice of Lucia's dress came an explosion of even more hot pink taffeta: an enormous bow affixed to her hip, a knee-length skirt bustled up in several layers, and head-sized ruffles that made up the single shoulder. Over her bare shoulder, she hitched the thin chain of a black sequined purse, and she wagged her fingers at the crowd. Her nails, like her pumps, matched her dress. She'd swept her hair off to one side in a long, teased mass.

Adelina's teased hair was pulled into a high ponytail and fixed with a big satin bow that matched her emerald green skirt. Her bodice was wrapped in black chiffon, and she wore a green bolero over top. She held onto the strap of her white leather crossbody bag, which was bigger than what women usually brought to these events, and nervously popped a heel in and out of its black flat.

John let go of the sisters' arms to pluck at his dark purple bowtie, which laid against a ruffled tuxedo shirt the color of cotton candy. The suit's cummerbund matched the bowtie, but the pants and jacket were bright turquoise. His white shoes looked like the same ones from Bruce's birthday, but the white gloves were new. John ran them over his slicked-back hair and appraised the room with a wicked gaze. His eyeshadow glittered even in the low light, purple and gold, with brushes of plum on his cheekbones and a thick coat on his lips. He'd pinned a freckled white lily to his lapel.

"Honestly," Selina said, "he pulls that off."

It didn't matter how good John looked. The gala guests only stared in response to his appearance, their expressions ranging from alarm to cautious interest, but a security guard was in action, a finger to his earpiece as he rushed up behind the party crashers. Bruce's glass nearly toppled over when he dropped it on a cocktail table on his way across the room, contradicting the cool look on his face.

"Our introductory performance is still days away!" John was saying to the guard in a friendly manner when Bruce reached them. "We can't have autograph hounds already!"

It seemed they'd already had an encounter outside; the guard's face was rigid with frustration. He noticed Bruce and straightened up, saying, "Your acquaintance and his friends are not on the list, sir."

"It's fine, uh, Gershwin," Bruce said, noting the tag on the man's lapel. "An oversight." He never wanted to throw John out of anything, and even if he did, he had a feeling John was prepared to make a scene.
Probably regardless of what happened.

Lucia patted Gershwin's shoulder. "Told you we were on the secret list."

The guard narrowed his eyes at them. Adelina smiled and flashed the OK sign, which was apparently his prompt to give up and head back to the check-in.

To John, Bruce tensely said, "You didn't say you were coming."

"How often is happiness destroyed by foolish preparation!" John quoted, then loudly clapped his hands twice.

The room had already zeroed in on the new arrivals, and now everyone fell silent, and Bruce would give anything for a smoke bomb.

"On behalf of all the kooks," John declared magnanimously with raised arms, "I thank you for your generous donations!"

Lucia and Adelina applauded daintily. The guests looked on with a mixture of bewilderment and anxiousness.

Bruce nervously moved to John's side and projected composure. "Yes," he agreed, "they are greatly appreciated."

The assurance was partly successful, with half the room seeming to return to their conversations. Bruce meant to take John aside, but the other man's head swiveled toward a tray being carried across the room.

He clasped his hands and bounced on his feet. "I see some arancini that need appreciation!"

Bruce nearly snagged him by the back of the collar, but John had already taken off, leaving his associates behind. Adelina walked toward a sculpture of a headless woman's torso, but Lucia just looked at Bruce, shoulders shaking with silent laughter.

"Do you think it's wise to enable this behavior?" Bruce asked coarsely.

Her brow arched and she propped a hand on her hip. "If 'this behavior' is having a good time at your expense, yeah." She winked and sauntered off.

A hand touched Bruce's arm. Selina had made her way over. "Uh, is there a problem?" she asked.

"I– no– I..." Bruce's hands clenched. "John and I are having a disagreement."

She looked across the room, where John demonstrated to an aggravated Cassandra Ellington and four others how he caught arancini in his mouth. "Well, if he just wants to hang out."

"I don't know what he wants," Bruce said lowly. "You know how much these things rely on appearances. If this gets out of– hey!"

He rushed over to Adelina, who was accepting champagne from a server. Bruce pulled the glass out of her hand and replaced it on the tray. "This girl is not of drinking age," he warned the server, who apologized and moved on.

Adelina pouted, turned on her heel, and stalked to the painting she'd been eyeing.

"Oh, come on," Selina commented from behind Bruce. "A buzzkill over a little drink?"
"Will you please," Bruce said shortly as he turned to her, "help me keep an eye on them?"

She sighed. "Babysitting adults is not what I expected from tonight," she said, but she headed in Lucia's direction.

Bruce made a beeline for John, who remained the focal point in Cassandra's circle.

"Oh, I dunno," John was saying while obnoxiously chewing a mouthful of rice and cheese. "Arkham had its high points over the years. When it came to drugs, they spared no expense if they really wanted you to be quiet, but it's a catch–twenty-two. Why would you wanna behave if you can get such a great reward for misbehaving?"

"Of course," Bruce broke in, joining the circle across from John, "now staff are screened more carefully to be sure appropriate disciplinary methods are used, and anonymous reporting is available, for patients as well as staff."

If it was possible to swallow disdainfully, John did.

Cassandra's disapproving gaze turned to Bruce. "I'm certainly glad to hear it, dearie, but my cousin, you know, is on the Arkham Board of Trustees, and he's very skeptical about these new treatments and practices."

Her cousin would probably love to get in on Ferris's kickback scheme, but Bruce didn't let that thought show on his face. "People are often skeptical of new methods, but Arkham's previous punishing atmosphere only made it a more violent place. A more compassionate approach has already improved the disposition of many patients, and if allowed the time, I believe in the long run we can get those people back to independent lives."

"Yes!" John said with that acid smoldering in his eyes. "That's all any of us wants, right? Agency in our choices? People in our lives who respect that?"

"Absolutely," Bruce replied intently. "People who want the best for their friends and family, who try to help their choices."

John held his gaze for a moment, then hummed. He rocked back and forth on his heels, nodding slowly, while Cassandra and the others waited in awkward silence.

He suddenly laughed and slapped the back of the elderly man next to him. "Oh, man, imagine Zsasz's life choices?"

"The serial killer?" Cassandra said, and news headlines practically flashed in her eyes. "I bet he's itching to be back out on the street with some agency!" John made a quick stabbing motion toward the ribs of the old man. "Phwip-phwip!"

A few gasps and a "my word!" erupted around the circle, but much louder was Lucia's voice over the soundsystem.

"Esteemed Gotham elite, the band has informed me that requests are out of the norm for these events!"

Bruce turned toward the string quartet, who'd been positioned on a plush black rug in the rear left corner. A couple microphones were set up to enhance the volume, and Lucia had taken one over. Standing nearby, Selina shot Bruce an apologetic look while covering half her face.
"But come on," Lucia continued, "people with this much cash must know how to have a good time! Let's have some variety!"

"Ooh, dinner and a show!" John chirped as Bruce hurried away.

He excused himself rapidly through the room, running across a security guard doing the same. Bruce stopped him with a raised finger and a smile, which disappeared when he turned back to Lucia.

"I've got a good one," she promised, "though I'm a little fuzzy on the lyrics." She covered the mic and conversed with the band.

When Bruce reached Selina, he hissed, "I thought you said you'd help me!"

She lifted her hands in a helpless gesture. "Was I supposed to dropkick her?"

The cellist was apparently not as unamused as the rest of the quartet, because he started plucking repetitively. Lucia turned back to the crowd. She cleared her throat and started shouting more than singing.

"You'll never live like common people! You'll never do whatever common people do! You'll never fail like common people! You'll never watch your life slide out of view, And dance and drink and scr--"

Bruce tore the mic from her hand. He brought it to his own mouth as they exchanged glares. "Excuse the, uh..."

John's lone applause rang in the silence. He added a whoop for good measure when Bruce looked over.

"The impromptu sampling," Bruce said quickly, "from the Circus's upcoming show in the Village. It's important to support your local arts, thank you."

He shoved the mic back onto its stand, and in that time Lucia had merged back into the gala. Selina had gone off somewhere as well. The quartet resumed their scheduled program, and Bruce scanned the room for either woman. Somehow Lucia's neon eluded him, and he spotted Adelina instead as she hid behind a ficus. Bruce reached her just as she lifted champagne to her lips.

He confiscated the glass. "People have licenses to lose," he scolded. "Do you do this to Rosaline?"

Adelina just folded her arms and gave him a dirty look.

Bruce sighed. "Look, I would never intentionally hurt John. I want to make things right, but it'll be easier if this night doesn't turn into a disaster."

Her arms stayed crossed, but she seemed more pensive, looking away.

"I'm not asking you to take my side, but could you stay out of trouble?"

She looked at him skeptically, but she shrugged and went into her bag. She pulled out a small pad and a drawing pencil and turned to the Victorian painting of a dancing couple mounted just behind her.
"Yes, that's fine," Bruce said approvingly as she started sketching. "Thank you."

As he handed the glass off to another passing waiter, he caught sight of John's hair— and of Selina speaking to him, the rigid set of his shoulders, and the severe judgement error in asking Selina to help de-escalate. Bruce didn't know how to explain why he invited a known criminal while excluding John, but getting over there only became more crucial when Veronica joined the pair.

By the time Bruce speedwalked to John's side, John was kissing the back of Veronica's right hand. Her left held a mostly empty glass, and her face was flushed. She giggled delightedly, without a care about the purple lipstick left on her skin.

"I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to meet you, uh…" Veronica couldn't find the answer in the ceiling. "Oh, it was months ago now."

John replied cheerily, "Yeah, I'm not sure why Bruce avoided it!"

"Because you didn't want to miss the start of the show!" Bruce said with a light laugh. "And afterward, you know how the crowd just surges out."

"Oh, I know," Veronica said breezily, slurring a bit. "Everyone's in such a rush-rush-rush!" She gestured to Selina. "I'm sorry. We haven't met, have we?"

"Yes, Bruce!" John said with a vicious smile that Bruce was getting too familiar with. "Introduce the stray to Ronnie!"

Veronica didn't catch the insult. She extended her hand to Selina. "Oh, Veronica is just fine. 'Ronnie' is from my younger days."

"Ages ago?" John asked as the women shook hands.

Bruce shot him a warning look, but Veronica just snorted and toasted him. "At least I don't hold the record for unnecessary surgery in this crowd." She knocked the rest of the drink back and struggled not to smile as she swallowed. "Excuse me," she said to Selina. "I shouldn't be so 'improper' around people I've just met, Miss…?"

"Trixie Vanderbilt," Selina supplied. "It's no problem."

John raised an unimpressed eyebrow at the name. "Little on the nose," he muttered.

Veronica missed that, too. "Oh, my ex-husband would say it's a problem! One of my many faults against his stellar character." She rolled her eyes.

She was too caught up in the implosion of her marriage for John to offend her. Bruce managed to feel a tad at ease.

Naturally, right then a hand fell on his shoulder. Gershwin had returned. "Sir, can I speak to you?"

Bruce reluctantly followed him to the side of the hall, wondering where Lucia was. Had she done something while he and Selina were distracted? Or had any of the three done something no one noticed until now?

"What is it?" Bruce asked.

"The younger lady," Gershwin said, "she's selling art."

Bruce gaped. "She's selling the paintings?!!"
"No, no," Gershwin said. "She's asking the patrons if they want portraits for fifty dollars."

That was it? It was a little tacky, but the whole event was about giving money. "And?"

"I assume some kind of permit—"

"Look, unless a museum rep complains or she's scrawling on the art, I don't care," Bruce said, turning away and heading back.

He didn't enjoy brushing anyone off, but he needed to deal with John and Lucia alienating potential donors, not harmless busking.

Speaking of Lucia, she was a pink burst at the edge of a group clustered around one of the abstract paintings. The elderly man John had mock-stabbed was enjoying the attention of the others. Nothing was clearly wrong, but Bruce moved in to evaluate.

"Really a mediocre work from the artist's blue period," the old man assessed, adjusting his spectacles. "The attention it gets is a product of the more pedestrian mainstream, unfortunately. I'm sure the public school trips love it."

The chuckle that rippled through the group made Bruce flush with mortification. Lucia's eyes narrowed.

"Chadwick, weren't you at that auction?" one of the sycophants asked eagerly. "For the Robham piece?"

Bruce was somewhat familiar with the artist's name, a largely anonymous figure specializing in political graffiti. Lucia seemed more familiar; she snorted and muttered under her breath.

"Oh, yes," Chadwick replied with pride. "What a moment, to almost become part of a work of art!"

He launched into the story, though Bruce was sure everyone else already knew it. "You see, the Robham was sold at the end. There was quite the back and forth, and an overseas buyer procured it. Then at the bang of the gavel, a spark lit the center of the canvas, and the whole center burned away!"

The group nodded and hummed knowingly. Lucia rolled her eyes.

Chadwick caught the look. "It was quite the statement, young lady," he chided. "In the future the bid will no doubt be much higher. Quite the achievement."

"Yes, it sounds very expensive," Lucia said, nodding seriously. "I'm sure it means something. Excuse me; I should split my time evenly amongst the windbags."

She left with a dramatic turn, her bag swinging and hitting one of the women in the butt. All the bewildered, aghast looks shifted to Bruce.

After a moment, he said, "The champagne is excellent. I'll send someone over," before escaping.

He headed back to John, but John had disappeared. Selina was left alone to receive Veronica's tipsy, tearful ranting.

"And if that sleaze thinks he's getting custody of Bunny," Veronica sniffled, "he won't know what hit him!"

Selina had an arm around the redhead's shoulders and helpfully pressed a tissue under her eyes.
"Absolutely," she replied. "It'll be fine. He's not worth the mascara."

Veronica shook her head. "I named her Bunny, after his mother." She covered her face.

"Is she... okay?" Bruce asked.

"Just a good cry," Selina said. "I'll take her to the ladies' room. John went thataway." She gestured with her head.

In the center of the hall, John spoke with the Boyles, who evaluated him over their champagne. Bruce was getting less agile with each room crossing; this time he nearly knocked over a server carrying a tray of stuffed mushrooms.

Sylvia peered at the lily on John's jacket. "Oh, that is just lovely!" she exclaimed. "Do you happen to know the species?"

"I can't say I do," John giggled, smiling big at Bruce.

"Ferris may know. He worked in his aunt's flower shop as a boy." Sylvia looked to her husband expectantly.

Ferris stared at John like he was a strange dog on the street. "It's just a flower, Syl."

John tugged his lapel, examining the blossom with sudden curiosity. "It is very pretty," he said. "It would be nice to know. A whole bouquet could brighten up the ol' hacienda!"

"Come on, Ferris," Sylvia pushed.

"Fine," Ferris grunted, leaning forward to inspect.

"Where did you get it?" his wife asked John.

Ferris frowned. "Hold on--"

John slapped the breast of his jacket, and a stream of water sprayed from the center of the lily and hit Ferris right between the eyes. Ferris sputtered and reeled back, holding his drink aloft.

"John!" Bruce exclaimed.

"I got it at Arty McGee's!" John cackled.

"As we can see!" Sylvia said harshly, grabbing her husband's glass before he dropped it.

Ferris yanked a handkerchief from his pocket and blotted his face. "This is hardly the place for juvenile pranks!" he snapped.

"Jeez, did you donate the cost of a sense of humor?" John asked.

"The disrespect!" Ferris balled up the handkerchief in his fist and shook it in John's face. "Never in my life--"

"Wait, wait!" John broke in. Taking both drinks from Sylvia, he held up the flutes with a wide-eyed, innocent expression. "You wouldn't hit a guy with glasses, would you?"

Both Boyles were struck silent. Sylvia gaped while a beet color crept up Ferris's neck.
John burst into laughter and practically skipped away with their champagne.

The couple turned their disbelief onto Bruce, and he held out his hands in a calming gesture. "I am so—"

"If these are the kinds of– of animals you support…" Ferris seethed.

Bruce bristled. "It's water, Ferris."

"Yes, no need for name-calling," Sylvia said, but she added, "I think we'll head home."

"And I'm cancelling my check!" Ferris sneered.

That wasn't a terrible loss, but as the pair stormed toward the exit, Bruce saw they weren't the only ones reconsidering their support. About a third of the room was either waiting at the coat check or heading outside to the valet stand.

A thick sheet of paper suddenly appeared in front of his face, quickly replaced with Cassandra's angry expression.

"Is this some kind of elaborate joke, Bruce?" she demanded, shaking the paper. "Are we paying to be insulted?"

He grabbed the paper so he could get a look at it. It was a caricature of Cassandra that enhanced every wrinkle on her face. She wore a long fur coat that seemed luxurious until you noted the fox heads with X's for eyes trailing behind her. Though the drawing had no color, the smear the coat left behind was obviously blood.

Bruce's first thought was that he didn't realize Cassandra's reputation was so well known that it reached Adelina. By the time he thought to put a balm on the situation, Cassandra had already flounced away.

Another guest, a man Bruce hardly knew, marched up with his own drawing, though it was crumpled between his hands. "What is the meaning of this?!"

"They just…" Had a disproportionate sense of justice? "Let me get a handle on them," Bruce finished weakly.

"It's a bit late for that!" the man said, pointing.

To the right of the marble staircase, John had added the Boyles' drinks to dozens of other flutes covering the surface of a cocktail table. On one side, Lucia held out her arms as a gesture for the onlookers to keep back. On the other, John carefully took hold of the corners of the white tablecloth. A few people feebly shouted that it wasn't a good idea, but no one tried to stop the inevitable damage until Adelina ran over, waving her hands. John put his hands on his hips, annoyed, but she just grabbed one of the glasses and walked away.

Bruce squashed her victory as he stormed past and snatched the champagne from her hand. He grasped John's arm before the eager man grabbed the tablecloth again.

"We're talking," Bruce ordered, putting the glass back in its place. "Now." He didn't wait for a response as he dragged John away.

"Oh, so you don't believe in inertia either!" John complained.
"Don't touch that table!" Bruce barked as they passed Lucia, who put up her hands.

He headed for the central staircase. At the bottom post where he'd started the night, he saw that Adelina had run right into Selina— who was trading a champagne glass for a look at the girl's sketchbook. When they saw Bruce and the look on his face, they quickly aborted the trade, Adelina hugging the pad to her chest and Selina looking around the room as she drank.

Bruce didn't ease his grip as he pulled John up the steps.

"I know you prefer a rough hand, buddy, but come on!" John giggled.

They reached the balcony, where round tables with eight shining place settings each were lined up all along the balustrades. The entrances to the rear and side wings were roped off for the night, and the lights over the cafe tucked into the righthand corner from the stairs were dimmed. The inner kitchen was open for the caterer's use, however, and the maître d' and a couple waitstaff conferred in the seating area. Bruce shot them his darkest billionaire glare, and they retreated through a door behind the counter.

The first tables on the right and left had a wide space between them for the staircase traffic, and Bruce stopped there. John yanked free and rubbed at his arm.

He still, still, looked at Bruce like this was all his fault. "Yes?" he said testily.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Bruce burst. "This is a fundraiser and you have the funds running out the door!"

John pressed a fist to his mouth, his other hand cupping his elbow. "So terrible for them to be in the vicinity of the mentally ill," he sighed. "So much better to be at one of those dinners where you can socialize with polite war criminals instead."

Bruce lifted his hands helplessly. "They're leaving because you are insulting and harassing them!"

"Well, that's the best you can expect from me, isn't it?!" John retorted.

Bruce took that in. His face dropped into his hand. "Let me get this straight," he said. "You're acting the way you think I don't want you to act, to prove to me how wrong I am for thinking you act that way."

John let a beat pass. "When you put it that way, it sounds ridiculous."

Bruce's head snapped back up. "It sounds selfish!"

John scoffed. "Oh, yeah, those apologies seem real genuine now."

"If you're pissed at me, why are you taking it out on a benefit for people who need help?"

"This benefit is for a bunch of rich old fogies to look down on those people and feel good about themselves!"

"This benefit is to make sure Arkham stays on track to operating like a hospital where people actually give a damn, instead of going back to a hellhole! But I guess you're sabotaging it because you just loved the way Arkham was, and you can't wait to go back!"

"I handled it fine!" John declared. "I handled everything fine without you"— he jabbed a finger at Bruce's chest— "telling me what to do for a long time!"
"So this is a farewell gesture? Are you heading over to recommit yourself tomorrow? Or are you ordering a ride right from here?"

John wrinkled his nose like Bruce was an idiot. "I'm talking worst case scenario, obviously!" He stuck his hands in his pockets and walked over to the rope blocking off the rear wing. "I won't end up back there," he said more quietly.

"Because you're so good at keeping your head?" Bruce said, following a few steps.

"Yes!" John snapped, whirling around.

Bruce gestured backward, toward the stairs and the scene they'd left behind. "You think that was a good demonstration?"

John shrunk a little. "Well, that– that's different."

"How is it different?"

John balled his hands, his arms tightly pressed to his sides. "Why do I have to act like it's okay that you were a jerk?!"

"Because– this isn't about–" God, Bruce was already tired of yelling. He didn't want to yell!

He stopped. He shouldn't yell. It wouldn't help. He took a breath.

"It wasn't okay," he said evenly, "what I said about losing your mind, or spying on you. And I don't expect you to act like it."

John frowned, like the acquiescence could be some kind of trick. Bruce hated that look.

"I thought…" Now Bruce's hands went to his pockets. "I know I broke your trust, but if you're so upset that you're willing to wreck an event that… that I'm only holding because of what I learned because of you, I don't know why you couldn't talk to me instead."

"We did talk," John said through clenched teeth, "and you were very uncouth."

"That doesn't mean we never try to talk again."

"Excuse me for not feeling chatty when I'm hurt."

A growing clamor drifted up from the first floor. Bruce didn't even want to think about what the Palmera sisters were up to now.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Still sorry. I have some things to learn about keeping my own head." Despite himself, Bruce laughed a little.

"I fail to see what's funny here," John sulked. "And that's saying something."

"It's just… I did things that hurt you because I didn't want you to get hurt." He smiled wryly. "Put that way, it sounds ridiculous."

John blinked, and then he chuckled, the first genial laugh Bruce had heard from him all night.

It brightened Bruce's smile, which was a mistake. John pulled his face back into a scowl and crossed his arms.
"You can't charm your way out of this," he growled, stomping right up to Bruce. "I'm not just going
to forget everything!"

Bruce's stomach sank. He thought he'd made at least an inch of progress. "I'm not asking you to--"

"Excuse you!" John's glare shifted over Bruce's shoulder. "The vermin problem is probably
downstairs, pal," he said.

As Bruce turned, he registered the respirator, the gloved hand, and the spraycan before an acrid,
bitter cloud plumed in his face.

He lashed out reflexively, striking the assailant before pushing John back with his other arm. He
faced the attacker, but he could hardly see with his burning eyes, could hardly breathe with his
constricting lungs, and everything was just noise, shouts and thuds and his own wheezing. His
hands came up to his collar, trying to pull it open, make more room for good air to push out the bad
and give him just a moment of relief, a moment to get his bearings, but the moment didn't come.

He needed it, needed to stop the attacker, to keep John safe, to keep everyone safe, but when he
tried to look around, he found his tears melted the room. The tapestries streaked down the walls in
muddy colors, and the wine glasses bowed onto the tablecloths that dripped like wax. The white
lights screamed as they expanded, slow and hot and echoing like gunshots.

No, there wasn't-- None of this was-- But the shots were loud and quick and easy and cruel. Where
was John? John was in danger-- John was danger; he'd had a gun once, shot it wildly, his laugh
ricoeheting off the plant's steel walls--

Not the plant, not the plant, Bruce had gone to the museum, and John wasn't laughing, he was
calling for Bruce, but that couldn't be true because Bruce had screwed up again, had left collateral
damage like always, hardly better than his father even though he should be, he wanted to be, but he
never would and that was why he was alone. John was right, justice was an excuse and Bruce
knew he couldn't deny it even then, back in the-- in the--

The plant, John's skin taking on the toxic green glow of the vapor from the vats, truth spitting out
from between his teeth: Bruce was picking and choosing, he didn't know what he was doing, his
rules were a child's security blanket that could never staunch the bleeding and never keep him
warm not in that cold alley face down bleeding out just like Alfred said before he left far away
Bruce let him go didn't stop him deserved to be alone with the mission the endless mission who
would want a part of that why did he think Selina would stay why would he put John in that
position why would he tell John the truth why shouldn't John hate him--

"Bruce!"

The dripping room swirled around John's voice, around two grappling figures, their shapes
spinning in the opposite direction, solidifying into John and the stranger with the respirator-- no,
Lock-Up's full face mask and John's black-streaked face and bloodied cackling mouth-- now
screaming, John white-faced and screaming and Bruce wasn't holding him he was throttling him--

Bruce lunged and locked his arm around his own throat, tore himself off John. He couldn't let him
do this, wouldn't let it happen, and he threw the twisting body away forced it out how could he
ever do that he would never hurt John but he did

He did over and over and over John's scar proved Bruce couldn't stop proved why Alfred left why
everyone would leave him in the alley cold like his parents' shells couldn't touch couldn't hold
alone the walls bending overhead closing in
Chapter End Notes

As usual, it's all fun and games until the terrorists show up.

Lucia tried to sing this song. One of John's lines is a ref to Batman '89. If you enjoyed that or any of the other pre-horror bits, please leave a comment!
... Let's Start a Fire In an Alleyway

Chapter Notes

After a delay, here we are! Still aiming for every three weeks, but honestly, I've reached the fuzzier portion of the outline. Good times!

If you've got a needle phobia, you're not gonna like a section of this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Do you want coffee or anything?"

Spectrum turned from the window overlooking Robinson Park, one of many in Mayor Garcia's expansive loft apartment. Nasim, the mayor's assistant, waited for an answer at an awkward distance. Behind him, the mayor herself sat in the corner of a leather sectional in the center of the room, surrounded by police officers. Everyone wore bulletproof vests. The TV over the fireplace played a cooking competition show at low volume, in an attempt to keep the atmosphere light.

"I'm fine," Tiffany replied, the modulator in her mask helping hide any sign of nervousness.

Everything was fine so far, though. Batman couldn't convince Gordon to stay at home with a security detail like the rest of the targets, but the commissioner was with a large squad hustling the City Council to a secure location, so he was as safe as anyone else. If Batman was right about the likely time of attack, they'd use this night to establish the routine for the weekend.

Unless he was wrong. Spectrum remained alert.

She was watching over the mayor until Bruce got suited up. When he took over, she'd join the officers guarding the Arkham targets. Tiffany had no issue with the plan, but it was irritating how much the mayor agreed.

"Remind me when the Batman will arrive?" Garcia called over anxiously.

Spectrum resisted the temptation to reveal that Batman was just a very confident, armored rich guy. "When he's done checking out some leads," she lied.

"If this Lock-Up is a computer guy," Nasim said, "I think I'd rather you stick around."

The profile on Lock-Up was still pretty bare, but of course she couldn't say that. "Batman and I have access to the same resources."

"True," Nasim said quietly, "but he makes me uneasy."

He clearly intended the remark as a compliment, but no one wanted to be told they weren't intimidating when fighting crime. Also, was this guy seriously making shy eyes at her?

She narrowed her own gaze, obscured by translucent lavender lenses. "He should," she replied in monotone.

Nasim seemed disappointed in her response. He should have been disappointed in his priorities.
The tablet on her hip trilled three times and her heart skipped. She'd set that sound for one thing.

She excused herself and escaped to the relative seclusion of the front hallway. An officer standing by the door acknowledged her with a nod, and she reciprocated as she detached the tablet from the holster on her hip. As Lock-Up's site loaded, she tuned the audio to her ear buds. She'd see the broadcast first. It could be just another speech. No need to alarm anyone yet.

Lock-Up's head and shoulders took up most of the screen, but she could see some of the wall behind him. The shade and texture were different than last time. A location change?

He boomed in her ears: "Our reckoning is underway! We will show Gothamites the courage of our convictions."

"Dammit," Spectrum hissed, opening the link to Batman in another window.

"Your fellow soldiers are capturing multiple perpetrators for our demonstration," Lock-Up continued. "Not just lifelong scumbags like Sal Maroni, who mistakes his house for an impenetrable castle, but Commissioner Gordon, who deters police officers from fulfilling their potential!"

"They're coming!" Tiffany barked at the officer, simultaneously sending messages to the other teams that the attack was imminent, if they hadn't been hit already. The link to Bruce beeped. And beeped. And beeped.

"Gordon will be a hunt tonight, but the rest, we know just where they are."

The officer was on his walkie-talkie to the guys outside, and Garcia's panicked voice traveled from the main room. Why the hell wasn't Bruce answering? Tiffany couldn't wait any longer. She had to join the–

"If you're in range of the art museum, watch for your brothers dragging out a true blue-blooded coddler, Bruce Wayne."

It was rude of Bruce to make a good callback in the middle of their argument, even more one that really was kinda funny, and doubly more that he did it while seeming actually very sorry, which made John feel like it was possible to not be pissed at him until the end of time, and even like crashing the gala hadn't been the best course of action.

But what about Bruce's courses of action?! John's anger spiked, and he didn't care much about the man in black coming up the stairs. Every dull doof in this place was wearing black, including Bruce with his sad, chiseled face. Even when the interloper pulled on a gas mask over his nose and mouth and took out a spraycan, John's first thought was taking care of rats in All's Well's basement.

Then in an instant, the stranger sprayed an orange fog in Bruce's face, and Bruce nailed the guy in the neck, and John barely got a whiff of the rancid spray before Bruce shoved him away. John not-so-elegantly fell on his ass, choking on his own surprised shout. A cacophony exploded downstairs, gunshots and pounding feet and screaming.

Gas Mask had fallen and the aerosol can thudded to the carpet. It rolled toward John, and he scrambled for it on hands and knees, but so did the stranger in black— not a suit but a collection of tactical gear. John lunged and got hold of the can first, hands grasping the middle, but Mask's hands closed over the top and bottom. Bruce was still on his feet, coughing and hacking, while the men on the floor wrenched the can back and forth, white gloves versus black.
Mask tried smacking the can to activate the spray, but the twist lid had slid askew, and John wasn't about to twist the body into place. So on a tug back, Mask instead smashed his head into John's. The pain sparked a burst of laughter, and then John tugged forth and sank his teeth into his opponent's exposed wrist. Mask yowled and jerked away, letting go of the can.

John held it aloft with a triumphant "ha!"—until Mask's fist snapped forward into John's stomach. He did his best to keep down the arancini, but the same couldn't be said for holding onto the can. It slipped free and skipped across the rug under a far table, clattering unseen against chair legs.

Mask started to get up, eyes trained on the table, but John switched priorities. He leaped to his feet and grabbed the back of the attacker's armored vest, tossing him onto a table by the stairs. It buckled down the center under Mask's weight, the dinnerware and tablecloth piling on top of him.

With a cackle, John turned away. "Hey, buddy!"

Bruce deserved a shot at this cretin, and he must have recovered from that hairspray by now—except he hadn't. He gasped for air, moving jerkily as he stared wide-eyed at the walls.

An angry muffled cry swung John back around just as a chair came down legs first, one nailing him in the head. With a yelp he fell back, hitting the floor, and Mask slammed the chair down again. John kicked out just in time, his foot catching the edge of the seat and jamming the round back into Mask's face. Mask stumbled back but managed to hold onto the chair as John rolled back to his feet.

The noise downstairs hadn't died down. "Sheesh," John giggled, "all this for what, ransom? You don't strike me as Agency or the mob."

Mask seemed frustrated; he chucked the chair at John, who side-stepped with an "oop!" Now that he had a moment, John could see that the other man was on the young side, going by the smooth skin of the top half of his face, floppy brown hair, and slight frame. Definitely not a puppet of the usual suspects.

John's giggles dissolved into a disappointed sigh. "Ah, money. Root of all evil, endgame of all dirty deeds! Typ-i-cal." He clucked his tongue.

"You're the one supplicating to Wayne's money!" Mask erupted, darting forward and punching erratically.

John barely managed to dodge as his own indignance reared up. "Excuse you!" he retorted, landing a punch on Mask's chin. "You know noth—"

Nothing about me, he meant to say, but Mask suddenly ducked and socked him in the side. John doubled over and Mask grabbed his collar with both hands, sharply kneeing him in the stomach.

"We're here for justice!" the young man shouted through the respirator, yanking upwards. "For order!"

John's collar tightened around his throat, and his limbs were being very uncooperative after that blow.

"Little help?" he gasped. "Bruce!" They'd gotten all turned around in the fight, and Bruce wasn't in his sightline anymore.

"That elite asshole is coming with us!" Mask growled. "He's part of the disease! Lock-Up will show everyone!" His hands snapped from the collar to John's throat.
John pried at the man's fingers. He really didn't want to choke to death at the hands of some delusional peon. Why couldn't this city's so-called crime bosses have a hand in their own dirty work?!

Maybe he'd get the chance to ask in person. Bruce suddenly appeared over Mask's shoulder, arm latching around his throat and sharply drawing back. John was yanked forward just a step before the hold on his own throat broke, as Bruce lurched into a half-spin and flung the sycophant away. Mask reeled, trying to grab the edge of the broken table, but he found no purchase and toppled over the balustrade.

John cringed even as he knelt at Bruce's side. Bruce had collapsed on his hands and knees, fingernails scraping the carpet. John nervously patted his back.

"Uhhhhh, you did good," he said, staring at the railing. "Nothing to worry about, not at all."

Then he broke away, running over to peer down to the first floor. He exhaled and wiped his brow when he saw the goon lying on his back, twitching atop a fallen ficus and a shattered pot. Bruce would not have been thrilled if he'd accidentally cracked someone's noggin open.

Looking out over the rest of the hall, John spotted at least ten more crackable noggins, each wearing a respirator along with a personal take on tactical gear. Most of the men carried guns—shotguns and pistols and semi-automatic rifles. Firing just one shot on entering could have turned the guests into obedient cattle, but instead disorder had triggered a stampede. It looked like most of the fancypants had knocked down the screens blocking the first-floor wings and made a run for it. Two goons stayed behind to prevent anyone from going out the front door, but other goons came in and out of the wings, guns held at shoulder height. John heard shots, some right on the hall and others echoing from elsewhere, just like all the screaming.

One goon came out from the archway beneath John and knelt by his twitching comrade. He didn't seem that concerned, judging by the lack of urgency in his movements. He looked up toward the railing and John ducked down. Between the balusters, John watched him move toward the staircase, but then a walkie-talkie attached to his shoulder blipped.

"West wing, west wing!"

There was the urgency, as the goon ran off toward the action.

John rose up again, just high enough that his eyes were above the railing. Of the people left in the hall, a few were bodies, most of which wore security earpieces. Of the living, many seemed to have gotten a dose of the same bad perfume as Bruce. A man writhed on the floor under the watch of his crying wife. A shrieking woman fought off a breathing security guard who tried to stop her from scratching her bloodied arms. Two women stood in the sparse shelter of a ficus, hands on each other's shoulders, the first encouraging her friend to breathe while the second coughed endlessly. If only Bruce's reaction was more like that last one!

Beneath the arch of a wing close to the door crept a shock of pink: Lucia, grasping Adelina's arm. They were just out of sight of the men guarding the exit. Lucia spotted John, her face turned up to the balcony. He could tell she was worried, and she probably felt like she shouldn't leave him behind, which was sweet but stupid.

John picked up a fallen wine glass and crept to the other side of the stairs, between the table there and the railing. With a mournful sigh, he tossed the glass over and ducked so he was once again obscured by the balusters. Below, the carefully balanced table of champagne tilted on the glass's impact, several flutes shattering, then the whole arrangement toppled over in a bubbly cascade of
shards.

"The hell?" exclaimed one of the goons at the front door, and predictably he and his partner came forward a few strides, even though they'd only accomplish making their shoes a sticky mess.

But it was enough that Lucia and Adelina slipped just behind them and ran outside.

"Did you see how I handled that?" John quietly snickered as he crouch-walked around the table, toward where he'd left Bruce to catch his breath. "Not a single stab–"

His voice congealed. Bruce had collapsed on his side, arms wrapped around himself, eyes wide, chest heaving. John crawled the rest of the way over.

He swallowed and managed another laugh, weak and nervous. "Get it together, buddy!"

Even as John waved a hand in front of his face, Bruce stared at the carpet. His hair looked glossy with sweat instead of gel. He jolted at a burst of static, followed by a voice crackling, "Report!"

John followed the sound with his eyes to another walkie talkie left in the divot of the wrecked table. "If nobody finds Wayne," the voice went on, "we got Vreeland."

John snorted. "Find Wayne?" He turned back to Bruce with his most encouraging grin. "Not this amateur operation! Come on, we can take them–"

Bruce whipped out his arm and grabbed the ruffles of John's shirt, jerking him closer. "No! Don't!" he shouted. Just a narrow ring of blue enclosed his dilated pupils.

John slapped his hands over Bruce's mouth. "Quiet!"

Bruce twisted his face away, shouting again, "Don't!"

"Okay, I won't!" John hissed. "If you stop yelling!"

Bruce's gaze shifted to his own hand, and he abruptly let John go. He made a weak attempt to move away, shoes scraping twice on the rug, before he curled up on the floor again. "I didn't," he gasped, clutching his hand to his stomach. "I'm sorry, I didn't…"

John had thought the spray was some kind of tear gas, but it was clearly something else. He'd seen Bruce fight off surges of aggression from the Children of Arkham's drug, but this stuff was more intense, and instead of angry, it made Bruce so…

Bruce wasn't supposed to get scared, not like this.

"Please say this is a scene you arranged to make me feel bad," John said with a strained smile. His hand hovered over Bruce's shoulder, not sure if contact was a good idea.

"Bachman!" blasted a voice downstairs. "What the fuck?"

"I think he fell," responded another at lower volume.

"No shit. Did you check up there?"

"We're supposed to hold the door."

"You're suppose– Fuckin' useless."
Oh, this whole situation was just malarkey as far as John was concerned. How could Bruce let himself get drugged again?! Terrible habit, especially when people were trying to kidnap you.

The plural was the pickle, John thought as he got to his feet, grabbed Bruce's lapels, and started dragging. If it was just one or two guys, John could handle them and get Bruce out of here. But with several, someone could grab Bruce while John was fending the others off.

This was where unrestrained violence could really come in handy, but noooo. If someone died, Bruce would get all overwrought when he was back to himself, even if it was in self-defense, or Bruce-defense. Plus an incapacitated Bruce actually had a risk for getting hurt, and John hadn't spent so much time trying not to do that for nothing!

It also occurred to him, as he lugged his friend around the corner of the balcony, that Bruce was probably right about legal scrutiny. Even if for the greater good, John's behavior here could be picked apart by the authorities.

A very large pickle, all of this. He did not relish it, ha.

He set Bruce down by a table and crouched, lifting the tablecloth. The idea was to let Bruce power through this in hiding, but he was not exactly receptive. He suddenly came back to life, swiping at the air and trying to protect his face, as if John had released some swarm.

"No, no, no, no" wrenched out of his chest.

John gritted his teeth and grabbed for Bruce's wrists. The table only semi-hid them from the stairs, and this racket didn't improve the odds of not being spotted. Cheese and crackers, how did he reactivate stealth mode?!

"Shh shh shh!" he tried, failing to channel Dr. Leland. It was hard to feel calm and soothing when Bruce kept making those panicked noises and was still strong enough to fend him off. "Will you stop it?!" John whispered. "You are freaking me out!"

Then it was John's wrists in Bruce's bruising group. Bruce looked right at him, but through him. Despite the air conditioning, sweat beaded on his face.

"I can't," Bruce rasped, to John, to someone, to no one. "I can't, I can't…" His grip slowly loosened.

John pulled free and carefully took hold of Bruce's shoulders, easing him back to the floor. "It– it's gonna be okay."

Except not, if the telltale click of a safety directly behind his head was any indication.

It was too close, John knew. Even as he turned to grab for the barrel, he expected it to go off in his face.

Instead he saw Selina's shin plow into the goon's throat.

The silver pistol went off, and the bullet zipped past John's left ear as the man hit the floor. The gun tumbled on the rug as Selina, having jumped into the kick, landed on both feet in her open-toed stilettos. Her skirt swirled around her thighs and her blonde locks around her tense face as she brought up her arms in a fighting stance. There was no need; the would-be shooter was out cold.

Looking up at her, John thought he could have fallen as hard as Bruce did– if not for his grudge revolving around just that.
"Are you okay?" Selina asked, stepping over the goon to grab the gun. She popped out the clip, and it was empty. "Trigger-happy nutcases," she spat and tossed the weapon away.

"At least they're socializing!" John said.

She knelt at his side. Despite the excitement, Bruce was off in his head again, breaths coming short and quick.

"Shit," she hissed. "That gas?"

John nodded. "Courtesy of Lock-Up, I hear! Whoever that is."

A flicker of recognition crossed her face. "We need to get out of here." She touched Bruce's arm. "Bruce, can you--"

Bruce sat up with a swing of his fist, missing Selina only because she purposefully fell back, and missing John because she pulled him with her. They both tensed, expecting another swing, but Bruce stayed where the punch pulled him, half twisted with his hands planted on the floor, head hanging between his arms. At least he was only wheezing now, not yelling. Sweat soaked his shirt collar.

"What good was all that meditation if you can't handle some hallucinogens?" John scolded as he and Selina got back on their knees.

"I don't think that helps," Selina said.

Well, she wasn't doing much... but she was right. When John needed help, Bruce hadn't reprimanded him. He'd made mistakes, sure, but he'd been patient and understanding.

John tried to channel that. He took a risk and moved closer, ducking his head to catch Bruce's eye. "Buddy, I am right here," he said, gingerly putting his hands on Bruce's shoulders. "Take a deep breath, and you'll be fine. Let's get out of here."

Bruce slowly lifted his head and looked at John. His eyes had lost some of that panicked flare, and John smiled a little.

Then Bruce's eyes glazed over and he slumped forward, leaving John to support his weight.

"Also not helping," John grunted.

"It works," Selina said. "You take his left."

Together, they slung Bruce's arms over their shoulders and lifted him to his feet. He turned out to be half-conscious and, luckily, pliable. For the most part he shuffled along with them toward the central museum wing.

"Where exactly are we going?" John asked, kicking down one of the stanchions holding up the rope.

"Service elevator," Selina said as they entered the dim hallway.

"Funny how you know where it is," John replied.

"I stole from this place six--" Bruce suddenly lurched into her, and she hoisted him upright. "Six years ago, smart ass," she finished. "But it is a shame I didn't fall off the wagon tonight. I'd have my equipment."
That checked out, John supposed… "You've heard of this Lock-Up, though?"

She snorted. "Yeah, from Bruce."

Oh. Well. Of course. Bruce didn't want John involved in crime fighting, so he wouldn't have brought it up. But he would bring it up to her, because why not?!

Bruce stumbled again, this time John's way, and for a split second John considered letting him fall. Instead, he boosted Bruce the way Selina had, because if John was going to have anything to say after tonight, it was going to be gloating about how good he was!

Because Bruce was going to be fine. He always pulled through.

The elevator was just off the end of the hall to the right. Thankfully, it opened immediately when John slapped the call button. As they maneuvered Bruce into the car, a glimpse down the hall revealed more black-clad men coming up the staircase.

John wasn't sure if the goons spotted them; it seemed likely, considering a turquoise suit was the opposite of camouflage. Selina kneed the button for the ground floor, and the doors closed. John braced for a wall of guns at the end of their short ride.

Disappointingly, the doors opened to a maintenance area with little more than a floor waxing machine and empty pallets. They pulled Bruce forward and found double doors on the left leading back to the entrance hall, then doors on the right with windows showing that they led outside. John could see a black-clad figure standing by what looked like a commercial van.

"Grabbing their ride is probably the fastest way out of here," Selina said.

"Okay," John said, mind working, "we pull the ol' disguise trick. We sneak back in and get the outfit off the guy Bruce threw off the balcony, get me dressed up, then sneak back here. I tell this idiot that I need help getting Bruce in the van, and when he gets close enough, I throw Bruce—"

Movement at the window: the van driver's face up close, eyes wide. He shouted into a walkie-talkie, and Selina lunged forward, slamming the door into him. John nearly buckled under Bruce's full weight, but he adjusted while listening to the punches and kicks.

