The one solid truth about the world is that it is always changing.

But things were going according to plan, for once. Tiffany was training to become Bruce’s protégé. Iman was settling in as Wayne Enterprises’ CSO. Alfred was traveling the world. John was slowly moving back into the world outside of Arkham. Bruce’s life was climbing in a steady, uphill line.

That is, until fate throws Batman a wrench. With every new death he finds, the case grows more chaotic, and the bigger it gets, the more dangerous his lifestyle becomes.

Soon Bruce’s life is more uneven than ever, and the only real constant seems to be John.

But can he even hold onto him, when their worlds are changing so much?
Prologue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gotham Harbor always had a peculiar smell. There was the scent of the river, rotting wood, and seagulls with the odor of diesel and bunker fuel from the variety of ships in the docks.

And of course, there was the stench of dead fish that carried on the wind. It was that sickening sweet odor of death that Bruce always picked up on first, and it always made him think of his first case working with then-Lieutenant Jim Gordon. He’d never forget the sight of the dead salesman buried under a pile of yellow perch.

Bruce always hoped he’d never see another body around there. He was usually proved wrong.

“Any sign of them yet?” Tiffany’s voice asked over the communication link in the cowl.

“No, not yet,” Bruce answered, adjusting the focus on his cowl’s lenses. He sat perched near top of the nearby cell tower, watching the harbor line for the sign of the cargo ship drifting in amongst the fog. “Any movement down below?”

Tiffany snorted. “I think ‘Dice’ is going to lose his round to ‘Muddy’ at the table, but other than that the only thing going on down there is the weird tension between the two lookouts and ‘Four-Ears’. I swear he’s not actually reading that book…”

“Their delivery is late. They’re bound to be tense.”

“I dunno… What kind of name is Four-Ears for a leader of a gang, anyway? It sounds more like an insult than anything.”

“He’s not the leader, he’s a leader. Black Mask is the leader. He gives all his major subordinates nicknames to distinguish them from the rest of the group, unless there’s two of each name within the lower ranks.”

“…are you telling me ‘Muddy’ is that guy’s real name?”

“Yes.” Bruce answered, looking back out at the harbor. The fog was fairly dense, rolling over the water in slow streams, covering everything like a delicate blanket. The warm air of late May caressed the exposed skin of Bruce’s face, reminding him of the last time he’d been so close to the harbor on a case…

It had been over a year since the travesty the Riddler and the Pact brought to Gotham. Thirteen months and nine days.

Bruce heard the message tone in his ear like a small sonar beep. It wasn’t often he got a text message that late at night. He knew who it was from before he even glanced down at his gauntlet to read it.

Still on night duty?

Yes, Bruce typed back. It’d be better if you were here, he added honestly. Tiffany was still at the base, keeping lookout via camera drone, but it wasn’t the same as having a physical presence there.

The feeling’s mutual! I keep hoping I’ll wake up next to you…
Then I’d be able to make EVERYTHING better ;D

Bruce felt the corner of his mouth curve upward, despite the roll of eyes. I gave you that phone for emergencies. Sweet-talking me doesn’t count.

My heart burns for you like a match thrown on a box of oily rags!!!!

Doesn’t THAT count??

He was tempted to ask if John couldn’t even wait three days since he’d last seen him, but truthfully the time between their visits had gotten shorter and shorter as weeks passed. Bruce didn’t like keeping away for long, either.

A box of oily rags, though? That was a bit far, even for him. Almost concerning.

But he wouldn’t be John if he didn’t go a little overboard.

Bruce was halfway into typing ‘I don’t think I have enough burn gel for that’ when another text stopped him.

Come what sorrow can, it cannot countervail the exchange of joy that one short minute gives me in your sight, fair Bruce ♡♡♡

He stared down at his gauntlet. He was getting quoted Shakespeare.

No, that wasn’t quite right - he was being wooed with Shakespeare.

That was…definitely a first. It was bizarrely pleasant, leaving a warm feeling in its wake.

I’ll see you tomorrow. Get some sleep, Romeo.

So soon?? :o

Stay safe for me, then, Brucie ♡

“Batman?”

Bruce blinked, closing the message system on his gauntlet so he could resume looking at the horizon. Sure enough, there was a shadow of a boat finally showing behind the fog.

“You got awfully quiet there for a moment. Who was the text from?”

“…how did you know I got a text?”

“I see the notifications for your gauntlet on this thing, remember?” Tiffany answered with a laugh. “Eight texts on duty, huh? Someone special you’re not telling me about?”

There was no way he was going to tell her he was texting John. “You said the heroin was coming in disguised as fan merchandise. What kind was it?”

“Don’t try to change the subject. This is the fifth time in two weeks you’ve gotten texts while I’m manning the cave. You have to tell me about them sometime.” Bruce winced, his good mood quickly disappearing. “Anyway, it’s all Sunset stuff. You know, that vampire thing from a couple years ago? I’m pretty sure they said it’s inside those weird plastic figures with the big heads. The heads are hollow, so they probably filled them with heroin and put them back in the collectible boxes.”
Bruce zoomed in on the ship in the distance. It didn’t seem to be in a hurry… It was a commercial fishing boat, not overly large, but it could certainly move faster than that. Bruce tried to watch the waves crash against the crest of the boat, but the water lapped at it as if there was no propelling force. “I think it’s stationary.”

“What, you think they’re going to take a lifeboat to the dock?”

“That’s possible.” If they did, it meant they would not be dropping off the heroin shipment right away. What would they come for? Payment first? That seemed like a poor decision…

Bruce scanned what he could see of the deck. Nothing out of the ordinary… But no sign of life. Even the dim light in the captain’s cabin showed only the silhouette of a man in the chair.

Warm wind hit his back, and Bruce heard the ends of his cape flap whip at his ankles.

Something was wrong. It was too lifeless. Too simple. There should be someone on deck when the boat was that close to the docks, keeping a look out for any signs they would be disturbed.

“I’m going out there,” Bruce said, gaging the distance between the tower and the boat. With the wind, he should get a good enough glide. Getting back would be harder – he might have to swim.

“Wait, what?”

“Something’s not right. The boat’s not running. I’m going to go check it out.”

“…normally, I’d ask if you were insane, but I already know the answer to that.” He could practically hear the light frown she was wearing; he narrowed his eyes at the light ableism. “You’d go even if I told you not to.”

Bruce frowned. “I wouldn’t go if you had a good reason for stopping me.”

Tiffany sighed over the communicator. “Do you want me to call Gordon?”

“Not yet. I’ll tell you the second I think we need backup.”

“So, what, two seconds after they start shooting you?”

Bruce ignored the comment and took a running leap off the tall warehouse, his cape outspread as the wind picked up, gliding him towards the small ship. He was almost weightless, flying freely through the foggy night.

It was simple and short, but the moment was always worth living in.

He landed on the edge of the boat, his boots hitting the metal of the front as he grabbed the railing with both hands and hoisted himself up as quietly as he could, his cape fanning out behind him.

Just as Bruce had thought, the motor wasn’t running. There were no footprints or signs of movement on deck. There wasn’t as much as a whispered conversation.

It was all quiet, and quiet on a boat like this meant something was seriously wrong.

He ran through scenarios in his mind. The motley crew of Black Mask’s lackeys back at the dock might have rigged it to explode. Or perhaps it could be an ambush job for him; they could be hiding, waiting for him to go below deck and then spray him with bullets.

It would be best to investigate the captain’s cabin – he could easily get there by hooking onto part of
the roof-line and grappling up to the door. The lack of lights on deck would make it impossible for the captain to see him there now, so he should be safe...

The whir of the grappling line cut through the silent fog like a piano wire through butter. With still no noise out there, Bruce was getting that creeping feeling at the back of his neck.

The cabin creaked open in a rush as Bruce readied Batarangs in each hand, primed to throw at whoever was behind the door.

No one was there, aside from the captain, stiff in his seat, the dull yellow light of the control panel barely illuminating him.

It wasn’t the eerie stillness of the person in the chair that clued Bruce into what really happened, but it was the unpleasant smell of urine that lingered as Bruce stepped closer to examine the man.

A dark red line ran across the man’s pale neck. The crew-neck shirt was soaked with blood. Slight bruising on his forehead, suggesting he’d been held still. The man’s eyes were still blown wide in surprise. It was almost comical, with the small o-shape his mouth was set in.

His death been fairly recent. About an hour. A quick scan with his glove turned up no trace evidence.

“Oracle – the captain’s dead. His throat’s been cut.”

“Uh, there’s no chance it was mutiny, was it?”

“Doubt it. Call Gordon; I’m going to look below deck.”

“Got it.”

Bruce swept away, not seeing anything else of note in the cabin.

The lower deck was also suspiciously silent. Bruce made sure to walk slowly, wary of any trip wires or traps, and keeping his eyes and ears open for any hint of sound. It could still be an ambush.

The cargo hold had piles of cardboard boxes, all with the Sunset logo printed on top next to the word FIGS in a spiky word balloon. Bruce understood the collector’s value of such things – he still had pieces of Gray Ghost memorabilia stored in their original boxes in his media room’s display case. There must have been a few thousand dollars’ worth of figures alone, but with the price of heroin, it might have been a several hundred grand more.

A small fortune worth killing over. But the boxes seem untouched. Why?

Even simple revenge between a rival gang wouldn’t have justified leaving several grand worth of drugs behind. There were some gangs that didn’t like dealing with illegal substances - either for fear of getting their hands too dirty, or the fact that such things were so often stolen or seized that it wasn’t worth the investment. Surely a group like that would have shot up the place… And it wasn’t like those groups to go head-to-head with the likes of Black Mask. At least not alone.

Bruce heard the light patter of tiny feet on wood. Rats. The sound was coming from his left. Past the tower of boxes.

And tucked away behind a stack, another corpse, accompanied by a pair of rats trying to nibble away at his hands and face. They scampered away behind the boxes at the sight of Batman’s shadow.
This second man hadn’t died so cleanly. There were several puncture wounds, as if he’d been
stabbed by someone playing five finger fillet on his torso. There was no instrument left behind, no
broken blades or anything helpful. The size of the wounds and lack of torn flesh suggested
something small and straight-edged, like a traditional switchblade or dagger.

Bruce ran his glove’s scanner over them, hoping to find any trace elements. Paint chips, hairs, fibers
– anything.

“Another body, huh?” It wasn’t really a question. Just subtle disgust from Tiffany. “Randolf Barron,
age 44, did time for smuggling, possession, and assault. Pretty sure the cotton-poly blend fibers
sticking in the wounds are from his shirt.”

“Nothing else?”

“Nada. Where’d you find him?”

“Cargo hold. He’s been here about an hour.”

“God… I hope you find someone alive tonight.”

Bruce doubted it. “So do I,” he muttered, hoping he was wrong in thinking it would be a very long
night.

He treaded carefully, hearing only a few squeaks and scampers of rodents. The kitchenette had two
people, sitting in plastic chairs with very bloody eye sockets on the sides exposed to the door. If the
blade was long enough, death would have been instantaneous.

Bruce unclipped the miniature-drone from his belt and let it fly into the air to take an aerial shot. He
didn’t want to risk contaminating the scene too much, and if there was someone hiding behind the
counter…

There wasn’t. He frowned, zooming in on the wounds to the eyes – the blades were long, shoved or
thrown in at an angle so they hit the brain. Near-instant death.

“Jack Whendleham and Kirby Noltz,” Tiffany repeated with a slight strain in her voice. “Both 39,
Gothamites, tried for breaking-and-entering, assault, assault with a deadly weapon, cocaine
possession… Ugh. What the hell is going on?”

“I don’t know, but there’s probably more. Are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll be fine… Just… I have this thing about eyes getting poked.”

No knives were left behind...but there were partial bloody shoe-prints moving from the doorway to
the table. He’d need a closer look, but at least it was something. He might be able to piece together a
full size, analyze the wear on the treads…

The killer could still be on board.

Bruce swept away, letting the drone fly in front of him as he kept a vigilant watch. There was no
other sound aside from his muffled steps and the low hum of the drone.

There was a storage room, packed with more boxes…

And four more bodies, laid out in the middle of the floor with their heads all pushed together.

“Oracle, send your drone out here to check-“
There was a slight noise coming in over the ear-piece, like a firework had gone off in the distance.

“I can’t, Black Mask’s gang is on the move!”