Selina hurried back in, fixing her wig. "Let's go," she said breathlessly, getting back under Bruce's right side.

"My idea would've worked, too," John muttered.

Their ride, parked in the middle of a maintenance lot, was a personnel van with two rows of bench seats behind a sliding side door. John got in and pulled Bruce up by the arms onto the middle seat, Selina helping the best she could. When Bruce's legs were out of the way, Selina slid the door shut and jumped into the driver's seat. The keys dangled from the ignition, and with a hard twist she brought the van to life. She jerked the wheel and slammed her foot on the accelerator, swinging the van sharply around and onto the street.

John wrapped his arms around Bruce's torso, fighting to keep him off the floor, feeling his quick, ragged wheezes. Bruce's head was barely balanced on the armrest and his bleary eyes wandered, as if trying to follow something on the ceiling. His right arm dangled, brushing the back of the passenger seat. John laid a hand flat on Bruce's chest, wanting to will the other man's lungs to fill properly, and the thought was flicked away by Bruce's rapid heartbeat-beat-beat-beat.

But John could control his own breathing, deep and steady, just as all his doctors instructed. It
wasn't hard, even though he was feeling shaky, because the plan of action was obvious. Selina was going the wrong way, though.

"Gotham General is too far," he said. "Elliot Memorial--"

The lighting was suddenly brighter, John's shadow stark against the front passenger seat, and he turned to the back window. The high beams of a sedan came up on them fast.

"They have another ride," he informed Selina.

And, he saw as someone leaned out the passenger window, they still had those guns.

The rear window shattered and Selina shouted, hunkering down. John laughed as he ducked his head into Bruce's chest.

"Hoo boy!" he exclaimed. "You don't know what you're missing!"

Selina hunched over the wheel and sped up. John could hear and feel the van's straining motor. The sedan was nothing special but definitely in better shape; it eased up alongside them in the oncoming lane. Selina stomped on the accelerator as if there was a hidden speed beneath the floor.

With a flash and a bang, her window shattered and she fell away, over the shifter. John stared even as the pilotless van started to pull to the right. He didn't see blood, she had to be fine, it was ridiculous for these goons to get both the Bat and the Cat--

They hadn't. Selina popped up after only a moment and grabbed the wheel.

"Hold on!" she snarled.

John really should have remembered seat belt safety. Selina yanked the wheel left and slammed the van into the sedan, and Bruce fell between the front and middle seats, and it was probably his body smashing John's legs that kept John from flopping on top of him. The vehicles crunched and screeched, and murderous shouts came through the broken window. Selina swerved right, and John pulled free to cling to the back of the passenger seat like a koala before she jerked left again.

The second hit didn't happen; the sedan's brakes squealed and it fell back, leaving the van in the wrong lane in the path of a tow truck. Its horn blared and Selina lurched right, overcompensating and taking the van up onto the sidewalk. It scraped and banged along a brick wall for several feet, cracking the glass in the side window and popping the glovebox open. She pulled back onto the road, narrowly missing a couple coming out of a liquor store.

It was dandy that no random pedestrians had been splattered, but John was more focused on the glovebox. A handgun had been left inside.

"Bastards," Selina said, eyes on the rear mirror.

John looked back. The sedan was still in pursuit, framed by the shards left in the back window. He looked down. Bruce was still slotted between the seats, eyes closed now, not conscious enough to see this.

John held out his gloved hand in Selina's peripheral. "I won't tell if you won't."

Selina glanced from John's hand to the glovebox and to the road again. Her jaw tightened, but she grabbed the gun and put it in his palm. "Don't make me regret this."
"Yeah, yeah," John said, grasping the weapon's handle and clambering into the rear seat.

More shots rang out and he ducked. "Pull to the side again!" he yelled.

"What?"

"Pretty please!"

Selina complied, giving John a better view of the sedan's front left tire. Tongue poking out the corner of his mouth, he took aim and shot twice. The tire blew with a dusty burst, and the car spun out into the other lane. Selina course corrected in time to get out of the way of a pickup, which swerved around the van's rear to avoid the screeching sedan. The pickup clipped a fire hydrant and came to a stop in the road, while the sedan's spin ended when it smashed into an empty bus stop. John giggled at the gush of water rocketing above the scene, which grew ever smaller as sirens sounded.

"We're clear!" he announced, crawling back into the middle seat. "Ah haha, that was something wasn't it, Cat Lady?" Kneeling, he dropped the gun over the passenger headrest.

"Oh, yeah," Selina scoffed, briefly looking at him. He caught a flash of two thin red lines etched in her left cheek. "Something."

John snickered as he reached down and hooked his hand in Bruce's armpit. "Come back on up, pal," he said, tugging.

There was not even a weak attempt to fight John off, nor to follow his lead. Bruce's body was limp, eyes closed and head lolling back as John pulled him up.

"Bruce? Hey. Hey!"

The answer lay somewhere in the dark, but the dark was no longer familiar ground. It stretched all around, up and down, and in the numbing cold he didn't know if he was moving at all.

Sometimes a moment crept in, warm and soft, that told him to rest–

And then turned loud with an icy blast, a swarm bursting from the dark, wings flapping in his ears in warning. If he didn't find the answer, did he know what would happen?

It was too terrible to focus on, too awful to leave to someone else–

John and Selina, they–

They were out of reach. They should be. He couldn't pull them up after he'd fallen so far. He couldn't help. They were better without his help.

He couldn't feel the cold at all anymore. The dark had seeped into his pores, muscles, bones, and deeper. He thought he had more time, but there was no negotiation. He'd decided to go it alone, and that was it.

No answer, only a conclusion. Why fight it now?

This was not how Selina's night was supposed to go.

Not that she had a plan. It remained a mystery even to her whether she could maintain her
newfound conscience and not go poking around the museum. As for the alternative, she could do worse than an elegant evening out with a friend– possibly with a recreational turn.

Such risky thoughts were inevitable when reconnecting with an old flame, especially one as intimately attentive as Bruce. If only it could be as simple as physical chemistry. His heart was too magnetic, bringing idle notions of what it might be like to live with him on the straight and narrow.

But those fantasies were short, quickly sinking beneath the surface of glamour and conjugal bliss into the inevitable boredom, the growing resentment, the frustration of someone else's expectations.

Selina was trying a different tack, sure, but that didn't mean she wanted to be bogged down in idealism. And sadly, even occasional playtime with Bruce would be too close to toying with him. He was less skilled at detachment than she was.

Still, it was possible they'd give into sudden passion– though less likely after Bruce enlisted her to run after party crashers.

Then the chance was brutally squashed when a ragtag squad of gunmen with chemical weapons emerged from the exhibit entrances on either side of the staircase.

Selina had run out of the line of fire with John's friends, but they got separated in the panic. Almost immediately she decided to figure out a plan of action with Bruce, but she did have a near miss with heroics on the way back to the entrance hall. She'd left Veronica in the bathroom, but the poor woman had emerged at the wrong time. Selina saw her on the floor at the end of a line of Wyeth paintings, coughing into her hands. She looked up at Selina with teary eyes, but before Selina could get to her, two thugs appeared. She hid as they dragged Veronica away at gunpoint.

Selina did not like Veronica enough to relive the experience of getting shot. Besides, she figured Bruce had blueprints in his head for dealing with situations like this effectively.

How was she to know that Bruce's brain was out of service?

At least she and John had gotten him out of there and shaken off Lock-Up's men, though that still left a major problem.

Selina looked away from the road to the seat behind her. John had pulled Bruce's top half onto his lap and cradled the other man's head in his elbow. Bruce's eyes were closed and his mouth was slack, and while his wheezing had quieted, his breath came shallow and quick.

"Buddy, buddy, oh, jeez," John rambled in a tight voice. "Just– just hang on. We'll get you to the hospital. White coats, defibrillators, IVs, the whole nine yards."

That was the obvious next move, except the stench of the weaponized gas had been surprisingly recognizable to Selina. She'd been heading for the Gardens since they got in the van.

She checked the landmarks and street signs. They weren't far. "John, do you trust me?" she asked.

"... Kinda?" he replied.

She decided not to point out that she'd just handed him a gun. "We're going somewhere else," she said. "If I'm right, it's extremely unlikely a hospital has an antidote."

"And if you're wrong, I'm not going to be very happy."
John's searing look met her gaze in the rear view mirror, and it felt much like when he'd recognized her at the museum. They'd never had the opportunity to be on friendly terms, but she was surprised at his hostility. "I guess things are less complicated between you two kids now," he'd sneered. It gave her second thoughts about Bruce's insistence that she ignore all the clickbait. Then again, it couldn't have been fun for John to realize that she'd been invited to the party and not him.

Whatever the issue, they were just going to have to get past it. "I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't think it was his best shot," Selina said, flying through a red light at an empty intersection.

Bruce's weak gasps drew out every second it took to reach the Gotham Botanical Gardens and Research Center. She pulled around the side of the building into the employee lot, coming to a rough stop in the handicap space closest to the door. The parking brake had barely locked into place when she got out of the van, and in the next instant she'd run to the intercom on the wall and dialed an extension.

"Come on, come on," she murmured as the speaker let out a low, distorted ring. She glanced back. John had the van's side door open and pulled at Bruce's legs.

"What?" came a dull voice from the speaker.

"Thank god!" Selina exclaimed. "Ivy, it's me. Let us in. It's an emergency."

"Who's 'us'?"

"I'll explain in person. Hurry before my friend dies!"

A pause. "This better be good."

Selina glanced back again. Bruce had landed on the blacktop, and John had him on his knees. John slung one of Bruce's arms over his shoulders and strained to lift the larger man's dead weight, his verbal encouragements falling on deaf ears.

"Do you have a cart or something?" Selina asked the speaker.

The only response was a buzz and a click as the lock unlatched. Selina propped the door open with a stick before going to help John.

They carried Bruce like they had in the museum, but this time he was no help, his dress shoes dragging across the building threshold and the linoleum floor. Selina directed the way to the elevator, just ahead.

The door slid aside before she could press the call button, first revealing a rolling desk chair and then Ivy standing next to it. Ivy looked the same as usual: effortlessly striking, a movie trope come to life. Whereas Selina gave off all the signals of being happily high-maintenance, Ivy looked like she just threw on a jade wrap dress, stepped into taupe ankle boots, and strutted off to work. Her hands were hidden in the pockets of her open labcoat, and she shifted her weight to one side in a bored posture. Given the late hour, her thick red hair should have been a tangled mess, but it fell in glossy fiery waves. Selina was positive there wasn't a trace of makeup on that freckled face.

Ivy's deceptively soft olive eyes looked from Bruce to John, and her brow furrowed with recognition. She frowned at Selina. "They say cats drag in unwanted gifts, but come on."

"Time is a factor here," Selina replied, hooking the chair with her foot and pulling it over.

Ivy watched her and John set Bruce between the armrests. Bruce's head lolled to his hitching chest.
"Why aren't you at a hospital?" Ivy asked, moving to the side of the elevator as John and Selina rolled Bruce in backwards.

"That was my suggestion," John said pointedly, taking a spot behind the chair to hold Bruce up by the shoulders.

Selina took the side opposite Ivy and answered, "The rancid gas a bunch of junior terrorists just attacked us with smelled a lot like that flower I brought you."

An indecipherable look crossed Ivy's face before she swiped her ID against a sensor. "That's interesting." She pressed the fifth floor button.

"Interesting as in you totally know what's wrong and the solution?" John asked.

She hummed noncommittally. "A blood analysis comes first, though the time for that would be to Wayne's detriment, going by the look of him. So I'll need…” She trailed off into her own thoughts.

John cleared his throat.

Ivy looked over but didn't seem affected by his dismayed expression. Her eyes went from his suit to the darkening mark high on his forehead. "So things got rough at the Wayne taffy factory?"

"We were at the Arkham gala," Selina said.

Ivy eyed the top of Selina's head. "And the wig?"

"Oh, uh…” Selina had forgotten she was even wearing it. "Discretion, you know."

The elevator stopped and the door slid open. Ivy walked out ahead into a long hallway. "And what happened to Wayne exactly?"

Selina and John pulled Bruce backwards again, working together to keep him upright. Most of the doors they passed appeared to be offices; they had nameplates and dark windows.

"Bruce and I were having an excellent discussion," John explained, "about how wrong he was, and…” His righteousness quickly dissipated. "And then we were rudely interrupted by a thug with that nasty gas. Bruce just… went bye-bye."

"A lot of people who got sprayed went into a frenzy," Selina said. "Screaming at things that weren't there, that kind of thing."

"That would be consistent," Ivy mused.

At the end of the hall was a solid door marked as "LAB 3" in vinyl stickers. She swiped her card across another sensor and held the door open for Bruce to be wheeled in.

The laboratory was a large room lined all the way around with smooth black countertops on wooden cabinets, with more cabinets mounted on the walls above. The room was divided into four quadrants, each with a long island that had a small sink in the end closest to the wall.

The owner of each station had personalized their space with trinkets and posters and, of course, plants, but Ivy's was most over flowing with a variety of flora along the perimeter counter. The morning glory crawling out of the corner acted as the centerpiece, with thick vines and enormous purple blossoms creeping up between the top cabinet doors and stretching left and right to curl around the pots of its neighbors. Selina didn't think all these plants were meant for the same
environment, but they thrived regardless: an orange cluster of chrysanthemums, a yawning venus fly trap, a cactus mound with pink blossoms, and more she couldn't identify.

Except for the only plant in a tall, sealed case, the opaque bottom filled with soil and the clear lid fitted with a special light. The stems were about a foot tall, with many smooth, toothy leaves surrounding intensely yellow trumpet-shaped flowers. When seen from above, the petals formed a star with tips that folded to the right. If the case was open, the room would be filled with a smell so rotten that Selina had worried about the integrity of the case at all stages of transport.

Ivy cleared some equipment off her island and stowed it in a high cabinet, one of many with pictures, articles, and signage—DO NOT TOUCH—taped over the door.

"Lay him there," she directed. "Get his coat off."

Selina and John removed Bruce's jacket, wheeled the chair back against the island's end, and hoisted him onto the counter. His legs folded over the edge and his head laid just shy of the sink, with just enough space at his sides for his arms.

Ivy rummaged in various cabinets, while John felt Bruce's forehead, pulled up his eyelids, and felt the side of his neck. There was a paper towel dispenser just visible behind all the plants, and John pulled out a bunch, got them wet in the sink, and draped them over Bruce's forehead. None of it was of any real help, Selina thought, but it wasn't hurting anything. She felt useless herself.

Ivy set an assortment of objects on Bruce's left and rolled up his sleeve. On Bruce's other side, John nervously tapped the counter edge with his knuckles.

"So what's the prescription?" he asked. "Old fashioned barbiturates? Benzos? Adrenaline shot?"

"Quiet," Ivy said, leaving the inside of Bruce's arm turned up. "First, I need the blood sample."

She tied a thin rubber hose around his bicep before putting on latex gloves and swabbing the skin over a blue vein just below the elbow. She popped a sheathed needle into the closed end of a clear barrel, then removed the sheath and held Bruce's skin taut. As she slid the needle into the vein, John bit his lip, and Selina held her breath as she realized Bruce might start thrashing. Thankfully, he didn't move— which just prompted another fear. She watched the rise and fall of his chest, terrified it would suddenly stop.

Ivy untied the hose and picked up a finger-length, purple-capped glass tube. She put it into the open end of the barrel, popping the cap onto the exposed end of the needle. Immediately, Bruce's blood spilled inside the tube. It filled in only a few seconds, but John looked so tense that Selina thought he might pass out when Ivy removed the needle.

Ivy placed the tube into a small rack and set it by the cactus. She removed the needled barrel before picking up an empty syringe and a small bottle.

"If Wayne was exposed to a concentration of Datura graveolens," she said, "a sedative will buy enough time for a permanent solution."

John watched her fill the syringe. "Why does an oversized greenhouse have sedatives?"

"The Gardens have developed many plant-based products," Ivy replied, injecting Bruce's arm. "This one isn't fully vetted by the FDA, but it's not dissimilar from approved tranquilizers." Needle empty, she drew back. "That should ease the strain on his heart and give him more time."

"While you test his blood," John said. She just looked at him and he shooed her. "Go on."
"Blood should be allowed to clot for about thirty minutes," she replied as she pressed a cotton ball to the injection site and placed a bandaid over it. "Then it needs to centrifuge, then I can examine it."

"But what if--"

"He'll last." She leaned against the counter by the tube rack. "I wouldn't waste my time if I expected him to expire right here."

"He better not," John growled, the glitter of his eyeshadow accentuating the sudden blaze in his eyes.

Ivy, of course, didn't even blink, and to Selina's relief, John started fussing again. He moved around the table to roll Bruce's sleeve back down and take his pulse at the wrist. Minutes passed, and Selina watched Bruce take progressively longer and deeper breaths. She found herself matching his pace, and she saw John was, too. His worried smile was fixed on Bruce's relaxed face.

Ivy watched impassively, like Bruce was reacting just the way she expected, but also like she would have shrugged if the sedative had no effect. To her left, the light over the datura buzzed quietly, reminding Selina of all the unanswered questions.

"So," Selina started, "you do think that gas was derived from your plant?"

"Its odor is very distinct," Ivy replied. "I don't think you'd mistake it, though I could open the--"

"That's fine."

Ivy smirked. "And I don't mean this specific plant. I mean the stolen one you replaced."

"We didn't discuss the stolen part."

"The Gardens acquired its *Datura graveolens* specimen years ago, before stricter regulations on plant imports went into effect. I imagine the difficulty in bringing one in now is why I had a visit from a former coworker, Dr. Jonathon Crane, several weeks ago. He was very interested in harvesting a pod, if not purchasing the whole plant outright. In the end I had to refuse. Frankly, I didn't know what he'd do with it."

"Well, what else can you do with a panic plant?" John said, gesturing to Bruce.

Ivy rolled her eyes. "All plants can be used for a multitude of purposes. Most daturas are effective poisons, and this one in particular is highly hallucinogenic. In controlled doses, its mind-bending properties have their place in religious ceremonies, and it can be an effective topical medication. Of course, after our datura vanished, I suspected it was for more nefarious reasons."

"But given all that, what is the datura's importance to you?" Selina asked gingerly. She'd already known Ivy was no saint, but flower deliveries had seemed safe enough.

Ivy caught on and responded coarsely. "It's a beautiful, rare living creation that deserves to thrive despite how humans choose to use it. Really, Selina, why on this good green earth would I attack a Wayne gala? It's hardly an effective way to press for eco-friendly practices, not to mention Wayne Enterprises provides a good chunk of our grants. They're not worth crushing up a defenseless flower over."

"The gala wasn't the only target, though," Selina said.
"It wasn't?" Ivy and John said at once.

Selina glanced at Bruce, then at John. "Batman checked up on me when he realized I was back in town. He mentioned he was working with the GCPD to track down a man called Lock-Up. He made threats online against city officials– and others, I guess."

John hadn't known the name earlier, but Selina thought Bruce would have mentioned the threats to him. Clearly not, by the frown on John's face.

"I imagined explosions, Mayor Dent-style," she continued, "but the lackies were taking people. They got Veronica Vreeland and tried for Bruce."

Ivy snorted. "Even if I thought kidnapping had some benefit, I wouldn't work with a reckless yahoo. Without medical intervention, he's going to end up trying to leverage a lot of dead bodies."

"Veronica seemed a lot more lucid than Bruce. I don't think everyone got the same treatment."

"Inconsistent doses? Even more reckless, but interesting. Sloppiness isn't part of Dr. Crane's poor reputation."

"But you do think he's the one who stole the datura."

"Yes." Ivy folded her arms, looking uncharacteristically uncomfortable. "Crane is a psychologist who specializes in fear. One could think of it like studying cancer, a negative subject but still very worthy of analysis. However, Dr. Crane's interest in his research is… visceral. It's one thing to enjoy discovery, it's another to enjoy the discomfort of test subjects. He'll say it's just more data, but even in his research papers you can see that's the data he focuses on. When I wouldn't part with the datura, just the look on his face… He's obsessive."

John let out a loud laugh. "I guess you would know!"

"Excuse me?"

He pointed to a curling sheet of paper taped to a high cabinet door. It read: This space reserved for DR. PAMELA ISLEY.

"I know that name!" he said. "You're an eco-terrorist!" He held up his hands, palms out. "Eco-activist, activist, sorry. The terror was all alleged, nothing proved in court, totally get it." He winked.

Ivy braced her hands tightly on the edge of the counter behind her. "Those alleged 'crimes' are nothing compared to the corporate atrocities against this planet."

John grinned. "Sure, what's a few tree spikes to disarm loggers in the Amazon? Or a little bomb to stop construction of a nuclear plant upstate? Or--"

"I know nothing about any of that," she deadpanned.

He cocked his head at the sign again. "'Ivy' doesn't really track from Isley. Where's it from?"

"From appropriating a name bestowed on you by mediocre insecure men who think matching initials is clever."

He nodded as if he could have guessed. "I appropriated unidentified dead bodies."

Ivy looked over at Selina. "I can start some preparations now. I'll need to go to another lab."
John perked up. "Do you need—"

"No." Ivy was already on her way to the door, which clicked shut behind her.

"Maybe they should call her Thorny Rose," John said, looking to Selina for a laugh, then to Bruce, and his grin vanished.

"He'll be okay," Selina said.

"Of course he will!" John exclaimed. "He's Batman! He survived me blowing him up twice! He's not gonna be taken out by—by some terrorist, or weirdo fear doctor, or whoever…"

"Do you think they're the same person or working together?"

He rubbed his hands together gleefully. "Whatever the case, they're not gonna know what hit them when the reinforcements come, whether Bruce likes it or not."

Selina exhaled. "Not sure I'm one to be going after a group of chaotic terrorists, even with Spectrum."

"I don't mean you!" he said with a dismissive wave. "I'm talking about me and my friends! Bruce thinks we should have our heads in the sand, but look who's running around out there! He said to let him handle everything, but that's—that's classism, is what it is!"

Selina nodded slowly. "So you and your friends… You're back into vigilantism. The party crashing clicked into place, and so did some rumors she'd run across when hunting acceptable jobs. "This is what you and Bruce are fighting about."

"We're not vigilantes! We're the Neighborhood Watch! We have local concerns and we take care of them."

She raised an eyebrow. "Like a gang?"

"Of course not! Gangs have territory and wear symbols and use intimida…" John stared at her for a moment, then shook off the potential epiphany. "We don't commit crimes!"

Selina held up her hands. "I don't have a cat in this fight." She gestured to Bruce. "But I imagine this is the kind of thing he doesn't want to happen to you."

"Like it's fine when it happens to him," John snorted.

"His martyr complex is one of his most endearing and enraging qualities."

"I'll say!" He folded his arms. "Really puts a bee in my bonnet!"

A buzzing sounded, and they both jolted, looking around. Selina thought maybe Ivy had set a timer for the blood, but…

"Or a bee in a jacket!" John snickered as he picked up Bruce's coat, left on the rolling chair. "But not a bee," he said, pulling out a vibrating phone. "Oh, if he'd worn a yellow jacket—"

"Answer it!" Selina scolded. "It's probably Tiffany!"

"Oh, right!" John swiped his thumb across the screen and put the phone to his ear. "Crazy night, eh, Specs? … Ha, must've been during the fight. … He's, uh, taking an unexpected nap. … Yeah, it reeked, right? … Well, nobody is happy about it. Where are you? … Uh huh… Hm… Oh, wow."
He covered the bottom of the phone and stage whispered, "She rescued the mayor!"

Selina snatched the phone and put it on speaker. "Bruce is okay."

"Well, I've been telling Gordon that Batman's on Lock-Up's trail," Spectrum said, voice unaltered, sounding not exactly panicked but absolutely stressed. "I mean, you don't expect public figures like Councilman Hartford to get kidnapped when Batman is active."

"Hartford?" John said. "Oh, thank god, at least someone deserved it."

"Ms. Vreeland was taken, too," Selina said, "but we got Bruce out."

"Dammit," Tiffany hissed. "Why didn't I think… Bruce always spread the credit for Arkham around, but why would Lock-Up?" She sighed. "Okay, I could say that Batman was part of Bruce's rescue."

"Uh, you can't," Selina said. "A third party knows it was us. She's in another room right now getting things for an antidote."

"What? Who? I mean, good, but…" Another breath. "Okay, if she can help with the effects of the toxin, she needs to get to Gotham General as soon as possible. A lot of bystanders are in bad shape."

Selina hesitated. "I can ask, but… She helped Bruce mostly as a favor. She's really not a people person."

"What are you talking about? People could die!"

"I'll talk to her."

"Who the heck is she?"

"Poison Ivy!" John giggled.

"Dr. Pamela Isley," Selina said, "at the Botanical Gardens. She knows the plant that's the basis for the toxin. She even has a suspect: Dr. Jonathon Crane."

"I'll add that research to my to-do list," Tiffany said. "Everything is a mess right now. I'm still in the field with the GCPD. When is Bruce going to be up and around?"

Selina looked at his unconscious form. "I wouldn't count on tonight."

"I knew you'd say that."

"I think we can bring him back to the manor in a couple hours, but—"

"Rethink that plan. We're still gathering intel on who else is missing, and hearing reports that Lock-Up's soldiers are still on the streets. If they want Bruce, they'll probably be waiting at the manor—and the penthouse and Wayne Tower. Too much risk."

"You're right," Selina said. "We'll hide out somewhere until he wakes up."

"I know just the place!" John chimed in. "Don't you worry!"

"Too late," Tiffany replied, "but I know you'll take care of him."
John lit up. Selina had a nagging feeling that the remark was only directed at him.

"Uh, we gotta go," John said quietly as the door handle twitched.

He ended the call and stuck the phone in his jacket just as the door swung open. Ivy came in with what looked like a rice cooker propped on her hip.

"Time for step two," she said.

She set the machine on the neighboring island, and when she opened the lid there was a rotor suspended on a spindle. The rotor had several deep, round slots attached around the edge. She put the tube of Bruce's blood into one slot, then stuck another tube in the opposite side. After closing the lid, she plugged the centrifuge into an outlet on the side of the island. With a push of a button, the rotor spun with a low hum.

"Just fifteen minutes," Ivy said as John peered through the translucent lid.

He rolled his eyes to the ceiling, his whole body sagging back as he groaned, "Come on!"

Straightening up, he exclaimed, "We already waited thirty!"

"Which has bearing on what?"

He walked backwards, sweeping a hand over Bruce's steadily breathing body. "When a victim is brought via dramatic car chase to a mysterious new character for assistance," John explained patiently, "that character is supposed to swoop in with a save that's just as dramatic. The pacing of this meticulous mumbo jumbo, it's got no panache."

After a beat, Ivy smirked. "If it's drama you want, I could let him die."

John squeaked and clapped his hands over Bruce's ears.

"She won't," Selina said, folding her arms. "But speaking of death, the city hospitals probably aren't prepared to treat other victims."

"Doubtless," Ivy replied, ignoring John's glare.

Selina waited expectantly, but the other woman stared back with a willful obtuseness.

"You should bring them the antidote after you give some to Bruce," Selina said with an irritated rhythm.

Ivy glanced at a clock on the wall and yawned. "I fail to see the benefit of getting myself more involved in this than I already have."

"Well, I imagine part of the reason you're helping us is that, like you said, Wayne Enterprises is on the lower end of the Evil Corporation scale."

"There is no low end."

"But imagine how grateful the Bruce Wayne will be that you saved not just his life, but the lives of fellow citizens of Gotham, the city he loves. Imagine his influence on grant money."

Ivy tilted her head, considering. John seemed to consider, too, looking down at Bruce's hand-sandwiched head. He brightened suddenly and snatched a pencil from under the foliage on the counter.
"You could be the Savior With a Syringe!" he exclaimed, striking several valiant poses. He brought his thumb down on the eraser with each one, as if depressing a plunger. "The Hypodermic Hero!"

Ivy watched dispassionately. "I could care less what the overpopulation of parasitic mammals on this planet thinks. It would be best of all botanical life took over."

John blinked a few times, then rubbed his chin. "You know, you'd get along real well with someone I used to... well, we didn't date, but--"

"You have a point," Ivy said to Selina. "It should be simple enough to make a large quantity of the antidote."

Selina smiled. "Thank you. John and I won't let Bruce forget how crucial your help was."

Ivy arched a brow. "You know, that's something you haven't cleared up. Wayne is your friend?"

Selina smiled coyly. "Oh, I don't know if I'd say that."

"You did say that."

She had, Selina realized, but she didn't let the thought show. She'd made it a policy to never be too candid about the rest of her life with clients.

"You weren't just casing this party of his?" Ivy asked.

"Maybe, maybe not," Selina replied with a shrug. "You know I have my secrets. Why wouldn't some of them be with Bruce Wayne?"

John started tapping the pencil on the edge of the island, and she caught a sour look on his face, but suddenly her wig was plucked right off her head. Ivy held it up and swung it from side to side.

"So you're asking me to put myself in the middle of this situation," Ivy said, "but when people start asking questions, I'm supposed to hide your part."

Selina chuckled and fluffed up her hair. "If you wouldn't mind."

"Yeah!" John said with a sharp grin, the pencil tapping faster. He started to pace, drumming along the wall-side counter. "She needs to slink off into the shadows as usual."

"I am not slinking off," Selina protested. "I'm going to help Batman. I just don't need the GCPD after me while I do it."

John frowned and suddenly found great interest in the venus flytrap's mouth. "We'll see," he muttered, poking the inner membrane with the eraser.

With a SNAP, the trap broke off the end of the pencil. John yelped, and Selina was taken aback herself. The plant looked too frail to break through wood. Ivy had a proud little smile on her face.

Naturally, John recovered with a grin. "Can I get one of these?"

Ivy looked disappointed by the enthusiasm. Her usual stoicism returned, and she replied, "No." She tossed the wig back to Selina. "Helping Batman. Are you turning over a new leaf?"

"I owe him," Selina said, dropping the headpiece onto Bruce's jacket. "The least I can do is look into this Dr. Crane."
Ivy hummed. "Crane wouldn't get much punishment for stealing one of my babies, but terrorism? That's years behind bars." Her pleased smile returned. "You know, I know where he's holed up. I'll help you."

"Help me?" Selina said.

John laughed. "You've got some priorities, lady! Speaking of which..." His humor vanished and he pointed to the clock. "It's been fifteen minutes."

"So it has," Ivy said. She stopped the centrifuge and the whir fell silent. "Our blood analyzer is upstairs," she said, removing the vial. "I should have something for you in twenty minutes."

"Auugggh!" John tugged at his hair. "You're killing me!"

"Don't tempt me," she replied, heading out again.

"Hold on!" Selina exclaimed. She stopped Ivy at the doorway. "Are you sure you want to help? I don't know what we'll run into. Look at Bruce."

"I've withstood worse," Ivy said.

"You have?" Selina shook her head. "Come on, I can't let you risk--"

"I'll take whatever risk I like to make sure that gangly cretin gets what he deserves," Ivy declared. "You want me to hide your involvement in tonight or not?"

Selina rolled her eyes. "Well, if it has to be like that, fine." She could always hustle Ivy away if things looked dicey, and the chances Crane was still at a known location seemed low anyway.

"It didn't have to be," Ivy retorted. "Now let me earn those grants."

Selina let the door swing shut and took a moment to herself. This was definitely not how she expected this night to go. It was a real opportunity, though, to put her money where her mouth was. If she really wanted her life to be less transactional, she wouldn't bolt as soon as she knew Bruce was okay.

"... prefer some kind of a rehearsal, for a role reversal," John chuckled

Selina spun around, thinking Bruce had miraculously woken up, but no. John was just talking to him as he slept.

"But I did pretty well as The Responsible One," John continued. "Maybe you'll agree in the morning." He frowned. "Unless this is some elaborate test..."

The corner of Selina's mouth tugged up. "It's not," she said, walking back over. "Definitely too dramatic for my tastes."

"Yeah, of course," he said with a serious nod. He looked back down at Bruce. "I'd say to forget I said anything, but... heh."

"You said you knew a hideout?" She'd been using a fake name at an upscale hotel; it would be difficult to sneak in two high-profile Gothamites.

"Absolutely!" John chirped. "We'll take him back to the bar!"

"The bar? Where you live?" John nodded with an obtuseness less willful than Ivy's, and Selina
added, "Wouldn't they expect that?"

"A rinky-dink bar compared to any other place a billionaire could go? Besides, there'll be people all around who'll give us a heads up if Lock-Up's masked minions come by."

"The Neighborhood Watch that is definitely not a gang."

"Right!" John affirmed. "I'll give them a ring."

Selina didn't have any better ideas, so she didn't protest as John retrieved Bruce's phone. It was in locked mode again, but John just pressed Bruce's thumb to the glass to get to the home screen.

"Tit for tat, pal," he muttered.

"I assume the bat apps are under another layer of security," Selina commented.

John didn't respond, and he didn't make a call. He stared at the screen. Selina came around, wondering if he actually had run into a security flag, but there were just some basic phone icons– against a selfie of him and Bruce. She recognized the outfits from unexpectedly striking photos from Bruce's birthday that she'd seen online.

In this picture and nearly every other one Selina had come across, Bruce and John looked plainly happy in each other's company. She'd been teasing when she asked Bruce about the tabloids, but there was a sliver of earnestness in the question. After all, it wasn't a stretch to wonder if all those captured moments added up to something. Bruce had said they didn't, and she didn't have a good reason to think he was lying, but the soft expression on John's face...

Maybe the possibilities for the night had been more limited than she'd thought.

Selina bumped John's shoulder. "Think your tiff is over?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Death may be the kindest way to lose a person, but it's also the most final..." His head snapped up and he looked at her like he just remembered where he was. Then his eyes darted around. "Just something to think about– for Bruce to think about, I mean. Obviously. He– well, anyone, possibly, but mostly him– he may think there's a reason to do something, but that doesn't mean it's right, and ha, imagine if that's the last thing you did or said, ever, to someone before they gave up the ghost– before he did– I mean the last thing he did before–"

"An important lesson."

John turned away and dialed, muttering, "Who wouldn't have a change in perspective after tonight?"

Nobody in this room, that was for sure.

Chapter End Notes

John amends a quote attributed to Emerson at the end there.

Given the Telltale's departure from how Harley is usually portrayed, I'm not as sure as
John that she and Ivy would pair as well in this universe. Maybe if Ivy were a lighter character... buuuut that’s not what I went with. Could be a writing challenge depending on how much steam I have left after this wraps up.
I've added another chapter to account for the gala getting split into two parts.

Anyway, for this chapter in particular, Bruce finds out something he could have learned in Season 1, but this version of him did not make that choice. So it may be more of a thing for Bruce than you.

Lock-Up had expected word-of-mouth to draw in a quick supply of like-minded manpower. Consequently, he hadn't counted on airtight security. Still, there was no way to be content with how the police and the Batman contingent had been aware of his plans.

A few hours had passed since his soldiers dispersed, and the failures and successes were clear. Institutional figures like Garcia and Gordon would hold onto their freedom, as would Bruce Wayne. Wayne wasn't in charge at Arkham, but he was certainly the main driver of the "reforms" that declawed Harvey Dent, and Bolton had been eager to get his hands on him. At least there was some satisfaction to be had in how, according to the soldiers who'd evaded arrest, Wayne had been incapacitated by the gas.

As for successes, the museum team may have let Wayne escape, but they'd brought in an excellent alternative: Veronica Vreeland, another famed socialite. Her personal dramas often distracted the public from reacting to the true injustice around them. Like Wayne, she deserved to feel the heavy weight of reality.

Then there was the television studio, which put up the least resistance. It seemed the GCPD had expected that all targets were connected to the public sector. The studio security certainly hadn't expected an attack, and Summer Gleeson was easily extracted from her dressing room.

Capturing a city council member had almost been a bust. Bolton had chosen the two he despised the most, Smythe and Nelson, and observed their routines. Both men were expected to arrive home in the early evening, hours before the squads outside their houses received the signal to move in. Yet both targets never arrived. The Nelson team was proactive and went to check City Hall, just in time to watch Smythe get hustled into a police cruiser. The team tailed the cruiser to a safehouse, an old administration building at the shipping yards. Observation from a distance eventually clued that the whole council was stashed inside and, even better, Gordon was there. The council teams combined forces.

In debriefings, Lock-Up would allot blame (and punishments) for the failures, but this group made him proud. The other attacks had begun, so the police were visibly on alert. The soldiers sent out a representative to the front of the building who claimed he wore a bomb and demanded to speak to Gordon. If the commissioner came freely, everyone else would be left alone. Gordon had been skeptical and engaged from inside with a bullhorn—while Councilman Hartford evidently decided to abandon the group. Alone, Hartford ran out the back of the safehouse, right into the soldiers preparing to ambush the building from the rear. If the fool had just waited another few minutes, he would have been safe inside when the trick fell apart. Either Gordon had called the soldier's bluff about the bomb, or someone spotted the attempted ambush, or both, and an exchange of fire erupted. The soldiers retreated; they had what they came for.
It was hardly surprising that a council member would only think of himself, and of course a man of such poor constitution couldn't handle a lungful of Crane's concoction. Empty and pathetic, Hartman's corpse sat on the floor in front of the blank wall Bolton used for broadcasts.

"Are you going to tie strings to his limbs?" Crane asked from his cage. "Put on a puppet show for Gotham?"

"He'll serve as a warning," Bolton replied.

"That you and your 'soldiers' have poor methods of control?" Crane replied. "I'm sure there was no chemical uniformity across those canisters, and the idea of consistent application probably occurred to no one! Just look at the differences!" He pointed to the bank of monitors.

Two screens showed Veronica and Summer in their newly built cells. The women already had an unofficial alliance in amplifying spectacle, and it seemed they would get along in their captivity just fine. With the bars between them, Veronica knelt in the muck right behind Summer, who sat with her legs akimbo, still convulsing occasionally but otherwise listless. Veronica had wrapped her arms around Summer's chest to hold her up, likely to prevent the anchorwoman from falling facedown in the sludge and drowning. Veronica coughed now and then, at times jolting as if waking from a nightmare.

"They're receiving punishment as intended," Bolton said.

"What a waste," Crane scoffed. "The core ingredient is not easy to come by. Do you have the slightest…"

Bolton stopped listening, his attention drawn to the monitor overseeing the main gate. The final squad had finally returned, their truck pulling into view. Acquiring Sal Maroni had some setbacks, first because he'd been in a gambling den instead of at his home, and then because of how single-mindedly members of his crew gave chase. But the team had lost them, and now the mobster was in Lock-Up's grasp.

As Bolton watched the gate guards inspect the truck, Martin came over.

"Word on Channel Eight is some biologist is already going around with medicine for the scare spray," Martin said.

Bolton brought up the station on a free screen. Jack Ryder breathlessly recounted the latest developments. Nine civilians and officers had died from gunfire, but only three had died from the mysterious aerosol weapon. The rest of the gas victims in critical condition were pulling from the brink of death thanks to this mystery woman. She avoided the press, but they'd gotten video of her leaving Elliot Memorial through a side door. This was a night of insufferable redheads, apparently.

Lockup had gotten the attention he wanted, but he'd been hoping to hear that Wayne was among those who succumbed to the gas. Instead, Ryder reported there was word that the billionaire was the first one saved.

"When the media hunts down her identity, let me know," Bolton ordered.

He'd expected pushback from the usual suspects, not the lower citizenry. Yet it had come immediately, not just from the meddling scientist but from John Doe, who'd helped spirit Wayne away. Bolton found that disappointing. Doe had seemed the type to push back against a corrupt system despite personal connections.

Well, when Lock-Up made his wider debut, everyone would have the chance to reconsider their
loyalties.

Everything was still: the air, his body, the black expanse before him. Someone hummed softly.

Bruce's eyes opened to reveal a white expanse, faintly marked. A ceiling. John's ceiling. A string of bulbs lined the edge. They were dull, off. It was day.

The night hadn't been still or quiet. It was... better not to think about now. The light was solid, held him in place. The hum buzzed pleasantly in his ears.

A page turned and Bruce's gaze slid to the side. Facing the door, John sat crosslegged on a thin layer of blankets spread over the round rug. His gray pajama pants were patterned with the Batman symbol, and he held a book in his lap. He read by the early morning light filtering through the blinds behind him, casting yellow stripes across his white tanktop and the bare skin of his shoulders.

The humming stopped when John suddenly perked up and looked over, his smile bursting. His face was clean of makeup. "Morning, Brucie!"

He put the book down and crawled the few feet to the side of the bed. Rising on his knees, he pressed his cool hand to Bruce's forehead.

"Guess Pammy's stuff really did the trick." John said, then pulled his hand away and frowned at his palm. "I think. How warm is a fever?"

There were questions to ask, Bruce knew, but he wanted to listen to John's voice, a singular, familiar sound. It staved off the frenzied memories at the edge of his mind.

"She said the antidote would clear the poison from your system, but you'd probably be a little woozy." John waved his hand in front of Bruce's face and giggled when he blinked rapidly. "Do you understand me, though?"

Bruce nodded. John laughed again and reached over to the desk for a water glass.

"That's my fighter!" he said, tipping the glass to Bruce's mouth. "We'll get you right back to tip-top shape."

Bruce could take the glass, but the weight of his arms molded them to his stomach, and it was nice to be taken care of, for John to take care of him, for John to smile at him. Bruce had missed his smile.

John put the glass back, and Bruce finally registered the red and purple blotch on his forehead, under that errant lock of hair. Bruce moved then, pushing himself up slowly through the creeping aches. John tsked but rearranged the pillows so Bruce could sit comfortably against the iron headboard. With John closer, Bruce brushed away the lock of hair to get a better look at the bruise. John's eyes rolled up as if he could see the abrasion.

"It doesn't even sting anymore," he said with clear disappointment. "Probably won't scar either."

The sunlight caught the angles of John's face, and Bruce's hand lowered to cup his jaw, thumb tracing the slash of his cheekbone. Despite everything, John managed to be a bright spot in Bruce's life: a burst of laughter, an unfurling gesture, a mischievous flash of green. Those eyes were wide now, and John sputtered something but didn't resist when Bruce pulled him forward.
Bruce kissed him, just as he'd wanted for so long, feeling the softness and warmth of John's lips. He closed his eyes and curled his fingers, nails stroking John's neck. John responded then, mouth moving tentatively, and light burst behind Bruce's eyelids.

The mattress creaked as John leaned forward, his fingers tripping on Bruce's collarbone as he took hold of Bruce's shoulder. Bruce moved his hand to John's arm, intent on pulling him onto the bed.

He faintly heard a bump and a creak, then a voice—Selina, something about sugar. John pulled back, and Bruce opened his eyes. Selina stood at the open room door with a coffee mug in each hand. She stared at them, both eyebrows high.

Bruce felt like he dropped into his body, and the aches flared like the light from the window. He looked at John, who stared back wide-eyed, mouth shut. John's arm was still enclosed in Bruce's hand, and Bruce let go.

"Uh..." Selina started to back up. "I can just--"

"Gotta check on the girls!" John almost shouted, stiffly getting to his feet and walking over to her. "All that rich food and late night peril!" he rambled as he took a mug. "Never know about delayed effects!"

Selina watched him swiftly leave, then turned to Bruce. He pulled at the blanket around his waist and tried to formulate those questions about the night, because he didn't want her to start, because what would he say? He hadn't meant to—John wasn't supposed to ever know, and Bruce just...

"I admit," Selina said, closing the door, "it knocks my self esteem a little, but still, you could have told me. We're not kids."

Told her... Bruce rubbed his face. "It... it's not... Nothing is going on." The look on John's face, what did—It didn't matter, Bruce couldn't—

"Excuse me?" she laughed.