“What?”

“Their van exploded, they’re leaving the warehouse! I can follow them but-FUCK!” Tiffany shouted, and Bruce heard the tell-tale sound of her fist hitting the desktop. “My feed cut out! It’s...UGH! Fuck them! They took it out! I’m not getting a power signal!”

“Oracle, send Unit Three out to try and track them. I need to finish searching the ship; the killer could still be on board.”

“I can’t, Three’s too far away, it’ll be too late,” Tiffany explained frantically, “What do we do?”

Bruce cast a look at the bodies. “The shipment will be in custody shortly. We’ll get other chances at the Black Masks; this takes priority.” He took a breath, trying to clear his head. “Alert the GCPD about the warehouse. Get Three out here and try to scan the area.”

“...I need to bring it in for repair; the bio-scanner is malfunctioning.” There was a split-second pause. “I could throw on my gear and be...”

“No. Surveillance photos will do. We’ll look over the CSI findings later,” Bruce emphasized, his voice-modifier grumbling over the line.

He let the drone fly up and get an aerial shot of the four dead men, hearing the whir of the machine and the light ‘click’ of the camera, and sighed to himself as he looked at the image on his gauntlet.

“It’s going to be a long night.”

Chapter End Notes

Welcome back, my friends, to the middle of a new series I call “The Perseverance Project” - as *At the Brink of Midnight* was my Season 3, consider *The Tolls of Justice* my Season 4; and an unnamed Season 5 will be released sometime after 4 wraps up. I have such sights to show you... A new “game mechanic” that will be introduced next time, old characters returning that I won’t spoil yet, new relationships to grow, fresh villains to introduce - we’re going to have so. much. fun! (§ fiz Disqus)

If you’re ever in doubt of my new bi-monthly update progress, please visit my profile page here, or check my “btts s4” or “ttoj” tag on my tumblr. Please keep in mind that I have much less time to write now that I’m fully employed - but the drive I have to finish what TellTale could not is currently shifted into the steady high speed of fifth gear. But I can’t stay at that leisurely cruise forever, so it’s bound to shift now and then to slower gears, and I know there will be days where it’s stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic. So I hope you’ll bear with me, and give me some encouragement on the way. And since the next chapter is already written, and I love you guys so much that I don’t want to keep you in suspense for too long, it will come out early - so I’ll see you same time next week! (˘んですけど　˘)
Thank you for all your kind words!!! ( "∀"人 ) ♥ I'm slowly reading that nice pile of new TT works you all made! ♥♥♥

**Important Spoiler Tags:** more talk of dead bodies, blood mention, mental illness

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John Doe stared wide-eyed up at the whitewashed ceiling, feeling his breath catch in his chest and release too fast. He could practically hear his heart thudding in his ears like the world’s worst wake-up call.

*Where am I?* He asked himself.

He turned his head as he tried to breathe slowly. Dull light streamed in through the thin chicken-wire over the window - a standard of mornings in Gotham. There was flat blue paint on the walls, a familiar photograph sitting on a nightstand, a clock (*oh*, it was 7:20, that was helpful) and a phone there that he wasn’t technically supposed to have.

He snatched the phone off the surface and swiped up, barely paying attention to the illuminated rollercoaster that was his lock-screen. A selfie of himself and Bruce Wayne greeted him, only partially obscured by a couple of icons. He’d taken the picture three days ago, during their last visit; he could see the phone’s little timestamp in the corner, underneath the clock. He took a deep breath and focused on Bruce’s face.

Bruce had worn that *really* good cologne that day. He could smell it lingering on his own shirt for hours afterward, bringing to mind memories of his short stay at Bruce’s house.

He felt his panic start ebbing away. He wasn’t in Arkham Asylum anymore. He wasn’t in the Old Five Points, either, or the abandoned Funhouse, or Ace Chemicals. He wasn’t dreaming or being delusional or…

John pinched himself and winced slightly at the sharp sting it made in his wrist. Nope, he wasn’t under any kind of drug-based hallucination, either. Just like the day before that, and the week before that, and the fortnight before *that*.

But his subconscious apparently hadn’t caught up with reality just yet. He kept *dreaming* of everything else. Everything that could have gone wrong, or everything that *did* go wrong, but amplified by twenty.

Things should be different now. They *were* different now. Bruce was fine. John was….well, *here*.

The halfway house he was in was one of the better ones in the city. It wasn’t the *best*, of course, considering John’s past...*difficulties*, but it was better than where he’d ended up last time. There weren’t any bars on his window, his room actually had some color in it that wasn’t just a stain, and the only rat he’d seen so far was *outside* of the building.

His thumb hovered over the messenger icon on the screen, and he looked at the little digital clock in
the corner. Was it too early? Bruce had been on patrol, and he’d already bugged him after one nightmare.

But it was a different one. He’d only dived over the railing towards that bubbling vat of chemical waste before. He’d had that dream before, always feeling like he’d fallen onto his back on the mattress afterward; he was almost used to that one.

This time he’d been covered in blood. He could only see the Funhouse floor, the countless bodies there, forming a grotesque ring around him, staring at him with unblinking dull expressions...

John rubbed his forehead. He really didn’t want to think about it anymore. He wanted a distraction and comfort and Bruce’s soothing voice in his ear.

His phone buzzed in his hand, and the first line from Bruce’s text dropped down from the top of the screen.

John hit it like lightning and let his brain simulate Bruce’s voice.

I’m close by. Can I come see you before work?

Bruce was heaven-sent, surely. A gift from a god of some sort. An absolute treasure John didn’t deserve to even look at.

He hovered over the keyboard. Should he wait a minute? Should he just say yes with all the exclamation points he felt in his heart?

No, no - Bruce might want to see him to get comfort of his own. Which meant he needed to loosen up a little.

Ha ha, I knew you couldn’t resist me ;)

John waited a moment, his brain buzzing that maybe it wasn’t the best idea to joke with a man that might have stayed up all night again... Maybe he should amend it with a ‘j/k’?

What can I say, your raw animal magnetism has a tendency draws in bats.

John laughed to himself.

Ha ha ha! I bet I can amp up the magnetic power to get you here *faster*!

No need. I’ll be there in 5 mins.

...you’re that close already?

How’d you know I’d say yes?

I had a feeling you would.

Plus this is important.

Important. So, a nine-out-of-ten chance it was about Bruce’s stakeout last night. John pushed aside the budding worry that something had gone horribly wrong - Bruce was talking to him. If he wasn’t fine (or at least Bruce’s definition of it, which was ‘alive and secretly hurting somehow’), he wouldn’t be speaking to him.

Unless someone had found out about his secret identity, knocked him out (or worse), stole his phone,
discovered where John was staying, and was coming to kill him and taunting him about it by masquerading as Bruce...

...but that was a preeetty low chance.

Ok. Drive carefully, there’s a bunch of lunatics out there.

And I would know! Ha ha ha!!

I’m always careful.

I’ll see you soon.

Ten minutes, five minutes - hell, John could be ready to see Bruce in one minute. He threw on the closest things from the drawer, smoothed his hair back, and paced over the tiles a little, darting his eyes out the window towards the mediocre parking lot. It was funny how different it looked compared to Arkham. He still sometimes felt like he’d wound up in a different wing of it rather than a whole new place...

He blinked, remembering that St. Dymphna New Life Home had a somewhat different set of rules and that he could leave his room. And unlike Arkham, he didn’t have to ask or do someone a favor or play innocent. (Most of the time, anyway…)

He was already out in the hall, feeling like he should rush even though he knew he didn’t have to, passing other rooms, other snoozing patrons, turning a corner, and smacking right into Mickey.

Mickey Williamson had a serious case of ‘resting bitch face’. Well, that coupled with paranoia and aggressive issues.

“You trying to start somethin’, clown?” Mickey grunted, staring down at John.

From anyone else, it would’ve been a threat, but John had helped Batman take down Bane; this guy was a limp noodle in comparison. Still, picking a fight - even a verbal one - wasn’t a good idea. Neither was shrugging it off. “Only part one of my plan to brighten your day,” he joked. “I know you don’t like loud noises. How else am I going to get your attention?”

Mickey gave a short hmph, clearly satisfied. “...what’s the plan?”

He definitely wouldn’t buy that it was a secret. “A joke! Why are lawyers buried ten feet underground?”

Mickey looked up at the ceiling for a brief moment. It was hard to tell if he was rolling his eyes or thinking about it. “Okay, why?”

“Because deep down, they’re not that bad!”

Mickey gave a short, boisterous laugh that was definitely genuine-sounding, despite the smile slipping off his face shortly after. “Okay, that was much better than the one about the rotisserie chicken you told Chuck yesterday.”

“Yes, I guess when there’s more than one meat that cooks like that it kinda takes away the punch…”

He crossed his arms. “So what’s part two of ‘plan’ of yours?”

“What, and ruin the mild surprise? Mickey, how long have we known each other?”
“Four weeks.”

“Exactly! And have I ever done you wrong in all that time?”

His jaw shifted slightly. “That green sauce you told me to use the other day made everything too spicy.”

“Okay, honest mistake on my part, I didn’t think you’d use that much… But that aside?”

“...no,” he admitted with a slight shrug.

“Mm-hm! So trust me - it’ll put a smile on your face!” John emphasized with a click of his fingers towards his bulky neighbor and a grin of his own as he slunk away. “Probably,” he muttered to himself, completely unsure of what he would do next. Mickey might not have been as scary as Bane, but John was constantly trying to be on his best behavior, so getting on Mickey’s good side - along with everyone else’s - was for the best.

John glanced briefly the camera in the corner of the open stairwell, seeing it still pointed down the hall. He knew from the angle and shape of the lens that the corner of the stairs was a safe place to talk if Bruce didn’t want his lips recorded.

The thought made him giggle a little to himself. It took two flights of stairs to get down to the welcome area, where’d he’d no doubt have to wait as Bruce signed more pointless pieces of paper and -

And there he was. Bruce Wayne, standing there, signing away another visitor’s form and chatting up the easily-charmed nurse for the sake of his public image.

He was radiant, even under the fluorescent lights. A gorgeous demigod - no, a hero, a warrior of the highest class, out to mingle amongst the common criminals without his armor. John felt like the atmosphere had shifted and grown warm, and there was something about the way Bruce’s flirtatious smile wasn’t reaching his eyes that made John’s stomach feel all light.

The real smiles were all his. His, his, his.

He knew he had to wait until Bruce passed through the little security check, but for what felt like for the hundredth time he just wanted to walk over it and ignore everything that stood in the way of them. His fingers itched to touch Bruce, grab his hand, his wrist, anything, and he couldn’t. He shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked on his heels, waiting, waiting, and smiling wider as Bruce caught his eye.

It didn’t matter how small the little smile back on Bruce’s face was, it was genuine. It made John chuckle: that silly girl at the front desk thought she had half a chance with Bruce? Ha!

John barely heard the guard talking about how they should go to the visiting room a-s-a-p. He knew the rules - visits were a maximum of sixty minutes, they had to be conducted in the visiting room unless a doctor signed off otherwise, and if a therapy session, work, or a meeting with the social worker was scheduled John would have to go to that no matter what.

Blah, blah, blah. There was no rule on how long they could take to walk to the visiting room. And John was willing to bend and break rules into tiny pieces for Bruce any day.

“Hey, John.”

“Hey, Bruce,” he echoed back in the same tone, grinning just a little wider. “You’re earlier than I
“I drive fast,” Bruce shrugged with a small smirk. They left the guard to pretend he wasn’t listening or watching them leave in his peripheral vision. “You doing okay?”

“Is our new mayor crooked?”

“…possibly?” Bruce answered tentatively.

“Exactly!” John joked.

Bruce wasn’t keeping his eyes focused on the stairs. Cautious concern worked its way onto his face, which John felt simultaneously annoyed and relieved at it. It was amazing having him for support - every doctor he’d ever had stressed how important a good support system was - but sometimes it made John feel like he was being babied. “I’m not sure how to take that.”

“Take it any way you want! Doesn’t change the fact that I always feel better when you’re here.”

Bruce frowned slightly. “Is something wrong?”

John rolled his eyes. Bruce was toeing the line of babying. Why could he not take a good dark joke? “No, Bruce. I’m not being mistreated, I can take care of myself, and I’ve taken my meddies like a good boy.”

Bruce’s frown deepened, and he got that stern look that made John’s brain give a little burst of adrenaline. His more dominant side always made John want to challenge him… and swoon, usually at the same time. Bruce took hold of his arm, his grip firm but not entirely threatening, and pulled him discreetly underneath the camera so they wouldn’t be seen; both stood side-by-side with their backs against the wall, Bruce’s grip on his arm loosening. “You’ve texted me in the middle of the night several times this week. I know you’re not sleeping well.” His too-blue eyes searched him. “I won’t say anything if you’re not okay, John. I just want to know what’s wrong.”

John thought briefly about retorting with ‘you’, but that was so incredibly untrue that John couldn’t even try to lie with that sorry excuse. He couldn’t say he was ‘fine’, either, despite the habitual urge to. He wasn’t, Bruce knew it, and they did make that promise to be honest with each other...

“It’s just… you know, my brain, being… rude to me.” He knew that wasn’t a good enough explanation, but Bruce was giving his ‘I’m taking you seriously’ face. John always liked that expression. He didn’t see it enough on people. “I just keep having, you know,” John fumbled, rubbing the back of his neck to try and dispel some of the awkwardness, “bad dreams. I mean, straight-up barbaric ones, Bruce,” he felt his lip curl in a sneer at himself, “My brain compacts all my garbage memories and twists it into something worse.”

Bruce took hold of John’s hand so smoothly it actually took him by surprise. John stared at him, wondering if he’d said something wrong. He should explain, shouldn’t he?

“I think… I’m still adjusting. Like, I know you’re here, and I’m here, but… it’s like my brain secretly doesn’t like the change and is punishing me for it,” John continued, giving a short, nervous giggle, “Which is ridiculous, because this is more than I could’ve hoped for in a lifetime!”

“Have you mentioned this to Dr. Song?”

“Umm… sort of?” John gestured with his free hand. “Sans graphic details, but, uh, yeah.”

“Is it why you’ve been texting me so late? You wake up from them?”
He didn’t quite want to put it like that. He didn’t want to keep thinking of those stupid dreams. “That, and I miss you,” John answered with a sly smile. Their fingers were entwined - he stroked the Bruce’s thumb with his own, feeling the old tiny scar there, slightly smoother than the rest of his warm hand.

The reaction was more of what he wanted to see right then - Bruce had that sweet longing look in his eye.

“I’m literally counting down the days, Bruce,” John purred, feeling much more confident as Bruce’s face flushed a delicate shade of pink. “I’d do anything just to kiss you right now.”

“We shouldn’t,” Bruce replied, looking like he was trying to talk himself out of doing just that.

“That’s not what you said last time,” John teased quietly with a grin, turning to lean his shoulder against the wall. The delicious aromas of expensive cologne and hair conditioner clung to Bruce’s collar, bringing to mind the more sordid details of that last visit. “In fact, I remember you pinning me to the wall and kissing me until you couldn’t breathe.” He’d give anything (any mild luxury, a whole week of visits, all the good night’s sleeps he had left) just have a room alone with him for a while. “I’ve had a hard time thinking about anything else since then.”

He could almost see the struggle between reason and desire in Bruce’s mind. He tried to hide his little shudder as John leaned in a little more; oh yes, John had him right where he wanted him. Bruce might as well have licked his lips.

“Oh do you want me to do the pinning this time?”

John considered just pulling him forward and kissing him anyway, but that would ruin their little game. He liked seeing how far he could push Bruce. He watched Bruce’s baby-blues flicker slightly between John’s eyes.

The admonishment in his voice was gentle, like the squeeze he gave John’s hand. “We really shouldn’t.”

“All-right,” John said with a playful pout, “If you say so, Bruce.” He pulled away and crossed his arms, wanting something else to do with his freshly-warmed hands. “You got spooked when that door opened last time, huh?”

“It’s more like ‘I don’t want people to think you got out because of my influence’,” he retorted quietly with a slight smile.

“Well, they’re not wrong, Bruce. I wouldn’t be in here without you,” John pointed out with a shrug in the general direction of their surroundings. “But I get it. So, if you’re not here for a good ol’ round of canoodling, it must be work-related, huh?”

He looked slightly embarrassed. “I actually just wanted to see you.”

John felt his heart skip that middle beat. “Oh! I mean, when you said ‘important’, I thought… Oh, geez,” he blustered, tapping his thighs with his fingers, “You sure know how to make a guy feel special.” He brought his hands together, looking up at Bruce with his best puppy-eyed expression. “But you’ll tell me how last night went anyway, right?”

Bruce had that cute little smile perking on the corner of his mouth. “Of course.” The smile slipped away just as soon as it appeared. “Not well. The shipment coming in was sabotaged before it came into port; I found all the crew dead.”
“Uugh,” John grunted, putting his hands in his pockets. “Did you at least get B.M.’s guys?”

“No. Their van combusted not long after I boarded the ship. G.C.P.D. found three dead, the last one’s presumed missing. We think it’s a rival gang - C.S.I. was still examining the wreckage when I left.”

“Sounds like a rough night.”

“It was. I barely got a power nap in before-”

“John?”

He glanced down the stairs, towards the voice - Devi, one of the few women staying there. She’d been there for three months already, coming out of her second stay at the county clinic.

“What’re you doin’? We got work in five minutes.”

“...we do?”

“Yeah, it’s Tuesday, man. You comin’ or what?”

He didn’t want to, but he should. “If I don’t make it down there, hijack the bus to wait for me,” he joked.

Her face lit up. “Hey, an upside: I can finally get one of Peralta’s Boston cremes in you.”

John grinned and gave a dramatic gasp. “Devi, you scoundrel, that’s dirty!”

“You’re the one makin’ it dirty, man!” Devi laughed, “I better see you down here in five, or I’m tellin’ the warden,” she teased as she turned the corner, her ponytail of tiny braids shifting as she walked.

Bruce had that calculating look. “I’m sorry, John, I didn’t know you had work today, either.”

“That’s okay, Bruce, I forgot entirely!”

Bruce looked far away, like he was thinking through something.

“Um, you okay?”

“...she didn’t question us standing here.” Bruce turned his gaze to him again. “Do you think she knows something?”

“Devi? Nahhh, she’s on the level.” Weeell... “Our level, I mean. Even if she ‘knows something’, she’s no rat.” Bruce still looked concerned, the big worry-wart. “Look, it’s fine - I’ll go get on the bus with the other crazies, go sit in a back-room sewing den where no one sees me for half the day, and text you if she tries to blackmail me so your other half can pay her a visit.”

Bruce’s little smile returned, making John want to just reach out and caress him like the treasure he was. “You don’t need an excuse to text me, John. You can do that whenever you want.” The sincerity made John’s stomach twist a little. “Just be careful. And have a good day at work.”

John wondered if everyone else in a relationship felt a little burst of joy at the simple well-wishing phrase. “Right back at ya, Brucie,” he said, nudging Bruce’s shoulder with his fist. He leaned in a little, lowering his voice just so Bruce could hear. “You know what I’ll do if anyone hurts you.”
Just as soon as Bruce got that complex look of desire-in-denial and mild alarm that John had wanted to see, John tossed him a wink and whirled around, leaving him to puzzle it out as he descended the stairs.

He grinned to himself, feeling much more relaxed and in-control than before. “Don’t stay too long, Bruce, or you’ll start thinking you live here!”

*~*~*~*~*

The Eastern harbor was one of the more seedy places in Gotham. Batman often fenced the place as part of his patrol, and John could name every mob that made a hit on the infamous 13th Street.

So naturally, it was one of the few sections of the city that would think of employing former Arkham inmates. It was a twenty-minute bus ride every morning to get to their respective jobs. Most of the residents in St. Dymphna were leased out to the laundromat or the incorrectly-named Lucky Hotel down the street. Occasionally one would go to the weird fish market to work in the back, gutting and descaling whatever was brought in. John was so far the only one to be placed in the Stitched Up Alterations joint next to the laundromat.

The bus was discreet, looking more like a white van with the city logo than a repurposed short school bus. It made John long for the flair of Lil’ Puddin’; it might have just been a stolen car he’d had repainted, but at least you knew who was coming.

He gave a little wave to Devi as he passed her heading towards the laundromat, leisurely making his way to the back alley around the place. He passed the always-smelly dumpster and the brick wall covered with graffiti - grinning slightly at the ‘fuck the agency’ tag someone had made with a decent imitation of his clown-smiley-face - and entered through the back door.

It was a small space, crowded with giant spools of various fabrics in all kinds of colors and patterns. There was a little group of headless dress forms in a few different sizes that he had recently cleaned the dust off of, one of which had what might be a burnt-orange off-shoulder dress pinned to it, likely for prom. Or was it homecoming? John never really knew which was which, but summer was only a couple of weeks away, which meant it was likely for whatever the last dance of the year was, and it was definitely new.

Though the color really wasn’t in season. It put him in mind of the fall, of the range of makeup he’d been eying in his few hours of freedom in Gotham half a year ago... He touched it, feeling the synthetic satin under his fingertips. It hadn’t been there yesterday, but it was real.

He passed the shelf of jars filled with colorful buttons, and the rolls upon rolls of fabric, taking a moment to run his hand over the beautiful purple broadcloth he’d half-hidden in a stack, and checked his lonely workstation. A pile of pieces to work on, all folded and tagged, sat at the table by the sewing machine.

He flicked through the pile. Boring, mildly interesting tack job, ooh nice pattern, boring, and S.Townsend. Beautiful calligraphy, almost like it was from someone with years of practicing their signature. (John would know – he had roughly eight years of practice and he knew his wasn’t anywhere near that pretty.)

“Why does that name sound familiar…?”

A quick search turned up a few results, but nothing recent stood out… There were too many famous S.’s with Townend, apparently – a musician, some newscaster miles away, a convicted murderer ten...
years ago, some yacht owner…

“Ah-haaa.” One of Gotham’s one-percenters. Sonja Townsend, the chairwoman of Wayne Enterprises. “Why would a member of Bruce’s round-table go here?”

The ticket was recent, made yesterday at closing and wanted in half an hour. An easy enough job - just adding a ticket pocket to a very new purchase. The tag for the jacket was still attached to the sleeve - on sale for fifty bucks, marked down from two-hundred.

“A big-wig who doesn’t always buy big, huh?”

That was...definitely strange. Suspicious, even, considering Wayne Enterprise executives made so much it was a surprise they didn’t try to declare themselves kings.

He unbuttoned it and checked the lining - there was a ticket pocket already there. It was certainly a man’s jacket, just...very small. And they didn’t want it taken in or shrunk?

Hmm.

He took the seam-ripper and tore through the thin stitches holding the pocket closed, wondering if there was something inside.

Nothing.

“You’re being paranoid, John. Dr. Leland warned you about looking too far into things,” he muttered to himself, “Even if it is really weird… There could be a decent explanation! But... Ugh, what would Bruce do?” his arms and staring at the annoying tag.

Bruce would question it, look at it from every angle… And research it.

John snapped a photo of the tag where The-Mysterious-Person-S had scribbled their signature and sent it to Bruce.

Hey buddy, does this handwriting look familiar?

I can’t check right now. In a meeting.

Fair enough. Looking at it from other angles it was.

John pat the sleeves, the collar, turned the inner-pocket inside out, thinking about the tiny packets of drugs he’d seen exchange hands at Arkham when he found something in the outside pocket.

An ordinary USA Express. No signature on the back, and the black stripe was very worn, but the card wouldn’t expire until next month; the unlucky name on the front was Michael Hodgson.

Huh. Well...no, it wasn’t finder’s-keepers, and John had already been told off for petty theft during his trial, but...it could be useful. Door locks could be picked with a card. As long as he didn’t buy anything with it, it was fine, right?

Right.

John stuck it in his back pocket.
Just as soon as he did, the door to the front opened, and John sat and moved the shirt like he was doing ordinary work as usual, pulling out the boring fabric that someone wanted to turn into a very boring pillow.

The manager came through, hauling a grocery bag of more fabric.

“Oh, John – can you… take a walk for a bit?” The smaller man asked, his mild Thai accent slightly more prevalent than normal. It only seemed to happen when he was nervous. “I have a special order I need to do back here. It will take up the bench.”

“Uh, sure, if you want. How long will you take?”

“A while. Just make sure you’re back in half an hour; the social worker’s dropping by then,” he said with a wave of his hand, moving in John’s way to force him back up.