He realized he was in his boxers and undershirt. His tux was arranged neatly in the desk chair, shirt and pants folded on the seat, jacket hanging on the back, shoes tucked underneath. Last night, that's what he should focus on. The events came back in a trickle: the offended gala guests, the interrupted argument, the lungful of awful vapor, and then the dark twisted muddle, at first frantic, then hopeless. Lock-Up, the gala must have been a target, Bruce had misjudged...

He rolled his shoulders, gauging the soreness. "What happened when I was out?" he asked.

Selina shut her eyes for a second and shook her head. "Hang on. How was that nothing?"

"Selina—"

"You kissed—"

"Is it really your business?" Bruce snapped. He couldn't do this right now. He shouldn't have...

Selina pressed her lips together in a frustrated look. After a moment, she set her mug on top of the mini-fridge. "No," she said. "It's not. Fine. What's the last thing you remember?"

John did have some vague intention of checking on the girls, if only to put off processing what just happened. It caught up to him on the second floor. He clutched his cooling mug as he leaned
against the wall outside the Palermas' apartment.

He lifted one hand to cover his mouth, and the texture of his palm and the fleeting warmth were nothing like Bruce's coaxing lips. And right now his heart threatened to knock through his ribcage, but back in his room, it had felt like it inflated, like he could grab Bruce and they'd float to the ceiling.

But the bed bore their weight, and if Cat Lady hadn't come back–

He burst into nervous giggles. No, it was good that she interrupted, because this wasn't supposed to happen. Knock knock, open up for reality with a big old check. You've won the Wake Up Sweepstakes!

What was supposed to happen was a mutual rejoicing that Bruce was alive. He and Bruce were supposed to formally end their fight, with Bruce agreeing to not be such a snoop and John agreeing to take more care with the Watch. Then John was supposed to parlay that into convincing Bruce to let him help with Lock-Up. Granted, several Watchers were already on fact-finding missions to suss out the guy's identity, location, or accomplices, but they'd all happily volunteered without John even asking.

But that was it! John and Bruce weren't supposed to go beyond an unlikely but delightful friendship, like that between a goose and a panther at an unregulated petting zoo. Beyond that, John was no good for Bruce. He'd won that argument against himself several times. And it didn't matter that it was Bruce who'd kissed John. Ivy had said Bruce might be groggy, so it must have been a mistake. He must have been confused.

Though Bruce had plenty of time leading up to that moment. His impulse could have been to hug John or give him a noogie, but instead…

John thunked his head repeatedly against the wall. It was an old coping mechanism for troubling thoughts, one that John had considered ultimately harmless but Leland had relentlessly qualified as self damaging. He'd have to bring up the regression at his next session with Doc Adams, he thought, as his head kept thudding away.

Of course, Adams would ask why he hurt himself– after the obligatory "hey, I heard you were in the middle of another terror attack." The worst thing about therapy was that it tended to be more productive if you were forthcoming.

John stopped hitting his head, or rather, Adelina suddenly appeared and grabbed his face with both hands. She frowned up at him.

"What?" he said. "You've never seen inner turmoil before?"

Her expression didn't change, but her response was unrelated. "Police are here," she said, gesturing to the stairwell.

She'd come from downstairs, he realized, not her room.

"Talking to Lucia," she continued. "Looking for Bruce."

No surprise. John had been expecting the cops. He'd made a grand entrance with the girls at the gala, and he was the last person Bruce had been seen with. Ivy could say she didn't know who the blonde good samaritan with convenient plant knowledge was, but there was no reason to deny that John had helped bring Bruce to the Gardens.
"Yeah, uh, I'll go talk to them," he said. "Go tell Bruce to come down, will you?"

He certainly couldn't look Bruce in the face right now. John couldn't blush, but his insides might liquify.

Selina recounted their escape from the museum: finding Bruce and John in the dining area, fighting their way to a getaway van, and losing the car that chased them. It was almost a blur, she said. She wasn't sure if the car had driven over sharp debris or if the passengers managed to shoot their own tire.

After that, the story was calmer and clearer: Dr. Isley– Ivy, Selina called her– positively identified the toxin's key ingredient and created a successful antidote. And she knew a likely culprit.

As Selina spoke, Bruce tried to multi-task on his phone. He noted the time, 7:28 am, and sent Spectrum a message that he was awake. Then he attempted to speed-read the reports she'd sent throughout the night, but his focus was shot. The light of the screen was somehow too bright, the words would randomly jumble, and even as he sat on the edge of the bed, vertigo popped up.

To say nothing of the ghost of John's breath on his face.

"Bruce."

He realized he'd closed his eyes as he opened them again. His phone had been about to slide out of his hand. He had a message from Spectrum.

"You look like garbage," Selina said bluntly.

"After all that, I'm sure," he replied. Although, comparatively, the night had only left Selina with small cuts on her face.

Bruce concentrated on the message. Tiffany was happy to hear from him, but just as he'd taught her, she got to business. There was little information to add to her reports, but the GCPD would be at All's Well soon. Isley had told them who her Patient Zero was, and the police had been trying to confirm Bruce Wayne's welfare for a couple hours.

"The police didn't find me at known addresses," Bruce told Selina, "so here is next."

"Because of your closest associate."

He didn't acknowledge her insinuation, didn't want to acknowledge the kiss and how it changed things. He wanted to work on the case, on retrieving the abductees, on analyzing this disturbing weapon. (The toxin death count was now four, Tiffany said, after an elderly gala victim had complications, bringing the total deaths to thirteen, plus the dozens of injuries requiring hospital care.) But Bruce Wayne couldn't reasonably refuse talking to the GCPD after the night he'd had.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Police interview will take all morning, when I need to be working. But I need to make sure they aren't looking for ways to blame this on John." Especially so soon after the incident with Maroni's goon..

"You need more rest," Selina said, voice softening a bit. "Ivy recommended you stay in bed at least through the afternoon."

"That's what Bruce Wayne will be doing." He slowly got to his feet and stretched carefully. The aches were either another lingering effect of the gas or from being dragged around all night.
"Meanwhile, Batman will make up for his mistake."

"Mistake? What, taking a few hours to make sure a mental hospital had funding? Bruce, half the cops in town were on protection duty, along with Tiffany. You did plenty of due diligence."

"I could have done more!" Pain flared in his temples and he tried to massage it away. "And I should have been more aware of my surroundings."

She huffed. "Well, if you want to get closer to omnipotence, you still need to recover. At the very least, stick with desk work or whatever in the cave. Ivy and I are going to look into Crane."

"You shouldn't--"

"You're still in no shape. And you can't stop us while the cops talk to you."

On cue, there was a knock. Selina opened the door partway at first, then wider to show Adelina.

"Police in the bar," Adelina said to Bruce.

"Thanks," he replied. "Are you okay?"

She smiled and flashed a thumbs up, then disappeared. Selina shut the door again.

"Lucia is a little roughed up," Selina said. "I think she made herself a human shield for her sister."

She paused. "Lots of willing human shields in this neighborhood."

"John told you about his contradicting plan to stay out of jail?" Bruce asked.

"You can't expect me of all people to comment on how someone deals with the cops."

He supposed not. He needed to get downstairs. He dressed slowly, trying to avoid another bout of dizziness. He left the dress shirt hanging open over his undershirt and draped the jacket over his shoulder. He stepped around the book and blankets on the floor to get to the door, and stopped at the sight of his miserable reflection. The mirror on the back of the door showed mussed hair, wrinkled clothes, sagging posture. His skin looked on the pallid side, and he rubbed his cheek, trying to bring life to it.

Selina opened the door, taking the sight away. "Afraid you're doomed to the worst pap photos ever, sorry," she said, walking into the hall.

Bruce followed and closed the door after them. He left it unlocked, not sure if John had the key on him. Bruce would let him know when they talked...

"I'll take my leave from the roof," Selina said, then looked at him evenly. "I'll let you know what we find."

He relented with a frown. "If I don't call you first."

With a triumphant smirk, she sauntered to the stairs. As he watched her go, he was suddenly apprehensive that she'd stop to comment on what she'd walked into, but she silently made the turn to the fourth floor, out of sight.

When Bruce made it to the bottom of the stairs, Lucia was coming through the bar door. She looked tired, dressed in a baggy t-shirt and shorts. She looked up at him, and he saw a dark bruise along the left side of her jaw.
"Get out there before they decide to bring John in," she said, trying and failing to be curt.

"Your face," Bruce said.

"You should see the guy I nailed in the balls." She glanced around, then made awkward eye contact. "I'm glad you're alright."

"I'm not injured."

"Are you kidding?" she said tersely. "When Mo and Lorenzo lugged you in here, I thought you were fucking dead." She braced her hands on the back of her head, pulling forward to bring her elbows together. "And I saw other people get gassed. It was… I had to get Adelina out of there."

"You did the right thing."

She let out a breath, and her arms fell to her sides. "Yeah." She started up the stairs. "Cops are cranky as usual. Don't keep them waiting."

Bruce went into the bar. A GCPD officer standing by the front door looked him up and down, apparently surprised to see him in one piece. Rosaline was posted behind the counter as usual, arms folded, and her eyes lit up.

"Good, you're awake," she said.

Bruce didn't respond. A full, abandoned mug sat on the corner of the counter, and at the other end, John sat on a stool facing Sergeant Montoya and Officer Ramamurthy. Bruce couldn't quite make out John's muttered answers to Montoya's questions. Trying to read lips was useless, as looking at John's mouth only made him feel...

Bruce shook himself. "Good morning, Sergeant," he called over. "I hope I can help clear up what happened last night."

Montoya and Ramamurthy looked over at him. John stared straight ahead.

Montoya folded her arms. "According to your friend, you were out for most of it, Mr. Wayne."

"True, but I'm certainly here and not dead at the museum."

"Finish up with this one," Montoya instructed Ramamurthy. She came over to Bruce and said, "Glad to see you're alive."

"That's the nicest thing you've said to me in a while."

Montoya looked at Rosaline, who grudgingly took her leave through the kitchen door.

"What have you heard since you've been up?" Montoya began.

"I know the gala wasn't the only place attacked, and I received an antidote after I got sprayed with… whatever that was."

"Thanks to Mr. Doe, and this blonde you were seen with. What can you tell me about her?"

"Trixie? Very interested in cosmetics, very pretty." Bruce eased himself onto a stool and leaned on the counter, not just for show. Another wave of dizziness had come on, and he closed his eyes. "We got along well, from what I remember."
"She wasn't on the guest list."

Bruce shrugged. "It's not unusual for people to find their way into events to talk to me." He looked up and managed a vacuous smile. "Particularly women."

"But you see how it's concerning given who forced their way in later?"

"Sure, but…" He scrunched up his face as if struggling to remember. "Wasn't I attacked by a man?"

"Why would this Vanderbilt woman know to take you to a botanist instead of the hospital?"

Bruce shrugged again. "Makeup and botany cross over, especially with organics being so trendy. Honestly, Sergeant, all that matters to me is that she and John saved my life."

"Did Mr. Doe know her previously?"

"I don't know. I planned to ask him if he'd heard of her being involved in any makeup brands. He loves that stuff."

"That would be enough to trust her with his drugged, delirious friend?"

"I assume that's what the officer is asking him."

Behind her, Ramamurthy walked away from John, apparently finished with the interview (and perhaps with helping to finesse John's story). John glanced at Bruce, then drifted to a keyboard set up near the stage.

Bruce leaned toward Montoya. "You know," he said confidingly, "Trixie had a very commanding, A-type air. I wouldn't be surprised if John responded to that in such a chaotic environment, especially when a friend was hurt by a chemical weapon. You remember with the Lotus virus, no one would have been prepared to deal with it."

"That's the one thing Doe dealt with correctly."

"Preventing its release isn't the same as knowing how to treat someone. Remember how he handed the virus over to Batman? I bet Trixie's confidence was very convincing– and she was right, after all. And why would she save me if she was involved in the attack?"

It was hard to tell if he'd allayed Montoya's concerns about the mystery heroine. Her expression didn't changed as she checked her watch. "We'll finish up the questions at the hospital. Gordon wants everyone looked at."

"I got the same treatment as the others," he tried.

"But not the same follow-up."

He sighed. "I'd really like to go home, but I see your point. I just, uh, need to say goodbye."

Montoya shot a disdainful look in John's direction. "One minute."

She went to wait with Ramamurthy and the other officer by the front door. Bruce made his way to the back of the room.

John sat at the keyboard, facing the stage, and played a jangle of notes with one hand. Sometimes the notes flowed into a melody, and other times they broke into discordant clanging. The sound
(and thinking of what he would say, what he should say) made Bruce feel even more off-kilter, like he’d suddenly lose his footing. He reached John without tripping over chair legs or the bare floor, and after a few more notes, John stopped playing and stared at his fingers.

"If I'd known," Bruce said, "that you wanted to attend a Wayne party that badly, I would've had one for my birthday."

John's shoulders jerked with a short laugh. "You should've checked with me," he said, looking up with a small smile that didn't reach his eyes. "But I wouldn't want to put a damper on the affair for your guests."

Bruce's chest tightened with the need to be silent or divert or ignore. That reflex– maintaining his walls– had been instilled in him for years. Yet now, face-to-face with John, with what happened upstairs, he felt the weariness take over. This wall suddenly felt like it was made of sand, not worth the effort.

Bruce said, "I took you to the show instead because you were the person I really wanted to celebrate with."

John's eyes went wide, his lips parting with a quiet breath. He turned back to the keyboard and wrung his hands in his lap. "That... That's great to hear. Because we're such good pals! Ha, you were really out of it upstairs, right? I won't hold it against you. You should have seen what some of the guys at Arkham got up to when they were delusional!"

Bruce hadn't been sure what to make of John's quick exit, if he was upset about the kiss, or if he was thrown by how abruptly Bruce had crossed the boundary of friendship. And here was the answer, like a faceful of icy water: John was giving Bruce an out. Everything could be the same as before.

Bruce could cast that moment with John aside. Just a delusion. Crossed wires. No meaning at all.

"It wasn't a mistake," Bruce said quietly.

John went still.

Bruce fumbled on. "And if you... I still want to be your friend, if you— but you don't have to act like it's okay that I just did that, out of the blue. I... I'd never want you to feel uncomfortable or like you have to—"

With a burst of laughter, John turned back to him. "Uncomfortable was the last thing I felt!"

"It was?"

John's smile vanished again, and he hunched over. "Yeah, but..."

Bruce felt caution and elation at once, trying to reconcile John's words with his behavior. "But what? Why—"

"Wayne!" Montoya barked. "You're not the only victim we need to check on."

Of all the times... "We'll talk," Bruce said to John, "when all this is straightened out. Okay?"

John rubbed the back of his neck. "Okay, but you've got a lot going on, and..."

"Don't get involved, okay?" Bruce said, inwardly berating himself. He should have said that first.
John's safety was paramount. "Please. I can handle–"

"That's not really what I mean," John said. "I mean, comparatively..." He gestured between them. "This isn't... It's not..."

"Not what?"

"Not a good idea..."

"What?"

"Wayne!" Montoya shouted. "Let's go!"

Bruce reluctantly backed toward the door. "I'll call you," he said.

"Alright," John said, slotting his hands between his knees.

Bruce forced himself to turn away before Montoya could decide to grab him by the collar. He walked to the front door, which she held open with an exaggerated "you first" gesture. He mumbled an apology and passed through.

In the direct sunlight, he paused and shielded his eyes. After a moment, he could see the squad car parked at the curb and Ramamurthy waiting by the open rear door. Across the street between a nail salon and a Thai restaurant, Maureen and Lorenzo leaned against the wall, coffee cups at their feet. They offered subtle nods. They'd forgone the Watch symbol, maybe because they didn't want to draw too much attention with the cops around.

Walking around the front of the car, Montoya saw them and scowled. "I swear, any day now the report rates in the neighborhood are gonna skyrocket," she said.

"Time will tell, Sergeant," Ramamurthy replied, his gaze shifting to the other end of the street, upwards.

Bruce looked that way, to a second-floor window over a laundromat. A bald figure in an orange robe leaned out, smoking, watching. Bruce thought he could make out that black slash through their eye, and he peered at the gleam of the shut windows, wondering if there were unseen others watching too, and how many had stayed up through the night.

Ivy had met Dr. Jonathan Crane at Gotham University years ago, she explained, when he was a full-time psychology professor and she was an adjunct for the biology department. Crane had recently achieved tenure, and rumors circulated that he’d started pushing the limits in experiments with students: administering his own hallucinogenic concoctions, starting habituation trials at extreme levels, and obtaining insufficient informed consent for behavioral conditioning. The university investigated, but many of the students involved were uncooperative, whether out of deference to a professor or, as became clear later, out of fear. Or perhaps the university hadn't looked very hard, given the optics of an unethical monster in a lofty faculty position.

Then Crane fired a gun in a full classroom for a "demonstration" of fear's many components. He was brought up on multiple charges, primarily reckless endangerment and unlawful use of a firearm. Students filed lawsuits against him and the university. Alumni threatened to withdraw donations if he remained on staff. Crane had miscalculated how much tenure would shield him from consequences.

In the end, he was fired and served just a month of jail time, and when his attempts to rejoin
academic circles were rebuffed, he disappeared. Eventually, he resurfaced at a poorly staffed public clinic in East End, which didn't surprise Selina. It was also no surprise that the clinic had limited space and allowed Crane to meet patients in his nearby apartment.

"It should have been a scandal that anyone hired him," Ivy said.

She leaned against the hallway's peeling wallpaper and watched Selina pick the apartment's lock. No one had answered when they knocked. No other residents, if they existed, made a sound of life, not so much as a murmuring television.

Ivy went on. "Instead it was just outraged gossip I heard from old acquaintances."

Selina hummed with more indifference than she felt, but she wasn't concerned about how Ivy would perceive her. The scientist was definitely more upset about how Crane had been free to steal the datura than his access to more patients. Regardless, Ivy took the cue and went silent, and Selina listened for the click of the lock pins. The knob on Crane's door was a higher grade than the others, but it would cost her maybe an extra half minute.

Maybe longer if she let herself get distracted. The scene in John's room had just been so… odd. She would've thought Bruce and John had just been hiding their relationship (for any number of understandable reasons) if not for Bruce's ridiculous denial. John's reaction made no sense either; after he'd been so snide at the gala, she would have expected him to gloat, not run off.

But all that was a mystery for later. She heard a final click and the cylinder turned, and she pushed the door open. It caught on something, envelopes on the floor. She forced enough room for her and Ivy to slip into the apartment's entryway, then closed the door behind them.

Ivy nudged the pile of mail with her foot. "Crane hasn't been here in a while. A few weeks maybe."

Selina moved to the living room. "I don't think of his own will," she said.

Ivy came up beside her and raised an eyebrow at the mess. What had been a wooden coffee table lay in pieces in the middle of the room. On one side of the debris sat a threadbare loveseat with cushions askew and pillows on the floor, and on the opposite side laid an overturned desk chair. A tall tripod stood near the chair; it held no camera, but a few long cords on the floor led back to an old desktop computer on a card table in the corner. Most significant was the blood: streaks on the wall behind the chair and blotches in the carpet near a burlap bag. The marks were dark, dry.

As she and Ivy moved carefully into the room, Selina pieced together a story in her mind. "So… a patient jumped off the couch, broke the table, and attacked the therapist in the chair."

"Deservedly," Ivy said, standing over the blood on the carpet.

"I wouldn't assume that in this town."

Ivy gave her a look and nodded downward. Selina joined her and looked at the bag—what she'd thought was a bag. The burlap had multiple holes, two small ones that had been torn or maybe burned, and then a longer slash below them that was loosely stitched closed with dark brown twine. The open bottom—the neck—was woven through with thicker rope, ends untied.

"A mask?" Selina said.

"Some students claimed Crane wore one," Ivy said. "No investigation turned it up." She scoffed. "I'd actually thought it was too urban-legend-like to be true."
A galley kitchen to the left had gathered a small swarm of flies around the sink. Ivy went to the right instead, and Selina followed, going through a short hall with a tiny bathroom on their left and the bedroom straight ahead.

Right away their attention was drawn to a corner table holding a large, rectangular case with a tall clear lid. Its light was on, but the datura was just a brown tangle on the soil.

Ivy stood over the dessicated shell and stroked the case. Her hand seemed to tremble. "Poor darling," she said quietly. "No one was here to water her."

Just as Selina knew of Ivy's unsettling tendency to reserve empathy for plants, she knew the other woman just needed a moment to refocus. Selina surveyed the little that was in the rest of the room: a spare amount of clothes in the doorless closet, a neatly made twin bed on a rickety-looking frame, and a TV tray acting as a night table. Any lab work Crane was up to must have been in another space.

Not that there wasn't anything significant. On the TV tray, on top of a folded newspaper and a psychology journal, laid an open day planner. Selina picked it up and saw it was organized by weeks, and among notes like "LAB" and "CLINIC" were names and times.

"This was open to three weeks ago," she said, "and some entries look like patient appointments."

Ivy turned away from the dead datura. "Three weeks matches all that mail."

Selina glanced at the date on the newspaper. "And this Gazette. We'll need help narrowing down these names—assuming a patient really was the attacker."

"Believe me, if you don't see any social dates in there, it isn't because he had too many friends to keep track of."

When Selina and John had gotten Bruce to All's Well, they'd checked in with Tiffany, who'd been more open to Selina and Ivy's help than her partner. Tiffany had given Selina a contact number, and Selina dialed it now on her burner, putting the call on speaker.

"Hello?" came the muffled answer.

"It's Catwoman," Selina said. "Dr. Isley and I are at Crane's apartment."

"Mmph!" Some indecipherable sounds, then a voice modulated follow-up: "Yes, I was expecting your call."

"Was she eating?" Ivy asked.

Spectrum blew past the question. "I'm especially glad to speak with you, Dr. Isley. I picked up one of the fear toxin canisters last night, and I'm doing an analysis."

"Fear toxin?" Selina repeated.

"What else would you call it?"

"Fair enough."

"I've got a lot of information piling up in our database, but given the urgency, I could really use your expertise to find obvious flags." Tiffany must have done that research on Ivy.

"I assume you found plenty of datura," Ivy said.
"Yup. There's also…" Spectrum launched into a list of components, most of which Selina had never heard of.

After about a minute, Ivy interrupted. "Field bindweed?"

"The convolvulus one? Yeah, about two-point-eight percent."

"It doesn't matter what percentage it is. With the rest of the components, it's useless. It's not even filler."

"So why is it there?"

Ivy chewed the inside of her cheek and nodded at Selina. "Tell her what we found."

"After reading these court filings and GU press releases, I'm gonna guess it's not good," Spectrum commented.

"Not for Crane," Selina said. "Looks like he was abducted or worse during a patient session that went wrong. He works for the East End clinic."

"Worked. I found him in a cached version of the directory. Looks like the clinic removed him a couple weeks ago, probably because of no-shows. I guess no one cared enough to think he might be in trouble."

Ivy evidently caught the pity even in Spectrum's computerized voice. "I can assure you," she droned, "they were rightly glad for an excuse to never see him again."

"We got his calendar," Selina said, "with his patients from when he likely went missing. Maybe one of them is your guy."

"Or associated with him," Spectrum said. "Give me the names."


"Alright, I can compile their available information and cross-reference that with the knowns about Lock-Up."

"You have a Big Brother database, I'm guessing," Ivy said.

"We have methods."

"I'm sure, but right now, can you pull up these patients' known addresses?"

"Sure. Why?"

"Give them to me."

A couple minutes of typing passed, then Spectrum read off the addresses. Dekker lived in a duplex on Carver Road in the Narrows. Mayo lived on Spruce Street in an East End apartment. Bolton lived in Otisburg in a walkup on Miller Avenue.

Ivy interrupted. "Does the last one live in that part of Otisburg, too?"

"No."

"That area of the city has a high incidence of *Convolvulus arvensis.*"
"You just know that?" Selina asked.

"I'm sure Crane knows it, too, if he's fond of using flora in his experiments." Ivy laughed. "What an obscure clue. I bet he was counting on Batman finding it."

"I've got a picture of Lyle Bolton," Spectrum said, excitement coming through. "He matches Lock-Up's known characteristics. I think this is him."

"If it is, it seems unlikely he could have snuck multiple well-known citizens into a walkup unnoticed," Selina commented.

"So he's probably got them and Crane stashed elsewhere," Ivy sighed. "Assuming Crane is still with us."

"Checking Bolton's place is the next step in finding out."

Ivy looked vaguely regretful. "I was hoping to get Crane one-on-one, but considering the blood we found, it's not worth the danger. I can settle for doing my part to flush him out."

"We appreciate your help, Dr. Isley," Spectrum said. "I'll team up with Catwoman from here."

Ivy gave Selina a look. "Batman gets all the slack-jawed praise for protecting this city, yet I keep seeing his work taken up by women."

"He's following up on other leads," was Spectrum's response, sounding particularly mechanical with her filter. More brightly, she added, "But I'll bring up your feedback at my next performance review."

Bruce opened the clock face and thought about John's excitement.

He walked to the elevator and thought about John's hand grasping his.

On the slow ride down, he thought about the earnest look on John's face as he expressed thanks for getting to see the cave.

During the hospital evaluation, the staff hadn't minded Bruce's absentminded and delayed responses; apparently the other recovering victims behaved much the same way. He wondered if anyone else also had a personal crisis they were now unable to shunt aside.

Montoya had been annoyed by his behavior, but he had no answer to most of her questions regardless. She'd moved on from "Trixie" to explain that the GCPD were on the trail of terrorists who coordinated the attacks, but Bruce couldn't tell her much from his glimpse of just one of them. The rest of the interrogation was brief, and he declined staying at the hospital for observation. He wasn't safe to drive, though, and his car was at the museum anyway, but Regina was there.

She'd come to check on him as a representative of the WE board and offered to take him home. They'd maneuvered through the shouting journalists and photographers to her car, and once inside, Bruce expected an onslaught of questions to determine the Board's concerns. Instead, she'd kept conversation light on the way to the manor, and when he got out of the car, she said they'd worry about the Board when he felt better. Despite their past friction, Regina still tried to do the right thing. He was going to miss her when she retired in the fall. Certainly any other Board member would've kept him in the exam room to nail down talking points before suggesting he call a ride-share.
Wouldn't it have been nice to call John, to have him go get the car and come to the hospital, to hear his thrilled laughter at the chance to be behind the wheel…

No, wait, John didn't have his license, and driving without one might send him…

Bruce needed to call him at some point. But John was right that Batman had a lot more on his plate than deterring the police from asking about the wrong things. And when had Bruce ever put anyone before the mission?

He had a sudden flash of sinking into the dark, a memory from last night. He gripped the elevator's railing and breathed, shook it off.

As the platform entered the cave, he heard echoing voices, Tiffany on a call, but just for a moment. When the computer came into view, the call screen blipped off.

He released the railing and called over, "Was that Selina?"

Tiffany looked back to the elevator. "Yeah, sorry," she called back. "And Dr. Isley. I've started a list of grants she qualifies for."

The platform came to a stop and Bruce made his way over. He must have still looked bad because Tiffany met him halfway, her eyes scanning his weary movements.

"There's evidence at Crane's apartment that he doubles as a victim," she said. "We cross-referenced components of the toxin with addresses of Crane's patients, and we think Lock-Up may be a man named Lyle Bolton. I'm bringing up his records now, but I'm going to meet Catwoman at his last known address."

"You're that sure?" Bruce asked as they reached the computer.

Tiffany tapped some keys and a picture came up of a bulky, square-jawed man with a buzzcut and hard grey eyes. It was in a four-year-old PR post on the Serac Security Solutions blog about an employee outing at a Knights game.

"It would be a wild coincidence with a guy who worked for Serac and whose build and eye color match the broadcaster," Tiffany said. "We could run it by Harvey to be sure?"

"Maybe later if necessary. It's a solid lead," Bruce said. And I'll meet Selina was what he meant to add, but the cave suddenly tilted and he leaned on the console.

"Whoa, watch yourself," Tiffany said as she called up the chair. She helped him sit, remarking, "You're still having a hell of a morning, huh?"

Bruce almost laughed. She meant the toxin's aftereffects, but after the past several years, he'd grown adept at going into the motions after sustaining an attack like this. He could determine the fastest way to recover. He could log the body count to bolster the urgency. He could process the horror that someone would indiscriminately weaponize yet another drug, one that threw you into an abyss of your worst fears. He could determine the next steps to find and stop the responsible parties.

But that moment with John kept bobbing to the surface of his thoughts in a dizzying cycle. His chest swelled at the memory of John leaning into the kiss, and then the feeling dropped to his gut with the knowledge that there was no going back.

"What was it like?"
With a start, Bruce looked up. "What?"

Tiffany stared at him anxiously. "The fear toxin. I took some reports from the early recoveries, but not anyone hit as hard as you."

Bruce forced his fingers to uncurl from the armrests. Of course, the toxin. The sense memory of John's mouth was replaced with the noxious smell and taste of the spray.

"It's a waking nightmare," he said. "And you're drowning in it." Of the details he could remember, the worst was how he'd just given up, let his fears overtake him. "Even with the detox, it feels like it soaked into my subconscious," he admitted.

Tiffany squeezed his shoulder with a sympathetic smile. "You can't detox memories," she said, then gestured to a row of respirators on the nearby table. "But you won't have to relive them, now that we know what to expect."

Bruce tried to take assurance from that, instead of feeling rankled at the note of pity in Tiffany's smile or mentally listing every step he didn't take to avoid being gassed in the first place.

The computer emitted a series of beeps, and one of the side screens announced: INCOMING VIDEO CALL.

Tiffany grimaced at the contact name. "Oof. Guess the story crossed the pond."

With a steadying breath, Bruce accepted the call, replacing the Serac blog post on the main screen with Alfred's distressed visage. "Hi, Al."

Alfred's face instantly opened with relief. "Thank goodness," he exhaled. "The news, it said–"

"I'm fine. I'm just–"

"Oh, I heard enough of that over the years," was the sour reply.

"He went to a real hospital this time," Tiffany said, ignoring Bruce's sidelong glare.

"I'm glad," Alfred said, "and grateful you're still with us."

"Glad to be here," Bruce said curtly.

Alfred hadn't talked about this part of Bruce's life so directly in a long while. Since he'd left, there had certainly been other wide-reaching stories of Batman putting himself in danger, though maybe not as dire as the news today. But Bruce didn't have time to indulge in Alfred's sudden outflow of concern. Lock-Up was sure to come out with demands, or he might have other plans. In either case, he needed to be found as soon as possible.

If Alfred wanted to be involved now, maybe he should still be in Gotham, helping.

"I heard John was with you," Alfred persisted, "and so was a pair of women?"

Bruce replied sharply, "I thought you didn't want to hear anything."

Alfred didn't miss his tone this time. He narrowed his eyes.

"Soooo like I said," Tiffany said awkwardly as she pulled her balaclava over her head, "I'm leaving to meet Selina."
Bruce started to get up. "I can–"

She flattened one hand against his chest and used the other to adjust the fabric over her mouth. "You almost fell over standing in place." She pulled her hand back and tucked away stray curls. "The records will be done compiling soon and you can look through them."

"You don't know–"

"Don't worry." She twirled a gas mask around her finger by the strap before putting it in her pack, then added a second. "Selina and John got you last night, and she and I got you now."

John, eyes flashing, insisting he wasn't going to be walked over.

"I don't want John involved," Bruce burst. "He already…” He didn't finish, suddenly remembering Alfred was listening.

"Uh, he's not coming, as far as I know," Tiffany said. She pulled on the backpack. "I'll let you know what we find."

She ran off to the motorcycle, alone on the vehicle platform, and roared out of the cave. Alfred waited until the echoes faded before speaking again, voice terse.

"I gather Ms. Kyle was one of the women. And John has 'already' what?" He leaned forward. "I ask because I do, in fact, want to know."

"Since when?" Bruce replied.

"Since I thought, once again, you might be dead."

"Which was the whole reason you left!" Bruce snapped. Memories of the toxin's thrall rose up: the wings of the bats, the vast abyss, and the looming replica of the alley, where he knelt alone because Alfred wasn't there to get him– Alfred wasn't there, not last night. He was always supposed to be there. "You didn't want to deal with any of this."

"Essentially," Alfred said evenly. No matter how agitated he was, he'd always been good at refusing to escalate arguments to shouting matches. He'd learned quickly when Bruce was a teenager. "However, not wanting to enable you hardly meant I expected to stop worrying about you."

"That's just it, Al! It was never you enabling me; it was the constant crime. It was people being hurt. The war goes on, but I'm supposed to bow out? I'm supposed to let criminals get their way when I know I can do more than charity?"

At that, Alfred's tone did get a bit clipped. "You know very well that I served in war– for longer than you've gone at your crusade, for that matter, and before your parents even met. I'm well aware of the feeling of accomplishment, the pride of direct impact." He paused pensively. "Then years pass. The wars go on, or they become excuses to start new ones, or they twist into rationales for other forms of destruction. If war is the core of your life, it's all you'll ever see. You miss what the fight is even for."

"I know what I'm fighting for."

"Intellectually, certainly. I worry about how often you truly take a moment of peace for yourself, to keep perspective in what you do."
Bruce shook his head. "I don't know what you want me to say."

"You don't need to say anything," Alfred said. "You brought the matter up. I don't mean to re-argue the point. But..."

Of course there was a but.

"Your increased efforts for the public good, out of the mask, make me hopeful."

Bruce hadn't expected that, or Alfred's flash of a smile, and his reply fumbled out. "I mean, of course, it was pretty clear that a lot of work needed to be done off the streets."

Starting with Arkham, influenced partially by Bruce's brief experience there, but far more by John's long residence. And John was willing to go back there, to dull uniforms and regimented days and supervised visits. And Bruce couldn't...

The irony hit hard.

"John started a gang," Bruce said, not quite laughing, rubbing his face.

"What?" Alfred said, alarmed.

"He thinks he hasn't, because they act in self defense, and they don't hurt people, not much, and a lot of them are just artists, but it's a gang. And I..." Bruce looked straight at the screen. "And I can't stop him."

Alfred's voice was quiet, but he got the joke. "I can imagine the frustration."

"I just... He doesn't have to do this, not like I do," Bruce insisted. "I would give him everything he wants– anything– and he would be safe. But he..."

Bruce already knew, regardless of the kiss, that the outcome of their talk later was not going to result in John giving up the Neighborhood Watch. It was too entwined in the life he'd built.

"He did live in what's essentially a cage for over a decade," Alfred said. "It seems natural he'd be averse to–"

"You and Tiffany," Bruce interrupted, "you have judgmental comments for years, and it's now you both want to see things from his point of view?"

"You want me to speak unkindly of him?" Alfred said skeptically.

"Of course not! I just– I want–" Bruce jabbed a passcode into the keyboard and nearly tore his mother's journal from its drawer. "I don't want to be like Mom! I don't want to just stand by!" He flipped through the pages, looking for the entry. "Feeling helpless! Doing noth–"

He stopped. He'd found a later entry, with glaring words. He read through it, then the entry before.

Alfred stayed silent, taking the opportunity to let the atmosphere cool. After a minute, he asked tentatively, "What is it?"

Bruce said nothing and read again.

The school called today. Bruce and Oz were in a fight with other children who were making fun of Esther.
Thomas was able to come home for dinner, and we sat down with Bruce before we ate. We've always stressed that it's important to stand up to bullies, but made the point that the bullies are young like Bruce. They need to learn to be better, and fights should be avoided. But today, Thomas said, "Soon you'll all be old enough that you'll have to show them who's boss before they get ideas."

I know what Thomas's idea of "showing who's boss" is.

I've been in denial even about this. Thomas has separated Bruce from our dealings so far, but that can't last. What Thomas is doing is what he'll teach our son. The ends justify the means. Deals with the crooked mayor, with organized crime, that's the real family business. That's how Bruce will grow up.

And I'm just going to let it happen. I didn't say anything after Thomas said that to Bruce. I didn't know what to say. And then dinner was ready and we ate and talked and smiled while Esther is locked in the asylum.

The next entry was two days later, itself just three days before the night that irrevocably changed Bruce’s life.

I can't let it happen.

I told Thomas that. I told him he needs to stop, once and for all. He told me to stop being ridiculous. He said we're in too deep. "In too deep." We live in a goddamn crime novel.

I got emotional and threatened him. I told him I would tell the police everything. He wished me luck turning the police against Hill, but his sarcasm quickly changed to worry. He turned everything around, turned sweet, pulled me into his arms.

I cried because I still love him. He kept asking what I was going to do. He told me what Hill or Falcone could do to our family if I tried to break the pact. As if I made these deals. I didn't want any of this.

I couldn't answer and he got angry, scared. He said I wasn't thinking clearly. He told me to think about our life together, to think about what I really wanted.

I told him I would keep quiet. My own lie.

I will get Bruce away from this. I'll go to the state. It doesn't matter if we lose everything. Thomas changed so slowly, it was too late when I realized what a monster he'd become. I won't watch that happen to my son.

Three days before they met Joe Chill. So little time for Martha to have changed her mind– and too little to be coincidental with the murder.

"You know how old Hill admitted he had your mum and dad killed?" Oz said with that smug grin. "I found out why he did it. And I'll tell you the story, but only if you say, 'pretty please.'"

Oz wasn't a trustworthy person, so Bruce hadn't trusted him not to lie, or not to go back on his offer once he heard Bruce grovel enough. Maybe Bruce had been too proud in that moment when he decided not to say the magic words. Maybe this was what Oz, with his access to Hill's records, was going to tell him.

"Mom was going to the authorities," Bruce said, "to tell them everything."
"Was she?" Alfred said quietly.

There were only a few more entries, and Bruce skimmed them for any sign she'd changed her mind. Nothing. "She was ready to turn Dad in."

And most likely Thomas didn't believe her as readily as she thought, not during an emotional argument. He could have foolishly confided in someone about the fight and it got back to Hill. It was possible that he told Hill himself, put forth a revised, even-tempered version before suggesting that they step away from Arkham, maybe just for a while, to give Thomas time to soothe his wife's concerns. A man like Hill wouldn't have been able to tolerate even a pause of the machine that generated his power.

Alfred sighed. "I would have been ready to stick by her, the both of you."

Bruce stared at his mother's handwriting. "After the family's assets were frozen, I don't think she could have afforded you."

"Oh, I wouldn't have needed much. My back could still handle a cot in those days." Alfred paused. "You still seem upset."

"I don't know." But he did. "I guess there was still something about… about them being a team, even though…"

"She still loved your father. I saw that every day." Alfred hesitated. "But real love, when you want the best for someone, comes with a responsibility…"

Bruce closed his eyes. He didn't want to hear the comparison. His mother had no choice but to turn on his father after what he'd become. Alfred had no choice but to leave Bruce on his own for fear of enabling a tragic end. Unequal weights on the scale.

But then Bruce had been making unequal comparisons himself: his mother's desperation to hold onto his father versus his own fear of what may happen if he forged a closer connection with John. Searching for a clear answer, a path to follow– or a path to avoid.

"I know you feel a responsibility for John."

Bruce looked up at the screen, feeling pinned.

"Oh, come now," Alfred said with forced nonchalance. "The tabloids may be brimming with nonsense, but anyone with eyes can see the infatuation."

Bruce shifted in his chair. "I thought you might have suspected earlier."

"An inkling during the whole… debacle. Then when I realized from your letters that you visited John regularly… He had the benefit of proximity, but it still seemed curious that, in comparison, you just let Ms. Kyle go. Never so much as sent a PI to look for her."

Bruce hadn't. Selina was the type who didn't want to be found. Yet when it came to John, Bruce had convinced himself it was fine to bug his friend's phone. He felt a twist of shame. John's reaction after the kiss wasn't inscrutable if Bruce stopped thinking about himself.

"John is reluctant about the idea," he said, then added quickly, "We both are, you'll be happy to know."

"My boy," Alfred replied, "I am never happy to see you miserable." Another pause. "It's been a
long time since we've really discussed John."

Bruce closed the journal and held it tightly shut. "He hasn't done anything wrong this time out," he said, then amended, "Not any worse than me."

"But you're afraid he could."

"I'm afraid I can't help him."

Alfred's brow furrowed. "By all appearances, you help him a great deal."

The computer broke in once again with three ringing sounds. An alert popped up in the lower right corner: INCOMING BROADCAST.

Bruce put the journal away, the drawer shutting with a clang. "I need to handle this, Al."

"Understood," Alfred said soberly. "We should talk more when it's over."

Unless this was the time the vigilante didn't pull through, was what went unsaid.

"We will," Bruce replied. "Try to have a good day."

He ended the call before Alfred could respond, then brought up Lock-Up's site.

This stream was different. It showed a countdown of thirty minutes, with a link below the video. The link led to the regular web, to a CamEra livestream with the same countdown, now superimposed over pictures of Summer Gleeson, Veronica Vreeland, Paul Hartford, and– finally confirming– Sal Maroni. Lock-Up had mentioned Maroni in his announcement the night before, but the family was loath to admit to the authorities that the patriarch had been taken.

The video title was "Demands for Gotham," and the number of watchers ticked up and up, already in the thousands. The link must have been strategically posted in just the right social media feeds to make it go viral.

Lock-Up was ready for a wider audience.
AH HAHA! Life is trying to bring me down with "responsibilities" and "maintaining relationships" and "future plans despite creeping dread" but nothing will stop this fic!

The batcomputer finished its search on Lyle Bolton—white, black hair, brown eyes, thirty-six years old—not long before the countdown ended. Bruce was able to load several photos into the facial recognition software by the time Lock-Up appeared. The terrorist’s face may have been covered, but his exposed eyes and the contours of his head were useful data. The analysis was nearly complete before he finished his first statement.

"Good morning, fellow Gothamites. I’ll begin with an introduction."

Ninety-one-point-seven percent match with Bolton, the computer reported. (With an inverse likelihood, in Bruce's opinion, that the rest of the information dredged up in the search would support a different conclusion.)

"I am Lock-Up. The government and the media have labeled me a terrorist, but that's what they do to revolutionaries. They want you to fear me, not listen to me. They want you to fear your brothers."

The view changed to a different angle of the concrete room. Over a dozen men filled the frame, standing at attention. They'd traded in their respirators for black balaclavas in homage to their leader.

"This is just a portion of the militia fighting to end Gotham's deep-seated corruption," Lock-Up said as the camera switched back to him. "Which brings us to the reason you clicked on this link."

The viewer count was over three million. The batcomputer's side monitors showed the two local news stations that had taken it upon themselves to broadcast the stream.

"Here are the spoils from last night's city-wide raid."

A splitscreen now, showing video of four cells. Nightvision tinged everything with pale green and added a gleam to the occupants’ eyes. At first, the different angles made it difficult to understand the space, but soon Bruce recognized that the cells were encircled by a concrete wall, and metal bars divided the circle into slices. Three of the slices held Gleeson, Veronica, and Maroni, stuck in some kind of muck. The fourth spot was empty, and Bruce would estimate a couple more off camera.

"Wave to Gotham," Lock-Up said mockingly.

He must have turned on a speaker in the cells. Gleeson sat curled in a corner with her back to the wall and her shoulder against the bars, but she lifted her head. Maroni sat against the middle of his portion of wall, with his arms balanced on his knees and looking straight ahead. A blink and a twitch of his fingers were the only signs he was cognizant.
Veronica had tucked herself into the point of her cell, and she got to her feet. The pins holding up her hair had fallen out, her lace dress was ruined, and her legs looked filthy. She grasped the bars and shouted at the camera, "What the hell do you want?"

She got no answer; the stream returned to Lock-Up. "The empty cell was intended for Councilman Hartford," he said, "but he volunteered as our first example."

The terrorist stepped out of view. At first, Bruce felt numb at the sight of the body lashed to a metal folding chair. One length of rope looped over Hartford's forehead to hold up his lifeless, ghastly face. Bruce glanced at the side monitors; the news stations had cut to their anchors.

Lock-Up walked back into frame, unaffected by Hartford's wide eyes and grimacing mouth. A blend of anger and sympathy welled up in Bruce's chest. Lock-Up was truly content to follow Harvey's legacy, bloodshed and all. Hartford may have deserved to feel terror, but indiscriminate murder wasn't justice.