Mr. Prinya definitely wasn’t supposed to tell him that. Those were meant to be surprise visits, to see how John was coping. “This isn’t some kind of test, is it?” John asked with a nervous little laugh, “Like you’re seeing if I’ll take the opportunity to skip out and report me?”

“You ask a lot for a man who wants this job.” Mr. Prinya put the bag by the stack of orders. “You leave, be back in thirty, both of us live to work another day.”

Ah. He was moving something. His accent came in a little thicker with the light threat, and his little show of bravado made John think it was probably against his will. Probably. But John knew the score – he had more than his share of experience keeping secrets in Arkham. And time away was beneficial for both of them.

“Hey, no worries,” John answered with his best understanding smile and a raise of his hands, “I get ya. I’ll just leave this one on the outgoing rack, ‘k?” He emphasized, picking up Townsend’s jacket.

Mr. Prinya gave a stiff nod, taking a seat in John’s chair and fiddling with his phone as John put the jacket on the wire hanger and threw it on the ‘outgoing’ rack by the door. He clearly didn’t want John to know what was in the bags. Probably for the best.

John left through the backdoor and stepped back into the alley.

He wasn’t far from the harbor. He could easily go have a look at the crime scene from last night by warehouse twenty-two… It was best not to get too close to it, though, so strolling by the actual docks wasn’t the best choice. He could go the roof of one of the buildings close to it instead. John had managed to get a close-zoom lens for his phone’s camera a little while back; it was a tiny thing attached to the back of his phone’s case, plugged into the audio jack for safe-keeping - all he had to do was clip it in place and he’d be able to have almost-binocular vision.

He took a quick look at the back of the laundromat. There was a camera by the door, but if he went juuust wide enough, he wouldn’t be seen by it’s all-seeing-eye.

The wire fence was a little difficult to climb in his shoes (he missed those ankle boots Bruce had bought him last year, the slight heel dug into crevices nicely) and he was never a fan of the feel of metal digging into his hands, but he managed to climb over the fence with a swing over the top and a hop to the ground without any injury.

John straightened his shirt, feeling a little accomplished, and set off for the sets of buildings closest to the docks, passing by graffiti in the twisting litter-coated alleyway - there was a poor imitation of the bat signal that someone had scribbled over and written ‘fuck batman’ next to, standard gang tags, non-standard gang tags, an anarchy symbol, a giant cartoonish bat chasing people…
Actually, *that* was one for the album! He *had* to stop and take a picture; one of the people looked like the Mayor. He didn’t even care it had a few of the tags in it - it was part of the *charm*, really.

He passed by one of the partially-repainted dumpsters, wrinkling his nose and walking faster when he smelled rotting fish parts, and spotted the ladder for the fire escape next to it dangling down partway into the alley. John was tall enough to tug at the ladder, but it wouldn’t budge.

The windows were mostly blacked out by something or other. If anyone lived there, he doubted they were home. It would be a damn good view, and close enough that the journey back wouldn’t make him late.

“Hm, to use the smelly abyss as leverage, or risk a minor injury?” He muttered aloud.

The dumpster was ancient and rusting. Not worth it.

John bent and jumped up, grabbing hold of the bars on the ladder and swinging his legs out to keep balanced as he climbed the first few bars. He checked the window by the landing and wiped his hands on his pants for good measure. The room there wasn’t as empty as he thought - the window had been darkened by thin film, like the kind they used for quick-fix window tinting, and the inside had some bare battered furniture. He could see a duffel bag half-hidden by a table leg.

Probably another runner. It was no use pondering about what they were running *from*. In *Gotham*, there were far too many choices.

The next two windows had curtains (or in one case, sheets that had been clumsily tacked on the panes that let John see someone watching bad on-demand porn) and the last one showed nothing but an empty room with an open doorway. “Man, how hard is it to get a little bit of human interaction around here?” He grumbled to himself. He’d at least like to *see* someone else properly for more than a minute. Or get an *idea* of them at least.

He looked out into the street below - three passers-by in matching grey-and-black hoodies, seeming to laugh it up as they passed. A street gang, maybe... They weren’t very observant, if they *were*; there was a perfectly good motorcycle just sitting at the end of the alleyway there. It couldn’t be *too* difficult to hot-wire. At least compared to a car.

There was one more ladder going to the rooftop - and upon poking his head over the top, John was unsure on how to feel.

Tiffany Fox stood near the edge of the roof, doing exactly what *he* was planning on doing - only she had a pair of *real* binoculars. And that tablet she used for her drones.

She looked different from the last time he saw her, too; she was dressed fairly professionally, making her look a little more mature despite the dark blue streaks littering the thick curls on the one side of her head.

He wished he had her number so he could just *text* her he was there. Sneaking up probably wasn’t the *best* thing to do, despite the little urge to spook her; she was being trained by *Batman*, after all.

Weird situations like this surely called for some playful banter. “What’s a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?” He asked with his best *film-noir-detective* voice.

It certainly got her attention. She whirled around looking like a frightened cat, reaching for her hip like there was something *useful* there. A taser, judging by the shape in the pocket. (John always wondered why women’s slacks had those terrible form-fitting pockets.)
The wary look on her face didn’t quite diminish when she noticed it was just him. Despite the better terms they ended on in the ambulance back in October, he didn’t completely blame her for distrusting him - they had matching scars, after all.

“John,” she said simply, “Don’t sneak up on me like that.”

“Ha, now you’re sounding like Bats, at least!” He chuckled, moving towards her to close some of the gap. He knew better than to get too close, though. He’d be the same way, if things were reversed; you never really knew what someone had hidden on them. “I would’ve thought you’d have developed that sixth-sense of his by now, after all you’re training, Tiff’.” (He made sure to keep of the ‘y’ he wanted to add. He remembered she’d said not to call her that; ‘Tiffy’ was reserved for brain-talk only.)

Tiffany’s expression shifted. She wasn’t just wary anymore, she had that little frown on her face that meant he’d crossed some unseen line. It couldn’t have been her name - was her training not going as well as Bruce had said? Or was it just one of those secretly-sensitive subjects?

“So… What’cha doin’?” He asked casually, stopping at the edge several feet away from her to look down into the street. “People watching, or crime scene watching?”

“Crime scene watching. Aren’t you supposed to be in that halfway house?”

He couldn’t decide whether the tone was accusatory or curious. It kinda sounded like both… Well, best to be nice about it. She had Bruce’s number on speed-dial, after all. “I am; I’m technically on a break from the mandated work. What about you, Tiff’?”

She raised a brow, and her tone was instantly recognizable; the same rebellious sort that came when someone nosy asked Harley what she was doing. “What about me?”

John fiddled with his phone, clipping on the magnifier lens to cover the camera. “Are you skipping work entirely, or just going in late?”

“Late. I would never skip.”

Really? Never-ever? He doubted that. “Eight hours a day, five days a week - and that’s not even counting your night gig. Doesn’t it wear on you?”

Tiffany didn’t quite seem focused on that tablet screen. “Sometimes. But last time I took time off, Bruce scolded me.”

“Do you mean he actually got angry, or he was he just like ‘Don’t be irresponsible, Tiffany. Just because my double-life allows me to up and leave work for as long as I can’t walk doesn’t mean you can take a break,’” John said in his best imitation of Bruce’s smoother-but-stern voice.

Tiffany gave a noise that might have been covering a laugh. He could see the smile on the edge of her mouth. “That does kinda sound like him.” She made a swiping gesture on the screen and looked over at him. “But it was more like he’s worried I’ll get too into the night job and go work on stuff without him.”

That wasn’t quite right. Bruce cared about people - more than likely, he just didn’t want Tiffany to get hurt or be in danger when Bruce couldn’t be around. John had caught sight of Batman staying outside of Arkham some nights when Bruce hadn’t stopped by in a couple of days, as if he was just checking up on things.

*That* was the type of person Bruce was - clearly it extended further where Tiffany was concerned,
and she was clearly tired of hitting that ceiling.

“So, like you’re doing now?” John grinned, focusing the camera on his phone to try and zoom in as far as he could on the remains of the van in the distance. They were just high up enough to see most of the scene.

Tiffany was finally smiling. It was small and smug, but it was a definite change from the last time he saw her. It reached her dark eyes, lighting them up like a little candle in the dark. “Yup.”

John squinted at the image of the wreckage on his screen. “Yeesh, that was some firework they planted. Looks like the whole thing went up in smoke.” He zoomed in as much as he could. “Wow, the back doors are either open or gone on that thing.” The strangeness of it seemed to click the second he said it. “Or the explosion came from the inside.”

“That’s what the C.S.I. think, too,” Tiffany answered. “The glass all shattered outward; I think someone planted it there. That, or the dumbasses left the keys in the van.”

John giggled at that. “Mobsters leaving their keys behind? In Gotham? No way.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if one of the more lunkheaded ones was in charge of driving.”

“No, no, you want the people with quick reflexes to drive, not the muscle. It’s why I was the designated chauffeur for the Pact,” he said somewhat proudly, “That, and Harley liked being driven around. Said it made her feel all fancy.” He scowled to himself as he felt his gut twist at the old memory. “Though Dr. Leland thought that was just another example of her using me for her own gain...”

“You don’t still miss her, do you?” Tiffany asked, the accusatory tone lacing in between caution.

John thought. He kind of did. Not the same way he missed Bruce - not by a longshot - or the same way he missed Dr. Leland.

He shot a look at Tiffany. Were they at the point of bringing up ‘personal’ stuff yet? They’d worked together before, and they were on the same team now… He supposed that there wasn’t a better time to find out than now.

“It’s...more like I miss the fact that I could talk to her. Being in her company was easy, you know? That sort of ‘natural connection’ thing. In hindsight, there were some red flags about our whole relationship...but I can’t just pretend everything that happened between us just never happened.” He breathed out through his nostrils, already angry even though there wasn’t even a Harley there for him to be angry at. “Even if she did try to hurt Bruce.”

“And left you behind several times, tried to kill me alongside Bruce, and took advantage of you at every chance,” Tiffany said pointedly, a sardonic sort of smile perking up. “You shouldn’t just value Bruce’s life that much - you’ve got your own, you know.”

John snorted. She sounded a lot like Leland, in her own way; neither of them really quite got his relationship with Bruce. “Not much of one.” Though... “I guess it is getting a little better.”

She had that sort of pitying expression on her face. He wasn’t really a fan of those. Sympathy was fine, empathy was better - but pity? He didn’t need that. He really, really wanted to just change the subject rather than deal with any conversation pertaining to that.

“Speaking of lives, though - any idea what happened with the ship? I can still kinda see it in the harbor.”
“...how did you know about it?”

“How else? Bruce dropped by this morning.” He saw the mild bewilderment there, and decided he might as well drive the point home and make her jealous at the same time. “He *always* shares his case details with me. Among *other* things,” he added slyly. “But I had to go to work, so the conversation got cut before I could hear the juicy details. You were on patrol with him, right?”

“I wasn’t there in person,” Tiffany grumbled, going back to tapping her tablet. (What was she *doing* on it, anyway?) “I was using my drone from the cave, before some trigger-happy asshole took it out.”

John remembered her father had made those; no wonder she was upset. He should offer comfort. Better comfort that the *last* time they’d spoken about her father. He’d learned what to say since then. “I’m sorry for your loss,” he echoed with all the sincerity he could.

She looked more puzzled at that than anything, but she didn’t look more upset, so that was probably a good sign. “Uh, thanks… Anyway, Bruce saw everything - I only got the data feed from his drones.” She tapped something, and seemed to think. “You sure you wanna see this?”

“I wouldn’t have asked if I wasn’t.”

“They’re pretty bad.”

He didn’t care. It wasn’t the blood or wounds that got to his head the last time he’d seen carnage second-hand; it was the ferocity, the terror on the people’s faces, the *familiarity* of it all that brought back the memory of the manic episode that had spiralled him to his worst point, and it made him feel very...*displaced*. But it wasn’t video, and John’s curiosity and his drive to help Bruce overrode everything else.

He wanted to squeeze something. He settled for putting his hands in his pockets and feeling the back of his phone case. “I can handle it.”

Tiffany turned the screen towards him. “There were eight victims. Most of them were stabbed.”

There were two men sunken in plastic chairs in the ships kitchenette, each with one of their eyes gouged out.

It was the kind of thing to put a sharp *thrill* in his gut and made the neurons in his brain fire away; enough to make him smile. No weapons in the wounds, and from such fun *angles!* “You know, I’ve always wanted to see a knife thrower in person. I wanna find out how they *do* that.”

When he looked back up, Tiffany’s nose was wrinkled in the kind of stern disgust that Bruce displayed at the sight of dead bodies - only she lacked the spark of intrigue he always had. (Guess she wasn’t as far along in the training as he thought…) “Knife-throwing, huh…”

“Yeah, with *reeeally* long blades - I mean, I think some butter knives are big enough to hit the brain, too, but they’re probably harder to aim just right.”

Her frown deepened. “I don’t want to know how you know that…”

“It’s kind of obvious,” he answered anyway, unsure of how else he would know, “I mean, look-” He spread his thumb and forefinger to measure and held it up against his head, “it’s at least three inches to the temporal lobe; butter knives aren’t *that* long! Unless it’s for the world’s largest stick of butter.”

He was clearly *close*… Just a scoach more, and she’d *surely* crack. Her frown turned upside down
for a little bit, there. The wall was dropping, further and further - he had to *time* these things just right…

Tiffany swiped on the screen, her expression souring at the sight of whatever-it-was, and his tiny hope died like a butterfly caught in a snowstorm. That was too serious a look to run with.

So he dared to scoot a little closer and peer over her shoulder, catching sight of the overhead image of the ship’s storeroom.

Four unfortunate men were laying on their backs, positioned so their arms crossed their chests like they were newly-buried pharaohs. Their heads all touched, three nestled snug together at forty-five-degree angles while the last one touched them all in the middle; a *three-to-one* ratio.

John itched to just grab it out of her hands to have a better look. He clenched his hands once and released halfway, forcing the impulse to pass. He didn’t want to be *rude*, even if they weren’t on the *best* of terms; and she was clearly in a rebellious streak, so acting demanding was right out. “Can I see that?” He asked instead, as politely as possible.

“Please?” He continued, seeing the morbidly-curious look in her weirded out face, “Just to check something?”

She was more guarded than ever, looking straight at the tablet in her hands...

*At her right hand, just briefly, thinking back to the knife he’d plunged into it that day months and months ago, debating on whether or not she could trust him with even holding one of her tools when he’d trusted her completely back at the skyrail station -*

“Alright,” she said finally, holding it out to him and letting him take it without another word of protest. He could see the faded scar on her palm, not quite identical to his. Like fraternal twins. *Just how deep does that parallel go,* he thought. “What are you checking?”

“The shape,” he answered, pulling open the editing menu.

He started doodling over it, first in pink - red was too close to home, in this case. A large inverted triangle...

No…a trapezoid on top of a pole, perhaps?

He switched to neon yellow. A miniature upside-down triangle, with a point down. That looked better.

He switched to green, tracing a line over each body. A trident, maybe? *Maybe.*

It was… *Something.* He’d *seen* it before. Somewhere, *sometime*…

“Have you ever seen this before?” He asked, keeping the tablet flat in between them so they could both look.

“I dunno, gang symbols? There’s a lot of weird ones around,” Tiffany said. “I know someone in the Cauldron uses some weird triangle as their tag…” She looked at him, no more wariness or caution or anything negative in her expression. Just simple curiosity. “Does it look familiar?”

A phrase he’d heard a hundred times before. Always a *no.* Always followed with ‘are you sure’ and more *no’s* and follow-ups of ‘well what *can* you remember?’ in that same insulting tone that tried so *hard* to appear inquisitive...
John drummed his fingers against the tablet, feeling the material of the reinforced case under his short fingernails. He was talking to Tiffany Fox, on top of a roof, both of them taking time out from work to look into a crime scene.

He laughed at the ludicrousness of it - she could push him off the roof or tase him or escape with a grappling hook, and she was just here talking to him, like things were actually changing.

(They were, though. He could smell the smog and the harbor. It was real.)

John let the short laugh die out with a little cough as he saw the look at Tiffany’s face.

“Sorry,” he said, being used to apologizing for causing any level of ‘disturbed concern’. “But, no, it’s, uh, more like a nagging feeling.” She didn’t seem to understand that; her brow was raised, almost skeptical instead of curious, and still unsure of him as a whole. “Déjà vu with no direction.”

Tiffany actually looked like she was thinking about it, pulling apart the words in her head…

“That’s…a different way of putting it. So, you might have seen it, but you don’t know where or when?”

He rolled his eyes slightly at her. He wasn’t going to dignify that was a proper response.

“I guess I’ll look into gang symbols,” Tiffany said, carefully taking the tablet back. “I’ll go back a few years, see if someone revived an old gang or something…”

“Or they could’ve just stolen the logo,” John pointed out.

“True.” She stared down at the tablet, concentration furrowing her brow. “You know, you might be right… It is kind of that nagging feeling.”

“Speaking of nagging, you haven’t found out anything new about those Black Mask guys, have you?”

“Only that one is still missing. There weren’t any tire tracks or bullets casings left behind, so whoever killed them made a clean getaway…” She cast a look over at the crime scene in the distance. “At least until I get the footage back from the broken drone. It might have picked up something.”

John hummed. A rival gang on the hunt - they would likely send whatever pieces were left to Black Mask. “Were they found the same way?”

“No. The members we found were all shot.”

Interesting! “Head or torso?”

“Does that really matter?”

“Depends on how sloppy our killer was!”

“. . . I don’t know how you’re so enthusiastic about this,” Tiffany grumbled, eyeing him scrupulously.

“Oh, come on, Tiff”, crime’s my specialty! We’re investigating a potential gang war, here - if it’s mostly headshots, it’s professional executions, which means a rival mafia sending a message; if it’s torsos it’s more likely to be newbies,” he thought for a moment. “Unless it’s the Corazón troupe, of course. But I’m pretty sure they’re all dead. Or really old.”

It was clear to see she hadn’t thought of that. “I’d say it looked like upper-body shots from the
pictures I saw last night. I don’t have those handy, though. I’ll bring it up with Bruce.”

Hm. Hm, hm, hm. The van exploding, the crew ending up dead with only one missing as a hostage or informant - it sounded too much like a professional job. Someone planned it carefully. So why did one group get stabbed, and another shot? And why were the knife marks so precise when the shots were… Well, they could be precise. He’d have to see the pictures. Or at least hear of it.

“Speaking of him, I gotta go. I don’t want to be too late,” Tiffany said, tucking her tablet away.

“Ooh, before you do-” John quickly opened a new contact page and pushed the phone at her - “here, I don’t want to have to surprise you every time I see you.” There was the small chance she’d take it and throw it over the building, or slap it out of his hand, or just give him that weirded-out look she got sometimes or -

Tiffany defied the anxious conspiracies his brain was spinning; she took the phone and dutifully punched the number in, handing it back without any kind of strange look. “I better not find myself added to any weird listings,” she said jokingly, offering a small smile. A peace offering.

“Not even cute cat videos?” He teased, adding the fox and computer emoticons to the end of her name.

“I’ve already got a playlist on UBox for that,” Tiffany shrugged, heading back towards the fire escape. “Bye, John.”

“Bye, Tiff,” he echoed, thinking for a second, “I’ll let you know if I find anything.”

She blinked, turning for a moment, her hands already on the ladder railing. “You think you can find something from the inside of the halfway house?”

She was underestimating him. It was an advantage sometimes, but mostly it just annoyed him. He wasn’t anywhere close to Bruce – a man of the world in every sense – but he did have some physical power and brains and could put things together when they interested him enough. “You think that could stop me?” He answered, thinking back to every little secret he ever learned within the padded walls of his former home. “I’ve got my ways, Tiff’ – I have access to stuff you and Bruce could only dream about.”

He saw the wariness return on her face. She was unsure of what he knew and how he knew it, and just what he did to get people to talk, or what he did to take.

But like hell he’d tell her. She wouldn’t get it. Not now, at least. Maybe someday. “Be careful out there,” he added, letting the seriousness sink in before turning back into something more optimistic for both their sakes, “and have a good day at work!”

Tiffany left his view, and John cast one more look out at the crime scene in the distance.

At least he had some new things to think about at all hours of the day. Two groups of filthy criminals pitted against each other over their petty toys, unaware that Batman would be hell-bent on stopping it, using his loyal assistants who were waiting and watching from the shadows for help…

But the questions were what their precious toys were, and when and how Black Mask would get revenge – and figuring all that out would be easy once John could pinpoint who the rival group was. How fun!
Yes, Bruce might be the main character, but relationships work both ways - John is his own person regardless of what their relationship is like, so we get to see his life, too! (Yes, that means even if he’s a villain - though he’d probably start at a hideout rather than the halfway house, considering TT wouldn’t be likely to let him have any kind of redemption arc. But we have nothing to hold us back anymore! No bars, no chains, no gods, no masters!!! So villain!John can have a redemption arc too if you want, probably starting back in season 3 and continuing on here, because he’s an ill man who needs a support system and you can make it however you want!! Fight me, TT!!!! Oh wait, you can’t! Ahahahahahahaha!!!!!)

(You’ll still be missed by us all. Thanks for the fun and new beginnings, TellTale… I hope you know my teasing comes from [mostly] love.

Anyway, I thought it would be fun to have some new mechanics, so “drawing” and “photography” are now things “the player” can do practically free-style! And of course a big new addition is also “character perspective swap”, to focus on John for some of the time so “the player” can experience different sides of this story. And of course John’s choices affect the story, too! And depending on what you do with him…wait, that’s spoiler territory… I can’t tell you yet… You’ll have to wait along with me. But I pinky-swear it’ll be worth it. (°-•-°)b✧

I try to provide updates on tumblr/my Ao3 profile but nothing is guaranteed, so subscribing and/or bookmarking would be ideal for you to keep current! I hope to see you April 17 for our next look into this case! (• ω´-っ)☆☆
The grayish afternoon light streaming in through the expansive windows of the executive sky-rise office was nothing new, unlike the man standing before Bruce’s mahogany desk.

Or he might as well have been, in any case; Bruce could barely recall meeting him, and it wasn’t until he’d spoken that Bruce had remembered him at all. He was not very attractive, but not very unusual-looking either, with no defining scars or tattoos or anything distinctive. His brown eyes matched his flat, mousy hair, and he didn’t take to wearing the same minister’s collar like the other clergymen in the Coventry neighborhood of Gotham. He didn’t even wear a tie. The most distinctive thing about him was his voice - the sort you would hear on an audio-book. Listenable and somewhat unique, but the changes in pitch and waver weren’t outrageous, and it flowed smoothly from one emotion to the next.

“I just want to thank you again for sponsoring us,” Sebastian Overfield said graciously, still standing like Bruce hadn’t offered him a chair. “It’s quite generous of you to add our little charity to your gala’s roster.”

“I was happy to do it, Reverend Overfield. The Wayne Charity Gala draws a lot of donations; I’m always looking for ones that need a little extra help.” And ones that aren’t just hoarding the profits, Bruce thought to himself. “Besides, Mercy International is designed to help children; you’d have to be heartless to turn away a charity like that.”

Reverend Overfield hummed in agreement, casting a look at the picture of the elder Waynes’ wedding day still sitting on Bruce’s desk. “But as you and I both know, Mr. Wayne, we can’t always take simple acts like donations at face-value.”

Bruce felt his jaw clench. He didn’t care how true it was that his parents had pulled a lot of wool over the city’s eyes - they were still his parents.

The reverend hadn’t noticed. “Which is why I came to ask - do you attend church at all?”

“Not at the moment,” Bruce answered politely, knowing exactly where the question was leading.

The reverend gave an encouraging smile. “I thought not. Now, I know what you’re going to say,” he added, wrongfully assuming Bruce was just going to interrupt him, “but at my church, we value righting the wrongs of the past and moving towards a peaceful future. I think you’d be a perfect fit.”

A publicity stunt, perhaps. It wouldn’t be the first time. Bruce was tempted to treat it like any other offer he didn’t want and just say he’d take it into consideration. He looked hard at the man across the
desk - he might have the good reverend constantly pestering him for a proper answer if he just gave him a casual brush-off. “I appreciate the thought, but I’m really not interested at the moment,” he said, giving his best what-can-you-do smile.