"Go ahead and feel the knee-jerk reactions: disgust, fear," Lock-Up said. "Ask what you've been trained to ask: what kind of monster does this to a person? The question is reflexive; it's normal. Now let it fall away, because it's distracting you from the greater picture. What you should ask is why we had this vermin on the City Council. Is a man who beats on women someone who represents this city? No, like the rest of the Council, he represents his own interests."

Cut to Maroni's cell. "As does our next prisoner: Salvatore Maroni. Why does this city allow a man to remain free when he threatens residents, fills our streets with drugs, and is responsible for countless other crimes? Why do we tolerate the legal loopholes that pretend there's a chance a mob boss is a worthwhile human? Why do the benefits of judicial compassion only seem to benefit him and his kind?"

Maroni stayed seated and still, but Bruce could make out the corner of his mouth creaking up. Even in this dark circumstance, Maroni felt at ease in his power. Maybe he assumed his subordinates were on their way, or that Lock-Up wouldn't have the gall to kill someone of more consequence than Hartford. Maybe he had no idea that not even Batman had figured out where he was.

A view of Veronica's cell now, and Lock-Up ranted on. "Why is this woman renowned for something as insipid as inheriting wealth? How does that entitle her to your attention and sympathies for her personal failings, while 'lower' people face real struggles alone?"

Veronica's brashness shrunk away. She ducked her head and wrapped her arms around herself, clearly frightened by how Lock-Up had spoken with as much vitriol for her as for Maroni. Bruce was disturbed himself. Veronica may have spent her life gaming the press, and consequently her traumas were as well publicized as everything else, but how was she comparable to a calculated murderer?

Lock-Up didn't have any sympathy for Gleeson either. "How about a woman who does work hard–to exploit pain for ratings nightly? Oh, she'll paint on the right face and recite the right condolences, but all it takes is a cocktail party invitation, and she'll happily ingratiate herself to those responsible for your misery."

Gleeson's voice was raspy but loud enough to hear. "Screw you."

Back to Lock-Up, who took up the frame and obstructed the view of Hartford's body. "This is only a sample of the scum that make it impossible to live in a righteous and orderly world," he declared. "The moment of terror you felt seeing that corpse? Compare it to the stream of fear undergirding
your entire lives as you take in the news or walk your own streets. These supposed authorities and elites are responsible. They deserve to be jailed as much as any street thug, but that won't happen in a system they've built. So last night we gave them a taste of the fear that should dog their every step, and today I lay out my ultimatum.

"I am giving the City of Gotham a chance. Hand over control to me by midnight, or I will be forced to defend this city by executing my prisoners. If my leadership is recognized, however, all vermin will live to be tried for their crimes— not by the rules meant to set the wicked free, but by the laws of virtue and common sense!"

"Wonder who decides those laws," Bruce murmured.

"Do not misunderstand, people of Gotham. This is not a request I make of the current administration. I am calling upon your will. You will decide to take back this city. Treat the public servants as what they are and demand they submit to my direction. Your brothers are doing the same; the bridge checkpoints have been laid out for us, but we will overpower them. The marine unit patrols the river, but we will capture the boats. And you will command the authority of the mayor and the police commissioner. We can finish what Harvey Dent began!"

This was ridiculous. Even if the militia took over the bridges and the river, only a short time would pass before state or federal forces moved in. Of course, that was a nonfactor to someone blind in his fanaticism, and to the Gothamites susceptible to his rhetoric.

And Bruce had no doubt that, no matter the scenario, Lock-Up was not amenable to setting any prisoners free.

"The first step in conceding to my authority is handing over the GCPD headquarters, including all who are detained within its walls. A squad of my men will be waiting outside to receive access cards from all personnel. Again, you have until midnight to comply."

Lock-Up extended his arms, ready to embrace his dominion. "Trust in me, Gotham, and we can build a city that is an example for the world!"

The imperious posture faded as he fixed the camera in a warning glare. "And to anyone who escaped our justice last night, or provided aid to those fugitives, know that we have not forgotten you."

"Boss?"

John blinked. He sat at a table next to Lucia, surrounded by Sideshow performers and a few bar patrons. Rosaline had turned the TV above the counter to a broadcast of Lock-Up's stream, and now instead of prepping for rehearsal, everyone was in a tizzy.

Well, John's tizzy had started hours ago. The livestream had been a promising distraction, until somewhere in the middle when he reflexively thought: Bruce is taking care of this idiot. Then his brain shot right back to thinking about Bruce and his firm grip and his sweet little confession and how it all was everything John's ba-dumping little heart desired, except he couldn't let himself have it. Talk about a joke!

It was Chuck who'd crashed into John's daze. He, his sister, and her boyfriend stood at the opposite side of the table with expectant stares.

"What do we do?" Chuck repeated, gesturing around the bar. "At the end, he meant people like us."
On the TV, Jack Ryder was reporting that the militia's promised attacks at the bridges and on the water had already begun, but that was all well away from All's Well.

John snorted. "We do what we've been doing. Keep a look out. This guy is way overestimating himself, especially comparing himself Dent." He cackled. "I mean, people knew who Dent was!"

Lucia's laugh was short and semi-hysterical. "If we're going to be attacked, couldn't it be after the premiere tomorrow?" she said, leg jittering.

John waved that worry away. "They'll go after the grouchy gardener or Bruce before us. Not that it matters. Batman's got this way before midnight."

"The Bat texts you about his progress, huh? Does he use emojis?"

Well, no, Bruce had left John pretty clueless before the gala. (Also, no, he'd never once sent an emoji.) He folded his arms grumpily and retorted, "Fighting crime is what he does!"

Laying on the table, Lucia's phone rang. With a glance at the screen, she pushed it over to John. "Oh yeah, I forgot you don't even have a phone still."

John shrunk away from Bruce's name. "Uh, just let it go to voicemail."

"What? He probably wants to make sure you're okay."

"He knows I am. We just talked this morning." More than talked, he thought, stifling a burst of anxious laughter.

"Before the citywide threat." Lucia tried to put the phone into John's hands, but he shoved them under his thighs. "What if he's not okay? You just said..."

"I know what I said!"

"He almost died already!"

"I know."

"What is your deal?" She accepted the call and brought the phone to her ear. "Hey, you alright?"

John stared at her, holding his breath in case Bruce could hear it.

After a moment, she went on, "Yeah, we all saw. No one's busted in just yet." Listening again, she looked at John. "He's here. He's, uh..."

John waved his hands wildly and shook his head. "I'm– I'm washing my hair," he whispered. "Balancing my checkbook. Chasing pigeons in the park!"

"He's busy."

"Oh, that's good." He gave her a thumbs up.

"Busy and safe. If you can spare any security from your mansion– well, no, I guess the checkpoints are war zones."

She stared at John as she talked, silently inviting him to take the phone at any time. It really was unnecessary: he knew what Bruce was saying. Stay inside, lock the doors, and everything else being repeated on the television right at that moment. Call the police if anything goes down–
despite knowing the cops were preoccupied.

A familiar urge rose in John's gut, to throw out some excuse and run headlong into trouble because Bruce needed help. John tamped it down, stayed in place with his hands balled into fists under the table. He had a moment to think it through, to remember how well running headlong into trouble had ended before.

Then again, on more recent occasions when trouble came to him, that all ended okay, didn't it? Last night's performance in particular was stellar. Heck, he'd even gotten a breathtaking reward from his patrician in peril–

Stop it. That was a problem, not a perk, and however happy Bruce was to be alive, he'd asked John to stay out of the Lock-Up situation. It wasn't like Batman would be alone; Spectrum and Catwoman were plenty of help. Plus now that the vigilante knew what to expect, it was classic stellar rebound time! Lock-Up's beef was city-wide anyway, not limited to the neighborhood boundaries John had been working in.

Although if trouble had a way of strolling into John's vicinity, who was to say the same wouldn't happen with right opportunity to help?

Lucia put the phone down, and he realized she'd hung up.

"What was all that about?" she asked.

"Can't a guy just not want to talk?"

"Some other guy, sure."

The trio suddenly reappeared, which was doubly startling because John hadn't noticed them go. He also hadn't noticed the arrival of two people just inside the front door: a woman with short purple locks swept away from the undercut on the left side of her head, with stars shaved in, and oh, hey, Scarhead from the bowling alley!

Lorenzo gestured to them. "Some reps from the neighborhood."

"Okay?" John waved them over. "Don't block the door! It's rude."

Scarhead and Undercut walked up to the table with their heads held high and postures straight, and they murmured respectful greetings.

"Ah, yes, salutations to you as well. Jeez!" John chuckled. "Just because things look grim doesn't mean you have to."

Scarhead smirked at that. "Shoulda known you wouldn't be bothered, J-man."

"I prescribe a positive outlook to everyone!" John leaned forward. "You have something for me on Gotham's latest masked menace?"

Undercut shrugged. "Heard that the sex workers haven't seen a some regular johns for a while. Not like those girls have their home addresses, though."

Mreh, not that interesting. That tip John had gotten from "Candy" was way more substantial, and Tiffany had mentioned that Gordon was already looking into a number of ex-cops and Dent sympathizers who paid for intimate company. John raised an eyebrow at Scarhead.
"I've got nothing," the other man said sheepishly.

John let his disgruntled disappointment show on his face. He'd heard the same from other Watch reports; nobody could dig up anything new on Lock-Up or his militia.

"Sorry," Scarhead said. "We came by 'cause of that video. We wanna help make a plan for dealing with this guy."

John fixed him with a look. "How do you think I'd like to deal with him? His minions tried to kill me and my good buddy last night!"

Lucia coughed.

"And Lucia! And her kid sister. Plus, you know, all those other people, especially the dead ones."

"Exactly," Undercut said, hands on her hips, "we don't want to be the dead ones. I know we aren't gonna kill, but maybe we should try some kind of negotiation?"

Scarhead nodded. "Get on the guy's good side."

"What are you even talking about?" John said, breaking down into giggles. "Lock-Up and his pals threw Sal Maroni in a dungeon when they could've exchanged him for anything! Not that I'm complaining. It's great that his family isn't worried about any of their other, uh, irritants right now."

"Yeah, but Maroni's a crook," Scarhead said.

"And we're not," Undercut said, "and if these 'soldiers' come around, we only got so much legal firepower, you know?"

"Right, so instead of being on the defensive, maybe we make a deal to--"

John pounded his fist on the table and shot to his feet. "Clean out your ears!" he hollered. "And try paying attention! Lock-Up can read a tough script about some stupid fantasy of order, but his troops are a bunch of reckless idiots who were psyched to blow open my skull just for being in the way." He jabbed a finger gun to his temple and mimicked an explosive shot. "They're gonna come for anyone they catch jaywalking or looking at them funny." He extended his arms, mimicking magnanimity. "But by all means, fall in line so they can hit more targets per bullet!"

Scarhead and Undercut averted their gazes and nodded rapidly, but John wasn't convinced they got the point. One ominous video and they got spooked enough to kowtow to Bruce's near-murderer? The Watch was supposed to be about keeping their noses (mostly) clean and sticking to it.

He could feel electricity lighting up his face when he laughed. "No, really, if you or anyone else really believes the best way to avoid being a target is to fall in with criminals, go ahead. Run off and enjoy your free lesson— except for the exorbitant hospital bills and all the emotional costs. You know, pride, integrity, little things like that. So if that's the case— he stabbed a finger toward each of them— "I don't wanna see your idiot faces around here again!"

Ah, now there were better signs: wilting postures and flushes of embarrassment.

"No, J-man," Scarhead said, "we'd never— We just…"

"We're brainstorming," Undercut chimed in, "given the magnitude of the situation, but you're absolutely right--"
"That helping a terrorist isn't going to lessen the magnitude?" John guffawed. "Yeah, I'm right! I would know." He rubbed his temples and rested his eyes for a moment. "Do me a favor and make sure nobody else out there is getting the same bright ideas."

Mumbling more apologies, the reps turned and navigated through clusters of silent Circus members. As the front door closed behind them, the room filled with awkward silence.

"You seem frustrated," Lucia deadpanned, staring up at him.

"There's no reason to lose your head when no one's actually around to lop it off!" John replied. He gestured to everyone else. "As far as we're concerned, there's a show tomorrow, and the biggest threat to that is if Fredelle keeps chasséing off the stage! So let's get started."

"What?" Ivy's voice whipped through the phone speaker.

Selina winced. Nearby, Tiffany knelt on the kitchen counter to get up to the highest cabinet shelf. Since a respirator covered half her face, she expressed sympathy with a glance.

"Hey," Selina started uneasily. She hoped her own mask didn't muffle her voice too much. This conversation was awkward enough. "So I guess you saw—"

"The delusional tyrant on the widely broadcast video essentially calling for my head?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't think—"

"Right, you didn't!"

Selina closed her eyes. "I just want to make sure you get underground."

"Where? Lock-Up could have acolytes anywhere. He put out an open invitation for membership to any lunatic."

"He's not nearly as omnipresent at that," Selina said, giving the phone a dry look. "His followers were out pretty late last night, and they never got us at John's place."

"Ahem." Tiffany gave a warning look this time. She pressed a button on her gas mask and said, with computerized affectation, "Doe's not supposed to get more involved."

"Just an example."

"Again," Ivy exclaimed, "that was before the online pronouncement! I'm sure the clown's on the enemies list."

"Maybe they can help at one of the smaller precincts," Tiffany suggested as she hopped off the counter.

"Oh, sure, the cops would never happily submit to a violent wacko."

Selina didn't want to think about how Lock-Up's proclamation reminded her of Harvey's mayoral decrees. "You can't just hide out at the Gardens."

"Oh, god." Ivy's tone abruptly shifted into worry. "What if… I need to go."

Before Selina could reply, the screen flashed CALL ENDED and went dark. She slipped the phone back into a pouch strapped around her waist. "There better be something here that helps find this
creep.”

Tiffany turned off her modulator and gestured to the kitchen cabinet. "Nothing illuminating so far, though I'm surprised such an alpha guy likes animal crackers."

They were halfway through their search of Lyle Bolton's home, another apartment in another shady neighborhood. He did not have, to Selina's surprise, another easily pickable lock. He'd gone electronic, with some amount of customization according to the readout on Tiffany's tablet, which had the door open before Selina could suggest her own hacking tool. It was tempting to suggest Tiffany consider a career change.

They'd started the search while waiting for Lock-Up's countdown to end. The unit was long: on opening the door, Selina could see to the very end, along the continuous lefthand wall. On the right was first a narrow closet, then a living room wide enough to lie down in, and then a galley kitchen with a door opening to the bedroom. There were no windows.

The closet held only a few empty wire hangers. The living room had been completely cleared out, even of carpet, and the unfinished wooden floor was marked with a line of holes from the front entryway to the kitchen. Matching holes were in the ceiling, and crisscrossing black marks covered the bulk of the floor. It looked like a barrier had sectioned the living room off from the rest of the apartment. Exposed wires stuck out from a square hole in the wall just outside the closet door.

Selina was no engineer, but it definitely looked like the remnants of an electrified cage. Tiffany hadn't disagreed, and she theorized that Bolton had taken the materials with him to conserve his resources, rather than wasting time to steal more.

They were in the middle of finding little of interest in the kitchen when Lock-Up's stream started. Tiffany propped the tablet on the counter so she could listen while finishing up. Selina meant to do the same, but she hadn't seen Lock-Up before and ended up watching the whole galling presentation.

Harvey had been reckless and vindictive, but he hadn't shown off bodies like trophies.

Selina came back to herself with a start when Tiffany waved a hand in front of her face.

"Sorry," Selina said. "Just thinking I've had my fill of 'alpha guys.'"

"I hear you," Tiffany said, attaching the tablet back to her hip. "I don't think we're gonna get a story out of old condiments. Let's check out the bedroom."

A stripped twin bed sat in the far left corner, and beside it leaned a cheap lamp and a short bureau with two drawers that had been left half open. In the other corner, a bagless trashcan held some tall, rolled up sheets of posterboard. To the right of the room entrance, another door led to a tiny bathroom tucked behind the kitchen, and next to that was a small closet. The closet had a bifold door at some point, but the tracks were now empty, and the plaster ceiling was mottled with black spots.

Tiffany rummaged through the bureau, so Selina went to the trash can. She pulled out one of the rolled up sheets and unveiled Harvey's dependable and charming face, framed by a command: VOTE FOR DENT.

"I guess he really was a Harvey fanboy," Selina commented.

Tiffany looked up from the drawers. "There's no way he was a fan before Dent lost it. Probably found those online after."
Selina rolled the poster up again. "And trashed them in a fit when he couldn't get Harvey's blessing." At least there was that, proof that Harvey had pulled back.

"Since they weren't set on fire, gotta assume Bolton didn't realize Harvey tipped us off." Tiffany closed the drawers. "Nothing but clothes."

Selina used the poster to poke around the sparse debris at the bottom of the trash can. "Nothing but garbage."

Tiffany's tablet started ringing— an actual old-fashioned telephone ring. She left it on her hip and tapped the screen to answer.

"Thought we'd hear from you immediately," she said.

"I called John first," Bruce said, "to make sure he saw."

"I'm sure he was excited."

"I talked to Lucia, actually, so I don't know, but I told him earlier to stay out of it."

Tiffany raised her eyebrows. "He didn't talk to you after that morbid announcement?"

"Sure sounds strange," Selina said tonelessly. She avoided Tiffany's curious look.

And Bruce didn't acknowledge the comment. "Did you tell Dr. Isley?" he asked.

"I called her," Selina said. "She's... aware."

"We haven't come across any toxin boobytraps," Tiffany said, "but we've got a closet left to go through. You've got Bolton's records, right? Can you sum up his history? Might point us in a direction."

"Sure. One second."

Tiffany knelt and proceeded to pull out the assortment of footwear left in a row on the floor. Selina started going through the few hanging garments, checking any pockets she could find.

"Bolton is a local," Bruce began, "born at Gotham General, though his formative years were spent around the country as an army brat, moving almost every year with his parents and brother. When he was fourteen, his family returned to Gotham after his father was dishonorably discharged for excessive drinking and disorderly behavior. The father was ordered to undergo rehabilitation for alcohol abuse, but seems it didn't help. Several police reports tell the same story: a bout of drinking preceding domestic abuse of his wife.

"She had her own problem with heroin, and after four years in Gotham, she died of an overdose. Dane, the younger brother, had the same addiction, which he supported by fencing stolen goods. He wasn't great at covering his tracks and served multiple prison stints by the time he was twenty-seven."

"If only he followed his big brother's shining example," Selina said sarcastically as she inspected a slip of paper. Just an old movie ticket.

"Bolton's record has no prison time, though he did have a few overnight stays in jail for fights in his twenties. Nothing after that until a recent hearing after a work altercation."

"Not at Serac, though," Tiffany said, inspecting a boot sole. She held a metal scraper, but it didn't
look like she was finding significant dirt samples.

"Right. He didn't come up on our list of disgruntled Serac employees because he left on amicable
terms, to work as an independent security consultant a couple years ago. Three months ago, a
dispute with a client over unpaid work escalated when Bolton threatened them. No one was
physically injured, but the court found it had enough to mandate anger management counseling.
Bolton chose East End Clinic."

"And Crane's ideas about therapy must have really helped his sense of grievance," Selina said,
turning out the last pocket. Nothing.

"I doubt they helped, but Crane didn't incite the creation of Lock-Up," Bruce said. "Bolton's
definitely been nursing this need for control for years."

"And he knows about covering his tracks," Tiffany said, dropping a sneaker. "I'm not seeing
anything here that clues where he went. No electronics or mail were left behind. But if he was
robbing places serviced by Serac, maybe he's using insider info to hole up in one."

"A few of Serac's clients did go under and leave unoccupied facilities," Bruce said, "but Bolton
worked many jobs around Gotham over the years, before and after Serac. A number of those
locations have also been abandoned."

"And we have to search them all in less than twelve hours."

"You might find something that narrows the field."

"I'm not optimistic."

"We're not done just yet," Selina said, reaching up to the bare plywood shelf. She grabbed an
upside-down football helmet by the face guard and pulled it forward, turning it to the side. A
weathered baseball rolled out and hit the floor at Selina's feet with a hollow thunk and a faint clack,
then skipped less noisily across the bedroom.

Tiffany swatted Selina's legs. "Move, move, move."

Selina stepped back and crouched down. She could see it now, how the floorboards had been cut
neatly right along the door track.

Tiffany pulled out a crate of tangled device cords, and it left a dusty outline behind. "I think the
floor came up a bit," she said, "hit the baseboard."

She reached in and pried the board off the wall, and Selina placed it behind them, mindful of the
nails. Two shallow notches had been cut at the edge of the floorboards, and Tiffany dug her index
fingers in and lifted up the whole closet floor.

Selina got that out of the way, too, and looked back to see a shoebox stuck between two joists.
Tiffany tugged the box out and set it on the floor, and Selina noted the brand logo. As far as she
could remember, that company had long gone out of business.

Tiffany detached the tablet from her hip and held it up so the rear camera could see their find.
"How about an unboxing video?"

"What's this?" Bruce said.

Selina took off the lid. "Secrets, of course."
She'd never stayed in one place long enough to collect a box of mementos, and she quickly pushed away the tug of envy that someone like Bolton had one. The items' significance ranged from obvious to invisible: a rolled up old Boy Scouts sash, a matchbook from a bar that closed a decade ago, a tiny American flag, a tarnished gold band.

At the bottom of the box, among loose ticket stubs and postcards, the corner of a photograph stuck out. It lay face down, but "BULLSEYE PHOTO SERVICES" was printed in stripes across the back.

"Retro," Tiffany said, pulling it out and turning it over.

Pictured was a younger Bolton, perhaps in his late twenties. He had a companionable arm around the shoulders of a shorter man, not much younger and with similar facial features. Holding beer cans, they smiled in front of an abandoned cabin covered with graffiti. Trees made up the backdrop, yellow and orange in the wane of autumn.

"Dane, right?" Tiffany said. "We should ask him if he knows where his brother is."

"I didn't finish that part," Bruce said. "Dane fatally overdosed three years ago. Their father died of a heart attack a few years before that."

Tiffany turned the photo over again. Handwriting on the back had been obscured in the pile. The first notation in the corner, neat in black, read: "Brews at Bru." Above that was a note in blue, the writing more haphazard with the first two words starkly underlined: "one week before Delaneys."

"Hold on," Bruce said. A moment passed, and he went on. "After one of Dane's relapses, he robbed the Delaneys, who were Lyle's neighbors. Dane was staying with him at the time."

"Home is where the resentment is," Tiffany said.

"Not at first, I don't think. In the early days, Lyle's name appears in documents for posting bail, attending hearings, things like that. But later, it looks like Dane was on his own. A pause. "So Lyle starts off unable to stop the criminal activity in his family, and now his resentment has spread to the whole city, with an extreme need to control it."

Tiffany leaned toward Selina and murmured, "Awkward pause, 'cause that sounds a little too familiar."

"What?" Bruce said.

"Nothing." She picked through more of the box. "This is interesting character development, but it doesn't lead us to a secret facility. I say we give this place another once-over and scan for more hiding spots, but we need to start searching those abandoned buildings."

"I've sent the list, sorted in order of likelihood," Bruce replied. "I'll suit up and start at the decommissioned ship down at Tricorner. You head to the old women's health building for Elliot Hospital, and Selina can check out the old Rogues stadium. If you're up for it, Selina."

Selina shrugged. No reason to back out now. "I'm not much for sports, but sure."

Tiffany flipped the camera view so Bruce could see them instead of the box, and she brought his image up on screen. "I think the question is, are you up for it?"

Still in his rumpled tuxedo, he crossed his arms. "I'm fine."
"I'm gonna have bio monitoring on, so at least we can find you right away if you pass out during a grapple."

"You don't have anything to worry about."

Except time. They should enlist John, given his proven ability to slink around the city, but Selina caught herself before voicing the thought. Tiffany had reproached the mention of his name so quickly, and Bruce's mood didn't look to have improved since the morning.

Instead, Selina nudged Tiffany and said, "Is 'puts up with stubborn supervisor' something you can add to that performance report?"

Laying in his bed, John turned his hammer-shattered phone over in his hands. The ghost of daylight leaked through the blinds; it'd been hours since Lock-Up's livestream, and even longer since John last spoke with Bruce. He hadn't abandoned rehearsal to help, but he desperately wanted to text for an update. He couldn't leave a record of bat business on Lucia's phone, though, and making a call would just... just be wasting search time– and was kinda maybe a more direct form of confrontation that John didn't want to deal with.

But he would have to eventually, and then what?

When John decided, months ago, to pretend nothing had changed about his and Bruce's relationship, he hadn't counted on Bruce having the same feelings– because the idea was ludicrous! Bruce was ludicrous!

Of course, John already knew that. That's what he liked about–

"No, shut up," he muttered, clenching the phone in his right hand. He dug the knuckles of his left into his forehead, maneuvering his brain back on track.

It was no longer possible to pretend nothing was different, which left one option.

"Feh." He flipped the phone onto the mattress. He couldn't even get rid of a broken piece of treachery tech. How was he supposed to let Bruce go?

But, well....

Maybe this was another test from the universe, like choosing to let Freeze run off with his wife-sicle, and like last night, when John had to step up when Bruce couldn't. If Bruce couldn't be the hero in their not-meant-to-be, it was up to John to put up the boundary.

Wouldn't that show progress, the ability to Let Things Go in the most wrenching way? Wouldn't Leland be proud of him for making a rough emotional decision, like normal people made all the time? John was supposed to handle everyday life with his emotional and mental toolbox, and with all the friends he had now. With enough time, he was bound to get over the loss, wasn't he? And so would Bruce, much sooner, no doubt. John's absence would just bring Bruce back to his senses.

Bruce had to be senseless, to have looked at John that way.

To have touched him that way, calloused fingertips against his jaw, stroking his neck.

In this very bed. Bruce had tried to pull John into it, on top of him– or maybe he would have turned over and let his bulk fix John to the mattress.
The latter was how it went in so many daydreams, and John imagined that weight again as he palmed his groin. This could still be within the boundary, couldn't it? Did he have to give up Fantasy Bruce, too?

He closed his eyes, and it was Bruce's hand teasing him, not delving into his waistband but working steadily at the crotch of his cotton pants. The hard pressure was paired with feather-light kisses up his throat, getting John all wound up, even tighter when those lips reached his ear and murmured the rewards for being a good boy. All John could do was whine and roll his hips upwards, as Bruce's other hand locked John's wrists together and held them over his head, grip just on the edge of too tight.

Once upon a time, John thought he'd be all over the rough treatment, uncontrolled and exciting, no holds barred. Then Harley's fist connected with his eye socket, and the flash of pain illuminated a line he hadn't realized he had. He'd wanted her to understand why he'd hid from the agents, that he'd make up for it any way he could, but she hadn't understood. She hadn't cared. The sparks around his eye only made him feel betrayed, not alive.

Bruce was different. In all his simmering darkness, a relentless light shone through. He was careful, not careless, and while that could make him a worrywart, John could convince him to play. That calculating part of Bruce would be drawn to the challenge of balancing on the line between pleasure and pain, of figuring out when to edge over and when to draw back. John knew Bruce wouldn't really hurt him. He could trust Bruce.

The problem was Bruce trusting John.

The vision dissolved, leaving John behind with a flagging erection. He pounded the mattress in frustration. It was easier to indulge in fantasies when that devoted look in Bruce's eyes had only existed in John's imagination. He could pack up the image in a little mental box, set it aside, and go about his day.

Now it was real, and he was going to reject it, right after he'd almost lost Bruce to the big batcave in the sky.

Someone knocked. John barely felt his hand grip the broken phone before he sent it across the room. It just missed the mirror and banged on the door.

"What?" John yelled. He still had twenty minutes before the final Sideshow rehearsal, and he didn't have to budget travel time anymore. The Circus had planned to move to the rec center for a full run-through, costumes and all, but since the city lockdown had disrupted normal business, now they could do it on location.

Adelina's soft voice just barely bled through the door. "Isley's here."

He sat up. "Say what?"

"The plant scien--"

"I got it. Give me a minute."

John did as good a job as he supposed anyone did making themselves look like they'd absolutely not just been blowing their own horn, and then he went downstairs.

Costumed performers milled around the bar, the air buzzing with quiet conversation, as if there weren't ongoing shootouts at the city's edges and sporadic riots within. John felt a faint pride that no one was panicking, unlike the all-caps social media posts being displayed on the muted TV.
Granted, nothing disastrous had reached this part of town, but wasn't that the little haven John wanted?

A disappointingly boring haven, but that was the trade he'd made.

At several tables, people ate dinner in the form of the spare fare from Ro's tiny kitchen or collections of snack food. Ivy leaned against an empty table at the front, her back to the diners' curious or smitten glances. She plainly ignored the more subtle gaze from Lucia, who sat at the near corner of the bar, and masterfully stared right through Maureen who stood directly across from her by the front door. Mo looked more suspicious than anything, but that's what John would pay her for if he paid her.

Ivy had found time to change into jeans and a scoop-neck tee, with a pair of slip-ons that John was pretty sure were that brand made from recycled bottles. She'd woven her hair into a thick braid that laid over her left shoulder. The strap of a messenger bag lay over her right.

"Gonna tattle to Carterrrrr," John sing-songed as he passed Lucia. He dodged a swat and strode up to their guest. "Pammy! What brings you to these parts?"

Ivy straighten up, losing her cool expression. "I intended to lay low, but… The number of people treated last night indicates how much datura those barbarians must have used. If they need more, there's only one place to get it."

"You went back to the Gardens?" John said, blinking, then he cackled. "Where people know you work?!"

A rosy blush came to her cheeks and she narrowed her eyes. "I had to check on my plants! But I realized I was being followed when I got there. I didn't want to lead them to the datura, so I just kept walking, and– I had to go somewhere. Isn't this your territory?"

John wanted to ask how a greenery geek knew about street territory (not to mention how she got a cat burglar's business card in the first place), but Lucia caught on to other details.

"Wait a second," she said, stalking over, infatuation replaced with hostility. "You were being followed by those assholes and you led them here?"

"Temper, temper," John said, patting her shoulder. "Give the good doctor more credit. She was a big help last night."

"You owe me," Ivy said tightly.

"Sure, sure, but you did lose the tail, right?"

The front door flew open, and Lorenzo stood at the head of the room next to Maureen. His face was grim. "Just got word that a group of guys in Lock-Up masks have been casing the street the past five minutes."

John looked at Ivy. "So that's a no, heh." On second thought, the haven wasn't that boring.

"I tried– I thought…" Ivy sputtered.

"Just get her out the back!" Lucia snapped.

The stairwell door burst open then, and Mikey stumbled in holding a lit cigarette. His panicked eyes combined with his blue shock of hair made him look electrified.
"Guys!" he panted. "In black with… with guns! And a van! I locked… locked the door, but…"

The side door past the stairs, he meant, where Ro had asked him to smoke instead of out front. She appeared now from the office.

"What's going on?" she asked.

As Lorenzo eased Mikey onto a stool, Maureen said, "Lock-Up's guys are coming in, one way or another."

Ugh, and there were those gasping seedlings of panic in the crowd. Lucia pushed through everyone to grab her sister's arm.

"Upstairs," she said. "Now."

"Right, right, nobody freak out," John said, watching Lucia drag Adelina toward the stairwell. He shooed Ivy. "Go on up."

Lucia stopped dead. "Excuse me?"

"They might just think she's here! So we convince them she's not." John pressed his room key into Ivy's hand. "Three-oh-two. Up up up!"

Lucia didn't look happy, but she didn't keep up her protest, not after a glance out the front windows. She hurried Adelina and Ivy into the stairwell and slammed the door shut again. In the next second, Maureen jerked out of the way as the front door banged open and six armed, masked men entered. John wanted to commend Lucia for perfect timing, given how often it came up in rehearsal, but her stony expression reminded him it was not the time.

Lock-Up's goons stood in a triangular formation and surveyed the silent and wide-eyed occupants of the bar. The man in the lead was the tallest and most ripped. While the others wore short sleeves under their tactical vests, this one had chosen a tank top to show off his metaphorical guns. John clasped his hands behind his back and walked up to him with a smile.

"Hey there!" he chirped. "Love the daytime look!" He waved a hand over his face. "A little too much coverage for summer, but who can fight that urge for fashion over function?"

Gun Show's eyes settled on John. "Hello, Mr. Doe," he greeted. The mask was thin enough that his voice was still clear. "I think you know why we're here."

"Oh, come on," John replied. "You can't expect to throw a spontaneous murder attempt at a guy and not get some pushback." He sighed dramatically and held out his wrists to be cuffed. "But if you insist I pay the price, I'll go to your boss quietly."

There were those gasps again, and Maureen and Lorenzo stared with an intensity that bordered on telepathy, telling him that he was a fool. John knew what he was doing. Here was the opportunity to help he'd been waiting for; he could learn the location of their would-be overlord.

Unfortunately, Gun Show replied, "You're not a priority."

John threw his arms down to his sides. "Oh! Last night I'm worth shooting in the head, and today I'm nothing," he snapped. "I see how it is!"

"You got in the way of a main target," was the cool reply. "Today, everything will be much more orderly, moreso once the city submits to Lock-Up."
That was one hell of a rationalization for unbridled chaos, but John knew from Arkham that it wouldn't help to point out the holes.

Lucia didn't. She came to his side and exclaimed, "Are you kidding? After last night, when you murdered people left and right?"

John giggled nervously and waved her off, keeping his eyes on Gun Show. "Setting that aside, what can we do ya for?"

The team leader took another step forward and stared him down. "We know she's here."

"Oh?" John said. "Well, sure, we got lotsa shes and hes and some theys, but--"

"You know who I mean." Gun Show's fingers fidgeted on his semiautomatic. "You know what side to be on here, Joker. We can commit this city to real justice if we stop pussyfooting around and grab it by the throat. You should know that personally. A lot of my brothers think you still do, and Lock-Up is willing to let you show it."

"I am definitely glad," John said carefully, nodding slowly, "that they see things that way."

"Then where is she?"

"Thing is, when it comes down to it, what does a lab lady have to do with--"

"No bullshit!" Gun Show boomed. "Lock-Up will judge her! To be clear, I have more questions about you than the others. You can easily dispel them by complying. Resistance only proves how Wayne's corrupted you."

"No."

That was too brief to be John's line. He leaned slightly to look around Gun Show, at the goons behind him. Four were rigid with tension and looked at the one in the middle.

Even when the leader turned with a glower, the middle man ignored it. "Who wouldn't let a rich bleeding heart help them out?" he said. Then he looked to John. "But Wayne wasn't there for the real fight with the Agency, was he?"

"Shut your mouth!" Gun Show ordered. "The ringmaster can speak for himself."

And John could think for himself, quickly too, but during these unpleasant moments he could only come to unpleasant conclusions. Too many men with guns this time, ready and prepared to use them. Even more bystanders, dedicated but all too mortal. One scrappy clown doing his best to not giddily let things get out of hand. A single easily fulfillable demand.

"Your man there makes an excellent point," he said, maintaining his smile. "Priorities are so often a moving target. It can take a few knocks to shuffle them into place! If the plant doctor is that important to you, I'll bring her down."

"Good." Gun Show gestured to two of his silent brothers. "Go with him."

John nodded understandingly. "Yes, of course!"

When he turned away, the underlings following him, he let his smile vanish. He walked at a steady pace to the stairwell and upward. The gears in his brain were a-spinning, and by the time they made it to the third floor, he'd come up with a small gambit.
He stopped and turned to the babysitters. "Look, you just barge in there with me, she might get all hysterical and flighty, you know? Wouldn't take much for her to run off and give everyone the slip. Give me a sec, and I'll save you the hassle."

The two goons exchanged skeptical looks but didn't respond right away, apparently more following types than leading types. One finally took the initiative and said, "Yeah, okay. We'll be right out here."

"Back in a jiff!" John said, darting to his room. He slipped in and closed the door.

Ivy was just inside, standing stock still beneath the philodendron, fingering the lowest dangling leaf. Her bag still hung across her body. Adelina sat on the desk chair, clearly having chosen to stick by their guest. John's phone, screen now with twice as many cracks, was where he'd tossed it before he went downstairs, on top of the fridge. He snatched it up.

"Who's out there?" Ivy hissed, still frozen.

John knelt by his bed and pulled his tool bag from underneath. "Got some bad news, Pammy."

Her eyes flared, and her arm finally dropped. "Are you serious?!"

He sat on the mattress and rummaged in the bag. "Not often."

"I put myself on the line for your pal!"

Ah, there it was, a pack of teeny screwdrivers. He took out the cross-slot one, but first he used his nails to pry off the back of the phone.

"We're all on the line here, unfortunately," he said. "All pinned up, flapping with the whims of the wind." The battery was easier to remove.

"And I'm the expendable one," she replied bitterly.

John snickered as he took up the screwdriver and worked at the tiny screws that hid the phone's guts. "How are we gonna put on our show if we expend anyone downstairs?"

"Unbelievable."

"Cheer up, buttercup." With half the screws out, he got impatient and pried at the loose plastic. The freed section snapped off, catching his hand, and he hissed and shook away the pain. "Just go quietly and it'll work out."

"How the hell do you figure that?"

Stuck to the exposed circuit board was a teeny bat shape. John switched to a flathead and jammed it under the tracker to pry it up. With a *snik*, the bug flipped onto the floor.

"There we are!" he cheered, tossing the mangled phone aside. He scooped up the bug and walked over to Ivy.

She backed away as he reached for her hair. "What are you doing?"

He rolled his eyes. "This is gonna let Batman find you and Lock-Up."

She frowned but let him move behind her. "I see."
He tuck the bug into a thicker section of her braid at the base of her skull. "All snug! When they frisk you, they shouldn't find it– unless they're hair guys."

"I didn't come here to be bait," she said tersely. "I'm escaping at the first opportunity."

"Good luck," he snorted, coming around to her front. "They seem less willy-nilly today. I think they might be done with Crane's gas, so you kinda got yourself in this mess for no reason."

She pressed her lips into a solid line and gave him a withering look.

He responded with a shrug and a solid thumbs up. "Showtime!"

Her expression didn't change. He looked over at Adelina, and she looked no more enthusiastic.

Whatever. John could carry this scene. He opened the door with a wan expression and reached toward Ivy. "My apologies, dear lady, but our time together has come to an end."

She walked stiffly forward, glaring at the militia stooges. One trained his pistol on her as the other pulled out handcuffs. The second demanded her bag, then ordered her hands behind her back. As she let her wrists be bound, she focused her blazing eyes on the gunman's face. His own eyes flicked to his weapon, as if wondering why she wasn't more bothered.

She seemed resilient enough to get through a hostile van ride, but it was still a shame they hadn't just taken John as a consolation prize. He'd definitely enjoy it more, for one thing, just like he'd be happy to deal with Lock-Up face to face if Batman arrived a little too late. Hard to say if Ivy would fair as well. Bruce probably would've pressed harder to take her place, given how easily he gave himself up as the Pact mole way back when. It was hard to imagine him doing this.

The philodendron vine still swayed from her touch, dangling in open air.

"Wait!" John said.

The men had started to take their prisoner away, and they paused. Ivy's expression moved from contempt to surprise.

John pointed up at the plant. "Do you think I'm watering this enough?"

Her face twisted. "Screw you!" she yelled, and the men finally hustled her away.

"Sheesh," John muttered. He'd thought she was the pragmatic type, who'd see the limited realistic options here. Or maybe Phil was more parched than it looked.

Adelina squeezed past him into the hallway.

"Hey," John said, "doesn't Lucy want you tucked away?"

Adelina rolled her eyes and gestured to the stairs as Ivy and her captors vanished.

True, the militia should be leaving now that they had what they came for, making Lucia's concern moot. John shrugged, conceding, then raised a finger as he remembered his next course of action.

"Oh, let me borrow your phone."

Less than five hours to midnight, and Batman, Spectrum, and Catwoman had nothing but misses. The moored naval vessel once used as a temporary prison during Blackgate renovations was
empty. The abandoned medical center and soon-to-be-demolished stadium were home to only squatters, who had no idea about Lock-Up. No better luck at the uptown convention center under renovations, the deactivated Bowery electrical substation, and several other sites. Spectrum sent a drone for a quick scan of the old subway tunnels, but found none of the signals that would be coming off Lock-Up's communications equipment.

Now Spectrum and Catwoman were at the last two locations, a condemned motel just off the Gotham Bridge and the original Gotham Gazette offices in Old Gotham. Batman remained perched atop a confirmed empty warehouse in Tricorner while he worked out the best next move. Either Bolton was too smart to go to a place he was linked to, or they'd missed something, whether it was a hidden entrance or a location absent from the records. Maybe he shielded his tech while not broadcasting and they'd need manpower to trawl the entire underground system.

The GCPD was occupied with the attacks and unrest, with a small selection of personnel following up on their own Lock-Up leads, but Batman would need to ask Gordon for direct assistance if they searched the facilities over again. If only there'd been soil on Bolton's boots, or some record of visits to an isolated location, it could have given them something–

Batman's earpiece beeped. His gauntlet showed Adelina's number.

He turned off the voice modulator and answered. "Everything okay over there?"

"Oh, yeah, it's super fine. And it's, uh, me. Heh, obviously. You don't have to be a detective– Well, you do, but not for..."

Not Adelina's soft voice but John's nervous ramble. Bruce's stomach flipped.

"So hi," John went on. "That Lock-Up, what a jerk, right?"

Bruce swallowed and responded, "We're still investigating possible hideouts. It's getting tight, but–"

"About that," John interrupted, "if you use that tracker you planted in my phone, it'll lead you right to him."

Bruce's brain glitched. "What?"

"Uh oh, you can still use it, right?" John asked worriedly. "It looked intact, unlike, you know, the rest of the–"

"I asked you to stay out of this!" Bruce burst. He could picture John sticking the bug in his pocket—hell, swallowing it—and sauntering up to a group of militia. God knew how he'd accessed a phone in their custody. "And you're telling me you've turned yourself in to a murderer?"

"Uh, no, I am not telling you that, Mr. Prickle Pants."

"Then how–"

"I planted it on Ivy," John explained brightly, "before Lock-Up's guys took her to him just now."

"You what?!"

"See, now you can be annoyed, though I didn't have much of a choice. She was trying to go to ground here, and the militia weren't far behind. But thanks to me, nobody died, and you can get to her before anything too awful happens."
Bruce didn't think this was the time to sound so smug, but at least John hadn't waltzed into danger.

No, instead Bruce had just left him exposed to it.

"Okay." He took a quiet breath and tapped out a message to Spectrum. "Yes, the bug should still be on. I didn't bother to deactivate it considering… Anyway, it's an incredible help."

"You are welcome," John replied haughtily.

"I should have been there," Bruce said, "with the threat, but I have to– I could have–"

"Ugh," John groaned, "do we have to go over this again? You can't be everywhere. And you know what? I'm not going to sit things out just because you say. I'm not at anyone's beck and call."

"I know, but I… I can't not want you to be safe."

"I prefer you safe, but you run around punching people in the face all the time, and you don't see me getting crabby about it."

Because John loved stories about Bruce punching anything, but now was not the time to get into it.

"We're tracking Ivy now," Bruce said, reading Spectrum's response, "so this should all be over tonight. Tomorrow, you and I can sit down and–"

"It's fine, buddy," John interrupted again, talking fast. "I've given it enough thought for both of us. I mean, yeah, all the sturm and drang sure makes it feel like we're being pushed, you know, one step further, but come on. You need to think long term. That's something I've gone over a lot with Leland and Adams, you know, with the impulse thing, and it just, you know, it doesn't–"

"John, stop." Bruce looked out over the water, how it reflected the darkening sky, the deep blue blending at the horizon. "Just hold on. You said you weren't upset, but now you– Unless you're still upset about me bugging your phone, but–"

"Not really."

"Then why… You can't have a one-sided discussion about this."

"Ha, actually I have a long history of–"

"Don't. You know what I mean. You can't just decide I don't get a say."

"Oh, but I think you've had one! You're no shy guy, after all. If you didn't have misgivings, we would've addressed this months ago."

Misgivings didn't mean Bruce didn't want… He wasn't sure what he wanted. And, no, he wasn't shy, but John was so different from anyone he'd fallen for that it threw him off-balance. That's why they were supposed to talk, to work this out together.

Work what out? said that voice of doubt. He's right. Just let him go like Selina.

"See?" John concluded at the silence. "This is just some flight of fancy you have."

"And what about you?" Bruce pressed, because he realized John hadn't said anything about himself, because John had kissed him back.

"We're both on flights, yeah," John assented with a giggle, "but my pilot kicked too many back in
the lounge before takeoff. He's definitely due for a crash."

"What if we're on the same flight?"

Teeth sliced into John's tone. "Don't twist my metaphors!" he barked. "This– this is just what I mean! You've definitely been spending too much time around me. Maybe… Maybe we should try taking a step back." His tone changed again, with a faint crack. "Some space, you know? I need to work on me, focus on the show..."

Space? "John, slow down. If you need to concentrate on the show, that's fine. We can talk after."

"Maybe we can't. Maybe I don't want you there."

That stung. Bruce wasn't much for any stage show, but John was in this one. Sideshow was important to him, and while Bruce had only seen glimpses, it was clear that all the creativity and cooperation had helped John grow. Bruce had almost felt a part of it in a distal way, with how many times John reminded him to make time for the premiere.

Yet now he said, "You have bigger things to worry about than an overblown talent show."

"It's not– Don't–"

"Are you going to push my boundaries again or are you going to save Ivy and the others? Huh?"

The clock was ticking. Batman had another message from Spectrum with a meet-up point. He needed to get to the car.

"That's what I thought," John said.

It was cowardly to seize the moment over the phone, but it was the only way. If he had to look at those sad puppy eyes, he would choke on his words. Instead, he stared at the buttons of his shirt as he pushed them through their holes. Bruce had to go fight a wannabe dictator, and John had to rehearse.

This was for the best, like not being invited to the gala. Maybe now Bruce had some idea how that felt.

John thought that he'd at least feel that happy sproing of righteousness. No, he felt sick and stifled, and he flipped open the blinds to look out at the street.

Then he felt on-edge, because below at the side of the building, the two militia minions were just now loading Ivy into the waiting van. Why had it taken that long? Where were the others who'd come into the bar?

"Hello? John?" Bruce must have come up with some earnest protest that John had missed, but now they both didn't have time.

"I gotta go," John said. The two goons returned to the side door, and the van left.

Over the sound of whooshing wind, Bruce stubbornly said, "This isn't the end of th–"

John hung up just before the banging started, someone hitting the walls as they came up the stairs.

"House meeting!" a gruff, unfamiliar voice shouted. One of the other minions. "Everybody downstairs! Let's go!"
Clearly the militia were not satisfied with their party favor, but if John needed to sharpen his hosting skills, why not take advantage of the learning experience?

Chapter End Notes

Yup, even in a universe where Harley is not a factor, Joker finds the occasion to be a dick to Ivy.

I'm aiming to have the next chapter out before the end of 2019.
"I don't like this."

Batman said it to himself, but Spectrum was standing right next to him. She caught the words over the rumble of the engine and the rushing wind.

"What?" she replied loudly, looking away from the boat controls. "The open sea?"

After five minutes of tracking Isley, it became clear that the militia's van was headed for Templeton Bridge, one of the southern passages out of the city. According to emergency feeds, the police checkpoint there had fallen to the militia. The batmobile and Spectrum's motorcycle could have sped through the barriers easily, but then the terrorist group would know the van was being tailed. Not only would the vigilantes lose their chance to find Lock-Up's hideout, but he might jump the gun on his deadline.

Luckily, the nearest battle with the GCPD marine unit was a mile north of the bridge. Half a mile south on the mainland side, terrain maps showed a scalable river bank. The river was too wide to glide across, so the vigilantes had borrowed a pontoon boat from a small marina. Crossing the river would take little more than five minutes; if no one spotted them, the pontoon could be left intact on the shore. From there, they would catch up to the van.

The boat's lights were off so it wouldn't be spotted bounding over the waves in near darkness, but with the cowl, Batman could see Catwoman standing within the ring of seating at the bow. Her left hand rested on the seat of Spectrum's motorcycle, and her right hand flexed around the handle of a larger bike they'd stolen from a looted dealership. She stared ahead, but Batman imagined she still had that smug look from when he agreed they should take it. Unlike the boat, the likelihood the bike would survive the night undamaged seemed low.

Spectrum turned on the communication link between her and Batman, then said at normal volume, "Insurance will cover the loss."

How could she tell where he was looking? "I know," Batman replied, "but the car can carry more equipment."

"Oh, sure, that's all it is," she said.

This situation was another reason he needed to figure out where he could best store and access an aircraft without arousing suspicion. Ideally he could call one to him, if Spectrum could really nail their auto-pilot software. The current short-distance capabilities weren't close to cutting it. Alternatively, if the car could be made capable of water travel...

A series of pops burst through the air. Catwoman jerked around, and so did Batman and Spectrum.
There was no boat on its way to thwart them; the commotion came from the island end of the bridge, where red and blue lights flashed. The GCPD was attempting to recover the position.

Bruce checked the flashing dot on his gauntlet map. The van had already crossed to the mainland; then it turned south, passing the bank. The fact that it hadn't turned north may have bought precious minutes to catch up.

Or rather, to get to Isley. It was hard to tell if Lock-Up was the type who preferred to meet his prisoners unharmed so he could solely enact their fate, or if he didn't care what happened to them in transit.

When Selina heard about Ivy, her casual agreement to help with Lock-Up had turned much more serious. For someone who supposedly forwent connections, she seemed to make a lot of odd ones anyway. But who was Bruce to talk?

(Certainly never about Nygma and the truth about his death.)

She blamed herself more than John, because she'd gotten Isley on Bolton's radar in the first place. Bruce told her not to, while hiding a shameful gladness that the militia hadn't taken John instead.

Then again, it was probably the militia that should be happy about their choice.

Spectrum slowed the pontoon as it approached the shore. She relied on her own nightvision to ease the boat through the shallow water. When the muddy bank was close enough, she cut the engine entirely. She and Batman walked the boat's edges to the front, grabbed ropes tied to the cleats, and jumped into the water. Boots sloshing, they dragged the craft onto shore.

A lingering fatigue threaded through Batman's muscles, but he breathed through it. He let the flashes of the hallucinations pass. He was by no means helpless or alone.

(Those feelings also arose when he thought of John's call. He pushed those thoughts down.)

Once the boat was grounded, Catwoman applauded neatly from her spot between the motorcycles.

Spectrum started lashing the ropes to the nearest tree stretched out over the mud. "We know how cats feel about water."

"Very kind of you," Catwoman replied. She opened the boat's side gate, then wheeled the bikes over for Batman to bring them down.

In a few minutes, the three made it up a weedy trail through the line of trees that separated the bank from the quiet, unlit highway. Spectrum's visor glowed purple as she looked at the tracking map.

"Van's stopped," she said, mounting her bike. She paused, nose wrinkling, before saying, "Our ETA is two and a half minutes."

"Where are they?" Batman asked. Catwoman settled behind him on the other bike.

"Be glad we brought the respirators."

"I'm just saying," John said haughtily, "I think I deserve some credit for acting in good faith."

"Good faith," Gun Show repeated. "If you're being so cooperative, then where is Wayne?"
He ended the question by turning his commanding tone on the crowd sitting on the floor at the back of the bar. A couple dozen Circus members, a few bewildered apartment residents, and Rosaline stared silently back—except for Mr. Zhao in the back right. It looked like he'd fallen asleep on Chuck's shoulder, but then he'd lived in Gotham longer than anyone else in the room had been alive.

Chairs and tables had been shoved aside so the hostages would be in a nice watchable cluster, with the exception of John. He sat in a lone chair facing his pals, with his legs crossed at the knee and hands braced around his calf. He inwardly sighed at all the sequined leotards and ruffled collars and shined boots, plus his own fuschia suit. At least he hadn't had the chance to get the jacket on, and his hat wasn't ready yet. This situation had a high-as-heck risk for getting messy, given all the armed underlings. Three soldiers were stationed in a line behind him, and the remaining two guarded the exits at the front of the bar. All were ready to fire if so ordered.

Maureen, Lorenzo, and Chuck, all wearing striped singlets, stared at John attentively. Despite the obvious risks, they were ready to act on his signal. Their spirit was admirable, but he ignored them.

Gun Show turned back to John. "I think you're fucking with us," he growled.

Doe-eyed, John splayed a hand against his chest in offense— but of course he was fucking with them. He had acted in good faith, only to be herded downstairs and told that he hadn't demonstrated enough fealty to Lock-Up's cause. But the magnanimous Gun Show offered him another chance! John just had to call Bruce and tell him to turn himself in— and what would befall the bar if he didn't.

In theory, there was no actual threat if John was happily compliant, but the proof of compliance was Bruce showing up. So Gun Show still set up the hostage scene just in case. How neurotic!

Before John could reply, the goon to his left stepped forward. It was the talky one who'd defended him earlier.

"It hasn't even been an hour," Talky said. "We don't even know where Wayne's coming from."

Gun Show glared. "He can hand himself over at any checkpoint."

Yup, that's what John had said in a voicemail using Adelina's phone, which was his phone as far as these dunces could tell. The screen background was a group photo of the Circus after all, though Gun Show had thought it weird that Bruce's name wasn't on the contact list. John just laughed, laughed, at the assumption that he had Bruce's personal number, just because the media made it seem that way. Bruce's busy, busy days were all managed by his assistant, who John always contacted via the Wayne Enterprises line. She probably didn't answer because of all the hoopla, but she knew she had to stay on top of Bruce Wayne's business no matter what.

"I'd wanna get here to make sure my friend was okay," Talky said. "We don't even know where Wayne's coming from."

Gun Show glared. "He can hand himself over at any checkpoint."

Or, actually, the assistant wasn't real. Bruce did have an office secretary, but while she dealt with much of his schedule, she'd undoubtedly be at home in the middle of a city crisis, and she was rarely involved in Bruce's nightlife as it was, much less in a state of emergency. Right now John's message was just a blinking light up at a fancy desk in Wayne Tower.

John nodded agreeably at Talky. "Your boss's kerfuffle isn't doing much for traffic flow either."

Gun Show's glower snapped from his insubordinate to John. It wasn't great that he'd openly
disliked his lead hostage from the start; now it looked like his patience had worn threadbare.

John maintained a casual tone. "I'm just saying. Let's keep this easy breezy."

With a whip of Gun Show's arm, the pistol on his hip pressed into John's forehead.

"A hole in my head would be pretty breezy, ha."

"And maybe," Gun Show said, "a direct line to Wayne would fall out."

The hostages huddled closer together, except for the loyal bodybuilders, who sat even more at attention. John noted this in his periphery; he didn't break eye contact with Gun Show, lest he give the idea that he was rattled. John knew impulsive, and the lieutenant here was not so antsy that he'd blow away a great asset.

"Stop!"

Buuuuut Lucia was definitely antsy enough to get involved in this. She'd broken away from Adelina and jumped to her feet, reaching toward John like she could telekinetically swat the gun away. It would look more heroic if she was wearing the flashier costume that matched her sister's, a sparkly leotard with a fluffy neck ruff. Instead, Lucia looked more like a frazzled grade school teacher in her Peter Pan collared shirt and gray skirt.

Still, she did have a solid card to play: Bruce's private number.

John fixed her with a warning stare. Bruce needed to get to Lock-Up. He didn't need to be tempted to run back here and take out small fries. Of course, as far as Lucia knew, Bruce was holed up in the manor and John was lying to protect him.

Gun Show held the gun in place as he looked at her. "You got something to say?"

Lucia hesitated, glancing from his face to John's. John focused on one thought: Don't you dare. If there was one time he needed her to see him as the boss, it was now.

"I…" Lucia swallowed. "Just—just give Wayne time. He'll pay his way here somehow." She knelt back at Adelina's side.

A pleased smile crept onto John's face. Yes, everyone just had to settle down. He'd think of a way out of this soon enough. He always did. All anyone else had to do in the meantime was not provoke their trigger-happy guests.

"Exactly," he said. "I know you army types are all about the discipline, but relax!" He uncrossed his legs and spread his arms as he leaned back in the chair, away from the pistol. "Bruce still feels like he owes me plenty. He'll be here."

Gun Show lowered his arm, but his grip stayed white-knuckle.

The soldier at the stairwell door commented, "Seems like it'd be you who'd owe him."

John snorted and gestured around the bar. "Oh, yeah, look at the fabulous digs all his favors have bought me."

"Yeah, like Doe said," Talky piped up, "the media just wants to sell a fairytale. They can't be bothered with the real story."

"Ah, Christ," the stairwell goon groaned. "Maybe it's you who's suckin' his dick."
"Shut the fuck up!" Talky erupted, turning with a broad stance.

John wanted to say All's Well had a hefty surcharge for casual homophobia, but he was distracted by Talky's nape. The hem of his balaclava didn't dip down far, leaving a patch of skin visible above the neck of his t-shirt. John could see a tattoo that included roses and a mandible. The familiarity pinged around his brain until it struck one of the clearer memories from the bowling alley.

"Oh, hey!" he burst. "The barfly!" He laughed. "You said you wanted to disrupt, and you sure did!"

"What is he talking about?" Gun Show asked sharply, gun rising again.

John lifted his hands in a calming gesture. "Oh, just some casual chitchat over drinks, before your boss made himself known." He pouted at Talky. "Now I'm a tad offended I didn't get an invite to the fun."

"Right, I didn't say anything secret," Talky said, but his voice had a twinge of relief. He probably had poor recall of that night, too.

"Not at all," John assured him. "No threat to the clubhouse." He grasped his knees and leaned forward despite Gun Show's weapon, because John was on their side, wasn't he? There was no reason for the gun to go off, not between friends. "Come on, pal. Let's dial back the aggro."

Unfortunately, Gun Show favored a high aggro level. Through his clenched jaw, he ground out, "You don't seem to grasp how serious we are."

He pulled the pistol back, but instead of whipping it across John's head, he shoved John out of the chair. John landed on his side, and as he turned over, Gun Show grabbed Lucia by her collar. Adelina shrieked as her sister was tossed into the seat.

Lucia reflexively grabbed her neck and froze like that when Gun Show's pistol lined up with her face.

"Let's see if Doe is as carefree about someone else's life."

A good hideout was naturally in a location that people were unlikely to go. Batman had found operations holed up in condemned fire traps, icy meat lockers, and pier buildings half eaten by the river, not to mention crumbling Old Five Points and toxic Ace Chemicals. Those were all on the islands, though; investigations on the mainland were infrequent, and maybe Lock-Up had noticed. He certainly had options other than Christie Wastewater Treatment Plant.

The facility had closed seven years before, once the upgraded plant in lower Gotham went active. Clearly the city had decided the property wasn't worth even a lone patrol, or someone would have noticed the new occupants. Under two tall floodlights on either side of the open gate, three men with assault rifles patrolled the entrance. In a guard box to the left, another soldier sat looking at security monitors that were visible through the glass windows.

Hidden several yards into the trees across the road, Batman observed the scene. He heard slight movement coming from his left.

"Anything interesting?" he asked.

Catwoman had been using the binoculars in her own lenses for reconnaissance along the property line. "They electrified the fence," she said, "which is a minor problem, but if this guy's a security consultant, I would guess there are also motion sensors. Sometimes the old tricks work best. I'd
rather have these guys out of commission anyway."

Batman reset his lenses to normal and looked to his right. Next to the motorcycles, Spectrum sat on a fallen trunk and plugged away at the "old trick," locating the wireless signals for Lock-Up's acres-wide security network and tapping into the video feeds. By the scrunch of her eyes, Batman could tell she was smirking, likely at the very idea that Lock-Up thought his system was untappable. (Lucius had gotten that look, too.)

"Okay," she said, "gate cameras are mine. Copied footage from the past twenty minutes. Starting a loop in three… two…"

Batman zoomed in on the guard box. The screens inside glitched. The man watching them smacked the side of a monitor, then yawned. Still, it might not be long before he realized his pals’ positions on the screens didn't match the ones outside the windows.

Thirty seconds later, one patrolling soldier shouted as he dodged the miniature drone that zipped by his head. He and the two others turned to stare at the hovering machine, which swooped left and right above the road into the compound. The man in the box leaned out the rear window and shouted for them to shoot it down, and all three took aim.

Batman reached over the shoulder of the middle soldier, wrenched the rifle out of his hands, and brought the butt down on his head. The soldier on the left went down when Spectrum crouched and kicked his legs out from under him. She rolled out of the way when he fell, then jumped on top of him and punched him in the face before he could get a shot off. Catwoman took a simple route with the right soldier, with a sharp high kick at the base of his skull.

The man in the guard box cursed and scrambled for his gun, but Batman's fist shot through the open window and grabbed him by the back of the neck. As he was dragged out, the man kicked and spat, then went quiet after his face slammed into the wall.

Batman and the women had quickly gained entrance, but he reminded himself there was more to go. He broke down the guns and Spectrum brought down the drone, then they helped Catwoman drag the unconscious men to the front of the guard box. They bound the men together on the grass, out of sight for anyone looking out from the compound, but not for later GCPD pickup.

They retrieved the bikes and set off into the dark expanse between the gate and the distant first building, with glowing windows and a small light over the door. Per archived maps, the one-story, square edifice was a lab for evaluating water quality. Several yards to the left of the road, Batman and Spectrum rolled the bikes quietly through the grass, Catwoman ahead of them.

"Ugh," Spectrum said, pausing and opening her bike's seat compartment. "I told you. Maybe there's no more fear gas, but this smell will only get worse." She pulled out three respirators.

Batman and Catwoman did not disagree. The odor had been noticeable from the road, but the further they walked, the stronger it got, reminiscent of rotting eggs. Masks in place, they continued on.

About halfway to the old lab, they came across two large, round in-ground tanks: the primary clarifiers that had been the first stage of clearing debris from wastewater. They were placed one after the other, with another pair on the right side of the road. Each had a ground-level, railed platform crossing the top.

Except for the further clarifier on the left side. It had a cover instead, welded together from scrap metal. Multiple square hatches were held closed with simple but sturdy latches.
"Any signals here?" Batman asked Spectrum, thinking of the shape of Lock-Up's prison.

They propped up the bikes, and sure enough, in a few moments Spectrum brought up video of Veronica, hugging her knees and singing softly.

"Can you loop all the cameras in there?"

Spectrum nodded, but she warned, "He's going to notice before too long."

As soon as the loops rolled, Batman undid the nearest hatch and pulled it up. The metal screeched, and his cowl lenses lit the cell below. A dozen feet down, sitting against the tank wall, Summer Gleeson looked up.

"Oh, thank Christ," she sighed, slowly standing. Her pants were filthy with muck, as was one arm of her blazer. Whatever was left in the tanks when the plant closed had been left to ferment.

"Are you alright?" Batman asked.

"My hair is going to smell like a sewer for weeks," she replied, "to say nothing of the infections I've gotta have. But I guess that's better than being dead."

"Here," Catwoman said, picking up a ladder that had been laying in the overgrown grass.

Batman lowered it in and helped Gleeson out when she reached the top. He peered into the dark and saw Veronica in the cell to the right. The rest were empty.

"Where's Maroni?" he asked as he brought the ladder to the next hatch.

Gleeson kicked off her slimy heels and stripped off her blazer, letting it fall. "Lock-Up's merry band of incels took him… I don't know, a half hour ago? Time's fuzzy right now." She raised her eyebrows at Catwoman. "Look who's back in town."

"No interviews," Catwoman replied.

Gleeson turned to Spectrum, who only said, "No comment."

Batman ignored the reporter's cataloguing eyes and ears. He'd opened the other hatch, and once he set the ladder down, Veronica didn't need prompting to start up.

"Are you hurt?" he asked as she finished the climb.

She let out a frail laugh and grabbed his extended hand. "Oh, you know, I was running out of topics for Dr. Adams anyway." She stepped shakily onto the grass.

"We need to go after the man who did this," Batman said, "but you two should get out of here. The men at the gates are restrained. You can't return to the city. It's –"

"Lock-Up monologued all about his maniacal plan when he took Sal," Gleeson said, "but come on. A reporter hates to be part of the story, but I can't just–"

"You can just," Spectrum cut in. "Unless you want the story to be that you interfered in bringing Lock-Up down and refused to help Ms. Vreeland get to Bludhaven Hospital."

Despite the balmy summer night, Veronica seemed to shiver in her short, grimy dress. She'd also kicked off her heels. "Come on, Summer. We're about to succumb to the plague."
Gleeson sighed heavily. "I do owe you for not letting me choke on that diseased soup."

Spectrum indicated the borrowed motorcycle. "Either of you okay driving this?"

"Ha!" Gleeson took hold of a handlebar and appraised the bike. "Didn't you see my story on the Street Demonz?"

"Get it to the road before you start it," Batman warned. He handed Veronica a flat bat-shaped piece of plastic and indicated a red button in the middle. "If you run into trouble, this will send us a signal."

Veronica closed her fingers around it and nodded. "Got it. Thank you. Thank you so much."

"Just try to keep Ms. Gleeson from heading back here after you reach the hospital."

"You don't trust me?" Gleeson said with a smirk.

Batman didn't say more, though his array of bad experiences with journalists came to mind.

She kept up the grin and shrugged. "I'd be more offended if you did," she said, swinging the bike around and heading into the dark.

Veronica trailed after her, looking back with a wave.

"Come on," Batman said to Spectrum and Catwoman.

Under the whines and chirps of insects, their boots swished through the grass. It felt like an alarm would blast through the quiet at any moment, or unseen floodlights would blare on, but nothing changed as they neared the lab. About twenty yards away, Batman turned on thermal imaging.

Inside appeared to be one open room, the action revolving around a blinking orange figure in the middle. Assuming the tracker hadn't been discovered, that was Dr. Isley, sitting on the floor with her knees up. Oddly, a small orange lump rested at her hip. Four figures stood over her and made jeering gestures. Their taunts leaked through the metal door, now in arm's reach.

Another orange figure off to the left appeared to be restrained. The person stood in one place with their hands up, as if against glass. Of the six other people, one stood just inside the front door, and another was posted at the other end of the room. Another door, Batman surmised. Two figures busied themselves around the static heat signatures of monitors and wires on the left wall. To the right, another two ignored the ruckus in favor of their own conversation.

None of them matched the measurement parameters for Bolton or Maroni.

Whoever designed the lab wasn't fond of distractions; they'd installed only hopper windows along the top of the walls. A couple were open, though, one near each corner, the bottoms swinging out.

"I'll get the door?" Spectrum whispered as she parked her bike alongside the building.

Batman nodded. They were on the same page.

"Don't say we're going right in," Catwoman hissed.

"Not exactly," he responded. He handed Catwoman a smoke bomb from his belt as Spectrum released the drone from her bike's compartment.

Catwoman took the sphere, glancing curiously at Spectrum as the younger woman followed the
drone out of sight around the building.

"On three after the knock," Batman instructed, moving under the open window on the left. "There's a trigger button."

Catwoman caught on and moved into position under the right window. She tapped her goggles and the lenses flashed.

After half a minute, Spectrum's voice came over the communicator. "Launching."

At two angry metallic bangs, the goons inside all paused, facing the rear of the building.

"Jesus," one said, "hold your damn horses."

The figure posted at the back opened the door, then paused when he saw nothing. Spectrum had hidden just around the corner– her thermal readings flagged in purple– and the drone had zipped high upwards after launching its rubber bullets.

"Hey," the soldier called uneasily, "is anybody…"

Batman and Catwoman tossed the smoke bombs inside. The gas began to disperse before the balls hit the ground. Ivy and the other prisoner stayed still, but the other orange figures panicked, darting and spinning around, colliding with each other. One ran at the front door, and Batman shouldered it open into his face. The man hit the floor with a thud.

Batman charged into the smoke and tackled the nearest soldier to the ground, then grasped his head and smashed it into the concrete. He flipped over and jumped back to his feet just as another figure ran toward the noise, gun out front. Batman grabbed the weapon and pulled the man forward, crashing their foreheads together. A balaclava was poor defense against a kevlar-reinforced cowl.

Spectrum's purple figure darted in from the other door and unleashed a spin-kick into a man's ribs. That was as much as Batman saw before an arm slung around his throat. He flipped the opponent over his shoulder, right into another soldier reeling from an attack by Catwoman. She came up orange– the batnetwork had no way to flag her as an ally– but her curvier figure and the way she lashed out with her claws were easy to recognize.

The rest of the militia were trounced in short order, including two who tried to escape out the back door, only for the drone to reappear and pelt them with more bullets. Batman finished things off, shooting his grapple into a vent in the ceiling and yanking the cover down onto a soldier beneath it.

As the clang faded, an unfamiliar voice commented, "That sounded like a sight."

The tone was less wry and more… fascinated.

Batman turned off thermal vision. The gas dissipated, revealing a tight row of rectangular steel tanks standing off center, tables of lab equipment beyond them, the computer station along the opposite wall, and two cages.

Dr. Crane stood inside the cage constructed in the corner of the room, his hands not pressing against glass but fencing. He looked as bony and lanky as the pictures on file. His tweed pants and cotton button-up shirt were rumpled and creased, and the shine of his short brown hair indicated Lock-Up hadn't cared to let him bathe. Despite his captivity, Crane didn't appear distressed. His sharp eyes shot around the scene with much interest.
The second cage, sitting near the tanks, was meant for an animal, not Dr. Isley. The top of her head brushed the roof of the enclosure, and she'd bent her long legs to fit the length of it. Batman moved to release her— the woman who'd saved his life— but Catwoman was already at the cage door.

"Bastards," she spat, pulling a lock pick from her belt.

Isley watched her go to work. She looked less frightened than annoyed, and said dully, "These boys aren't subtle about their hangups."

"Is that a dog?" Spectrum asked, already in the middle of trussing up the militia members.

Indeed, the small heat source Batman had seen was a curled up ball of matted tan fur.

"It's alive," Isley commented, giving it a little pat. Then she directed her gaze across the room. "Did this experiment have your approval, Jonathon?"

Crane sniffed and moved further into the edge of his cage. "Yes, I certainly seem to be in the position to make suggestions."

At first it looked like he was getting as far as possible from the mess bucket in the other corner, but then he started pushing at the fencing. The cage was drilled right into the walls, providing no exit, but with some shaking, the bolts on that side came partway out of the concrete.

"I was able to get this far in the rare moments I was left alone," Crane explained. He looked to Batman expectantly for help.

"We have questions about your conduct," the vigilante replied.

"My conduct?"

The door of the dog cage squeaked open, and Catwoman helped Isley out and to her feet. Isley straightened her shirt and scowled at Crane.

"Stealing that plant in your apartment for one," she said.

"Not to mention what that mask we found implies," Catwoman added.

"Ohh, a mask," Crane said. "That certainly sounds incriminating in this context. And I purchased that plant from a party who knew of my interest. I can't be blamed if--"

"You can hang around in there until you're questioned," Spectrum said.

She'd finished with the soldiers quickly, and now she crouched in front of the animal cage. She held her hand out and the dog stirred, slowly getting up. It crept over and sniffed her glove, and she pet its head delicately. It jumped when Crane started rattling the fencing.

"This is ridiculous!" he burst. A high bolt popped free, pinging the floor, and he pushed harder. "I have been captive for weeks, and I will not--"

He flattened against the wall, cowering under the looming black shape that had swept over and shoved the cage back. The metal clang shot through the air.

"Where is Maroni?" Batman growled.

The frightened look on Crane's face was gone as quickly as it appeared. He looked Batman over, assessing instead of responding. One of his hands closed over his opposite wrist. Was
he really evaluating his own pulse?

Batman was about to ask again when Spectrum's tablet buzzed. When he turned, he didn't have to ask what was up. One of the larger blank monitors on the wall had come to life, showing a scene from elsewhere on the grounds. Lock-Up held Maroni at gunpoint on a railed catwalk, trees visible behind a small concrete building in the background. Maroni's arms were bound behind his back. The camera was just a short distance away, looking over a drop but close enough that Bolton's voice was still clear.

"Hello again, Gotham." Lock-Up kept his eyes on Maroni as he spoke. "It occurred to me that seeing the future would encourage you. After all, how would a crime boss qualify for my mercy anyway? Why wait when I could prove that my promises for justice are more than words? Gather 'round your screens, and tell your friends they have just minutes to make the show."

A snicker brought Batman's gaze back to Crane. The doctor gestured to the rear doorway.

"They went that way, I'd wager where that light is." There was indeed another lonely light in the dark, a couple hundred yards away. Crane grinned and leaned forward, curling his fingers into the chainlink. "You three ought to hurry along."

There was another whip of movement, but not from Batman. Crane yelped and lurched back, red scratches across his fingers. Catwoman grabbed the fencing herself and held it in place.

"Get out of here," she said. "I'll keep an eye on him."

Batman nodded, then turned to Spectrum. "Get this network offline."

She narrowed her eyes. "But I can--"

"Catch up. Don't let him make this a reality show." With that, he raced out the door toward the light.

She called after him. "Splitting up: never a bad idea!"

The show wasn't over yet, John told himself. Sure, the militia was getting more aggravated by the hour, and he hadn't thought of a plan yet, but… uh…

Waves of doubt were hitting higher and harder. It was in those moments of unsure footing that the rhythmic ting ting ting would start. With a sharpened claw, the creeping beast in his id ticked off the bars of its prison, reminding him that it was still there, that he did know a plan. The plan didn't account for getting anyone else out of this alive, but when it came down to it, what mattered more than his own survival?

Just tell the muscleheads to charge. Use that distraction to take out as many of the armed idiots as possible. If the others got caught in the crossfire or had to be sacrificed as meat shields--

No. That wasn't what John wanted to do. He liked these people. He had fun with them. He'd learned a lot with them. If any of them got him killed, he'd think it beyond rude, wouldn't he?

Ting ting-ting.

He visualized draping a sheet over the cage. You're cranky. Go to bed.

John wasn't about to let that thing strangle his life again, just because the situation got tougher than
He bargained for. He had to use everything he'd learned to rise to the challenge, as high as the bar might be.

"Just like Brucie-boy!" another voice chimed in. Her sweetness quickly soured. Whadda pair of idealistic blockheads. Oh, not a pair, actually. Sorry to jab that sore spot, puddin'. But hey, after this crew blows ya away, maybe yer buddy'll slap a big gold star on yer coffin, 'cause you tried."

John clenched his teeth. Being tempted by his own lizard brain was one thing, but he was not going to let a shadow of Harley pressure him into backsliding. What did she know anyway? She'd gotten herself a life sentence with an explosive collar.

He would try.

A swarm did seem like the best shot against the militia at this point, if everyone moved fast enough to take them down before a shot got off. But how was John supposed to arrange that with enemy eyes on him?

Right in front of his face, actually. He wasn't allowed to get up, so he sat cross-legged next to Lucia's chair, and now Gun Show had to crouch to really glare at him.

"Did you hear me?" the middle-management terrorist shouted.

John drew up a smile. "Oh, apologies, sir. You know how us crazies can get all spacey! Especially when I haven't eaten or drunk in a while, plus the stress from all the mortal fear..."

Whatever Gun Show had said couldn't have been that important, considering the guard at the front door actually piped up with "I'm kinda thirsty, boss."

Gun Show shot up, arm ramrod straight at his side, still holding the pistol Lucia couldn't stop staring at. "This isn't a party!" he snapped.

"They got water or seltzer, though," Talky threw in.

For a second, Gun Show looked like he'd lose it, but instead he took a heaving breath. "If your delicate throat is so parched," he said, "go for it."

Talky may have not been the best follower, but he clearly didn't enjoy his peers poking his masculinity. "They can serve us!" he exclaimed.

Now that wasn't a bad idea. John could improvise with any number of tools behind the counter. He raised his hand. "I'm your man, pal!"

"You're a liability," Gun Show barked.

"I run the bar," Ro said placatingly from the huddle of hostages. "I'll get it."

"Nah." Talky gestured to Adelina with his rifle. "This one can manage."

John couldn't help a snort. Talky'd picked the smallest and most nonthreatening hostage because he thought Ro would… what? Chuck glasses at them?

Adelina gingerly made her way behind the counter and grabbed two glasses from the wall shelves. She set them out and looked around the room for anyone else. For all his bluster, Gun Show grunted and she added another. She pulled out the soda gun and stuck the nozzle in a glass, but when she pressed a button, it sputtered and shot air. She tried again, shaking it, then pointed under
"Gotta fix it," she said quietly.

Right, that leaky tube Ro had never replaced. John started to get up. "That's actually my jo–"

"If you don't sit down and shut up," Gun Show said, pistol level with Lucia's nose, "this little lady's night is over."

John thumped back to the floor. "The union will hear about this," he sulked.

Adelina pulled her worried eyes off her sister and opened the cabinets. Her brow wrinkled. John wasn't sure why; she'd watched him enough to figure out that she should just replace the tape. A roll should be right there.

Her eyes flicked up to John, then back down. She said to Talky, "Tape and refill."

Refill? You didn't refill syrup boxes, you switched them out, not that any of the militia guys seemed to know that. And refill with what? John thought back to earlier in the day, after Ro reported the sink was clogged. All that was in the cabinets besides the tape roll were bartending tools, some extra mixers, and…

Adelina shot him another look before she ducked down.

Talky leaned over the counter to watch her. "What's that?"

"Lemon-lime syrup," she said.

"We just asked for water," Gun Show snapped.

"Nah, I'll have some of that soda," Talky said with a touch of impudence.

Adelina, the clever squirrel, still crouched behind the counter, but John could hear the thump of the lemon-lime box, the click of the tube connector coming off, the twist of a jug cap.

Okay, the nondrinkers were the one at the front door and the two flanking Talky. John stared at Maureen, Lorenzo, and Chuck. The lovebirds noticed first, both straightening up a little. Chuck was frowning at Mr. Zhao. Lorenzo cleared his throat and Chuck finally looked up.

"No real drinks for anyone?" John exclaimed. "Come on! You other three, you up for real fun?" He shook his head at the teetotalers and gestured to the bodybuilders. "We'll see if our champions here can get you under the table."

It was a loud signal, not that Gun Show recognized it. He just snapped, "What did I say?"

"Right, right, not a party," John said, smiling at the sound of ripping tape. Chuck carefully settled Mr. Zhao against the outer bathroom wall.

Adelina closed the cabinets up and tested the dispenser in the sink. She lifted her hand in a thumbs up.

"Ooh, can I have one?" John asked, gripping his throat. "We've got a show tomorrow, you see, and I gotta keep my voice in tip-top–"

"Does your voice have an off switch?" Gun Show asked.
John hadn't expected a yes. He just wanted to draw attention from Addy as she filled two glasses with "water," then quickly used the same button to fill the third glass partway before switching to seltzer.

She pushed the "soda" to Talky, regaining his attention. He took it and one of the other glasses for the guy at the front door.

Before the hand-off, Gun Show pulled up the lower half of his mask and grabbed the third glass, lifting it to his mouth.

"I'd like to propose a toast!" John declared, hoisting an invisible champagne flute. Gun Show's lip curled in annoyance, but he lowered his drink. "To Lock-Up and to justice!"

"Here here!" Talky cheered. He and the door guard raised their drinks.

Gun Show couldn't refuse to honor their dear leader. He lifted his glass, too, and all three men took a gulp.

And all three grabbed their throats, coughing and hacking as the glasses shattered on the floor. The other soldiers froze in a crucial moment of shock, eyes wide.

"Boss--" started the guy on John's right, before Chuck tackled him to the ground. Lorenzo bowled over the guy on the left, and Maureen raced around them toward the goon at the stairwell door.

That could have been bad, since the distance added an extra second for him to get his bearings. But before he could fire his rifle, clear liquid blasted the side of his face. He screamed, and Adelina held down the trigger even as he dropped his gun, only stopping at Maureen's shout. The goon was still trying to tear his soaked mask off his face when the muscular woman took him down.

John cackled. Man, who would've thought that drain cleaner was multi-purpose! Good thing he'd still had enough sense not to take Bruce's oblivious offer of water those few nights ago. And he thought a hangover was bad!

Gun Show sank to his knees, still clutching his throat, wheezing and starting to dribble pink drool. Before John could make a move for the gun, Lucia leapt from her seat and yanked the weapon away. She started beating the butt over Gun Show's head, and that's when the room erupted.

An acrobat leapt over John to tackle Talky, and John scrambled out of the way of three more running to help pin the gurgling gunman to the floor. Chuck and Lorenzo struggled to do the same with their targets, who fought back wildly until the shouting Circus members surged forward to help, mostly with sharp kicks. Two singers scuttled around the floor, collecting the guns that were tossed out of reach.

John had backed into the wall, and he leaned against it as he stood up. Across the room, the now-gunless soldier at the front door was trying to dislodge Fredelle from his back, powering through the scalding of his throat. That throat was locked in the crook of Fredelle's elbow, and her legs clung around his torso. The soldier flung himself back, slamming her into the door and cracking the glass. She yelled out but didn't let go.

John maneuvered between the unfair brawls to help—dodging friendly fire from Lian's sharp elbow and Ro's swinging foot— but Virgil got there first, winding up a dancer's cane. When it whipped across the soldier's face, he nearly collapsed and Fredelle let out a yelp at the drop in altitude. Mikey appeared and pushed behind her to open the door, then pulled at her waist, effectively dragging the soldier outside under the streetlight's glare. Fredelle hopped down as Virgil followed.
with the cane, bashing the soldier's head over and over. When the militia man dropped below the window, the onslaught didn't stop, certainly not after Mikey pulled a broken umbrella from the trash can.

Maureen's pile of brawlers spit out one of the apartment tenants, a balding middle-aged man whose usual mild-manneredness was nowhere to be seen as he let out a battle cry and charged past John. Chuck's target had managed to get to his feet, but he screamed as the tenant grabbed him by the vest straps, driving them both through the crowd and across the bar until they tripped over the stage. Chuck and company followed right behind to resume the dogpile, and the thundering stampede toppled upside-down chairs from their perches on the tables. Nearby, Mr. Zhao kept dozing against the wall.

Another stream of drain cleaner arced over John's head, blasting the neck of the goon who'd gotten Lorenzo on his back. Anica and everyone who'd been trying to pry the soldier off scattered out of the splash zone. The goon cursed and jerked out of the way, and Adelina stopped shooting as Lorenzo took advantage of the moment to flip his opponent over. Each bash of the gunman's head on the floor vibrated through John's shoes.

"I'm gonna need a new skirt."

In the middle of the hooting and hollering, Lucia straddled Gun Show, who lay spread eagle and still, a red trickle from the corner of his mouth. She held his pistol in one hand and inspected the split seam of her pencil skirt with the other. The singers approached, having found a duffel bag to hold the guns, and Lucia handed the pistol over.

She accepted John's hand as she got to her feet, and he helped her onto a stool at the bar. Then he climbed over the counter to join Adelina as she fiddled with the soda gun, apparently having emptied it. Looking at John and Lucia, she let the dispenser drop, let out a long exhale, and wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. John ruffled her hair and slung his arm around her shoulders.

He and the sisters watched the chaos wind down as quickly as it began, as everyone improvised restraints to keep the terrorists subdued. The bar was an out-of-breath mass of disheveled hair, mussed makeup, and probably not a few bruises, but minimal costume damage.

Sniffling, John swallowed against the tightness in his throat. "You guys are the best."

Catwoman was tempted to ask Spectrum's typing speed. The younger woman's gloved fingers flew across the keyboard as she killed Lock-Up's fear-mongering network from his own computer station. Her brow was knitted tightly in concentration— and frustration. Batman's tendency to run off like he was invincible probably never got less annoying. Soon enough, though, she could run off to help him with her gadgets. None of the tied-up goons had stirred, so there wasn't much else to handle in the lab.

A sudden weight hurled into the fencing, and Catwoman fell back a step before answering with her own body. The cage smashed back into Crane's face and he shouted, grabbing his nose as his back hit the wall.

Annoyed, she let out a warning hiss.

Crane threw his hands down and responded with his own petulant hiss.

"Okay, it's weird when you do it," Selina said. His wild eyes unnerved her, and she looked over her
Ivy had been busying herself at the equipment tables since Batman left. Selina had looked her over for signs of injury, from bruises to a limp, but she appeared unharmed. Ivy's barely bothered attitude, however, was an obvious front given how upset she'd been on the phone earlier. Selina expected an earful later.

For now, Ivy used passive aggression. She only hummed in answer to Selina's request, then turned and knelt, holding a vial of liquid in one hand and beckoning the dog with the other. The stray, lying just outside the cage, lifted its head.

"If anything, I thought you'd be a cat person," Selina said.

"Animals have their place in the ecosystem," Ivy replied as the dog crept toward her. "They don't maliciously destroy it en masse."

"For someone who constantly has her guard up," Crane said with a thin smile, "you never think to be more lowkey about your obsession."

"Look who's talking."

With a coo, Ivy tipped the vial just enough so the dog could lap at the first drop. It seemed to like the taste. It sat and wagged its tail, and let her pour the rest into its mouth.

"What is even the point of your toxin?" Catwoman asked Crane.

He'd watched Ivy with an acerbic puzzlement, so the transition to condescension was smooth. "A full exploration of human limits."

"Sure, that's great, but to what end?"

"To what end?" Crane laughed disdainfully. "To what end!"

"I told you," Ivy said as the dog rose on all fours and shook itself. "Jonathon enjoys the results for their own sake."

"You wouldn't understand! Couldn't!"

"Maybe Arkham will."

Crane shook his head, grumbling, and then Catwoman's attention was drawn to a loss of light in her periphery. The computer monitors had gone dark. Spectrum stood and took quick inventory of her belt.

"I'm going after Batman," she said. "You got this?"

"No trouble," Catwoman said. "Tell him it'd do him some good to run like that after people he likes."

Tiffany snorted. "I'm not sure he knows what to do when he catches someone he likes." She shot Selina a knowing look.

Selina chuckled. Of course Tiffany knew. Hell, didn't the whole town? Why wouldn't the person who'd practically taken over Alfred's role? "You'd think all that green would be a big 'go' signal."

She expected an eyeroll, but Tiffany's brow wrinkled with confusion, and it hit Selina instantly that
her assumption had actually not been a safe one. She tried not to blanch at her own carelessness. They were in the middle of presenting themselves as competent vigilantes after all.

"But, uh… better get going." Yes, what a polished follow-up.

"I am." Spectrum pointed at the rear doorway as her bike rolled up. When she turned away, she added just loud enough for Catwoman to hear, "Very awkwardly."

She dashed outside, mounted the bike, and zipped off, engine at a low buzz. The dog trotted to the threshold, ears perked and tail slashing the air. It looked ready to chase after her, but it darted to the left instead.

"I guess we're no fun anymore," Catwoman commented. There was no sense in dwelling on her remark to Tiffany. Could she even say the younger woman fully understood what she'd meant?

Ivy had no reaction to the dog's exit. She was back at the lab station.

"What are you doing now?"

"There are some datura leaves."

Catwoman muted her sigh. "Look at it this way: you're still around to protect plants like that for years to come."

"There are so few of this species left. Now one fewer."

"Connections, links," Crane mused, stoic again, hands folded. "Bonds to hold us steady in an uncertain world— until they snap."

"Aw, did you study writing, too?" Catwoman asked.

He replied, "How much do you take after your namesake, I wonder?"

She rolled her eyes. "Now's an odd time for flirting."

He hummed. "Ah, the slinking, graceful allure of a cat would occur to the crass among us. No, my interest is in the disposition. Loner, skittish around others. I have heard of you, of course, and certainly in business you act alone, but some of us do a bit of play acting career-wise, don't we?"

"An untrustworthy creep usually has to," Ivy said, not turning around.

"So is there an outward, catlike persona and a separate inward self?" Crane went on. "Or is this it? A lone woman against the world?"

"A lone woman who arrived with company," Selina pointed out, unimpressed.