“Are you sure?” Reverend Overfield asked hopefully. “I know you haven’t been to any house of worship since your friend’s tragedy,” he chose delicately, “but after all you’ve been through in the past couple of years, don’t you think it’s time for some kind of other support?”

“I’ll let you know if I change my mind, Reverend,” Bruce offered, not wanting to delve into the sticky concepts of personal faith and spirituality.

He looked far more disappointed than Bruce expected; the light faded from his eyes somewhat, like a candle burning too low. Yet his casual politeness didn’t waver. “I see,” he said as he pulled a business card out of his pocket. “Here - if you change your mind.” Bruce took it, barely glancing at the address. “And please, call me Sebastian; all my friends do.”

There was a brief knock on the office door before it cracked open in Bruce’s peripheral vision.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Wayne,” Gary rushed, pushing his rimless glasses up the bridge of his nose, “but Mr. Sionis is here to see you. He says it’s urgent.”

A small miracle, Bruce joked privately as he tucked the card into his breast pocket. “Alright - I’ll meet him in the executive conference room. I’ll be out in a moment.”

“That’s not necessary,” Roman Sionis’ rich voice piped up from behind Bruce’s secretary, sporting a very businesslike smile as he opened the door wider. “Your office suits me just fine.”

Roman stepped into the office in his polished Italian shoes like Gary wasn’t even there. “Hey, you can’t just-!”

Bruce frowned slightly as he stood. There were two large men standing by the door, looking very much like private security guards. “Thank you, Gary. I’m sorry about this, Sebastian,” he added towards the reverend.

Sebastian’s expression quickly shifted from what Bruce could swear was utter contempt to the same casual politeness he’d entered with, and shook Bruce’s outstretched hand with slightly more force than before. “That’s quite alright, Bruce. I’ll see you Saturday.”

Gary held the door open for the reverend, shooting one last disgruntled glare at Roman as the other executive just lackadaisically glanced around the office.

“I haven’t seen you in a while, Roman,” Bruce said carefully as Roman glanced at the shelf, sucking his teeth presumably at something sitting in the middle row. “I thought you were still in Bludhaven.”

“Nah, nah - I wasn’t planning to stay there, you know,” he joked lightly, taking a seat and gesturing for Bruce to join him as if the office didn’t have Wayne stamped on the outside of it. The ruby studs in his dark ears sparkled in the low light as Bruce sat down; they were the exact same color as the highlights on Roman’s off-white suit collar and the red cross-hatched tie. “You seem to be doing well, Bruce. I didn’t think someone like you needed religious counseling. I thought you had the same methods of coping with stress as the rest of us high-rollers; despite you being a little more private with it lately.”

Not even close. The playboy personality of the tabloids had cooled a bit in the past year; Bruce was trying to appear like he’d finally grown up somewhat. Mostly because he just didn’t have the energy to maintain such a persona anymore. “That was just a follow-up for the Mercy International charity.”
Roman looked entirely too relaxed for someone with ‘urgent business’. “Right, right - you got that fancy dance coming up. I always forget about it.”

*Because you don’t care*, Bruce thought to himself. “So, what brings you to my office? I haven’t seen you in here in, what, nearly two years?”

Roman was leaning back, watching Bruce with all the steadiness of a cat on the hunt. “I haven’t had a reason to - professionally, that is.” He pulled out his e-cigarette and took a puff. The vapor was oddly scented with rich tobacco and burnt vanilla, and was likely overpriced, judging by the gold the vape was coated with. “You know our families were friends?” He asked, not waiting for Bruce to interject, “My folks always said that if I ever got into trouble, I should call on the Waynes. Apparently your parents did mine a favor before either of us were born.”

Bruce was tempted to ask just what kind of trouble he was in, if he had to go asking the child of a secret-mafia family for help. He chose to let him continue.

“No, I don’t quite believe in owing favors for generations or anything. But I checked my horoscope today, and what do you know - it predicted that an old friend would be the one to help me with my troubles.” He slowly twirled the e-cig around his fingers. “Not that my little problem would be trouble for you.”

“So, you’re asking a favor?”

“More like we’re exchanging favors through business deal that will benefit *you* far more than me,” Roman continued, his deep voice almost like the purr of a mountain lion. “Janus Industries is on the market first thing Monday; I want *you* to be the one to buy it.”

He was offering to sell him his company outright? “Why?”

Roman watched the e-cig in his hand as he continued to slowly twirl it between his fingers. “I made a bad investment a while ago. I thought the team of developers I’d gotten were top-notch; turned out they weren’t as hot as their resumes claimed.” He returned his gaze to Bruce, not looking as resigned as he should be. “Thing is, I’ve had a *string* of bad luck lately. I don’t think I’m cut out for this job anymore - or Gotham. I don’t think it ever called to me, you know? Not like with you. You were born into all this,” he continued, gesturing to the grand office as he took another puff from his vape, “I had to work a little more for it.”

*You don’t exactly act like it.* Bruce held the cutting remark back, letting it sit acidly on his tongue. “So you want me to save your parent’s company?”

There was a spark in Roman’s dark eyes. “If you could.”

Bruce didn’t buy it for a second. He didn’t know whether Roman cared about his family’s legacy or not, but if he truly cared about selling it off he wouldn’t be walking around in a two-thousand-dollar suit and acting like he was the cock of the walk. He’d be more humble, more willing to make personal sacrifices. “I’ll take it into consideration, but for now, I’m afraid I have other work to do.”

“Come off it, Bruce,” he scoffed, “You could add Janus to Wayne Enterprises’ empire! You’d be taking over a whole new market - you’d be adding more jobs to Gotham than you could shake a stick at! It’d be a hell of a good investment.”

God, it would be so easy to twist that into an insult. Bruce held himself back, remembering that he had enough enemies on the streets as it was. “I’m sorry, Roman, but I’m just not interested,” he said delicately.
Roman narrowed his eyes, but there was something far too collected about his irritation. “‘Just not interested’, huh… I hear you’ve been saying that a lot, lately.” He smirked slightly, crossing one leg over the other and steepling his hands together. “At least to all the broken hearts you’ve left around town. Does that nutjob you’ve got stashed away give head that good or something? He doesn’t look it.”

Bruce wanted to punch him. He pushed the call button a little too hard instead, reminding himself that Roman would probably love a lawsuit. “Security, come escort Roman Sionis and his associates from the building immediately.” Bruce refrained from standing; he let anger boil in his fists, reminding himself that he could take out that anger later. He shouldn’t appear too pissed off, despite how he felt. “Get the hell out of my office,” he growled.

“I’ll take that to mean you won’t reconsider,” Roman countered, standing gracefully. “I’m sure the tabloids will be very interested in what I have on you and your little crazed affair.”

It felt like ice cubes had dropped into his stomach. Roman might actually know something; Bruce had been careless with John once, and one slip-up was all it took for their relationship to be thrown from the shadows.

But Roman hadn’t produced or hinted at videos or photographs. All Roman had was words, and words were an empty threat. And Bruce had already taken one tabloid to the cleaner for trying to print gossip surrounding his and John’s relationship, back before it was even real.

“I’m sure they’ll be falling over themselves to print blank pages,” Bruce shot back, standing to his full height and feeling like he was already wearing the cowl. He hoped that the Bat didn’t take over for him.“I believe I told you to leave.”

Roman ignored him, staring him down with an annoyingly knowing look. “You sure are defensive over one little lunatic you claim doesn’t get your rocks o—”

Bruce punched him in the cheek, leaving the man momentarily stunned as the doors swung open, two security officers striding towards them as Roman’s private security guards waited by the door. He flexed his fist, feeling the usual wear in his knuckles. “Get this man out of my office and put him on the restricted list.”

Roman gingerly touched his cheek, glaring daggers as he shifted his jaw to make sure it still worked. “You’ll pay for that.”

One of the security guards grabbed his arm, twisting it behind his back somewhat. “Come on, let’s go, Mr. Sionis.”

He straightened himself and went along with them calmly, glaring over his shoulder as they reached the doorframe. “No one hits me and gets away with it,” he called.

Bruce straightened his own jacket and sank back into his executive chair, still fuming when he was finally left alone. He wasn’t sure if it was the constant barrage of ableist remarks or the lewd implications that hit too close to home that made Bruce punch him. He’d probably goaded him just to make some ridiculous assault charge worth more than Janus Industries, and the paperwork alone was going to be enough to give Bruce a headache.

His phone buzzed, and for a moment he considered ignoring it and doing one of those short meditation exercises to get back into a calmer state of mind. But it could be something important; he checked the contact - unknown.
We need to talk.

There was a photo of the sportscar-turned-Batmobile attached, clearly taken from the driver side of a car parked next to his.

If you don’t hurry, it might be gone by the time you get here.

*~*~*~*~*

"Just come up to my office," he texted back.

I can’t risk being seen.

Then I can’t trust you.

If I wanted to kill you, I would’ve done it by now.

I’m here because I hate owing debts. And I owe you one.

For what?

Taking my collar off.

It seemed Selina Kyle was back in town.

As if things couldn’t get more convoluted.

Bruce was glad he was at the top of the organization. He didn’t need to answer nosy questions about where he was going or what he was doing; they all just assumed it was for something important.

He’d checked the security footage, of course. A black sedan with no markings and a tag that was definitely not one of his V.I.P.’s was parked in the reserved spot besides him, its tinted windows preventing him from seeing much of anything inside.

Bruce was nothing if not cautious. He couldn’t carry a Batarang around all day, but he did have one of his small stunners in his pocket. He’d started keeping one close ever since he’d gotten back into the Batsuit - something John had teased him for, pointing out that he might as well have ‘commandeered’ his joy-buzzer from the G.C.P.D. storage.

(Bruce had decided against telling him the super-charged joy-buzzer was already out of the evidence locker, waiting for it’s rightful owner. That was a surprise for another day.)

Bruce eyed the car in the car sitting next to his covert Batmobile - as far as he could tell, no one had left it. He eyed the corners and cars around him as he walked in the middle of the road, waiting for someone to try and catch him by surprise.

He stopped, looking at the cars sitting next to each other. He could see the outline of a person in the driver’s seat of the black car. Just one person, no obvious stowaways… Did he take the chance?

His phone buzzed.

I’ll roll down my window. Just speak to me from inside your car.

*~*~*~*~*

"How do I know it’s you?" He replied.

I found out who you really were after scratching your cheek the night we met.
It was her. There was too low a chance of anyone else knowing that, and an even less chance of her voluntarily working for the Agency to rope him back into one of their schemes.

It didn’t mean he could relax. She clearly wanted something, and they weren’t inclined to trust one another after everything that happened. He opened the driver-side door of his car and kept his finger close to the ignition button, just in case he had to make a quick getaway.

The car next to him suddenly rolled its window down, and Bruce turned - the rather tan woman in the driver’s seat removed her overly-large sunglasses, revealing the dark green eyes of Selina Kyle. She’d cut her hair so short there was no way she’d be able to put it in a ponytail. There was no trace of her usual cat-eye liner or lipstick.

Change of appearance, refusal to let herself be seen, dark windowed car - there was no doubt left in his mind. She was running from something big.

He rolled his own window down, shutting the battery off as soon as it was low enough.

“Long time no see,” Selina said with a smirk, “Still as much of a paranoid lone bat as ever?”

Bruce glared, but he didn’t feel as peeved as he normally would with her digging remarks. She looked like she was in more trouble than usual. “Why are you here, Selina? I thought you left Gotham to get a fresh start.”

“Some start,” she responded, her look souring. “It took a while to land on my feet. Believe it or not I actually didn’t want to leave Bludhaven. Things seem to have a habit of falling apart after they’re getting good,” she said, looking somewhat downcast. “Still, I guess it’s better than your pet clown is doing, with over half the city waiting to sink their claws into him.” Bruce bristled at the casualty of her phrasing. He was still stewing from Roman’s insulting assumptions. “Of course, you’re in the same boat, aren’t you? Only you’ve got more citizens and a little sidekick behind your back. Though I’m surprised she could go within a few feet of him during that ‘Scarecrow’ fiasco, all things considered...”

Bruce clenched his jaw. “Get to the point, Selina. I’ve got better things to do than listen to you insult the people I care about.”

“What, did you finally started caring about something outside of your stingy morals?” she shot back, not sounding as catty as she could be. She was baiting him.