"Third wheel, I imagine," he assessed indifferently. "You haven't been in town for a long while. It'd be in the news if the Bat had a second sidekick all this time. You're certainly talented enough, but this is temporary assistance, isn't it? Permanence is so daunting. It creates a multitude of expectations to live up to, day after day."

Was this loon really trying to run one of his screwed-up therapy sessions right now?

"The kicker," he continued, "is that those expectations aren't just for you. Inevitably you'll presume things of others. You can fail those relationships, but they can also fail you. The camaraderie, the love, whatever it may be, it's revealed as a delusion, and you a fool for believing in it. There is an
ease in living freely, in being sure the only one who disappoints you is yourself."

Crane's eyes, near feral just minutes ago, now held steady with a piercing gaze as he unwound his thoughts.

"It's fine when there's no one to catch you when you fall, because cats always land on their feet… except you are only playing a cat. For all your performed apathy, you know that one day you'll land wrong, break an ankle or smash your head, and when you reach out, no one will be there to pick you up either."

Selina did feel envious, not only after seeing Bruce with John, but seeing how cleanly Batman and Spectrum worked together. But she wasn't in denial. It was just her problem, one that she'd been addressing in her own way since she came back to Gotham. Maybe it wasn't the best way, but it worked for her, and now wasn't the time to dwell–

Crane lunged and Catwoman cursed as the fencing smashed into her. She wasn't ready; she not only fell, but the side of the cage separated from the wall just enough for the lanky bastard to slip free. She scrambled to her hands and knees and snatched at his ankle— and she missed. Crane bolted past the computer station for the front door.

Ivy stepped out from behind the row of tanks, her palm lifted to her mouth. With a puff, powder blew into Crane's path, into his face. He immediately stumbled and began to cough, though he tried to complete his dash to the door. He stopped mere feet away, hands clutching his knees, and a choked sound wrenched from his chest.

Back on her feet, Selina rushed over, stopping at Ivy's side, not sure what was happening.

Ivy said coolly, "It's past time you learn not to touch things that don't belong to you, including minds."

Crane turned his head, his look of disbelief blotched with red. The marks appeared on his hands, too. His mouth worked, but all that came out was a wheeze before he collapsed. As the two women came closer, standing over him, he curled into the fetal position. His brows pulled together over his scrunched eyes and he managed a groan.

"What luck," Ivy said nonchalantly, "that I was inspecting a mysterious substance when he came right at me."

Catwoman grimaced at his pained noises. "Is he...?" In explaining this to Batman, she could leave out the part when she fell for a freshman-grade psych-out, but there was no way to handwave Crane dying.

"He'll recover," Ivy said as if she wished the opposite. "He may even be a little wiser when all's said and done— but probably not."

Ah, well, incapacitated was workable.

"This was not my ideal night," Ivy added with a sidelong glance Selina's way, "but I got my retribution. I feel satisfied."

A begrudging forgiveness, it sounded like. Considering Crane's state, Selina felt lucky. Maybe Ivy liked her more than she let on. Regardless, Selina had no plans to get Ivy into more trouble.

"Not sure what you mean," she replied. "He came right at you."
Lock-Up stood on a metal walkway with a captive at his mercy, but he held a gun, not a knife. Maroni, wrists bound and thousand-dollar pants caked with sludge, stood a few feet away. Instead of a corrugated, chemically seared ceiling stories above, there was the night sky, stars washed out by the lights across the river. The glowing vats below were replaced by deep, dry concrete pools where water had once been aerated. The scene was lit by a light along the roof of a small building; it housed the compressor and pump controls, and a cluster of pipes sprouted from the wall. The pipes ran for a few yards before driving into the concrete at the edge of the pools, giving Batman cover to position himself at Lock-Up's rear instead of coming head-on.

Still, as with many other hostage situations, he found himself shaking off echoes of Axis.

He looked carefully over the pipe bends. A grid of railed walkways framed the basins, and two of Lock-Up's goons had set up on a parallel walkway to their boss's left. One monitored a laptop and another held up a phone.

The first looked up from the screen. "We're at twenty-one thousand!" he called.

"That's plenty of live witnesses," Bolton said conversationally. "We'll post the recording later for latecomers."

"Don't be an idiot," Maroni sneered. He stared at the gun leveled at his chest. "We can make a deal!"

"If I wanted your money I would have just taken it from you, old man. What I want is your body at the base of the stack."

Maroni took this in quickly. Just a moment passed before he lifted his chin with pride. "Then I'll see you in Hell."

Bolton chuckled. "If only."

"Wait!" the same goon yelled. The other one fiddled with the phone. "The connection's cut!"

Lock-Up growled. "You idiots–"

The batarang sheared through the air and caught his hand. He shouted as the gun dropped from his grip, tumbled on the walkway, and fell below. Reflexively he reached for it, giving Batman a moment to rush forward and leap over him to grab Maroni.

Lock-Up's reflexes were primed. His hand darted to his waist before he flung out his arm, and Batman reeled back in time to avoid a slash through his cheek. Lock-Up grabbed Maroni and roughly switched their positions, holding him close in front, the bowie knife at the mobster's throat.

Batman quickly turned to the two goons, who'd abandoned their electronics to pull their rifles off their backs. He launched the gauntlet anchors, snagged the collars of their masks, and yanked forward and down. The soldiers' heads struck the railing and they crumpled.

Batman retracted the wires and turned back to Lock-Up. "Lyle Bolton, this is your only chance to give yourself up."

Bolton was unfazed by his exposed identity. "There are those impressive principles!" he mocked. Maroni tilted his head back as the knife pressed in. "Come on! As if you believe I'm gonna hand myself over."
"It's your choice."

"Yours too. You'll just put this piece of shit back on the street, in the face of all your good intentions."

"This is about more than Maroni. If you get your way, thousands more people will never get a chance to turn around."

"Open your eyes!" Lock-Up hollered, eyes blazing. "People don't 'turn around!' They lie, they manipulate, they spit in your face."

"Is that what you think of Dane?"

"That's who Dane was. It took me too long to see it."

"Or did you just get tired? You supported someone through an addiction for years, after watching your mother die from it. That's not easy. Maybe you hoped your brother would be an exception, that it wouldn't take multiple relapses to hit bottom. That doesn't mean—"

"I'll save you the time."

Lock-Up's knife hand grasped Maroni's collar as his other hand grabbed the inside of Maroni's leg, and with a jerk upward, the mob boss toppled over the right-hand railing, just before Lock-Up let himself fall over the opposite side. Batman shouted, reflexively reaching for his grapple even though it was too late. He vaulted over the railing after Maroni, rolling when he hit the basin's concrete floor. It was twenty feet at most, survivable.

Except Maroni had landed on his head. Batman didn't have to get as close as he did to see the drastic angle of the mob boss's neck, or the frozen shock on his face. But of course Lock-Up planned it that way, knew just how to throw him.

And Lock-Up knew how to fall. Batman grappled back to the grid and looked into the other pool. It was empty, with a hole at the bottom where the concrete had crumbled around a rusted pipe. Time had made the hole large enough to squeeze through into the next tank, where half a ladder left in the wall was enough to get to ground level. The fatal distraction had bought Lock-Up seconds, but it was enough time to disappear into the dark.

Batman registered the approaching motor just before Spectrum appeared. Her bike rolled around the side of the control building and onto the walkway, coming to a stop in front of him.

She glanced at the unconscious goons. "Where's—"

"Maroni's dead," Batman said. "Lock-Up ran, but he can't be far."

She'd learned to process bad news quickly. She pointed eastward. "The water. He's got to have a boat stowed."

Batman nodded. It made sense. Lock-Up could link up with a group of his men or go it alone, most likely heading for the ocean rather than the obstacles upriver.

"Get ahead, knock out the boat with the drone," he said, though of course she knew that and was already speeding off the metal walkway toward the banks.

He raced after her on foot. Catwoman would say they should have stolen two extra bikes. Maybe she was right, or maybe he should have just told Veronica and Gleeson to stay put. Too late to
reverse that decision. They had to have made it up the road to the highway by now, probably even beyond…

Brubaker State Park.

*Brews at Bru* on the back of the photo. Familiar language, like the brothers had frequented the place.

Brubaker took up deep territory on the western side of the road, including the southern border of the treatment plant.

He changed direction and activated the commlink. "Keep going to the river." Still had to cover all possibilities. "I'm heading to the park."

After a second, Spectrum responded. "Got it."

Running at his limit, nightvison on, he never caught sight of Bolton ahead of him. When he reached the treeline on the plant grounds, he heard nothing but insects and his own controlled breaths.

The trees were thin here, large themselves but spread out enough that he could keep running. As he neared the perimeter, he focused on one tree. It was close enough to the fence that he could parkour over rather than waste time testing the electric current.

He leapt high to wrap his arms around a thick branch and pushed off the trunk with his soles to swing on top. From there, he jumped to a slightly higher branch angled toward the fence, and then again over the barrier and into the park.

It took only seconds, but he didn't miss that each of his movements corresponded with scraped and bare spots on the bark, like there'd be if Lock-Up had come this way multiple times, checking on his getaway.

Batman paused when he landed, boots making soft sounds in the mulched leaves. He still neither saw nor heard any sign of Bolton. He pulled up a local map on his gauntlet. The cabin in the photo would be more of a marker for hikers, but when satellite images were converted to maps for broader purposes, maybe…

There, a gray box in the park, less than a quarter mile northwest.

The trees were more crowded on this side of the fence, but he moved fast, mindful of unearthed roots and fallen branches on the flat terrain. It would take about ten minutes to reach the cabin, which amounted to a colossal waste of time if he was wrong. Spectrum must have reached the river by now, though, and hadn't reported Lock-Up zooming away on a speedboat.

It took most of those ten minutes before he spotted trash scattered in the leaves, including not a few beer cans and bottles. He thought he saw a line in the trees not far off, a path, but he avoided it. He moved faster, trying to keep his steps quiet.

Finally, a point of light.

As it grew larger, he kept hidden, sticking behind wide trunks and thick brush. Soon he could see the shape of the cabin in a small clearing. The light came from inside, mounted on the ceiling near the single glassless window. He turned off nightvision, moved behind a tall bush, and peeked around it. From there he could see clear through the open doorway— the door torn off long ago— that there was a single empty room with a dirt floor. A pile of dirt sat at the edge of a hole, and
when he ventured further to see more of the interior, he realized a large wooden hatch had been buried in the ground. The hatch was open, leaning against the back wall.

A tire rolled up out of the hole. Batman returned to cover and watched through the gaps in the foliage.

Handles came up next, then the rest of the compact motorbike as it flopped onto the ground. Bolton climbed out after it with a grunt, his mask and clothes streaked with dirt. He righted the bike and rolled it out the doorway.

Batman didn't wait for him to start the engine. He fired an anchor through the brush. Its hooks punctured the front tire, and Lock-Up jumped at the loud pop.

"Abandoning those who look up to you is a bad habit," Batman said as he stepped into the open. He detached the line from his glove.

Letting the bike fall, Lock-Up regained his confident stance, framed by the cabin light. "Fervent self righteousness is hardly better."

"Funny, coming from a wannabe dictator."

"I act on lessons well learned."

"Me too."

Batman charged. Lock-Up whipped the bowie knife from his belt, predictably, driving it toward the joint of Batman's hip and thigh. Batman grabbed his opponent's wrist before the blade tip could make contact, and Lock-Up jutted his knee into Batman's gut once, twice, then jerked his arm free. He went with the movement, spinning around and kicking backwards, but Batman jolted out of the way. He didn't go for Bolton's leg, which was a good thing; the spin came back around with a knife slash at face level.

Batman feinted a grab for the blade, prompting Lock-Up to lift his hand out of reach, and then Batman crouched low and kicked the other man's knee. The impact felt blunted—hidden pads— but Lock-Up cursed and stumbled back. Batman darted forward with a stunner from his belt, grabbing Lock-Up around the arms and slapping the disc on his back just below the shoulder.

Nothing happened.

Laughing, Lock-Up clamped his hands around Batman's waist, pushed back, and drove the knife toward another armor joint, under the left arm. The point caught this time, but Batman didn't care to see if it was strong enough to break through. He whirled away, his right hand catching Lock-Up's neck and trying to throw him backward to the ground. Lock-Up pre-empted the move and fell willingly, swinging the knife up. Batman lost his hold as the blade just missed the tip of his nose. Lock-Up rolled heels over head, right back onto his feet.

"Did you think I wouldn't use my disruptor?" he mocked, patting his pocket. "It'll be a joy to kill you man-to-man."

"You don't have a wide range of solutions to your problems," Batman commented, and it was jarring to hear his own voice, muffled as it was by the respirator. The disruptor affected even that.

Lock-Up cared more about the slight. He snarled. "You can't even get a simple knife away from your opponent!"
In a split second, Batman detached the grapple from his belt and launched it into the trees. He felt the snag, pressed the retraction button, and yanked down. Lock-Up moved at the CRACK, but not quickly enough to escape the hefty branch that crashed onto his head. Smaller branches scattered around his body, followed by a flutter of leaves.

The knife skittered across the dirt, away from Lock-Up's outstretched arm. Batman kicked it away under some brush and replaced the grapple. He turned back to his opponent, lying still and facedown in the dirt. The branch had come to rest diagonally across Lock-Up's legs, and Batman knocked it away before straddling his back and reaching for the cuffs in his belt.

He grabbed Lock-Up's right wrist with his own right hand, and suddenly Lock-Up's hand twisted and seized his arm. Then Lock-Up's whole body twisted and he pulled Batman's arm taut, jerking Batman to the side, his back exposed. Lock-Up's left fist crashed into the back of the cowl with surprising force. It wasn't enough to stun, but bought a sliver of time for Lock-Up's forearm to snag Batman's throat and his opposite hand to brace against the back of Batman's head.

Batman tried to get up or buck free, but Lock-Up wasn't afraid to get close, to latch his legs around Batman's waist. His foot was in reach and Batman grabbed it, pulling up, jamming his elbow into the calf, straining the injured knee.

Lock-Up's laugh was worn but his hold didn't weaken. "I'll drag myself out of here on a snapped leg if it means killing you," he growled at Batman's ear.

The neck of the batsuit was armored enough to protect from slashes and punches, but it had to have some flex or Bruce Wayne would have fresh bruises around his throat daily. The material slowly compressed under Lock-Up's strength.

"I'll rid this city of its greatest disappointment: a so-called protector who only wields 'compassion' and 'tolerance.'"

Batman reached back, tried to get a grasp on Lock-Up's neck, any vulnerable spot, but the angle wasn't right, and his armor restrained his movements just enough.

"The scum of this city won't get better. Their sickness just becomes an affliction on good people."

Lock-Up was fulfilling his own prophecy, Batman wanted to say, to punctuate with a solid punch, even knowing the terrorist was too far gone for sense to be knocked into him.

"They drag down anyone else with them. I've seen it! You repeat my own kin's sob story back at me as if I wasn't there! As if you know anything about it that I didn't witness!"

Prepared, Batman could hold his breath for several minutes, but he'd been off guard and was hitting his limit, especially with the respirator impeding his inspiratory rate. The blackness of the woods crept in, and the glare of the cabin light dimmed. Lock-Up's foot slipped from his grip.

Bolton was screaming now. "I saw! Dane was nothing but a parasite, and I should have put him down myself! I won't just watch anymore, not ever again, unlike you! You'd have Maroni alive and well! What good have you and your kind ever done?"

The question echoed, and the energy from Bruce's subdued panic almost spiraled into a laugh. Lock-Up thought Batman was strident like himself, that he never questioned the course– but no matter the considerations, Bruce always came to the same conclusion. He didn't have the right to decide someone no longer deserved a chance, no matter how strong the urge. Not when Harvey had defied the devil on his shoulder and reported Lock-Up's existence. Not when Selina had given
up the phalanx key prototype and assisted him so many times, not least by saving his life. Not when Tiffany had done so much to expand their operation and stop hundreds more criminals.

Not when John had turned things around, not into the idyllic life Bruce would have gladly given him, but something his own, working with the cards he was dealt and the ones pulled from his sleeves. He had people who supported him, people he protected. Maybe he didn't have the right emotional response to his crimes, but he worked to prevent them from happening again. He worked to create a new version of himself, fervent and colorful and blazing like the sun.

Bruce hadn't apologized correctly, hadn't said he understood. He did. He should tell him. He should...

"If you care for the vermin so much," Bolton hissed, "I'll toss them into your grave."

The burst of clarity was fading already, because it couldn't overcome the pressure on his throat, the hindrance on his arms.

Bruce almost laughed again, because John would be so mad that this is how Batman went out, strangled by a Mayor Dent retread. But John knew that life was chaotic, that it rarely came to fitting, poetic endings. He and Bruce had unusual reserves of luck, and now Bruce's had...

Was that barking?

The brush in front of Bruce's face nearly burst apart when the dogs crashed through, yelping and growling. He heard their paws scrabble in the dirt, felt nails scrape his cheek as one dashed over rather than around. Now at his back, at Lock-Up's, the growls deepened and Lock-Up hollered in pain. Strain on his leg was one thing; teeth were another.

Lock-Up's hold vanished and Batman rolled away. He caught his breath as he watched four dogs go at Lock-Up at once, biting whatever they could reach to keep him on the ground, and when he managed to throw one off, it would snap back before he could grab another. The tan mutt, the one from the lab, was the smallest, but it had the most ferocious snarl. It locked its jaws around Bolton's left wrist, and when he grabbed its muzzle, it let go only to lunge at his face.

"Motherfucker!" Bolton grabbed at his mask, the black material growing darker just under his eye.

His glove snatched the mutt by its scruff, smearing blood on its fur, and he managed to lurch to his feet, kicking the other dogs away. He flung the tan one into the wall of the cabin and turned. Batman's fist landed square in the middle of his face.

Bolton fell like a log. The tan dog got to its feet and shook the impact off, joining its friends as they excitedly scrabbled over the man's body. After a moment, they padded around him restlessly, waiting to see if he'd move. He didn't.

Their ears perked up at a clamor in the woods. Spectrum hurried through the trees on foot; she didn't have an easy way to get her bike over the fence. She stopped at the edge of the clearing, blinking at the scene.

Finally she got on one knee, reaching out to the dogs. "Such good boys!" she cooed.

That set the animals off into more excited bounds. The tan one trotted over for head pats. She duly complied while looking at Batman with surprise and touching her throat.

"I thought the tracker was just glitching when it went out," she said, "but my voice mod, too?"
Batman crouched and reached into Bolton's pocket. He pulled out a small rectangular device with a glowing green light. After toggling the switch on the side, his night vision successfully flicked on and off.

"Ah ha," Spectrum said with her re-computerized voice. The tan dog shifted back uneasily and she shrugged. "Sorry."

"Was there anything on the water?" Batman asked. He flipped Bolton over, and the other man's arm flopped like a fish. He proceeded to cuff him.

"More fighting, there and over at the bridge, but no one running for it yet."

Even as she grabbed her tablet, he instructed, "See what the battle statuses are, who we should help first." He dragged Bolton by the back of his vest to the cabin to sit him up against the wall. "And put a pic of this out on social media to boost his soldier's spirits."

"Heh, we could make that a thing," she said, scanning the screen. "Our own CamEra account, with self defense tips, workout routines, swag give…" Her eyes widened.

"What is it?" Batman brought up his own feed. Had Gordon been hurt? Did those lunatics destroy a bridge?

"No," she replied nervously, "looks like the GCPD is really holding their own, but so did, uh…"

Outside of All's Well was a combination of a crime scene and a block party. The GCPD had managed to cordon off the bar, but outside the barricades, Gothamites danced and whooped under the flashing cruiser lights, celebrating their local heroes.

Three of those heroes were in the foreground: John with his arms around Lucia and Adelina, all wearing what looked like their Sideshow costumes. John leaned into the microphone hovering in front of their faces.

"We just did what any good citizens would do," he stated proudly, "and stood up when a bunch of armed thugs tried to intimidate our city!"

"The internal chemical burns certainly make a point," the off-camera reporter said.

Forearms resting on the Palmeras' shoulders, John fanned out his hands on a "so what?" gesture. "They're still breathing, technically," he said. "I mean, come on, whaddaya want?"

Lucia pulled the microphone towards herself and sniffled, a little more dramatically than needed. "I'm just glad we were able to defend ourselves!"

Adelina nodded with big eyes. John rubbed her shoulder and she leaned into him, staring into the distance as if haunted.

"This poor girl!" he lamented. "She can barely talk about what happened!"

"Have the police thanked you for your assistance?" the reporter asked.

John replied solemnly, "No thanks are needed. I know they mistrust me, and so does the public, but that wasn't what mattered. What mattered was taking down another crew of terrorists!"

"We want to thank the GCPD," Lucia said, "for taking those awful men away and processing the scene so quickly. We've worked on our variety show, Sideshow, for so long, and we're thrilled
opening night will go on as planned." She added quickly, "Tomorrow night, ten-thirty."

"Only a five-dollar cover!" John chirped.

 Whoever had clipped the interview for social media ended it there, on a shot of the reporter just before her closing words.

Leaning back in his chair at the batcomputer, Bruce sighed quietly and looked over at a smaller screen. Alfred looked back hesitantly.

Al had sent a message asking for Bruce to call when the Lock-Up aftermath wound down. After he and Tiffany showered and changed, him into lounge pants and her into a tracksuit, the call ended up being after three in the morning. In England that was around breakfast time, but going by Alfred's weary face, he'd clearly stayed up following the events online. Bruce filled him in on unreported details, such as Batman and Spectrum's discovery when they returned to the lab.

Crane had been delirious and groaning, curled up on the floor. Not only had he tried to escape, Isley explained, but he'd attacked her, and she retaliated with a substance from the work table. She'd merely been inspecting the powder out of curiosity, but theorized (with little concern) that Lock-Up must have been coming up with a new weapon. Catwoman didn't contradict the story, but surely Isley knew better than to handle unidentified materials, and why would Crane detour his escape? It all sounded oddly convenient for a woman with a grudge, but Batman's doubts weren't enough for a solid accusation against a kidnapping victim. Maybe an interview with Crane would shed some light, once Gotham General got him in a state to talk.

In the meantime, Isley would be added to Bruce's long list of people to keep an eye on. It was disappointing that he still couldn't strike Selina from that list, as far as he felt she'd come. She didn't help her case when he took her aside to try asking more questions.

"There's nothing more to it, Bats," she'd answered as the faint sirens grew louder, "and I can't stick around. Your friends in blue still aren't friends of mine." She'd backed out the door, blowing a kiss. "You should worry about more innocent people anyway."

Her concern hadn't been unfounded. Just a single police squad had been able to respond to Spectrum's call for assistance, but while they'd secured Bolton and his cronies, the lead officer asked about the cat burglar. Summer Gleeson may have been hospitalized, but of course she'd filed a scoop from her Chatter account: not only was she okay, but Catwoman had been among her rescuers.

The conversation with Gordon probably would have been rougher if he hadn't been so exhausted. Of course, who wasn't?

When Alfred brought up the news report with John, Bruce almost said he didn't want to watch, but that wasn't true. Reading that John was okay did not eliminate the gnawing need to actually see him alive and well. Tiffany found the clip quickly anyway; it appeared multiple times in her personal Chatter feed.

"Well," Alfred finally said, "seems the situation worked itself out, against all odds."

"And they spun it into marketing," Tiffany said as she came back from the medical cabinet. She handed Bruce a long ice pack. "Any response from Lucia's phone?"

"She said they're okay," Bruce replied. He draped the pack across his throat and tucked it behind his bare shoulders. He was still deciding between covering the bruises with extensive makeup or
concocting a believable excuse.

Tiffany raised an eyebrow. "And John said?"

"He's preoccupied." Bruce looked at a divot in the stone just over the main monitor.

"To talk about Maroni?"

There was no doubt that John and the Neighborhood Watch— and most of the city— were relieved, if not ecstatic, that Sal Maroni was dead. The mobster's family would be far too busy grieving and reorganizing their key players to worry about retaliating against a bunch of audacious artists. And if history was anything to go by, the reorganizing would be sabotaged by infighting and the syndicate would implode like the Falcons.

Lock-Up's act would certainly have lasting consequences— but not any that John wanted to discuss with Bruce. He'd given no indication that he'd changed his mind about contacting Bruce at all.

"His attention wavers," Bruce said. "You said yourself there's a big boost in Sideshow buzz, more to live up to."

Alfred hummed. "I noticed a few comments myself, calling it a celebration for surviving another disaster."

"Gotham could use more celebrations."

"I mean, sure, but..." Tiffany shrugged it off. "Speaking of the show, so tomorrow night— well, tonight, I guess— if patrol is light, I was going to come back here and finish up the evidence package for Gordon, unless you want me to stay out while you're at the bar?"

Bruce had said he'd be honest with Tiffany— not that he'd been particularly forthcoming so far. "I won't be going."

"Uh... what? He can't still be mad at you."

"You said yourself John focuses too much on me. He knows that. He's been working on boundaries, so... I can't discourage his therapy." Maybe a half-truth wasn't that bad.

Or it was bad enough. Tiffany came around his front to sternly look him in the eye, with a glance toward Alfred.

Something must have shown on Al's face, too, because she said, "I know I'm not really family, but you said we're a team, right?"

"This isn't about the work," Bruce said. "It's private."

Her face fell. "I know. That's fine, but— but we're still friends. I don't have to know all your business, but I just feel like, if Selina knows, I just hope you know you could tell me things, if you wanted."

Bruce took a breath and sat up, holding the cold pack in place. "It sounds like you know enough."

Alfred looked between them, his expression appropriately awkward.

Tiffany maintained uneasy eye contact. "I mean sort of. It didn't really hit me until Selina made an offhand comment. Feels like all those lessons in deductive skills haven't gone very far if a bunch of bloggers realized you and John were a thing before me."
"We're not a… It's complicated. And I didn't tell Selina. She just… stumbled into a private moment."

"Not sure I need to know what that means. But so… I don't get it. John doesn't want you around?"

"It's complicated."

"More than the rest of our lives?"

"As much as."

"You sure he isn't just angling for you to run to him like in a romcom?" she joked.

"It's just not going to work."

"Even holding a radio over your head outside his window?"

"He told me to stay away in no uncertain terms," Bruce said, voice hard.

"Sorry, sorry." Tiffany bit her lip. "I'm still just… processing. I didn't even know you were bi."

Bruce wasn't sure how to respond to that, other than a small nod. He'd spent far more time preparing for a one-man war against crime than thinking about his sexuality in any concrete way. In the distant past, he'd felt attraction and just went with it. On his return to Gotham, it was easier to stick to the opposite sex than deal with an extra set of probing questions, not so much from tabloids than from the Board and other business associates.

"Plus I've seen you go ridiculous lengths for women, but now with John–" Tiffany raised her hands at his look. "Yeah, 'it's complicated,' I get it. I've hit the wall."

"I would think you'd be more uneasy about it being John."

"I don't know. It feels like we came to an understanding– but even if we hadn't, what does that matter? I didn't sign up to have say in a grown-ass man's lovelife, unless you're saying there was a clause in–"

A pop song cut into the conversation, and Tiffany pulled her phone out of her jacket pocket.

"Hold on," she muttered before answering. "Hey, Mom. … Yes, sorry, sorry. I'm about to call a ride. … You said yourself that holing up at Wayne Ent– I know. Yes, see you soon, promise."

"Head home," Bruce said. "I'd hate for her to worry more than she has to."

"Given what she doesn't know, she never will." Tiffany's bag sat at the base of the batcomputer, and she picked it up, slinging it over her shoulder. "I guess let me know if plans, you know, change."

"Good night, Tiffany," Bruce said dryly.

"Morning!" she corrected on her way to the elevator.

He watched the doors close and turned back to Alfred. "You've been quiet."

Alfred shrugged slightly. "I suppose I also don't quite know what to say about John."

"Nothing is fine. I'm making my choices, like Tiffany said."
"Of course, but may I refer to our last conversation?"

"What about it?"

"I just don't want you to underestimate the good impact you've had on him, whatever the underlying feelings."

"Compared to my previous impact."

"You're trying to pick a fight, but yes, compared to what happened with the Pact. Your actions have been much more beneficial this time around. I think that matters."

"Sure. Fine."

"And I want you to consider… There was reason for regret with John last time, and I don't think there is any now, not with anything you can help. Except in this choice."

"Al…" Bruce tossed the ice pack onto the floor and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "It's more of a commitment, which is more of a failure if I can't give him what he needs, and I can't. We know my track record in choosing anyone over the city, and John clearly doesn't think I could do it either. Hell, it just happened. Instead of coming back from the mainland and finding out he fought off the militia, I could have learned the militia shot up the whole building, and I wasn't there because I had to go after the target. That's the commitment I made."

"You could come home from the office one day," Alfred said, "not a patrol one night, and learn he'd been hit by a bus or buried in a collapse. John knows what you do. He's quite enamored with it."

"And he told me no. He's doing better with therapy. He has a whole network of support now. He's figured out he doesn't need a relationship where we promise not to lie to each other again, yet we keep doing it."

"I know personally that you don't think even tremendous lies are insurmountable."

Bruce looked square at the screen. "Al, I'm done with this discussion."

Alfred had remained cool making his points, and his expression remained calm now. "Understood," he said duly. "I'll change the subject. Since you've put this Lock-Up character away, I'm hoping you can find time for those last scans from your mother's journal?"

"Yeah," Bruce said after a quiet breath. "I can send them over before bed."

"Oh, that's not necessary--"

"It's fine. I'm still wired." The mechanical task would help wind him down. After all, he wasn't planning on re-reading.

"If you're sure. I appreciate it. I've been reviewing the other pages quite a bit. It's surprising how often better memories shine through. At times, I can almost hear Martha's voice."

Bruce had heard it, too, a ghost telling him to come inside or to finish his vegetables, but he also needed to listen to her now. She had been ready to blow up her entire life to do the right thing, to make sure her son became a person who did the right thing. Bruce had to let John go, not give into his own selfishness.
It wasn't like they'd never see each other again, especially with the Neighborhood Watch buoyed by taking down terrorists. Batman would no doubt be drawn to All's Well for investigations, and of course he'd need to interview the Watch's leader. He could imagine John awkwardly playing professional, taking care to avoid referring to Batman's civilian persona in the midst of off-color jokes. Something would leak through, though. John would make an oblique comment that only he and Bruce understood, with a smile. Would it be oblivious? Would it be regretful? Would–

Would Spectrum have to do these interviews?

No, Batman would have a handle on himself. Bruce had learned well how to fill empty spaces with action, with affirmations that he was doing the right thing. This may have felt different, but it wasn't. It wasn't.

Chapter End Notes

Whew, we're finally reaching the end, e.g. the last chapter followed by an epilogue. Not sure if I'm posting both at once yet.

I'm hoping 15 doesn't also manage to take over three months, but... :D
"I don't think you have anything left," Lucia said.

"Excuse me?" John's head snapped up. "All I have to give is in this show. It is this show, and if you wanna cut me out now, you better—"

"I meant your dinner."

"Oh." He avoided looking into the toilet while he fumbled for the lever. At the flush, he pushed away from the bowl and thumped against the wall. "At least all those nerves are expelled, too."

Lucia stepped into the tiny bathroom and reached down to take his hands. He maneuvered his hips through the tight spot between the toilet and wall as she pulled him up.

When he was on his feet, she looked him over. "So long as you didn't get any on your costume," she said. She was all put together in her first one: a sequin-laden blue leotard accessorized with a throat ruffle, gloves, and jazz shoes, all in white.

John spread his arms so she could see his suit was spatter-free, then turned to the sink. She leaned against the doorframe and stayed quiet as he squeezed paste onto his toothbrush, probably reviewing checklists in her head.

He scrubbed his teeth and tried not to think about the sight in the bar– but the sight in the mirror was what all those people were there for. Other Circus performances had middling crowds at best, made up of their small dedicated fanbase and curious one-timers. That was what John had expected when he peeked out the stairwell door, because Lucia had to be overestimating what a draw he'd be.

Instead he saw a house so packed that people clustered outside, with a surprising number of faces he didn't recognize at all. Maybe the terrorist take-down really had generated that much excitement, or maybe people were still just attracted to the freak element. In any case, the room was largely SRO. He'd caught a glimpse of Rosaline serving drinks, completely swamped, but looking thrilled by all the incoming revenue.

From all those people, the audience, who came to stare at John, to listen to him…

It didn't make any sense. He should be feeling nothing but confidence. His entourage just beat the
crud out of a bunch of Dent wannabes. The mob boss he'd antagonized was scheduled for burial. He could handle a nonlethal stage show, in short bursts throughout the night, each sequence its own test of if he'd actually learned anything about performance art over the past six months...

"You're going to be great," Lucia said evenly.

John blinked. He'd stopped in the middle of brushing. Foam threatened to drip out of his mouth.

"Even Ro laughed in rehearsal."

He spat into the sink and straightened back up. "Right, I know," he said to his confident reflection.

"On the other hand," she said thoughtfully as she reached out of view, "we can always set off a smoke detector and run."

His shoulders hitched in a weak laugh. "Nuh uh. We took out all the batteries for Lian's fireball."

Not that Ro knew that.

"Ah, right." Lucia handed over his gloves and watched him pull them on. "Just focus on Bruce. Ignore everyone else until you get into the swing."

John fiddled with his shirt cuffs.

After a beat, she asked stiltedly, "Is he not coming?"

"It's not like Carter is," he shot back.

"Of course she is."

"Oh. Still." He shrugged. "The show's not for an audience of one."

Lucia spun around and made a beeline for her phone, on the bed next to his hat.

"Unfuckingbelievable! I'm gonna tell that motherfu–"

John scrambled after her and grabbed her shoulder. "It's fine! I told him not to come."

She wrinkled her brow. "You... Are you sure? We could text him now--"

"It's too late." By this time of night, Batman had to be on the rooftops where he belonged-- not that John was reconsidering for the hundredth time. "It's fine."

Lucia frowned harder, sorting through questions behind her eyes. A little near-death experience just had to make her feel like she should give Bruce a fairer shake.

Before she could ask anything else, the room door burst open, and Adelina hopped in with a big smile. Her costume matched her sister's, except she'd added the Watch's black mark over her left eye.

"Addy's here!" John exclaimed, throwing his arms open. "It must be time to stop talking and go."

She held up a finger, then gestured grandly at the doorway, stepping aside. Frank and Willy poked their heads into frame.

John gasped and zipped up to them as they entered. "Guys! You're here!"

They were both smiling and all dressed up—well, compared to their usual attire. Frank wore a neat
white polo with multi-colored polka dots. Willy wore a pressed black bowling shirt with playing card suit symbols down the side in white. His hand was hidden behind his back.

Frank patted John's shoulder. "What did I tell you?" he said to Willy. "Look how this guy cleans up."

"Aw, stop it," John said, looking away sheepishly. He glanced back. "I mean, unless you have more to say."

"You pulled off a one-eighty!" Willy said. "Frank told me all about the job and everything. Really inspirin'!" He thrust his hand forward, revealing a small bouquet of gardenias wrapped in purple craft paper.

John gasped again and grabbed the flowers. He inhaled the scent and fluttered his eyelashes. "Why William, are we courting?"

Willy laughed. "My sister suggested 'em. I wanted to wish ya luck."

"Your sister?" A lightbulb lit. "Is that where you've been? The farm?"

"Ah, well, I had to get away." Willy looked down, hands in his pants pockets. "Told Frank nobody needed to know…"

Frank's expression confirmed it. Willy had taken a tumble off the wagon.

"Different environment helped," Willy continued. "Always does. Might end up staying there, but I wanted to check on ya after what happened."

"Such a secret softy!" John cooed. The spaces between the gardenias were filled with icy blue delphiniums, and he nicked off a stem and tucked it into Willy's breast pocket. "Take this for your own luck."

Willy's face turned pink. "Aw, jeez."

"What'd Wayne get you?" Frank asked, looking around. "Some kind of…" He raised an eyebrow at something hissing quietly over John's shoulder.

John turned and caught Lucia making sharp cutting motions across her throat. She quickly stuck her hands behind her back.

He turned back with a grin. "Hey, you fellas better get downstairs. It's almost showtime!"

"Yeah, sure," Frank replied. He exchanged a look with Willy.

Willy scratched his head. "Yeah, break a leg."

"Not before my big number!" John said, shooing them out. "It's near the end. I wrote it myself, so you better stick around!"

The two men nodded as they left, and Adelina followed after them. She walked backwards so she could give John two thumbs up until she disappeared into the hallway.

"I guess we're ready," John said, then remembered the bouquet in his hand. "Uh…"

"Here." Lucia grabbed a mason jar that once held an artisanal smoothie from the top of the microwave. She rinsed it out in the bathroom sink. "Sure there's nothing you want to get off your
chest before we go out?" she asked, side-eyeing him.

He scoffed. "My chest is weight-free!" he declared as he took back the jar, now half-filled. "I'm breathing so easy, it's almost a shame. Doc Adams is going to have a real snoozer next session." He stuck the flowers into the improvised vase and centered them on the microwave.

Lucia surveyed his work indifferently. "She'd probably be interested in how you analogized the woman I'm dating to Bruce."

"It's a negative analogy!" John grabbed the top hat from the bed and yanked it on. "Carter's coming, and Bruce isn't. You two ladies are romantic, and we fellas aren't."

"Not at all," Lucia said dryly. "No one's noticed that when you two get together, your eyes light up like you just twisted the bulbs in."

"Well, that's just… The wattages are still incompatible, and I'm the closest person here to an electrician, so, you know, I can tell you--"

"Let's spare ourselves tortured metaphors," Lucia said, plucking off the hat. She fixed his hair before replacing the hat neatly. "It's your life. You have your reasons."

"That's right. I don't need a mother hen."

"Is that another thing Dr. Leland said?"

"Yeah, kinda. She said, 'John, the key to self-actuali…'" He folded his arms and glared. "Ha, ha."

Lucia snickered and retrieved a lipstick tube from the mess on the dresser. "Everybody needs momming sometimes." She held his chin still and touched up his lips. "Good?"

The fridge now shared its corner with a standing mirror from a consignment shop, and he walked over. He checked all the angles of his face, then all the angles of his suit. Nothing looked out of place, to his surprise. Compared to his daydreams, the only thing missing was a preternatural glow.

Maybe the unexpected crowd had walked out of those same daydreams. He hoped they'd be as enthusiastic– but no, he shouldn't hope. It was his job to give them something to be enthusiastic about, to throw himself into the show, just like the performers he'd gone to see.

"Now or never," he said.

Each stair down jostled the queasiness and excitement stirring in his gut. The Sideshow cast had collected at the bottom of the staircase, filling the hallway almost to the side street door, and they quieted down as their manager and emcee appeared.

Standing a few steps up, Lucia asked everyone to join hands. John grabbed her left, sat by her feet, and reached over the side of the stairs for whoever was there. That turned out to be Fredelle, looking almost swanlike in her tutu, if not for the lime-and-silver striped palette. Once the messy circuit was complete, Lucia thanked everyone for their hard work. She said that while the turnout was bigger than they'd planned for, no one should let it jangle their nerves. She trusted everyone to do their best work, and they should trust themselves.

As he scanned everyone's excited faces, John suppressed the laughter that bubbled in his chest. It was so strange to feel on the same wavelength as multiple other people. Usually he just felt that with...
"And don't forget," Lucia finished, "if you're not having fun, what are we even doing here?"

Right, he couldn't revolve his life around Bruce, or anyone else. He knew how that turned out. John was here because the music got his blood pumping and the words released the electricity in his chest and when a whole crowd witnessed it at once, what could be more affirming of your existence?

(In Arkham, attempts to exist had to be carefully managed. Don't exist too much. Be grateful when someone cares to notice. Learn your lesson when the wrong person notices.)

Everyone lifted their arms with a little cheer, then let go. People by the door cleared the way for John, and Lucia followed him down the stairs. He stood at the bottom and took a breath. She squeezed his shoulder as they heard the band start up.

He heard the fourth-measure cue and swept out into the bar with his practiced greeting. While he couldn't see the whole room, he certainly felt its attention and grinned wider. He proceeded to the stage, doing some loud crowd work along the way.

"One side, one side… What style this guy has! No, really, I've already forgotten him. Did you decide on all those piercings or did you trip into a workbench? Excuuuuse me– ooh, what lip color is that? Really. I'm seri– Eh, we'll talk later. Yeesh, that shirt is louder than my hallucinations, but I bet it was cheaper. Oh, hey, of the few people who can pull off that haircut, maybe one of them will help you."

And he heard it: laughter. His brain buzzed, loud enough to subdue the thought that any of the shadowed faces could be Bruce.

Catwoman stood between two dumpsters, watching a herd of cats tear apart the parchment-wrapped roasted fish she'd tossed onto the ground. A few stragglers rubbed themselves along her ankles.

Perched on a fire escape overlooking the alley, Batman said, "I feel honored to get another goodbye."

She looked up, not at all startled. She'd been expecting him after their evening texts. Her attention quickly returned to the cats. A few raised their hackles when the vigilante dropped down beside her, but they didn't stray far from their meal.

"Seemed rude to ghost after I had such a good time," she said.

"Next time you're in town, I'm sure Gotham will have more thrills."

"For your sake, I hope not."

"What are you on to next?"

"I was thinking of expanding other interests. One of the environmental groups Ivy's involved with, they're coordinating with an animal rights group in South America to stop cattle ranchers from clearing more rainforest."

"Sounds like a good cause." He paused. "Crane is finally lucid."

"And you were concerned he wouldn't recover."
"Technically, the pruritic rash that cropped up this morning still has to resolve."

She smirked. "He have anything to say?"

"Just that he wanted his lawyer. It doesn't look good that he allegedly attacked someone while trying to escape, but the patient abuse charges are much worse, so he's not willing to talk." Batman shot Catwoman a pointed look. "Or he may have a desire to handle Dr. Isley personally."

Catwoman didn't blink. "She's aware of the possibility. She has her own way of handling things."

"I'll be watching."

"For her safety and his, hm?"

Her tone wasn't as mocking as he expected. After a beat of silence, he supposed it was the conversation's end.

Then Selina said, "Surprised you agreed to East End. I thought you might say to meet at All's Well."

The remark held a lot of implicit questions. Bruce didn't want to answer any of them. "No."

"Hm." She turned to him fully. "I like being your friend," she said, "and as your friend, I hope you know that you… you deserve to be cared about."

"I… That's kind of you to say."

His own uneasiness seemed to settle hers. She smirked and patted his cheek. "Look how far I've come."

"Thank you again, for everything."

She shrugged and took a step back toward the fire escape. "See you later, hero."

He nodded. "Until then, anti-hero."

She raised her eyebrows, still smirking. "Time will tell."

With three cracks of her whip, Catwoman jumped from platform to platform on the fire escape, boots clanging on the metal. On the highest level, she used the ladder to climb onto the roof, then vanished from view.

Batman glanced at the feasting cats before checking the feeds. He'd already met with Gordon to help fill out the Lock-Up case. Bolton and most of his lackeys were under lock and key at Blackgate. The few militia members who'd avoided custody had seemingly fled the state, and their families and associates provided no actionable information.

It looked like the night would finish up with a quiet patrol. The scanners weren't reporting anything the police couldn't handle, and Spectrum's check-ins from her route were unremarkable. Batman considered lurking around this neighborhood or the Narrows. Maybe some would-be purse snatchers needed a jolt of mortal fear.

"Ohhh, what if you said, 'Stopping crime is my bag!' John had suggested once. "'And you can't have it!' Or would it be that they could… We can workshop it."

Bruce didn't go for the workshopping, but when he'd confronted muggers afterward, the line
inevitably popped into his mind and threatened to crack his menacing demeanor.

If he did go to the Narrows tonight, it wouldn't hurt to detour to the Village and–

No. He wouldn't swing by the bar, or over it. He wouldn't check the internet for commentary on how the show was going. He would fulfill his duty, not spend the night pining.

A ringing drew his eyes back to his gauntlet. He frowned. Calls from Alfred through the batcomputer usually had to be redirected from Bruce's personal phone, so how…?

"What's wrong?" he answered.