He wasn’t going to sink to that. He let the air out through his nostrils, remembering to concentrate on the matter at hand. He could deal with his anger through a hard workout later. “You came here because you’re running from something. If you need a place to stay-”

“I don’t need a handout,” Selina interrupted. She looked annoyed that he’d suggest it. “If I learned anything from my experience in the Pact, it’s that I can only truly rely on myself.”

He couldn’t blame her for that, since he’d let her get thrown into the old puzzle-trap. He could say anything, do anything, and it wouldn’t make up for letting her get almost killed in exchange for saving more than a dozen other lives at the Lotus Spa. He’d made that decision on the firm belief that she’d escape. He’d hated himself for the what-ifs that choice had behind it and the consequence of completely losing her trust.

“I’m only here to repay my debt to you,” she continued, “The gang on the ship - were they shot, or stabbed?”

Bruce didn’t expect that. “All of the victims died from knife wounds appearing to be inflicted from a
distance. The only exception was the Captain.”

“Shit.” Selina sat back in the seat, frowning down at her lap. She gave a disgruntled sigh and brought her thumb to her bottom lip, looking like she was going to bite the long black nail; she just tapped her mouth once, twice, and then looked determined. “It’s too much to tell you to drop this detective act, isn’t it.”

He took in the worried frown and the warning in her stormy green eyes. “You know who’s behind this.”

“Not exactly. I had an encounter with someone back in Bludhaven who fits your M.O. - fast, quiet, and knife-happy.” She started the ignition, gritting her teeth. “You’re dealing with a professional, Bruce. They’re not the type to leave traces.”

Bruce had so many questions, but it seemed he only had time for one before she ran off. “Help me find them. What did they look like?”

“Sorry, Bruce, but I don’t feel like trying for another team-up,” she answered, her lip curled unpleasantly. “Your guess is as good as mine. They attacked me in my gallery during closing hours. If you’re that curious -” she reached out of the car, dropping a small flash drive into his passenger seat she’d fished from her pocket - “you can try and see for yourself. I’m getting the hell out of here while I still can.”

He knew she wouldn’t accept any help he offered after that. She’d either come around in her own time, or not at all. It was her way. “You know where to find me if you change your mind,” Bruce chose.

Selina smirked slightly. “With your C.S.O. being a former Agent? I think I’d rather risk going near that over-sized novelty flashlight than try to step into your office.” Selina pulled her shades down onto the bridge of her nose and shifted the gear. “‘Bye, Bats.”

The cat-burglar backed out of the executive space, and Bruce let the pointless request for her to stay out of trouble die in his throat as she rolled up her window and drove off.

She was heading towards some shadowy corner, but whether it would be in Gotham or some other city was anyone’s guess.

Bruce took the tiny drive from the passenger seat. He needed to look into Janus and Selina on top of the rest of the morning’s events, but Selina’s encounter came first, as it was highly likely to be connected to the murders at the docks. He sent a quick text to Tiffany to meet him at the cave as soon as she could.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Bruce was half-surprised to see Tiffany’s new motorcycle already parked inside the Batcave by the time he got through the usual evening traffic jam. What he didn’t expect to see was Iman Avesta already combing over what looked to be dirt on Janus Industries on the over-sized monitor of the Batcomputer.

Iman had turned to see him drive in, and waved from the specialized captain’s chair as Bruce stepped out of his prized car. Tiffany was already pulling up the rolling chair from the workspace to the long keyboard.

He glanced at the handmade fabric flowers sitting in the little glass vase perched on the far end of the massive computer desk, the over-washed orange of the rose and the sapphire-blue of the iris standing
out amongst the dark space. It didn’t matter that they’d been sitting there since February; he still felt something tug in his chest whenever he saw them.

Still, better to let Tiffany and Iman see those gifts from John than the lipstick-ridden Batarang he had on his bedside table.

“Hey, Bruce!” Tiffany shouted, waving cheekily at him. “You’re late!”

Bruce made a mental note to bring another chair down from the many rooms in his house. “Only because you get to use the commuter lane,” he shot back as he ascended the stairs, skimming the documents on the display above. “I’m guessing you saw the logs about Roman’s involuntary exit this afternoon.”

Iman smiled back at him. “I wouldn’t be your Chief Security Officer if I didn’t keep a tab on the goings-on in Wayne Enterprises. I’d figured it was worth looking into.”

She couldn’t have known about what was said in that office. He’d checked that place for bugs quite a few times following the stint with the Agency. Iman might not be an agent anymore, but -

“Since he was visiting unannounced and you had him barred for life when you kicked him out, I assumed he was going for a loan and got a little too testy when you said no,” Iman explained with a slight shrug, “so I wanted to know why he would’ve even asked.”

Sharp as ever. He was glad to have her on his side. “Roman tried to blackmail me when I said no.”

Tiffany raised her brow. “Blackmail you with what?”

Brushing the whole topic of him and John off by labeling it as ridiculous gossip wouldn’t do anything to bring them around to the idea in the future. “Nothing substantial. Just more rumors about me,” he answered carefully. “Looking into his business was actually the third thing on my list. Has there been any developments on the harbor deaths?”

The women exchanged a look - Tiffany looked unsure, and Iman looked like she was trying to gently encourage her.

“Oh, yes and no,” Tiffany answered, scratching the back of her head. “I couldn’t recover any footage of the van explosion - the crime lab report pinpoints the blast coming from inside the car like we thought, but there’s no prints or anything unique about the bomb they made. Looks like a standard pipe-bomb rig. The only thing that stands out is the car has some more recent parts that weren’t made by the manufacturer - I’m running all the estimated purchases and holders through our database. And since we don’t have any bureaucratic tape to cut through, we’ll have it in no time,” she added with a smirk.

Iman was giving her a pointed look.

“And uh, I’ve been trying to find gang symbols that could be a match for these.” Tiffany clicked around, and several duplicate pictures pulled up - different colored lines drawn digitally over the same photo of the four dead men in the cargo hold. “There’s a lot to go through.”

Bruce examined them. “Good thinking. I’ve been looking into burial practices and combing through backlogs of gang tattoos for some of these sorts of shapes. I’ve seen a few of those triangular ones around.”

“I...can’t exactly take all the credit.” Tiffany shuffled slightly, crossing her arms. “I saw John this morning. He sort of borrowed my tablet.”
Bruce felt several things at once.

The sheer improbability that Tiffany would willingly visit John now, thirteen months after the incident at Ace, when Bruce had gently asked several times since the Scarecrow case if she’d like to visit Arkham with him.

The relief that they hadn’t had a seemingly negative encounter. (Tiffany looked more worried over his reaction to it rather than concerned for her own well-being, and John hadn’t mentioned anything during the day.)

But more than anything there was the flat-out confusion at how she even managed it, if John was at work all morning; unless she knew where he worked, which meant he hadn’t covered those tracks as well as he thought...

“How?” He asked, folding his arms and regarding Tiffany carefully. “Both of you should have been at work all morning.”

“Don’t give me that look,” Tiffany grumbled, “You were the one who didn’t let me come along last night. I had to go and check out the scene for myself.”

Bruce frowned.

“From a distance,” she emphasized, “I’m not stupid. I just ran into John while he was on a break, and you’re always saying how insightful he can be, so I thought I’d give him a chance to prove it. He seemed like he wanted to help.”

Bruce was unaware if John even had breaks. (He should, but there was no guaranteeing. Bruce didn’t even know where he worked until John told him personally; it had seemed as legitimate as Gotham businesses could get, and John had never complained or mentioned anything off about it.) He was sure that John wasn’t skipping work, either - he was intent on being released, and he actively enjoyed what he got to do.

Though...John was always enthusiastic about Batman’s cases. He always wanted to know all the gritty details. Perhaps he’d gotten curious enough to have a look for himself when the opportunity arose, since Bruce hadn’t been able to tell him everything yet.

“You weren’t late, were you?” Bruce asked, unsure of how to offer praise for the bare minimum of making an effort to get along with John. He couldn’t really find it in him to be upset at her taking up the job on her own, even though there was the chance she could have been seen; it wasn’t as if she invaded the crime scene or visited the area at the prime-crime hour.

“By two minutes. But you should talk, you’ve missed more days than I’ve shown up late,” she teased.

That was annoyingly true. The cowl came with injuries and late nights. “Anything new on the crew?”

Iman brought up multiple pages on the monitor, all showing the photographs (mostly mugshots) of the Black Mask crew from the ship. “Their criminal histories overlap in places; I’ve managed to create some time-frame of when they joined the gang that we can look over. Unfortunately there’s nothing we didn’t already know about their injuries. No weapons were left on scene, either; for all we know they’re at the bottom of the bay by now.”

Bruce hummed in annoyance. He wouldn’t be surprised. “No other trace evidence?”
“You and the drones scoured the ship,” Iman shrugged sadly, “We’ve reached a dead end there, unless the coroner’s report has something we couldn’t find.”

Tiffany plopped down in the wheeled chair. “You find anything on the clock, or are we doing all the leg-work now?” Tiffany asked with a teasing smile.

Bruce held out the flash drive. “Selina Kyle dropped by to give me this.” Bruce didn’t miss the displeased surprise on Tiffany’s face. “She thinks whoever attacked her in Bludhaven might be the same person who killed the Black Mask crew on the ship. I thought it was working checking out.”

Iman frowned. “She didn’t offer any other details?”

He wasn’t quite sure how to phrase it. Selina definitely ran off as fast as she could... “She wasn’t interested in helping us out so directly. I want that drive scanned before we do anything else with it.”

“Well, duh,” Tiffany chided playfully, “Just who do you think you’re talking to, a couple of interns?”

Iman chuckled at that. “Do you want me to look into Selina, while we’re at it?”

“Later. I want to know what you’ve got on the crew’s origin points.”

Tiffany was making her way over to the workbench, plugging in the drive to their designated testing machine. Bruce could see her work tablet showing the progress of the car-part scan.

Iman pulled up a map of the criminals over the state. It reminded Bruce of an odd spiderweb. Iman looked rather intrigued. “I have to admit, I miss doing this kind of work more often,” she said, leaning back in the commander’s chair. “I’ve gotten Wayne Enterprises’ security so up-to-date that it’s not as necessary to make trace maps for instances like this anymore.”

“And we’re all the better for it,” Bruce answered honestly, “How many cyber attacks have we managed to stop in their tracks since I hired you?”

Iman smiled back at him. “I can’t take all the credit. Your security team just got a better trainer and better standards of practices.”

Bruce hummed, looking over the map. “Looks like a few came from known criminal establishments. Two Red Hood members from Bludhaven, one Falcone bouncer... They could’ve hired the others to join them.”

“Last known residences for the group on the ship were mostly Bludhaven and Gotham, with one listed in Ravenscroft. The Gotham residents’ cell phones were last pinged at our towers four days ago, so they’ve been out of the city since the weekend.” The images for the warehouse group were thrown on one of the adjoining screens as Iman explained. “Muddy Nye is still missing; his phone was found with the wreckage of the car, but it’s useless, and police have already checked with his relatives. The warehouse group were all Gotham residents, mostly from gangs you’d previously broken up - except for Muddy. He’s the only one who hadn’t joined a gang prior to Black Mask.”

“So our only hope of finding Black Mask’s hideout is if we find Muddy alive,” Bruce grumbled. “I have the feeling that he got taken by the killer for just that purpose.”

“It’s more than likely,” Iman admitted. “What did Selina want from you?”

“Just to warn me. She called it ‘repaying a debt’.”
“And I’m guessing she refused your help,” Iman stated simply, “Do you have her number?”

“It came up as unknown when she texted me, and I couldn’t get a trace from while I was waiting in traffic. Knowing her, she’s dumped it - she seemed serious about running away from whoever they were.”

Tiffany rolled the workbench chair back over to them. “USB’s clean,” she said, plugging the device in. There were a few folders, all labeled like security footage, starting from last Monday. The last file was labeled three days ago. “I’m guessing Sunday is what we’re supposed to look at first,” Tiffany said, opening the last four .mp4 files if the folder to simulcast across the screens.

The video footage was good quality, depicting a small art gallery late at night, with bright overhead lights. Bruce was somewhat surprised Selina had gone the artistic route, but he supposed she would have picked up some knowledge, or an interest, from all her past heists. It was too much to hope she would have gotten herself involved in the security side of things.