"Oh my," Alfred said, "I'd forgotten how gruff that voice masking is."

"Alfred."

"Nothing is wrong. I wasn't sure you'd be watching your private lines, so I asked Tiffany to connect me directly."

That was preferable to an emergency, but… "What do you need?"

"To speak with you, but I'd much prefer if you could get somewhere private and use your normal voice."

"Hold on."

A sequence of grapples later, Bruce was up on the roof of the old library. A stone peak jutted over the still-working clock that watched over the streets, and he slid down one side. He came to a stop behind a roaring, winged lion that clawed at the air, and sat on the edge of the statue's rectangular base.

He turned off his modulator. "Go ahead."

"I know," Alfred began, "that you wanted me to drop the subject…"

The cowl protected the back of Bruce's head when it fell against the lion's hindlimb. "You're kidding me."

"I wouldn't press the matter, but I finished your mother's journal, and a passage struck me."

"I've read the journal," Bruce replied tightly.

"Through?"

"You watched me."

"You flipped through the end in something of a stunned stupor, as I recall."

"And? I'm on patrol. I don't have time–"

"Humor an old man. The last entry."

"Al–"

"Please."

With a quiet exhale, Bruce tapped into the batcomputer and found the scans. The images would be
clearer back at base, but the resolution on the gauntlet was clear enough, even if Alfred's objective wasn't.

I haven't changed my mind. I feel more sure of myself with each incriminating document I copy.

It's a betrayal, but Thomas betrayed the family long ago. Conspiring with corrupt officials and the mob wasn't part of any of the plans he made with me. I have as much a right to derail the course of our lives as he does. No matter what, Thomas's "arrangements" will end up destroying our family. I'm just changing how.

I never thought I could hate him. And I never thought I could love him while hating him. He still ruffles Bruce's hair and reads with him at bedtime. He still surprises me with flowers and never misses a kiss good night. The man who volunteered with me at shelters is now the man who advises me on how the Foundation can do the most good.

Even while his deeds destroy lives.

Does he think he can balance the scales, that in the end the calculations in his moral ledger will edge into black and just barely save his soul? I can't ask. The dealings with Hill and Falcone have become the one subject he condescends on. "Don't worry. It's fine. I'll handle it."

When he's in prison, when there's no more pressure to defend all of this, I'll ask. Was it worth it? Do you see how you didn't protect us at all? Can you admit that you enjoyed the power?

I don't know how many people can truly undergo that kind of reckoning, but I'll give him that second chance. I'll visit him as long as he lets me drag him through his sins.

"In good times and in bad" is how the vows go. Of course, my marriage is suffering through something atypical, more dire than a lost job or infidelity, but still. While a vow may turn out to be empty rhetoric for some, I meant mine to the end.

I have to believe Thomas did too, and that he'll prove it. Maybe he won't, and I'll be left to patch my heart and Bruce's. Until then, I can't write off the good I've seen in him. If I don't believe in hope, I can't believe in anything.

I contacted the Monarch Theater to arrange one last showing of Zorro, one last family memory for Thomas to think on when he decides what matters, when he decides if, one day, however sparse, there can be more good times.

I know this won't be easy on Bruce, no matter what happens. He understands right and wrong, but principles won't fill a paternal void, and I'll be the one to blame.

But the tears will be worth it all, if in the end, at his core, he understands that I embraced my convictions wholeheartedly. I want my child to believe in goodness.

Bruce felt a creeping foolishness that he didn't quite understand, as if his mother was present and chiding him. But it was Alfred who was there, just waiting, and Bruce suddenly wished his friend would say anything at all just so he could coarsely react, push the self-consciousness away.

Instead, controlled, Bruce closed the gauntlet display. "This isn't even the same situation."

"The philosophical considerations appear relevant."
"I don't know what you expect me to do."

Alfred let out a short laugh. "My expectations have long been irrelevant. This is about your insistence that suffering is a virtue."

"No, this is about doing the right thing for John."

"Yes, after the immeasurable support you've volunteered over the past year or two, dropping out of his life will somehow accomplish something more."

"You can accuse me of a martyr complex, but trying to be a savior is no better. John shouldn't be dependent on me. He isn't dependent on me."

"Then why break from him? I would hope a brush with death would spur someone to pull their loved ones closer. Is the experience so rote for you that it no longer has an impact?"

"That's what this is about," Bruce said accusingly. "You still want me to give up the mission."

"Of course I do!" Alfred exclaimed. His sharp tone turned dejected. "My leaving wasn't the shock to the system I hoped it would be. You're too stubborn and valorous. All I accomplished was leaving you alone."

"Tiffany's here."

"On the same bloody crusade, and come now. She's not the one you've been taking on trips to the aquarium and buying overpriced brunch and promising to adopt wild mongrels for."

"That story wasn't..." Bruce tried and failed to rub the bridge of his nose through the cowl. "What does it matter? John put a stop to everything."

"And you let him. You know he cares for you, you know you've changed your influence on him, and you're giving up the relationship with no argument."

"Why do you care so much?" Bruce snapped. He ground his fist into the stone beneath him. "You called him manipulative and dangerous. You said he embodied the darkest parts of me."

"Perhaps you can forgive the histrionics, considering your kidney had nearly been speared like a kebab in the midst of a catastrophe."

"That centered on John," Bruce replied with a derisive edge, "but you're saying now you think he's an angel."

"Now," Alfred said, voice rising again, "he's done more than I could! Even if it's only to a degree. The Wayne Foundation is supporting more social programs than it did when your mother was still with us. Arkham Asylum could be on its way to becoming a reputable institution. And the paparazzi has captured photographs of you out and about in daylight for mere recreation, with a smile I haven't seen since your schoolboy crushes."

Bruce was struck silent. He hadn't expected Alfred to give John that much credit.

"In his own way, John grounded you," the older man continued more calmly, "Disengaging like this, I... I just don't see what good comes of it."

Bruce shook his head. "I'm... I won't suddenly forget what I've learned just because he's not around."
"No, not suddenly. Gradually. People often do, and you are still a mortal man, I'll remind you. A man who often takes control of more than he can handle. Anyone in that position can easily reverse course or let things go if they lose sight of their principles, especially if they are alone. Alone, we can easily become embittered and spiritless. That is why your mother wanted to be there for your father, and why she wouldn't want you to cut yourself off from someone so important to you."

Bruce leaned forward, arms across his knees, cape falling over his shoulders. He pictured himself from the outside: the fearsome specter of Gotham, not a shadow entrapping the city's malefactors, but a disconsolate man in the refuge of a blanket.

"I can't just ignore John's choices," he said quietly.

"If that's your concern," Alfred said with resurging warmth, "a simple text will do no such thing."

"Right. It's just a coincidence that you needed to talk about this on the night of his show."

"Well, I wouldn't want you or Mr. Doe to miss an opportunity for dramatics." Alfred's smirk was audible. "Perhaps he would be greatly upset by the appearance of the man he so admires on a pivotal night in his life, but who can say?" He muffled a yawn. "Certainly not a drowsy busybody. I believe I'll leave you to your decision."

"Alright." Bruce paused. "Al, you know that you're important to me, too, right? Despite everything."

"Of course, my boy." A smile came through Alfred's voice now. "And I'll be seeing you soon enough."

"Right. Good." Bruce sat upright. "I'll talk to you again soon."

"Find some peace tonight."

The connection cut. Bruce was left with the cold stone and the neighborhood's quiet ambience. When he focused, he could hear the resilient gears of the library clock.

He opened the line to Spectrum. "Update?"

"I've read there are almost three hundred suspension cables holding up the Templeton Bridge," she replied, "but I haven't cared enough to keep count for more than seventy-three. You know how it can get quiet after a big bust. This is, like, comatose."

"I'm seeing the same," Batman said. He mulled over his next words. "I'm considering heading back—"

"Bruce." Tiffany's voice was unimpressed.

He thought back to their conversation in the cave the night before. "Plans changed."

"I had a feeling. You better move it if you wanna catch the end of the show. I'll let you know if there's a surprise heist or whatever."

"Right. Thanks." Changing at the penthouse would be fastest.

The lack of street parking near All's Well was no surprise on a weekend. Luckily Bruce didn't have to park much further than usual. He came up on a sedan just as it pulled out of a corner spot two blocks south.
He realized just how lucky that was as he approached the bar. It was about midnight, so Sideshow must have been more than halfway through, and the crowd outside still filled up the sidewalks along the main road and down the side street. Cars slowed as they passed to avoid people at the curb. The front door opened now and then, allowing the muffled ragtime music to burst into full volume.

Bruce spotted the neighborhood’s usual suspects—unusual piercings, hair done up or shaved in elaborate styles, outfits assembled with conscious carelessness—but others had clearly traveled further, whether from uptown or the suburbs. A huddled group of questionable drinking age laughed together, a little too excited to be there and constantly adjusting their low-cut tops and fitted skirts. A woman in a tight designer dress strutted by in stilettos with a man in skinny pants and an overpriced t-shirt. A trio of men in loose-fitting clothes and baseball caps gathered under a street light. The son of a Wayne Enterprises board member tried to hide behind his friends when Bruce made a point of obliviously waving at him.

Bruce was a little embarrassed himself at his relief that he wouldn't stand out in this crowd. Dressing fashionably when a suit was not required had been a chore since Alfred left. There always seemed to be a danger of making some kind of faux pas even though he tried to keep it simple. Tonight he'd gone with slim-fit gray pants and snug, untucked oxford, with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows and top couple buttons undone. The shirt was one of the few patterned ones he owned, though John would call it "technically" a pattern: black cotton spotted with tiny, white four-pointed stars.

But John would still like it. He'd said that Bruce looked good in black—not that Bruce should be worrying about his clothes. He didn't know for sure if John would even be happy to see him.

When he reached the intersection, he saw that people also mingled on the sidewalk opposite All's Well, and wherever there were people, there were glittering figures: costumed Circus members carrying upturned top hats. They weaved their way around, pausing to ask for contributions. He recognized one of the shorter members just outside the bar and crossed the street.

As he neared, he heard Adelina ask, "Support the Gotham Mental Health Alliance?" She smiled as a couple dug into their pockets and dropped in a few dollars.

Bruce stopped at her side. "I'll donate, but I don't think you should carry that much around," he joked.

Her head snapped toward him, her eyes wide not with surprise but urgency. She pushed her hat at a passing Circus member, giving Bruce a second to note her eye makeup, then grabbed his arm and dragged him into the crowd.

"I don't think you can fit more people in there," he protested.

She looked back to roll her eyes as she maneuvered just up to the front door. A cluster of people crowded there with beer bottles, and she swatted their arms. After a glance, they made room for her and Bruce to pass into the packed bar.

Inside, the air conditioning did little to counteract all the warm bodies merging together in the low lighting. Everything was more distinguishable at the back of the room, in the reach of the stage's bright light.

There a young man—Jeffrey Padden—swayed languidly on his rola bola in time with the band. The four musicians—keyboard, drums, saxophone, guitar—were crowded against the lefthand wall and nearly blended in with the patrons. By this point in his act, Jeffrey had added a set of risers to the
board, and his head was inches below the Sideshow sign. Three bottles circled through his hands, and he encouraged a patron to toss in a fourth.

Everyone laughed when Jeffrey goaded, "Come on! On the street, people are excited to throw things at my head!"

Adelina and Bruce squirmed their way past the patron-packed counter, behind which Rosaline and a costumed helper speedily filled drink orders. At the corner closest to the stage and just feet from the band, Adelina touched the shoulder of a man sitting on a stool. It was Frank, who turned with a smile. On his left, Willy had only a scowl.

"Jeez, Wayne," Willy growled over the music. The inexplicable flowers sticking out of his shirt pocket didn't lighten his disposition. "This late? No wonder he was aggravated."

"Eh, he's here," Frank replied, getting up.

"Oh, no," Bruce insisted, "I can stand."

Willy pushed Frank back into his seat and slid off his stool, gesturing for Bruce to take that instead.

"Gotta be on my way anyhow," Willy said. He leaned toward Frank. "Tell John I'm sorry I couldn't stay for his big number. Place is starting to get to me."

Frank nodded. "Hey, you keep in touch, yeah?" He absently patted Bruce's shoulder once Adelina successfully pushed him into the free seat.

"It was, uh, good to see you," Bruce fumbled.

Willy harrumphed and squeezed into the crowd, which started clapping. Jeffrey finally had four bottles flipping through his hands. Adelina clapped enthusiastically over her head before disappearing as well.

Bruce cupped a hand around his mouth to be better heard over the music. "Where's John?" he asked Frank.

"Disappears between acts," Frank replied. He gestured to Jeffrey, who wobbled on one leg, and let out a jovial laugh. "Been a heckuva show!"

It seemed so, given the high energy. All the tables were full and so was most of the space in between. Across the room, one of the bathroom doors opened by degrees as the occupant pushed for the minimal space to escape. Sitting on the stools to Bruce's left, a man and woman each balanced their partner on their lap, and beside them was just enough room along the wall to squeeze behind the counter. Above the line of people vying for a bartender's attention, over by the far front window, a person with orange hair tried to balance on a friend's shoulders for a better view of the stage, laughing when their head nearly popped through the drop ceiling. Stageside, people were mostly seated, but they squeezed in tight around clusters of drinks. At one of the tables, a twenty-something woman sported another top hat, this one a bold pink. One of her friends played at swiping it from her head, and she held it in place with both hands, letting out a little shriek.

Despite having barely enough room to breathe, the band looked happy as they ended the act with a flourish. Jeffrey caught two bottle necks in each hand and bowed, still balancing on one leg. Bruce joined in the applause, and Frank stuck two fingers in his mouth and let loose a whistle.

Regardless of the Circus's decent reputation, Bruce had been worried that Sideshow would end up
a disaster and leave John brokenhearted. With this reception, John had to be thrilled.

"No no no no no!" trilled a voice from the front of the house.

Bruce turned with alarm. A blonde pushed her way through the crowd. Her bob and bangs cut neatly around her face, and she wore a blazer. A protester?

Then she got closer to the light and he recognized her face: Lucia, wearing a wig and a blue skirt suit. She stomped onto the stage in black heels, still chiding Jeffrey in a shrill manner that assured she was part of a bit, though so far the audience was murmuring more than laughing. She clutched the pearl necklace around her throat with one hand and the purse strap over her shoulder with the other.

"What has society come to?" she demanded of the juggler and the audience. "Cheering for this—this horrible farce!"

"A tour de force, you say?"

Bruce barely had time to swivel his head before John swooped out from behind the counter. He must have been back in the kitchen or office, and with all the people around, he missed Bruce entirely. He moved through the crowd easily as they cleared a path to the stage.

"That is absolutely not what I said!" Lucia exclaimed.

Jeffrey tucked the rola bola under his arm and slunk from the scene, and John patted his shoulder as they passed each other. A few costumed characters joined the crowd: leaning against the walls, sidling up behind tables, and, in one bold move, asking for a seat in someone's lap. Chuck was the most obtrusive even though he didn't travel far; he'd come out behind John, and his striped bulk waited against the wall just beside the bar.

"Many apologies," John said to Lucia as he joined her on stage. He faced the crowd with wide open arms. "The noise has dulled my hearing a bit."

In response, the whooping started up again.

All of John's work on the suit paid off. The fuschia pants and jacket fit his trim shape perfectly, with not an odd fold or pucker to be seen. In polished brown-and-white spectators, he turned this way and that to survey the room, his long coattails swaying playfully behind him. He'd piled on more color with a waistcoat striped in white and melon green over a periwinkle shirt, plus a bowtie and gloves in an eggplant hue. Like at the gala, his hair was slicked back, but for this event the lipstick framing his grin was brick red.

The woman wearing the top hat lifted her glass and blew him a kiss. John blew one back, popping one leg and showing a flash of a green sock. The hat was his, Bruce finally understood. The bar's ebullience wasn't just from the music or impressive performers, but from a real rapport John had formed with the audience. Bruce had never seen his offbeat charm win a single person over this quickly, much less hold sway over an entire room.

But then John had never looked this poised or confident. He ate up the attention, standing tall with a grin that was as delighted as it was boastful, and who could fault him? The room was eager in their adulation, and Bruce was struck with the thought, *He looks gorgeous.*

"What a peacock, yeah?" Frank chuckled.

Bruce jerked a little, coming back to himself. "Yeah," he replied as his face heated up.
And then John shifted his gaze to their corner, and he went still, expression blank. The blood in Bruce's face receded. His gut had steered him wrong. John had told him--

John smiled, eyes unmistakably bright.

"This is just shameful!" Lucia scolded, shaking her finger to quiet the room.

John turned to her, and the smile broadened into that showman's grin. "And who might you be?"

"I am Debra Lilywhite, citizen liaison to the City Council!" she declared.

"John Doe!" he greeted, extending his hand.

She whipped it away with her bag. "I know," she sneered. The bar started to boo, and she threw out her arms with frustration, shoulders up. "The public servants in this city give and give, and who gets the spotlight?"

"Batman?" John said, pointing upward. "On the roof--"

"I'm talking about you degenerates!" Lucia yelled over the laughter. "People shouldn't get the idea that there are upstanding citizens here."

"Where are they then?"

She pressed a hand to her heart and replied, "Of course I'd never correlate character with location!"

He looked skeptical. "Or color, sexuality, religion, looks, vocation…"

Bruce's brain kept trying to analyze John's smile, so it took those couple lines to register that the keyboard had started a quiet rhythm.

Lucia's wagging finger now aimed at John's face. "But those given authority deserve our commendation!"

John side-stepped the gesture with a spin and stopped behind her. "As they dodge consequences but hold onto the narration," he said, sweeping out his arm as if speechifying.

Turning, Lucia stomped her foot to gain his attention. The beat slowed and the bass guitar joined in. She put a hand on her hip and turned up her nose.

"Come on, stop your whining!
We know what's best for you!
Yeah, so there may have been
A small mistake or two.
Compared to yours, it's clear why
You're in the system's sights."

The stage's bright lights went out with the exception of one, which captured John in its glare.

"Sit down and accept it:
We've got you dead to rights!"

"Who's running this show?" John grumbled, perplexed, as the full band swung into a fast-paced tune.
A second light hit "Debra" as two dancers in silver-and-green tutus appeared: Anica to the right behind John and Fredelle joining Lucia on the left. Toes pointed out and arms behind their backs, they looked on like earnest students.

Lucia explained the situation very patiently to her partner.

"When addicts are pulled off the streets,  
Police should be rewarded."

John snorted to Anica.

"I think they are, considering  
The stashes not recorded."

Lucia ignored him and declared:

"Sex workers and their clientele  
Humiliate our city."

Fredelle covered her mouth and, surreptitiously, her cleavage. John winked and pulled Anica close by the waist, their cheeks side by side.

"The cops give the girls a spanking  
To register their pity."

Before John's hovering hand came down, Anica swatted his ass. With a yelp, he shooed her off, but hissed, "Not now!"

Lucia turned with a smug look.

"Well, when you're stuck in dire straits,  
Any guesses who you'll call?"

John simply shrugged.

"Beats me! Last time, the officers  
Smashed my phone against the wall."

"Your attitude, I imagine,  
Helped you give them plenty cause."

"I wonder if it's this easy  
To train seals to give applause…"

As John rubbed his chin in contemplation, the music slowed again, and Lucia threw up her hands.

"Oh lord, these sob stories  
Are just beyond belief.  
You'd file a report  
If there was that much grief."

Anica face-palmed, and Fredelle shook her head and crossed her arms. John guffawed and replied,

"The forms were rejected"
At the reporting sites.
Lady, it's like you said,
We're flagged as dead to rights!"

The last few words rang in stereo, boosted by the performers scattered in the crowd and some discerning spectators.

Unimpressed, Lucia flew back into her arguments, turning from John's snarky rejoinders.

"The Council could never stomach
Acts of bias, greed, and hate."

"With their appetites reserved for
The lush bribes that fill their plate."

"In pushing LGBT rights,
Members took on vital roles!"

"After one and his dashing aide
Closely analyzed their polls."

The audience howled at the reference, not only to happily jeer a council hypocrite who'd once tried to legislate their existence, but because the performers both on stage and off broke into lewd gestures as the saxophone went solo with ludicrous bedroom music.

Fredelle made no effort to hide a nearly frantic jerk-off motion from Lucia, while Anica spooned up behind John, both of them practically wailing as they ground together in exaggerated waves. Bruce half-covered his face as he laughed. John wasn't usually so bold about sexual humor.

Mortified, Lucia shouted at the band. "Excuse me! Can we move along?"

The saxophonist stopped, and so did the crude ecstasy. John nudged Anica off him and shrugged, and everyone fixed their clothes as the previous tune started up again. Lucia brought up a duller topic.

"Well, they lured in big businesses
To bring jobs for residents."

John remained triumphant.

"Of the suburbs! While no tax breaks
Help the small shops with their rents."

"Community's not your concern;
What's this show say to our lambs?"

"Ah, yes, we tore down the playgrounds
And dismantled arts programs."

She strode up to him, head held high.

"Go on, exaggerate
And play the victim card."
John chortled in her face.

"We are well past hoping
Our troubles haunt your nights.
The best offense is living well
When you are dead to rights!"

The whole crowd joined the refrain this time, and all the stage lights flared back to life as the band transitioned into a lively swing-style music break. John strode out of the way as Fredelle pushed past Lucia to meet Anica center stage, and they joined hands in a spirited jitterbug. (The ballet outfits were from an earlier bit, Bruce assumed.) After a couple measures, they spun apart into a synchronized routine, with smooth yet sharp movements of their arms and legs. The performers around the room cheered them on, popping their hips and bobbing their heads to the beat, while on stage left, John got the audience clapping. Lucia had retreated to the opposite side, where she stood stock-still, scowling her darnedest.

Fredelle and Anica linked arms for another spin, and this time when they separated, John jumped between them. The trio launched into the Charleston, still perfectly in synch as the audience kept up the beat. Frank let out another piercing whistle.

Seeing John dance briefly on a whim did not prepare Bruce for a full routine. True, the emcee often glanced at the women's feet, and the subsequent steps and patterns didn't get overly complicated, but John kept in time and matched his partners' energy and was obviously having the time of his life.

He could have started working toward something like this years ago, when he first left Arkham, if only he'd had real guidance—real friends—and not been surrounded by people manipulating him for their own goals, Bruce included. The lost time was something to mourn, but looking back on the past was always easier in the dark, and John's exhilaration was too bright, the bar too loud and gleeful.

Lucia had unknowingly begun tapping her foot to the music, and John broke formation to grab her hands and pull her into a dance. For a moment she went along, and then— with a warble from the saxophone—she came to her senses and jerked free. Stalking back to center stage, she shooed the dancers and waved off the lights, bringing them back to two.

Annoyed, John followed close behind, but when Lucia turned to resume her challenge, he pulled up a smile.

"Who claims suffering then dances?"

"People who don't miss their chances."

"Singing won't help their life choices."

"Silence won't strengthen their voices."

"One can't solve issues he ignores."

"Or thrive when life is endless chores."
"Such models of self expression!"

"We're not ones for self repression!"

On that line, John turned away from her and left the stage. As the crowd made way again, Bruce realized that during the ruckus, Chuck had moved. He crouched at the corner of the counter, back sloped, and John simply strode up his spine, past Frank's shoulder, and onto the bar amidst the glasses.

Rosaline scrambled to clear the space around his feet, but John was unbothered. Smile bigger than ever, he addressed the room.

"Because while you line up caskets
For those struck down dead to rights,
My name's not on a tombstone yet;
It's blazing up in lights!"

The entire bar went dark, with the exception of the neon ads and a single ceiling light above John. He spun with the music tag, extending his arms as his foot came down with the final beat. "Debra" let out an indignant squawk, just before the room erupted into cheers.

Bruce clapped along and watched the light play on John's cheekbones with each overly humble bow.

"Did they rewire my lights?" asked Rosaline, just audible in the din, a moment before the lighting returned to normal. As the applause kept on, Chuck reached up to help John down, but John's expectant stare had settled on Bruce.

Well, it was only polite, having been so late. Bruce got up and moved his stool out before offering his hand. John took it, snootily lifting his nose and stepping onto the seat, then hopping to the floor.

He let go of Bruce to raise his arms, and the cacophony died down.

"Some have said," John orated, "that our debut so soon after catastrophe was irresponsible." He waved off the boos. "I know, I know. I mean, would Bruce Wayne be here supporting irresponsibility?"

The response was a mixture of laughter and cheers. Bruce shrugged and smiled affably.

"What's your response to such accusations, Brucie?"

John was having fun putting him on the spot, but Bruce knew just the right thing to say: "Last call is on me."

"Hey now!" John shouted over the explosion of cheers. "You heard the man! Put in your orders and wind down with the twisted stylings of Bendy Wendy!"

A lithe young woman appeared on stage with a metal chair as the band struck up another song. John quickly shook Frank's hand and laughed something into his ear. Then as everyone pushed toward the bar, he pulled Bruce out of the way, behind the counter and into the kitchen.

Food service was long over; only the fluorescent light above the doorway was left on. Through another opening on the right, Rosaline's office was dark. Under the light, John turned Bruce around so they could watch the contortionist.
She stepped on one arm of the chair, gripped the other arm with her hands, and leaned forward, at first bringing her torso parallel to the seat and extending her legs behind her. Then with a key change, she gracefully arced her legs up and over her back, curving her spine, until her knees were on either side of her head.

Pressed to Bruce's left, John clapped. "Really something, eh?" he laughed.

"Yeah," Bruce said, smiling at him.

John looked over, suddenly bashful and unsure, but he smiled back. "Ha, buddy, tonight has been just… just so much more than I expected! And you, I know I said…" He shook himself a little, shook off the matter entirely. "It's great you're here! Look at all these people!" He broke into excited giggles.

Bruce had already seen the crowd. Now he could see the silvery blue sparkle on John's eyelids.

John put his back against the doorframe. "Everyone's having such a good time– with me! I mean, sure, when Lian blew fire over their heads, you gotta flip your lid for that. That was wild. But when I'm out there, everyone wants to know what I'm going to say, and they laugh when I want them to laugh– well, mostly– and it's so…” He rubbed his neck. "Still, maybe they're being polite? Just being nice to a–"

"It's great," Bruce said. "You were great."

The way John's eyes darted away made his rouge look like a blush. "Aw, you– you don't have to…"

Bruce carefully grasped John's wrist and pulled his hand down. "Really. You're amazing."

John's eyes shot back to Bruce's face. He didn't pull his arm away. After a beat, Bruce lifted his free hand to cup John's cheek, and when he leaned in, John tilted his head. Bruce closed his eyes.

Those lips were as soft as he remembered, and the thrill when John leaned in, grasping fistfuls of Bruce's shirt, was just as bright. Bruce let go of John's wrist to hold the small of his back instead, and he stroked John's cheek with his thumb, drawing out a soft, contented sound.

Bruce felt as he did when he glided above the city or dashed across its rooftops, like he was right where he should be. Home.

Then John's fist jabbed into his gut.

The noises of the bar rushed back into Bruce's ears as he jerked into the door frame. He clutched his stomach. "Jesus, what…?"

John stared back with no trace of softness, only tension. "If we're going to fight," he ground out, "it's going to be in private."

Bruce dumbly watched him stalk away, behind the bar and past Rosaline and the other bartender. Bruce caught up as John came to the crowded counter flap and scattered the people there with wild waves of his hands. He threw up the flap and continued through the door to the apartments.

The stairwell was another backstage area, this one crowded with performers and props. Unlike John, everyone seemed relaxed, enjoying the end of a good opening night. Lucia stood in the corner, wig gone, tousling her hair back to life while her girlfriend dabbed her forehead with a tissue.
Lucia's smile turned to a frown as she watched John start up the stairs. "Uh, you still joining us for the encore?" she asked, lifting an eyebrow.

John didn't stop or respond. Bruce turned to her, mouth falling open to explain... what? He managed an apologetic look before heading up, each precarious creak denying him even the illusion of solid ground.

When Bruce closed the door to John's room, he could hear the music shimmying through the building's bones. The crowd outside was audible too, their thrum permeating the windows and the blinds.

He didn't look at John at first. He looked around the room, noting the new mirror and the jar of fresh flowers on the microwave. He recognized the stem that had been in Willy's pocket. Bruce should have brought flowers, or some kind of gift-- because what? He chided himself. This wasn't the time to worry about flowers.

The string lights had been left on, but the lamp in the corner lit the room in full, and John still looked so impeccable, standing in front of a sewing machine instead of on a stage. Not that he was in the mood to hear it, going by his crossed arms and persistent glare.

Finally, he exclaimed, "This is impossible!"

"It... I mean..." Bruce felt bewildered and awkward, his hands twitching uselessly at his sides. "It wasn't, just then?"

"It's my fault." John paced from the bed to the dresser and back. "I've said it all the long. You're messed up, and I'm just enabling you. You know what Leland said about enablers? She said--"

"How is it messed up for me to have feelings for you?"

John stopped and jabbed a finger at him. "Because you saw what I did!" His growl cracked. "You were right there! When I..."

"I was." The memories of Axis were not the type to fade: the toxic air, the sprays of blood, the lost laughter. "And I'm still here, because I know that's not all you are."

John rolled his eyes. "Killing people isn't a character flaw like not putting your cart in the corral, Bruce."

"Of course not, but--"

"It's the biggest strike against your code! You know, that big principle your batty double-life revolves around? You're not going to look at me shoving people off the mortal coil and strike it up to a misunderstanding!"

"I'm not writing you off either."

"Oh, yeah? What about Alfred?"

Bruce's brow furrowed. "What about him?"

"You let Alfred-- your father figure-- leave the city-- the country-- instead of giving up your mission! That's how important Batman is to you."

"You're not against Batman."
"Ugh!" John threw his arms down at his sides, fingers splayed. "Are you deliberately missing the point or what?"

"I know you don't think you can trust me," Bruce said. "I've messed up a lot of things, but I've watched how far you've come in such a short time, and I promise—"

"What are you even talking about?" John cut in. "How can you trust someone who might go off any second?!"

Bruce knew it seemed like he didn't trust him, but... "I meant it when I said I shouldn't have tracked your—"

"That made perfect sense," John spat. "I was upset about it, but... but the reality..." He looked at his hands. "I killed. I tried to kill you."

Bruce swallowed, finally understanding, feeling stupid. Of course, to John, this didn't come down to Bruce's behavior. "I know that."

"Ha! Doesn't sound like it!" John didn't look up. "But eventually you'll come to your senses, and you'll leave. It's too much to not know if I'll... when I'll..."

Bruce stepped close enough to gently take hold of John's shoulders. "I know how hard you've worked. You know yourself better than you did before. You know the warning signs, and so do I. You're not going to suddenly turn into a monster."

John looked up and curled his lip in disbelief. "Oh, sure, not a monster, just a murderer. Can't wait for that nuanced take in the Gazette." He grew agitated again. "And what about that, huh? The outcry when shady Bruce Wayne hooks up with the vigilante wacko? What do you think your illustrious Board is going to do?"

"What could they do? My personal relationships are none of the company's business, as my lawyers would remind them. And apparently most of Gotham already thinks we're together."

John's jaw slackened. "You saw that stuff?"

Bruce raised an eyebrow. "How could I miss it?"

"You didn't say anything."

"You didn't say anything."

"Because I thought you... but you..." John scowled. "You can't actually feel all aflutter over a deranged clown."

"You can't tell me how I feel," Bruce said sharply. "Call yourself all the names you want. I still..."

As he realized what he was about to say, his voice fell away, in that same old reflex trying to protect against impermanence, against inevitable loss. A cold rationalization pulled him even further back: yes, it was futile to avoid that pain, and that was why he was supposed to take it on now rather than later. Why did he insist on dragging this out?

The answer was clearer with John in front of him. They'd gone through some awful times, but in the end, hadn't they pulled through together? And why should those times outweigh the unexpected laughter, the welcome distractions, the candid conversations, the comforting touches, and everything else that made up some of the most crucial years in Bruce's life?
"I love you."

John's mouth dropped open again, wider this time, like he'd been slapped. He turned away.

Bruce felt his gut throb where John had hit him. "I thought you..." He watched the other man start to hunt around the room, looking under assorted piles and opening drawers. "You said in Axis, you wanted..."

"Ah!" John exclaimed, snatching something from the desk and whirling around.

His expression had closed into something dark, determined, and he stalked over to Bruce with long, pointed shears. He opened them—\textit{shik}—and pressed a blade to Bruce's throat. Bruce grabbed his wrist, backing up, and John matched each step until Bruce hit the door.

Bruce swallowed against the cold metal as John leaned in close. The streaks and spots of John's eyes never strayed into yellow or blue, and the intensity lighting up the shades of emerald threatened to burst them into shards.

"How about now?" John hissed. "Do you love this? Because this could happen. It doesn't matter how much I don't want it to. Maybe things snowball again, maybe I just forget to take some pills, I don't know, and you don't know, but I lose it. What about then?"

Bruce exhaled slowly. He allowed himself to blink, but he didn't break eye contact. "I think you're missing the point now," he said. "I understand there are risks, but you're worth them."

"Really?" John challenged with bared teeth.

The blade pinched Bruce's throat. He let go of John's wrist. "If you think it's inevitable, why wait? Go ahead and kill me."

Their gazes stayed locked through three echoing beats of Bruce's heart.

John dropped his arms to his sides and sighed. "What the heck am I supposed to do with that?" he muttered, flinging the scissors behind him. They lodged into the dresser with a thunk.

Bruce touched his neck and checked his fingers. No blood. "You could tell me how you feel," he answered.

"That's not the point," John said wearily. "I'm supposed to be responsible. I'm not supposed to hurt people."

"Nobody is," Bruce said, "but they still do. We've hurt each other more than once, but that doesn't mean we don't care. Caring about each other is what brings us back together, makes us try to do better."

"It's easy to look at you and want to be better," John said sourly.

"You've made me better," Bruce insisted. "When we first met, I still thought..." He stared down John's skepticism and swallowed back the nerves tangling in his throat. "I thought I knew what I was doing, but I wasn't engaged enough. Batman turned criminals over to the police and moved on to the next. The Wayne Foundation's plan for Arkham was to just knock it down and build a new one. The operations side was left to other people. When I got thrown in there, you saved my life, and what did I do? I got what I needed and left the asylum to be someone else's problem.

"You invited me into the Pact, and I was going to do the same thing. I could see you needed help,
that Harley's 'guidance' was only going to get you in worse trouble, but I still thought it was better to maintain distance." He couldn't help a quiet laugh. "But you made distance impossible. You could be… atypical, and I didn't know how to react, but you were also so open. I… I don't know, you just drew me in. You were more resourceful and smarter than you let on, and I shouldn't have liked your positivity, considering what we were up to, but for a few moments, I could forget everything I was juggling in my head. And I did think you were funny, even if I didn't laugh much. There was— there is so much to like about you, and I always thought that under the right circumstances, you were capable of finding your place— but you trusted me to help.

"Being trusted is supposed to feel good, but it didn't, because I wasn't trustworthy." Bruce's face and chest felt hot. This honesty was critical to pleading his case, but he still felt a sweeping need to wipe these failures from John's memory. "When you're supposed to be the 'good guy,' that kind of revelation is a slap in the face. I realized that I had all these good intentions, but I kept looking for opponents instead of people. I realized how easily I could have written you off, even after getting to know you. That's not the kind of person I want to be."

John's dubious expression had slowly relaxed as Bruce spoke, and now it was inscrutable. He simply stared, his lips pressed in a straight line.

Bruce kept going. "I am better because I know you. You're a part of me now, no matter what happens. Even if you do cause some disaster, it won't matter whether we're together or apart. It's going to hurt just as much, and I'm still going to come help you."

Finally, John reacted, letting out an amused huff. "Of course. If I iced you out, you'd just make some bat-chisel and hack your way in to play hero."

"No. One of the bat-flamethrowers in R&D would be more efficient." John's smile reflected Bruce's, small and uneasy, and Bruce asked, "Wouldn't you help me if I was in trouble?"

"No," John answered quickly, folding his arms. He looked askance. "I'd send one of my friends in my stead to sneakily help you and report back. For a guy who hides his feelings so much, you're really bad at this."

"I don't want to hide this anymore. Maybe in the end it's just selfish, but—"

"You, selfish? That's a laugh."

"You've done so well without me." Bruce gestured to John, to his suit, his makeup, his whole presentation. "You came into your own, using everything that's great about you. Tonight you were magnetic, and you looked so happy, and I just… I want to be a part of that."

John looked a mix of flattered and flustered, smiling and rocking on his heels with his hands behind his back. "Ah, yeah, tonight felt really good, the best I've felt in a while." Then he frowned. "But I didn't do it by myself. They don't call it a 'support system' because it's a Rube Goldberg machine I set up."

"Right, but it was Frank and Lucia and—"

"And you! A whole lot of the time! All those visits back at Arkham? Helping set me up out here? I couldn't be pushing you away if you weren't around, could I?"

"Right now there's literally a whole circus—"

"Aye yi yi, just shut up," John groaned, slapping his forehead. "Has your self esteem always been this compartmentalized?"
"Then if you don't think I'll drag you down," Bruce said carefully, "if you don't actually want to run me off, can we keep helping each other? Will you stay with me?"

John's shoulders slumped, and he clasped his hands in front of his chest in that old nervous gesture. He bit his bottom lip and examined the floor.

Bruce pushed off the door and enclosed John's hands in his own. "Please."

John looked up and smiled incredulously. "Are you begging me?"

Was he really about to laugh? Bruce's jaw set. "I mean it, John. I love—"

"Yeah, yeah, I got that. It's just…" John giggled, shoulders shaking. "You—you, Bruce Wayne, Batman—are helplessly begging me..." He burst into a full cackle and bowed his head. "Some literal nobody, locked away in an asylum for years, mooning over tabloids… Who woulda thought..."

Bruce managed a weak smirk. "We've come a long way." Though he was still in the dark about how far. Maybe this was too much at once-- the surprise appearance, the kiss, this whole conversation. "If you need more ti—"

John lurched forward, jamming his mouth against Bruce's and banging him into the door. The shock rang in Bruce's skull, but he pushed through it and kissed John back, because this was a yes. John was saying yes, and Bruce held him close and tight.

John braced Bruce's face between his hands and pulled back. This time the light in his eyes was a wet shine.

"No more ifs," he said, smiling despite his shaking voice. "I love you, too." He giggled again and tucked his head under Bruce's chin. "Whatever happens," he murmured, wrapping his arms around Bruce's waist.

Bruce stroked John's hair, because he could, because he wanted to. The locks were stiff with gel, but later he could indulge in the softness, as much as he indulged in how nicely John fit against him. No more denials, no more pretending, no more keeping his distance when he wanted to be close just like this.

Or closer. John tilted his head just so, nose in Bruce's throat, and slowly inhaled. His hand slipped up to Bruce's open collar, fingers cleaving to slide along both fabric and bare skin. He pressed forward into the embrace, with no idea what the tighter proximity was inspiring.

Outside, a car honked, and a patron shouted something unintelligible that drew cheers. A small reminder that there was a world outside this bubble, and John had a job to do.

Bruce gently pulled away. "Hey, you don't want to miss that encore," he said, tracing John's cheekbone with his thumb.

John raised an eyebrow and played with Bruce's collar. "Encores are optional, buddy."

Bruce blinked, realizing they were actually on the same page. "Oh. I guess, but I mean, Lucia..."

"What about her?" Now John played at disinterested, with a little shrug. "Hey, no pressure. If you don't want to—"

"No, it's not…" Bruce's face grew warm at how quickly he'd cut in. "I do– would. I just thought—"
"Great!" John grinned from ear to ear and reached past Bruce's shoulder to throw the bolt on the door.

His fists clenched in Bruce's shirt front and swung him around. Bruce laughed as he was backed toward the bed, and he was sure to hold tight to John's waist when he fell onto the mattress. They landed with a thud, the bed frame scraping along the floor.

Head on the pillow, Bruce recalled the last time he had a view of this ceiling. "Continue where we left off?" he asked, grabbing John's thigh as their legs slotted together.

"You better be more lively than that," John chuckled against Bruce's mouth.

Bruce deepened the kiss, and now John was far from tentative, giving as good as he got. A little too eager at points, but he was a quick learner when Bruce murmured for him to take it easy, in the moments they managed to interrupt the instinctive rolling of their hips to shed their shoes and socks, then John's jacket and gloves.

Bruce was sitting up with John straddling his lap when they pulled each other's shirts loose, which was easier to do while kissing than blindly contending with John's vest. Bruce pulled away to make quick work of it, but then John leaned forward, reaching far over Bruce's shoulder.

Bruce turned his head. "What are you…"

The standing lamp behind the headboard, John was trying to get at the switch on the pole, but he couldn't quite grasp it.

"Mood… lighting," John muttered. "Bah!"

He slapped the lamp instead, and its bounce off the headboard on the way down was the only reason Bruce had time to reach out and catch it.

"You don't need to break it," Bruce chided.

"S'plastic," John murmured into his neck.

"If you bend the--" Bruce's breath hitched as John's teeth scraped under his ear.

He managed to twist the switch, then let the lamp thunk to the floor as he sat back up. John had started working on his vest himself, and the string lights painted his face and hands with splotches of blue, yellow, red, and green. Bruce slipped his fingers under John's shirt, getting a taste of bare flesh just above his waistband, anticipating the play of color across the full canvas.

The heat of Bruce's body, the slide of his tongue, and holy moly the swell of his erection felt more real than anything in John's life, yet it seemed like the mess of sensations could vanish at any moment, which was all the more reason to throw himself into them. The whole night was too good to be true.

Sideshow had started off a little shaky, when the audience was responsive but not giving up the big laughs he wanted. He'd powered through like Lucia said, and after a couple acts, click! He and the crowd were thick as thieves-- or as pseudovigilantes and vigilante sympathizers.

And just when John thought the night couldn't get better, Bruce appeared! (At the edge of the lights' reach, per usual.) And not only was he just in time to see John's personal project, but he said it was great, amazing, which alone would have been a stupendous capper to the night. Bruce had to
go the extra mile; he kissed John again, with more lucidity this time but just as much sweetness...

Then John nearly ruined everything, but he really had thought his decision was for the best. He wasn't psychic after all. He couldn't imagine that they'd both seen their feelings in the same way, as overwhelming and vexing and a source of danger for the other person. No, Bruce's feelings didn't sound like a misguided, passing fancy at all during his speech, so much more anxious than Batman had right to be. It was ridiculous that someone as amazing as Bruce would say that John was so important, would really love him back...

But when Bruce held John's hands, it didn't feel dangerous at all. It felt right. Complete. Strong.

It was funny, though, that nothing about the circumstances had really changed. John had just made a choice: to trust himself, to lean into his faith in Bruce. Maybe it was the post performance high. He'd had no idea Sideshow would go so well; why shouldn't he take that leap with the person he loved more than anyone?

Well, it wasn't true that nothing had changed. The kissing and groping were majorly welcome changes and definitely needed to be happening with less clothing. Was the AC even still on?

After getting rid of the waistcoat, John pried at the knot on his bowtie. The dumb thing was suffocating him. Why had he tied it so tight? Better question: why didn't he just wear a clip-on? At least Bruce was helping him progress in terms of shirt buttons.

"Augh!" John growled as he finally threw the tie away. He started on his cuffs next. "Why... are there so... many... barriers?"

"Only yourself to blame," Bruce said, slightly breathless.

As if this outfit hadn't gotten Bruce a little handsy downstairs, John was about to say, but when he looked up, he noticed the smears. Bruce's perfect mouth was marked with lipstick, John's lipstick, and the core of John's brain lit up with a silent shriek of mine mine mine mine mine mine mine mine! He slammed his hands into Bruce's shoulders and knocked him down onto the pillow. Bruce let out a grunt, and then a surprised muffled noise when John leaned down and didn't so much kiss him as swipe his tongue through his mouth, just once, on an indefinable impulse. But the gist of it was more, and John got to work getting Bruce's shirt off. His own could wait.

Bruce didn't seem to mind. He didn't try to sit up, and he didn't complain when John lost patience at the last two buttons and ripped them free, pulling the shirt open. John took in the steady rise and fall of the sculpted torso rarely glimpsed in tabloids. His fingertips followed the slopes and divots of the scars, smooth and gnarled, from pecs to abs. He knew only a fraction of the stories behind the marks—most intimately one on Bruce's left side— but that was far more than the tabloids knew. They swore Bruce's scars were from a combination of athletics and illicit sex games. John knew they were earned in nightly battles, bold and daring and deadly.

John only had the taser burn on his shoulder and the slash through his hand, and both were hardly from anything righteous. Heck, he couldn't even be bothered to get in a little aerobics when planning a public performance, with hardly a fraction of the dedication it took Bruce to sculpt himself into a god of shadows.

His hands came to rest on Bruce's waist as he felt his mind slip down that chute. In the pause, Bruce started to finish with John's shirt, and John felt keenly, tensely aware of his own wiry shape.

Bruce's fingers stilled. "What?"
"Ha, just..." John tittered nervously. "Freaking Goliath Hardbody here."

Why was his stupid brain ruining this?! Bruce had been pawing at him without hesitation, bringing John's greatest fantasy to life. Sure, actually participating was different, but it wasn't like John was ashamed of his body. It was just... different than the incredible physique before him. And he wasn't ashamed of his bleached skin either, but he knew it was still, well, unusual and Bruce hadn't seen this much of it before and maybe he would—

What Bruce did do was sit up and undo the final button at John's throat. He slipped his thumbs under the fabric and pulled the shirt open, holding onto John's shoulders and leaving a wet kiss in the center of his chest.

"John Doe here," Bruce murmured. He looked up with that dark-eyed earnestness. "Better than my dreams."

Yeah, okay, crisis averted.

John devoured that smeared mouth again, helping Bruce strip both their shirts away, and they finally embraced skin-on-skin. John felt cold much of the time, but Bruce felt like an oven, and what a joy it would be to roast alive. John wanted to crank the knob all the way, but Bruce moved notch by notch, holding John's hip to slow his rocking, hand sliding up his spine as if to soothe him, pretending he wasn't well versed in the rough and tumble.

John pried his mouth free and dug his fingers into Bruce's shoulders. "Don't coddle me," he growled.

Bruce's face went blank for a second. Then his eyes narrowed slightly and that soothing hand traveled upward to firmly grasp the side of John's neck. John's breath caught as Bruce's thumb pressed up under his jaw, tilting his head back, but not so far that they broke eye contact.

"There's a difference," Bruce said lowly, "between coddling you and taking my time." Then he licked a slow, hot line up John's throat.

The trail quickly cooled, sending a happy shiver through John's body. Hahaaaaa, maybe he should trust that the playboy knew a thing or two or sixty-nine about dancing in the sheets.

Bruce's hand relaxed and slid to John's left shoulder while his mouth moved rightward. He kissed from carotid to clavicle to shoulder, then proceeded steadily down John's arm. John giggled at the tickling sensation, until it stopped at his wrist, at the scar on his palm. For a moment, Bruce rubbed his thumb across the raised tissue, then he firmly pressed his lips there too.

That Night had been a hell of a fight. John remembered that much. Betrayal and adrenaline had seized them and sent them clanging over catwalks, leaping over vats, trading strikes that rattled bone. They grappled, each trying to get close enough for the final blow or slash that would end the night, one way or another. The fight couldn't have been that long, but the lead-up, the urgency, quickly sapped their breath.

But on this night, they were engaged in a much better reason to be breathless, headed for a fulfilling denouement. John did his best to smear more lipstick across Bruce's face while his fingers unbuttoned Bruce's pants and delved inside. He was more than a little delighted by Bruce's gasp and by the penis he freed, though it was hardly a surprise that Batman's codpiece was protecting a superb specimen. John experimentally slid his hand along the thick length, and his own cock throbbed when Bruce's hips jerked.
"Most people bring roses to the star," John giggled, "but who wants a bunch of little pricks when you can have a nice big one?"

"Really?" Bruce said, managing a deadpan face that just made John cling to his shoulder and giggle more.

Bruce knew how to recenter the mood, though. Before John knew it, his own erection was freed from its confines by Bruce's warm and rough palm. John's girth didn't match Bruce's, but the two fellows looked equally eager side-by-side, pressed head to base. Bruce slid his hand under both shafts and held them tight, and on the first thrust, John's giggles pulled into a groan. He clutched Bruce's shoulders with both hands and thrust back for more of that friction, watching pale and ruddy flesh rub alongside each other through the gaps between Bruce's fingers.

"That's it," Bruce murmured, matching John's rhythm.

Wordplay flew from John's mind as he focused on the feelings winding up in his groin, urged along by Bruce's panting. He'd always imagined Bruce as rough and commanding, but these lighter sounds were primal in their own way, born of mindlessly rutting against each other, driving the pleasure to its peak.

They could get there faster, John was sure. He pulled Bruce's hand away, then shifted closer to get head-to-head, so to speak, ha! He messily licked his palm, gripped their cocks, and started to thrust upward. On the downstroke, their balls rubbed against each other, and John keened in Bruce's ear at the sharp feeling. Bruce clearly liked it too; he clamped the back of John's neck and bucked against him, no longer concerned about taking his time.

In the back of John's head, he had a faint regret that they'd come so soon, still half-dressed, but Bruce clung to his body and moaned into his mouth and everything felt absolutely, explosively divine–

*Knock knock knock! "John!"

Bruce abruptly sucked in his breath, like a record scratch as everything stopped. He and John stared blankly at each other.

"John!" came Lian's voice again.

Bruce's forehead hit John's shoulder and his grip loosened. John stubbornly did not let go of either Bruce's shoulder or their dicks as he swung his head toward the door.

"I'm bussyyyy!" he sang through his teeth.

"Yeah! You're supposed to be saying good night to the crowd."

"Well, I'm not! Go away!"

An audible scoff. "And tell Lucia what?"

This was how it would happen. This was how John would kill again.

No, no, he liked Lian. Usually.

He had to free his hands to reach down and pluck one of Bruce's shoes off the floor. It struck the door with a sharp clap. "I don't care!" he shouted, pulling Bruce back against him.
"Oh, okay," Lian retorted, "that's what she wants to hear. If she has to come up here herself, she's gonna--"

"If she wants to know the details of how I have sex with my boyfriend, she's welcome up!"

Bruce's chest deflated.

A few moments passed with only silence from the other side of the door.

Then: "Gotcha." Lian's departing footsteps were lost in the music still drifting upstairs.

John huffed. Bruce lifted his head, and his cheeks were pink.

"That's not usually how the b-word first comes up," he commented dryly.

John giggled, shifting on Bruce's lap. "And you're so used to usual." The interruption hadn't affected his own excitement, but Bruce's cock had flagged a bit. John started to rub it back to full attention. "You of all people can't be this easily thrown, baby," he tutted.

Bruce didn't offer excuses. He gathered John close, pressing their cheeks together and letting out shallow breaths. John still found the sound pleasing, but the feel of Bruce hot and heavy in his hand was enthralling. Out of the cloud of an impending orgasm, he could consider his options for getting back to that point.

"That does feel good, doesn't it?" he murmured. "You know where I'd like it?"

John didn't wait for an answer before leaning over the side of the bed. While he felt around underneath, Bruce's hands tightened on his waist, as if he might go anywhere. Chuckling, John dragged out his playtime kit— a shoebox— and flipped open the lid. He grabbed the lube, leaving the box on the floor as he handed the bottle to Bruce.

Bruce took the bottle but raised an eyebrow at the box's other contents. The plug and masturbation sleeve were indistinguishable in their opaque bags, but a cover did little to disguise a dildo.

John snickered. "All that money, I didn't see any harm in investing in some wonderful toys."

Bruce's mild surprise receded. "None at all. They're not designed for harm."

"Hee, I did think I'd graduate to something more intense, but I haven't had too much free time with these yet." He stroked his index finger down Bruce's cheek. "You want to play?"

Bruce tugged at John's belt loop. "I thought you wanted to play with me."

John took the cue and moved off Bruce to shed the last of his clothing. "It's not a competition— or is it? They're very efficient toys..." He watched Bruce toss away his pants and underwear too, and took the moment to appreciate the full package (and instantly develop a thing for thigh muscles). "Though the lovely performers online sometimes boost the effect."

When Bruce looked back, his face went a little wooden. "Who do you watch?" he asked too casually.

"Ohhhh." John crawled back into Bruce's lap and pressed his hands against that scarred chest. "Are you jealous?" he asked delightedly.

"No," Bruce said. He popped open the bottle and spread lube on his fingers.
"Liaarrrr," John teased with a nip at his bat's jaw. "Don't worry. I think about you most of the time."

"Hm." Bruce slipped an arm around John's waist and asked quietly, "Like this?"

John gasped at the slick fingers splitting his backside, teasing him. After just a moment, Bruce slid a finger deep inside, and John bit his shoulder. The intimate touch had him back to wondering if this was really happening, if there hadn't been some pharmaceutical mixup that tossed him into a delicious hallucination. He'd definitely order refills.


"Lie back," Bruce said, and there was that commanding tone.

John obeyed happily, literally falling back so his head hit the foot of the mattress. Bruce shifted to kneel between his legs and told him to relax, and he did give John more, pushing two fingers into his hole. John grabbed fistfuls of blanket to ride out the steady slide and stretch, not to mention the movements of Bruce's other hand, fingertips tracing the curve of John's calf, dragging up his stomach, brushing over his nipple. Bruce's soft blue gaze turned steely as he watched John squirm.

"You like giving me my own show?" he asked.

John managed an "uh huh" and bit his lip as his cock dripped onto his stomach. Bruce had to be in a similar state, going by that intense look. John rolled his hips, wanting to feel those fingers deeper, get just a hint of what was to come— and he did, when Bruce hit that right spot.

John let out a noise that sounded almost strangled to his own ears, and Bruce pushed in another digit, pressing in at that same angle again and again. He held John still by the hip, so close to his straining cock but offering no relief yet. God, John loved him, loved him, loved him…

"Do you really not have any condoms?"

John froze along with Bruce's touch. Bruce frowned at the box on the floor, only now realizing what was missing.

John had used love gloves with his toys, sure, but there hadn't been an urgent need to make sure he restocked. How was he supposed to know Bruce would actually fuck him?! He rose onto his elbows. "Don't tell me," he said with feral urgency, "that's a dealbreaker." Of all the exceptions for Bruce to *not* make…

Bruce withdrew his fingers, but he didn't move to leave John high and dry. "Have you had penetrative sex with anyone before?"

"No." It was true, and how could it possibly be the wrong answer?

Bruce waited expectantly, then huffed. "You should at least ask me, if we're going ahead."

How could he be so calm when all of John's nerves sparked like down wires? At least that batarang still looked resolute. "Like you don't test yourself after any encounter to make sure your sexual performance doesn't screw up your crimefighting performance."

"Never assume," Bruce advised. "But I haven't had to get tested in a long while."

John nearly scoffed. "With all those Veronicas throwing themselves at you?"
Bruce leaned forward, putting his hands on either side of John's shoulders. "Haven't wanted to catch any of them."

It took a second for the meaning to push past John's frustration, and oh, if he could blush… but he could definitely kiss, and he pulledBruce down on top of him, using his legs to lock them together. "I will take every test you want after this," he murmured. "Blood, biopsy, matching, multiple choice…"

Bruce chuckled. "Are you sure you're ready?"

"What the hell do you think?" John exclaimed, spreading his arms. "You can't get me all revved and raring--"

"And ready to go," Bruce said. "Okay."

John sighed with relief, but Bruce didn't hike up his legs as he expected. He pulled John up and laid back like when they started.

"If you really want to do this for your first…" He squirted more lube onto his hand and slicked himself up. "On top, you can set the pace."

John rolled his eyes. What he needed was for Bruce to bang him like no tomorrow, but at this point he had no patience to argue. Whatever got that dick inside him.

Bruce set the bottle aside and took hold of John's hips as John straddled him. Without further prelude, John reached back and held Bruce's cock in place, and eased himself down. He felt a bolt of excitement as the head pressed against his hole, and then another as it sank inside. Bruce groaned, eyes falling shut.

John paused to enjoy the feeling of Bruce splitting him open, the fingers digging into his flesh, and the pretty sight the playboy made. He was all pliant, lips parted, messy black hair against the white pillow– not that it looked very white in the mottled light. It was like the lipstick on Bruce's mouth, standing out more in John's mind, making his cock twitch. John wanted a mark too, a lasting one; he hoped Bruce's fingers left bruises for days.

He kept pushing down, letting himself feel every jolt of pleasure and pain, yet all too soon, Bruce was fully sheathed inside him. John whined, feeling incredible and ready to burst. He pressed his hands against Bruce's chest and sighed.

"Take it easy," Bruce said. It was supposed to be gentle guidance, but his voice came out strained, and his pelvis jerked slightly.

John laughed low in his chest, because Bruce was clearly fighting the urge to take it hard. But who was John to dismiss a playboy's advice on getting down and dirty? And if Bruce regretted that advice, wasn't that his own fault?

John lifted slowly back up, as far as he could stand, then carefully pushed back down, reliving the joy of being filled. He'd done this with the dildo a few times, but it didn't compare to real, responsive flesh, to having Bruce under him, brows furrowed, still fighting to keep control. With each unhurried slide, up and down, John watched the battle in his eyes and silently urged him to lose, and… and…

Okay, there was something to this pacing thing.

The twisting coil was back in John's abdomen, and the pain he'd enjoyed had transmuted into
something tense and trembling amidst the swells of pleasure. He'd imagined sex with Bruce to be 
near frantic, hard and exhilarating. Going slow like this, drawing out when the coil would break, 
was a different exhilaration, a wonderful agony.

Oh, but he didn't want to forget about Brucie. He tweaked Bruce's nipples with his thumbs and 
watched them bud, then dragged one set of nails across Bruce's pectoral. He didn't break skin, but 
red lines formed and Bruce gasped, his grip tightening. The coil tightened too, because Bruce didn't 
mind real marks. He wanted to be branded the way John did.

John wanted to feel Bruce deep, and he sat up for a change in angle. He flattened his left hand 
against the wall for leverage, and swiped his hair back with his right. Ah, yeah, that was it... He bit 
his lip and let his eyes fall closed, focusing on the drag inside.

Bruce let out a particularly delicious groan, hips jerking again. John opened his eyes and grinned 
wide. Against his howling instincts, he moved even more slowly, and oh, wasn't that nice, to feel 
the trip of every nerve, to watch Bruce's nerves rattle?

"You seem frustrated," John murmured.

Bruce didn't say anything, but by the look in his eyes, he realized John had been playing a bit of a 
game. His tongue darted out to wet his lips.

"Do you wanna come, Brucie?" John breathed. "Just grab me and rail me? You could do it easily." 
He leaned forward and whispered, "And you know I wouldn't mind."

He rolled his pelvis on the next slide down, and a moan poured out of his mouth.

And the world toppled. Bruce grabbed John and pushed him onto his back, then followed after, still 
between John's thighs. He hitched one of John's legs over his hip as he guided his swollen cock 
back home. John barely managed to hike up his other leg before Bruce whipped his hips forward 
with a growl.

John's mouth fell open in a soundless cry, and he grabbed Bruce around the shoulders, holding on 
for each sharp thrust. Bruce tucked his face into John's neck as he bore his weight on his right 
forearm, his left hand gripping just under John's ribs. The slow pace had been achingly good but, 
oh god, so was this, Bruce taking him, Bruce wanting him.

"There you go, baby!" John praised with a breathless laugh. "Show me how it is!"

Bruce rose up at that, thrusts slowing, and cut off any complaint when he grabbed John's wrists 
and pinned them on either side of his head. He locked his arms and pushed down as he ratcheted 
the rhythm back up, and John could swear the pressure, bordering on pain, nearly brought him to a 
finish. Instead he was stuck in this glorious limbo, crying out with each beat of Bruce's hips against 
his ass.

"You're mine," Bruce grunted. "Tell me you're mine."

An electrical surge seemed to pass between John's brain and his dick, but all he could do was 
squeeze his thighs around Bruce's waist and toss his head back. "Absolutely," he groaned.

He'd reached the paradox: adoring Bruce's loving, brutal attention, but craving the zenith it 
promised.

"Bruce," John whined, trying to twist a wrist free. "I need…"
"I've got you," Bruce panted.

He let go of John's left hand and reached between them, swiftly stroking John's cock in time with his full thrusts, then with his shortened jabs. John flung his freed arm around Bruce's neck as they careened toward the edge, because it mattered more that they were entangled than if they survived the fall.

The coil twisted so tight that the loops sprung apart, snapping into a wire that pulled John's body taut as he came, howling and pressing his head back into the mattress. Bruce worked him through it, until his helpful hand latched onto John's hip instead and he thrust one final time, spearing deep as he sucked his head with a groan. John felt a trembling aftershock at the warmth inside him, at the clench around his sore wrist, and pulled Bruce's head up by the hair to kiss him. It felt like Bruce was trying to find air in John's lungs, lips urging his mouth open wide.

But soon enough, they needed to really breathe. John's head thumped onto the bed as he regretfully let his shaking legs fall off Bruce's hips. Bruce pulled out but stayed pressed close, his hand leaving John's wrist to brush through his hair. He kept his gaze on John's face, and John stared back, enjoying the pleasant buzz thrumming through his tired limbs and how Bruce looked like he felt the same.

Maybe if neither of them spoke or moved or thought, they would enter a kind of stasis, a bubble only penetrated by the string lights' glow and the hum of the crowd outside.

Then a clear voice burst through the din: "Thanks for coming, folks!"

The two men blinked at each other. John laughed first, naturally, and when Bruce's eyes crinkled and he joined in, it was the best sound.

A soothing sensation ran across Bruce's scalp, back and forth through his hair. That was all he knew for a time; when he wished it would stay that way, it was already too late. One tangible thought led to another, branching into full consciousness.

He cracked his eyes open and habitually assessed the room--unbreached, nothing awry--before his senses pulled back and centered on John. To fit on the twin mattress, Bruce had ended up laying halfway on top of him, cheek resting on John's shoulder and right arm slung across his stomach. The quilt covered their bottom halves, and Bruce's left arm was tucked underneath the other man. It had gone numb, but he didn't mind. They'd spent too much time at a distance.

He couldn't see much more. The only light was the white glow of John's phone--no, that was in pieces. John must have found Bruce's phone in the pile of clothes by the bed.

Bruce didn't mind that either. He wanted to enjoy the afterglow: the tangle of their legs, the warmth between their skin, John's idle humming, and the familiar way he pet Bruce's hair. If Bruce relaxed, pretended he never woke up, he might actually be able to get back to sleep like this. The room was too dark for it to be near dawn.

John had unplugged the string lights, Bruce suddenly remembered. Not when they'd cleaned up before going right back to bed, when sleep overtook Bruce as it often did after an overload of waking hours, but later, when John had gotten up to use the bathroom. When he'd finished, he'd darkened the room and righted the lamp, and giggled when Bruce grumbled for him to get back in bed already. It wasn't that the noises kept Bruce awake; he didn't like the empty space in the bed.

He needed to indulge in that kind of greed when he could, before his more practical nature started
picking at him.

It already reared its head. Bruce had shifted his gaze upward, watching John swipe the phone with his thumb. He fixated on an out-of-place shadow on John's wrist, and his eyes opened fully when he realized it was a purpling bruise. If he turned on the light and lifted the blanket, he'd likely find similar hand-shaped marks on John's hips.

Bruce needed to be careful, one part of him chided—except he was careful, another part coolly acknowledged. Giving into rough impulses could go too far— but he hadn't gone far this time. Bruce was in control, and if he had qualms, John would no doubt be happy to talk out their sexual future.

Memories of John's enthusiasm certainly eclipsed the vague unease. One particular image came back to Bruce now: John steadily, torturously riding him, head tilted back and smudged lips parted, eyes fluttering closed.

Even while he'd ached for release, Bruce had wondered if John could come like that, without touching himself. It was a hypothesis that he still wanted to test, if John was interested—later, anyway. Right now, John had to be sore.

In the meantime, they had plenty of other options to explore.

Bruce turned his head and kissed John's shoulder, then moved his right hand to rest just above the curve of John's ass. John let out a coo and kissed the top of Bruce's head, but he just snuggled closer, still focused on the phone, playing some video with low sound. Bruce shifted upward and mouthed John's neck instead, teeth scraping the flesh that had proved so sensitive hours ago.

Not only did John keep looking at that damn screen, but he started laughing. Bruce pulled back, about to crossly ask if John would rather date the phone, but John angled it so they could both see and turned up the volume.

It was a CamEra video taken in All's Well by someone sitting by the stage, judging by the lighting and the drinks at the bottom of the frame. The phone wasn't pointed at the performance; it focused past two women at the table to catch a scene across the room. There was enough of a break in the crowd to see the top half of the kitchen doorway past the bar, where Bruce and John talked. Bruce's face was visible, but the viewer could just see John rubbing the back of his neck.

"Shut up!" the person recording hissed as Bruce pulled John's hand down. "Looklooklook!"

The women in frame turned in time to see the two men kiss, and the table broke into muted chatter, excited but mindful of the performance happening just off-screen. Just as someone mentioned how many views "Amy" was going to get, John punched Bruce and the sound erupted with surprised gasps and laughter and an "oh shit!" One of the women slapped the table, toppling two half-full glasses, and the video cut off her curse to loop back to the start.

"Your face!" John wheezed, holding his stomach.

Bruce watched his expression on the replay. Maybe the surprise and dismay would seem funnier later.

"Well," he sighed, sliding back to sit up against the headboard, "that's one way to make our relationship public." His left arm started to prickle, so he used his right to reach back and turn on the light.

"It fits right in with your playboy image!" John agreed, sitting up beside him. He scrolled through the comments. "Look, everyone assumes you did something wrong!"
"Of course they did," Bruce muttered.

"Do we have to make up a reason?" John wondered aloud. "Or should I keep pretending to be mad at you?" He frowned. "I'm kind of tired of being mad at you."

"Kind of?"

"Well, if I don't leave open the possibility, how are we ever going to have mind-blowing makeup sex?"

"Right, better to play it safe." Bruce glanced at the comments again and shook his head. "We don't have to tell anyone anything."

"Leave the air of mystery... Ooh!" John opened the phone's gallery. "Should we at least signal everything is fine now by posting one of these?"

He'd taken selfies while Bruce slept tucked under his arm, one with quite the shit-eating grin, another with him kissing the top of Bruce's head. Apparently Bruce had missed some lipstick during post-sex cleanup; there was still a smear on his cheek. He rubbed at the spot while he considered the pictures.

At the lack of response, John nervously said, "Unless you don't– I can delete them. I wouldn't have posted without asking."

"They're fine. I'll forward them to you when we get your new phone." Bruce hesitated. "But posting them for everyone else is... My civilian persona is performative, but tonight wasn't... I think it's worth keeping some moments to ourselves."

John's anxiousness disappeared with a lip-biting smile. He leaned in close, setting the phone on the quilt between them. "You've got that earnest face on. It really is... darling!" He planted a firm kiss on Bruce's mouth. "Darling, that's you." He curled up to Bruce's side. "I agree. We'll come up with something else."

Bruce wrapped his arm around John's shoulders, trying to enjoy the warmth despite the needles still pricking his muscles. He reassessed his earlier thought about space. "If you don't want to come stay with me, at least let me get you a bigger bed."

"More room to wrestle, eh?"

"I was thinking to sleep, but that too." Bruce paused. "I know it's important that you be your own person... but the Neighborhood Watch still isn't my favorite thing."

John pushed himself upright with a hand on Bruce's chest and glared. "Um, mood killer?"

"Hear me out!" Bruce said. "It's not ideal, but I understand the need for it. I just want you to promise that you'll keep me in the loop." He cupped John's face. "I get why you didn't tell me about the militia, but if we're going to do this, you can't hide things like that."

John pressed his lips together, thinking.

"And I can help you strategize ways to avoid anyone being targeted in the first place, whether by criminals or the cops. You won't always luck out with people at the top of the chain being abruptly murdered."

With a sigh, John flopped back against him. "I guess not. Fine." He raised a finger in the air. "But
you have to tell me what you're up to. I don't want to wait until a bunch of idiots crash your next party to find out your latest antagonist— and if I can help you out with anything, I get to."

"Okay," Bruce said, though it wasn't really. It was just the reality of their tumultuous lives. They were both going to have to make frustrating compromises.

But, he thought as John ran the tips of his fingers along a particularly smooth chest scar, it all seemed worth it.

The pins and needles had almost faded, and Bruce draped his left arm back around John's shoulders, kissing his forehead. His right hand dipped under the quilt to feel the smoothness of a paper-white thigh.

John suddenly sat up straight, knocking Bruce back.

"I've got it!" John gasped. "We'll go mattress shopping, and people will see us testing them out, laying side by side!" He cackled and snatched the phone back up, typing in a search for "fancy mattress stores."

"That's a good idea," Bruce said as he plucked the device away, prompting a perturbed noise. "For later. Right now..." He rose up and pivoted around to straddle John's legs and lean over him. The phone clunked to the floor. "I have a better one."

Bruce grasped John's hips and pulled the other man flat under him, then whipped the blanket over their heads, capturing John's excited squeal.

Chapter End Notes

Well, if you didn't like the song, I hope you liked the smut.

(Speaking of: USE A CONDOM, KIDS.)

Over two years ago, I pictured the moment John and Bruce shared the kiss in the bar, and everything from On the Mend to this chapter was written to get there. I can't believe I actually had the stamina to do it. TWO YEARS. Maybe I actually have the wherewithal to actually get paid to do this one day!

Epilogue is next. It's supposed to be short like, you know, an epilogue, but hey.
Epilogue: By Your Side

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

The fallout shelter was a decades-old leftover from the days when nuclear war was an ever-present threat but the Narrows had been a thriving blue-collar neighborhood centered around active factories and warehouses. Dozens of shelters had been dug beneath Gotham's streets at that time, and in the present this one was of the few that hadn't been filled in or repurposed. Certainly its connection to the city's first and now crumbling sewer system made conversion into a novelty bar or even a sanitary storage space impossible.

Narrow and oval with a wheel-spin lock, the thick metal door that let out into the sewer tunnel looked more at home on a submarine. Scattered boards indicated that the city had once boarded it up. The shelter's power, however, had never been disconnected. A light switch turned on sickly yellow incandescent bulbs caged on the ceiling, not just in the narrow emergency tunnel but in most of the other rooms.

The underground structure centered around a large, round common room, with a concrete pillar in the middle. Time and flooding had worn the couches down to scraps of fabric hanging off rotting frames. In four of the attached rooms, rows of bunk beds– enough for over a hundred people– were in the same state, with the exception of one bunk. The top bed had been roughly cut free at the joint with the bottom, and someone had dragged down a mattress and a few moth-eaten blankets. The thickest blanket was rolled up for a pillow.

Batman expected similar signs of life in the dining area, located down a passage from the common room. When he reached the cafeteria, the ceiling lights did not respond to the switch. He activated the lights in his cowl's lenses and looked up, finding the bulbs blackened. He ventured past the rows of tables, long with attached benches, and noted the sheen of moisture on the floor. He spent only a moment at the entrance to the kitchen. There, the moisture had collected into puddles and the walls were spotted with black mold. Further in, another doorway by the wall of ovens presumably led to food storage, but if the provisions had never been cleared out, their edibility was unlikely.

He retreated to the passage, at the end of which sat a pile of dining tables and other furniture, tossed there by trespassing youths or transients. He considered returning to the shelter's main entrance, the one that led directly to the street. If his estimation was correct, the door was adjacent to one of the Narrows' clinics, which had been a Council office when the shelter was built. Not that the location mattered much. He could only use the stairwell if it wasn't as badly caved in as it had looked when he first found it.

He set that thought aside. The added light from his lenses pushed into the crannies of the furniture, and he realized the pile obstructed another doorway. He pushed and pulled enough out of the way to enter the room, and found himself in a small space consisting only of half-open file cabinets and a rusted metal desk holding an equally rusted radio. The rectangular transmitter and receiver sat side-by-side, each with a dozen knobs. The setup was useless now, but radio signals had been able to come in and out of this room. Theoretically, the structure here was different than the six-foot-thick concrete enclosing the rest of the shelter.

Batman opened his comms again. "Spectrum, do you read?"

"Yeah, I read!" she hissed. The sound was fainter than normal and a little distorted, but audible
enough. "What happened?"

He let out a soft exhale. "Status?"

"Status yourself!"

"I will. Status?"

"Nothing. The delivery man has been sitting there on his phone for the past forty-five minutes. Crane hasn't shown."

"Remember when you said you could handle him yourself?"

She didn't reply for a moment, then said uneasily, "Yeah? Did Killer Croc bite your leg off?"

"There is no Killer Croc. There's..."

He thought back to the tall bipedal form: its scaly skin, the hunch of its knobby spine, the way its fingers crooked like claws— but that was all perception. The old sewer ways were dark, and the only light had come from the open manhole over Batman's head. The figure had been standing several feet down the tunnel in near darkness. The human brain liked to fill in blanks.

"There was someone," Batman finished. "They trapped me in an old fallout shelter."

"What?! Crane's probably not going to show. I can--"

"I've had stakeouts much longer than this. He'll show. He needs the ibogaine."

Crane had managed bail, and while he seemingly kept his head down, close surveillance soon showed a number of red flags. For the past couple weeks, he'd taken long nightly walks that more often than not led past Isley's home address, and he'd started spending time in bars known for connections to the black market. Those discreet contacts didn't create a paper trail with their clients— but they often had to with their vendors. Of all the orders Spectrum uncovered, there was only one for a deadly hallucinogen. She and Batman just needed to directly link it to the disgraced professor.

Though her focus was straying. "So you want me to leave you in a hole for how much longer?"

"John's friends are working on it."

It was John who'd clued Bruce in on the seedling urban legend, just a month ago, as word spread of a creature lurking in the Narrows. Workers at multiple bodegas and restaurants, taking out the trash, had spotted a scaly "monster" rifling through alleywaydumpsters. Others claimed to see a hulk with glowing eyes looming in the shadows by the waterfront. One man in particular, driving late in the night, swore he nearly ran down a leathery figure as it dashed on all fours from an alley to the water's edge. Several other residents swore that the stray population had gone down, warning everyone to keep pets inside.

John had recounted the tales with flair, swathing himself in the parlor curtains. "I think at first people thought it was you," he'd snickered.

"We've both taken advantage of how people like to tell stories," Bruce had said. "Some animal probably managed to find its way in from the pine barrens. Maybe a starving bobcat with mange."

"Sure, hairless wildcats, easily mistaken for crocodile men."
As the sightings piled up, they'd spread along the river and caught mainstream attention. Several purveyors on the waterfront market reported break-ins and breached fish crates. Amateur sleuths started finding claw marks (or what looked like them) on building exteriors, roads, and the flood wall. They disseminated photos online along with analyses on the depth and span of the gouges. The Gazette published their own take, including a crude drawing by an eight-year-old girl. She lived across from a community pool and swore she saw "Killer Croc" swimming after hours. The moniker was from the Gazette, apparently deciding alliteration was more important than the absence of any killings.

All of it had still amounted to an urban fairytale as far as Batman was concerned– until today. Shortly after dinner, Bruce had received a few texts.

JOHN: !!!Croc Alert!!!
Your ~mangy cat~ was just spotted coming out of the river into the Narrows.
We're on it if you want to lend a wing. ;D
Heading for the warehouses.

It turned out "we" didn't mean John's direct involvement. From a warehouse roof, Batman had spotted the trio of bodybuilders running inland. He glided after them, and when they turned down an alley, he set down at the mouth of it. The three had stopped at the other end, where they gathered around a half-open manhole under a streetlight.

Lorenzo wasted no time with greetings. "Down there!" he'd exclaimed as his girlfriend dragged the metal cover aside.

Before Chuck could climb down the ladder, Batman had stopped him and insisted on going first. Strength didn't mean unarmored flesh was invulnerable to claws or teeth. He'd subdue whatever wild animal was down there and contact animal control.

And then he'd seen the figure.

Whatever– whoever they were, they'd run the instant Batman turned on his lights. He'd given chase through ankle-deep stagnant water. Each time he caught up enough to illuminate snatches of a rough limb, the figure would dart down a side tunnel. Batman tried shouting for them to wait but wasn't surprised that it didn't help. His modified voice wasn't designed to sound friendly.

The other's rasping breaths sounded close to growls, too.

After the fourth turn, he'd seen the open metal door and fallen planks, and he didn't have enough time to click out of pursuit mode. As soon as he passed into the shelter, the door slammed shut, and when he turned, the locking mechanism was already spinning, slotting steel bars into the surrounding frame. Batman had grabbed the inner wheel, but with a sudden metallic screech, it came off in his hands. The outer wheel had been torn free.

Maureen had confirmed it, shouting through the small hole left in the door. She and the two men had followed by the lights of their phones. They had been only seconds behind, which got them close enough to catch Batman's turns, but still left enough time for the "Croc" to vanish. They'd promised to return with equipment to break the vigilante out.

The infrastructure in this part of town was too unstable to risk any controlled explosion he could rig up, no matter how minor, so the best choice was to wait.

After his exploration, it seemed clear that the Croc had made the shelter a residence. Yet they had sacrificed its relative safety to escape the Batman. Was it merely because of his own unsettling
aura, or because they knew perfectly well who the vigilante was?

But then, the reason they felt threatened wasn't yet relevant. So far the Croc's trespasses hadn't been violent, except perhaps for the missing strays, a claim that hadn't even been verified. It was best to focus on locating or identifying this person first.

"I'll keep waiting for Crane," Spectrum sighed, "if you insist."

"Yes," Batman said, "but make a note for later. Compile information on scleroderma and similar dermal conditions. Severe cases."

"How does a skin condition explain the missing animals?"

"When we find the Croc, I'll ask."

"We're not going to use, like, cats as bait, are we?"

"I hadn't considered it until you said it."

"Shit."

"I'm kidding."

"No, I mean Crane— not Crane. He sent someone else for the pickup."

"Hopefully 'someone else' is talkative."

"We'll see. I'm going in."

The line clicked off. Batman wasn't too concerned. With a gas mask, Spectrum could handle Crane just fine. A lackey would be even easier.

He checked back on his personal texts. If he was getting a signal from Spectrum, maybe John had been updated on the shelter situation.

JOHN: don't be too late! <3

Bruce almost rolled his eyes at the lack of worry, but the emoji tempered the urge.

A faint sizzling sound reached his ears. He returned to the escape door and found sparks shooting out along the left edge. His rescuers had access to an oxy-fuel torch, presumably from one of their odd jobs.

The cutting took about twenty minutes. At the halfway point, he took a walk back to the radio room to confirm that Spectrum successfully apprehended Crane's surrogate. She was on her way to drop him off at the GCPD. Batman was back at the door in time for it to fall in and land at his feet. The hole left behind framed Maureen down on one knee.

"Sorry for the wait," she said proudly as she lifted her face shield with a thickly gloved hand. Lorenzo and Chuck moved in behind her with their glowing phones.

"Thank you for the help," Batman replied, moving past them. He looked around the tunnel for any clues the Croc may have left behind. "I didn't mean to keep you from your ringmaster."

Chuck shrugged. "Eh, he needs us over here for the block party anyway."
Batman turned to him and raised an eyebrow under the cowl. "Here. For the block party back at the bar."

"Just some errands," Lorenzo said quickly, "before we head back."

"Errands."

Maureen slung an arm around her boyfriend's waist and tugged him away. "Come on, Bats! The boss said you know we're on the level!"

"On the level" could get very relative when John was concerned. Still, over the past couple months, he hadn't done anything to sway Bruce's trust.

Maureen and Lorenzo headed back the way they came, and Chuck followed. Batman wasn't going to pick up the Croc's trail here, so he brought up the rear.

Chuck glanced back. "We'll have to check that place out tomorrow."

"It's decrepit and mold-ridden," Batman warned.

"Still, it's where the Croc's been staying, right?" Maureen asked. "Maybe we should leave some barbecued fish and an invitation to meet us."

"Yeah, think I'd like that better than being hunted down," Lorenzo said. "Though, can he read?"

There was a surer flaw in that plan. "Once they decided to trap me, I don't think they planned on coming back," Batman said.

"Oh, man," Chuck said. "I didn't wanna scare 'em off. It's just hard to say hi when somebody's all, you know, skittish."

"I'll establish a pattern of activity and judge where they hole up next," Batman said. Though that assumed the Croc stuck around Gotham– and if they did, it brought up the question of why…

"And you'll tell the boss so we can drop off the fish?"

"Depends."

They reached the ladder to the alley. As the other three climbed up, Batman took a last look around. He scanned the tunnel slowly with his lights and listened intently, but saw and heard nothing. He returned to the surface.

"I didn't realize you were so interested in engaging with the Croc," he said as Lorenzo moved the manhole cover back into place.

"The Neighborhood Watch watches out," Chuck said, "but the neighborly part comes first!"

"That's a good philosophy," Batman said.

"Yeah, I really liked it when the boss said it."

"He's in a better mood these days," Lorenzo commented.

"Well, yeah," Maureen snorted. "All those sleepovers will do that, especially in a mansion."

"It does look like a real nice house," Chuck said agreeably.
Lorenzo ran a hand over his eyes while Maureen scrunched up her face at her brother. "You knucklehead," she said.

"What?"

"Feel free to knock a little sense into this one, Ba..." Maureen trailed off, spinning in place as she tried to find where Batman had gone.

Lorenzo shrugged. "Guess he doesn't have time for gossip."

Chuck still looked confused, but he checked his phone. "Us either. We gotta check on the rig."

An hour later, Bruce pushed into All's Well, leaving the scent of popcorn and funnel cake behind. The bar wasn't as packed as it got for Sideshow each Saturday, but he still had to weave around people to get to the stairwell door. He waved to Rosaline as he passed through, then continued up the stairs. He checked his phone: only fifteen minutes late.

The time displayed over his new background, a photo of him and John, courtesy of the Gazette. They'd attended the recent opening of a celebrity chef's Mexican-Thai fusion restaurant in midtown. Unlike their theater appearance, Bruce had helped John out of the car and held him close by the waist, and John had slung his arms around Bruce's neck and firmly kissed his cheek. The red lip print stayed on through the evening.

The hinges on the roof door screeched when Bruce stepped back into the warm night. The light coming off the street was enough to see by, though it helped wipe out most of the stars in the clear blue-black sky. Across the blacktop, Circus members chatted and drank, either standing in clusters or sitting in the variety of chairs that had accumulated over time. In a cluster off to the right, Adelina was the first to spot Bruce. She waved, spurring Lucia, Carter and a few others to do the same. Bruce waved back as he went left, toward the green hair popping over the back of a plastic Adirondack chair.

John already sensed him coming; he turned his head and watched the former so-called playboy walk up until they looked at each other straight on. John sat with his legs crossed at the knee, wearing pink cropped pants and white slip-ons. His short-sleeved button-up was dark blue with a print in the style of neon lights: pink flamingos, yellow suns, green palm trees, and blue umbrella drinks. He'd recently gotten an undercut, buzzing off the hair a couple inches above his ears and slicking back the rest. A straw stuck out of the can of orange soda in his hand.

"Hi," Bruce said.

John stayed seated with both eyebrows up. "So not a wildcat, huh?"

"And not a croc. I chased someone, that's for sure."

"Sure enough to change your schedule!" John chortled.

Bruce glanced around and spoke softly. "We still intercepted the delivery, but a surrogate showed up. I'm going to interrogate him at GCPD later, see if we can get a location for Crane."

John took a sip of soda and asked around the straw, "Then you're gonna kick his ass?"

"If history is any measure, probably."

After setting his drink on the ground, John hopped up and patted Bruce's cheek. "That's my guy,"
he cooed.

Bruce snorted lightly and pulled John against him, leaning in for a brief kiss. "I'm sorry I'm late in any case."

"Well, I'm certainly glad you showered, especially since, uh…" John tapped his fingers up Bruce's chest. "I'm hoping, before you swoop off, there's time for me to show you… a thing… in my room."

"Very subtle."

Across the roof, the chatter of the Circus abruptly burst into song, a wordless waltz conducted by Adelina. Lucia and Carter twirled together around the chairs, and everyone kept looking over at Bruce with gleeful smiles.

"What's happening?" he asked nervously.

John giggled and brought out his new phone. The browser was ready with an old Herald article from when Bruce was seventeen, about the Gotham Débutante Ball. The feature photo showed a dozen pairs of young dancers, the gentlemen doing their part to present the ladies to high society. Bruce and Veronica were one of the pairs.

"You never said you could dance!" John said, his smile lighting up his eyes. He pressed the phone to his heart.

"That was almost twenty years ago," Bruce said warily, "and I was only there to honor my parents."

"And you can honor me at your next party!"

"You are killing me."

"It can be a tribute to Ms. Martha and the perseverance of hope!"

"I didn't let you read her journal to help you with emotional manipulation," Bruce said lightly. John pouted. "Don't I deserve a grand, choreographed introduction into the snooty Gotham ranks?"

The singing tapered off, but Lucia and Carter kept count as they spun closer. "One-two-three, one-two-three…"

"How did you even find that?" Bruce asked.

"The Herald finished digitizing its archives," John answered, "and they've been highlighting articles with notable persons."

"I'm honored."

"I demand a Halloween masquerade!" Lucia said as she and her partner swung past. "You still owe me."

For his part in making John miss the opening night encore, she meant, even though the kiss-punch viral video only brought more publicity for the subsequent shows.

"Halloween would be soooo fuuuun!" John whined, sagging off the front of Bruce's shirt. He suddenly shot back up with a little gasp. "Oh, and the Croc would fit in perfectly!"
"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Bruce replied.

John went on. "Bonus: if Alfred decides to stay longer, he could finally be at a party he wasn't supervising!"

"Alfred could never stop himself from keeping after the party planner."

"Well, we all have our own ideas of fun, and that's okay."

Bruce's response was cut off by an explosion. He swiveled his head in the direction of the waterfront, to the yellow burst in the sky. His alertness dissipated as the glittering lights trailed down like the branches of a willow tree.

Everyone else had also turned to watch, and John cheered. "It's starting!"

More fireworks whistled upward as he pulled Bruce to the edge of the roof. The street below was lined with colorful paper lanterns, smoking food trucks, and chatty street vendors, and the current of people between had stopped to look up. The bursts came one after the other now, in sparkling blue, green, red, purple. John let out a delighted cry at each one.

Bruce stared at him not-quite-sternly. "So this is the errand you sent your friends on."

John returned the stare with wide, innocent eyes. "I'm not sure what you mean." His grin took over at the next explosion. "The Fourth of July was such a blast! What a surprise that we don't have to wait until New Year's for more fun."

"I don't think the GCPD will see it that way."

"If they catch anybody for this harmless public service— which, personally, hypothetically, I would set up in a way that followed safety guidelines and was activated remotely."

The surrounding roofs filled with more and more spectators. Not a few children clapped and squealed.

Bruce let out a quiet sigh and smiled. "It's a good surprise."

John laughed in agreement and stepped onto the parapet, reaching up to the sky as if to embrace the embers. After a moment, Bruce stepped up beside him. John giggled when their eyes locked, and he dropped his arms to snag Bruce's hand. Their fingers interlaced, stitched together by the promises of the past and those ahead of them.

Chapter End Notes

Man. I've long used up my word count to articulate all my thoughts and feelings on finishing this. But this is basically how I'm going to assume Vigilante John's life turned out, because canon leaving him in Arkham is BULLSHIT heartbreaking.

I have some vague ideas on what could happen in the future of this 'verse, but for now
this series is at a close. I do have other stories with Bruce and John in progress, though, so keep a look out. Maybe I'll even get inspiration for typical batjokes.

THANK YOU to everyone who read along. <3 This is a small fandom, so it's always nice to know other people enjoyed what my brain came up with. If you have the time, please leave a review.

Also feel free to send an ask on tumblr, about this story or whatever.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!