Tiffany forwarded the footage - two security guards checking things, Selina Kyle chatting with a few stragglers (or artists, it was hard to tell). She sped up and up, until there was a flash of darkness and what looked like broken glass - a quick rewind back of a minute before.

Selina Kyle was walking around, looking very much like a well-dressed citizen with a curator’s badge, scribbling something on a pad of paper and seeming to look at the blank parts of the wall, half-filled with various pieces of modern art. She seemed to be planning what was going to go there next…

“Is it just me, or is there no sound?” Iman asked, tucking a lock of brown hair over her ear where the snake-shaped hearing aid sat. It was modified since joining the team to improve sound quality, but it didn’t stop the battery from dying.

“Nah, there’s no sound,” Tiffany answered, “It makes them cheaper for businesses to buy.”

The lights cut suddenly, and Bruce could see Selina go on alert.

There was a soundless crash as tiny glass pieces slid across the floor from the broken window, and Selina ducked as sharp knives were thrown from a dark figure emerging from the pile of glass. Selina ran, more blades getting stuck in the walls as near-misses as one hit her in the arm.

She grasped it, but kept going, and Bruce could follow her down the corner on a different screen, where the figure followed…

It was hard to see, but there was definitely a very long coat on whoever was attacking her…it almost looked like…

Bruce felt cold. It looked like the attacker was wearing something similar to the cowl sitting on display across the cave, tight to the head but seeming to have two protruding points. They could be goggles perching atop a balaclava. Or just an unusually-shaped hood.

But there was no way to tell for sure, with the shadowing jumping all around. There was no light down the hallway Selina ran through, and the cameras clearly didn’t go into night mode automatically. All he could see was just vague shapes.

They could see the emergency door open and close quickly, allowing a bit of red light from the sign to illuminate a bit, but Bruce could only see the back of the long-coated person as they opened the door and flew there.
Selina’s shape could be seen ducking out behind a statue display, still clutching her arm, and she went in the opposite direction.

Tiffany skipped forward, but there was nothing else for several minutes, until there was suddenly no camera feed from the room by the broken window - someone cut the feed.

Iman skipped ahead this time, scrolling until the lights came back on an hour later, and it looked like a janitor was going through the visible part of the gallery, pausing when he spotted the holes in the walls and pieces of art by the exit door.

The knives that made the holes were all missing.

“Not much help,” Tiffany muttered. “All we know is this guy takes his weapons with him.”

Bruce hummed. “No, we know they had access to the generator at some point, and possibly the camera feed. They clearly chased after Selina, and when they didn’t find her, they went to the control room. I’ll look for police reports from Bludhaven yesterday and Sunday to see what they found.”

The scan completion popped up in the corner of the screen. “You might want to put that on pause, Bruce,” Tiffany interjected, rolling over to her tablet to have a look. “Looks like we’ve got a couple of hits - Hubbard’s Garage and Fast-Fix Rides bought several of our guy’s universal car parts recently.”

She was giving him that same pointed look. The unspoken question of whether or not he’d take her along. He could already see the defiance in what her reaction would be if he gave the wrong answer.

He thought for a moment on whether or not he should put up with it and go alone.

It could be dangerous. Black Mask seemed to shift their operations around so much that they could meet up anywhere, anytime. He wouldn’t put it past them to have a meeting at somewhere as simple as a handyman’s garage. Tiffany’s martial arts skills were improving vastly, but she had little real-world experience with it so far, and he wanted to make sure she could handle it before being thrown into something too dangerous...

On the other hand, the chance there would be a large group was small. Tiffany could use the experience, and she seemed to be growing a little restless.

“Tiffany, suit up. We’re going to check it out.”

She looked relieved. “‘Bout time you let me come with you; I’ll be ready before you know it!”

Bruce turned to Iman as his protégé scurried off to change. “Anything substantial on Janus?”

“Nothing too big. Stock isn’t as healthy as it could be, but I’m not done digging; accounting was never my strong suit. What I can tell you is that Roman is a big spender - he bought four yachts and six cars in the past year, is the owner of a few restaurants and ‘gentlemen’s’ clubs, and he seems to own two penthouses here and one in Bludhaven on top of his parent’s mansion.”

“He certainly knows how to burn money,” Bruce muttered in distaste. “I’m surprised he could afford it all, if he was trying to sell me the company. I’ll sort through the financials later, see if I can find anything worth looking at.”

“I’ll see if we can’t brighten up the footage while you’re out,” Iman suggested. “I’ll try and see if I can spot someone who shows up repeatedly throughout the week of footage, and go back further if I can get into the gallery’s system. Shouldn’t be too hard to find.”
Bruce breathed out. “You’re a lifesaver, Iman.”

Iman smiled at him, leaning back in her chair and looking confident. “Are you saying that because I’m saving you the extra legwork, or because I’ve literally saved your life before?”

“Both,” Bruce answered, turning towards Batman’s arsenal to get ready.

Hubbard’s Garage was far too empty for such a small place. A few cars parked and waiting out back in various states of repair, a couple waiting to be finished on the floor, but not a sign of life outside the light in the manager’s office. Even if no one was there, Bruce could at least look into who owned the van. Or perhaps find security footage.

The security feed of the outside camera was already being scrambled, thanks to Oracle’s tech. Bruce could see by the size of the place that it was pointless in trying to find another, but he still looked out of habit.

Dark corners couldn’t hide much from his night-vision. “See anything?” Bruce asked as he and Tiffany took opposite ends of the repair space.

“Negative. Only a bunch of ordinary car parts and some oil-ridden jumpsuits.”

Bruce slid open the door to the waiting area, casting a quick look. Empty, save for beaten chairs and a small receptionist’s desk. He could see some old grease and oil stains on the carpet by the door to the garage. “Manager’s office is right here. You take the filing room.”

He didn’t have to turn around to know Tiffany was rolling her eyes.

Bruce breathed in, grit his teeth, and burst through the door with his fists at the ready.

The sixty-one-year-old garage manager, Ryan Hubbard Jr., sat laying face-down in an all-too-familiar puddle of red with a pistol clutched in his hand.

Chapter End Notes

I'M DONE ON TIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIITEEEEEEE!!!! *throws confetti* Thank you for your encouraging words and general expressions of love!!!!/(_￣□￣_/)

I had fun thinking of how a TellTale version of Roman Sionis-Janus would be! He's depicted in comics as hot-headed and hating Bruce for trying to rescue his failing company, so I decided to switch it up some, in typical TT fashion. I hope you guys will like what I do with him! (Fun fact, I keep shortening his name to RJ for my timeline notes, and sometimes I read it as RDJ instead...so I'll joke to myself that Robert Downey Jr would never do such things.) (Edit: i keep referring to him as Roman Janus...i forgot his last name was Sionis for a while until i was re-edit-reading...and none of you mentioned that slip up! hahahaha! Its fixed in the story now, but i do keep putting him in my notes as RJ because i got used to it.)

Now I know, you're probably like "but John's thing from last time?? why is that not mentioned??" Patience, my friends... All will be revealed in time. I'm trying to write this as having Bruce being focused on one chapter and then switching out with John the
Honestly I hope I wrote Iman and Tiffany true-to-form. I tried my best to emulate their voices in my head when I write, and Tiff' seems to come easier. (Selina's fun, since I get to use cat puns and imagine a noir-esque sultry voice for a lot of her dialogue.) It was nice to be able to shine more light on Iman...I bet she likes the change of pace from working with yards of bureaucratic tape. :)

Also, I just want to clarify something - I am not going to discuss what Bruce's, or any other character's, religious views are at any point in this story or any other in this series. That is ENTIRELY up for interpretation on a person-by-person basis.

If you haven't already subscribed, consider subscribing to the series to get constant updates! It's easier than checking here/tumblr every day obsessively until the next update... *(Note to self, always over-estimate upload time by an hour.)* Which should be May 1st! See you next time! ✭
John was finding it difficult to concentrate on what he was supposed to be doing.

He couldn’t help it. He’d made the mistake of looking at recent Gotham news, hoping for something new in the murder case every newspaper and station seemed to be going on about, but he’d scrolled too far down his news feed.

*You Won’t Believe What This Arkham Orderly’s Seen - Bruce Wayne and ‘Joker’ not ‘just friends’!*

Dr. Leland had warned him that people would speculate about his relationships with others. Especially Bruce, given Bruce’s social standings and John’s lack thereof. Bruce himself had said his team of lawyers were well-equipped to stop this sort of gossip from spreading; he’d proved it the last time one of the tabloids had printed such a thing, getting it redacted with an apology from the paper itself.

But that was before they actually *had* a relationship.

Bruce was careful. He’d never said anything or done anything romantic while John was locked away, with the exception of his first post-Scarecrow visit, when the power and cameras were turned off for those few minutes. And last Saturday, of course, but did it really count when they were so far from Arkham’s nosey orderlies and any prying eyes? The article clearly stressed *Arkham* orderly.

But John had been *good*. He’d kept the *real* them a secret, even from his Arkham doctors. Even from his *current* doctors. Sure, he’d occasionally give a *slightly* suggestive comment when he and Bruce had the rare chance to be completely alone, but no one could have possibly overheard them. As much as he wanted to shout it from the rooftops, John understood that any question about potential tampering with his recovery process could land him right back into another involuntary stay at Arkham.

And he’d die sooner than face that.

Unable to stop himself, he ignored the pair of shorts still waiting for a proper hem and skimmed through the thing, keeping in mind that Bruce would no doubt bring the hammer down on the *Gotham Moonrise* regardless of the details.

*Anonymous Arkham orderly claims to have inside knowledge regarding the relationship between John Doe, alias ‘Joker’, and Bruce Wayne, blah blah blah... “Reports to have seen Bruce pay off themselves and other orderlies in exchange for uninterrupted time in John’s cell on multiple*
“Hah, I wish,” John muttered to himself, closing the article as his anxiety starting to ebb away. A lot of money must have exchanged hands to be bold enough to make that claim on paper. Bruce’s team of three-piece suits were probably already on their way to the Gotham Moonrise’s editorial department with a nice large lawsuit.

He skimmed through further. There was an old close-circuit-camera picture in the middle, taken in the nicer of Arkham’s two visitor rooms - John and Bruce were sitting together at the table, watching something on Bruce’s phone. Bruce had been showing him one of the old Gray Ghost serials up on UBox upon learning that John had only ever seen bits and pieces of the nearly thirty-year-old cartoon reboot from bloggr posts. John didn’t see how that qualified as them ‘getting cozy’, as the caption put it, considering they had to stay a minimum of a foot apart at all times inside there.

He breathed out slowly, like he was supposed to, but it didn’t stop him from wanting to fidget. He pulled up his favorite picture of Bruce. He was walking down the steps of the courthouse after his first hearing regarding last year’s mess, looking determined and impossibly handsome in what John knew to be his second-favorite suit, the black with dark gray pinstripes. There was nothing about the angle or lighting that was wrong: it was perfect, like him. “It’s nothing, John,” he told himself in his best imitation of Bruce’s smooth, deep tone, “They won’t throw you back in on idle gossip.”

“You’re right,” he answered in a whisper. He kissed the tip of his index finger and tapped it over Bruce’s face. “I’m worrying over nothing,” he said firmly. The more he said it, the more he believed it.

The feed above that article had some of the usual fair regarding celebrity socialites cheating on their significant others and some minor political scandal, but then - boom, third article down: Missing man’s body found near East Docks.

John wasn’t sure how to feel. He was excited there was something new, but he couldn’t help but think he shouldn’t be happy over a stranger’s death. The thought might as well have Dr. Leland’s voice attached, telling him to think of how it would feel to lose someone he cared about, and apply that. The stranger might have been a criminal, but he could’ve been someone else’s Bruce Wayne.

But John didn’t cause this one. It was a force beyond his control. He didn’t have to feel bad about it. Hell, it might have been justified. Maybe Muddy Nye had done far worse things than distribute toxic garbage to the masses through organized crime.

The scar on his palm peeked out over the edge of his phone.

...or maybe Muddy was someone’s John Doe.

John opened the article, finding a video on top. That would be much faster than reading.

He recognized the newscaster - Faith Ackart, who had covered his recent court proceedings with barely a smidge more kindness than Jonathan Crane’s. A real go-getter in the journalistic field with apparently very little fashion sense; her top was so bright it made the blush on her cheeks look severe.

“You think your morning’s bad, be thankful you aren’t Lou Monger - a task that should’ve taken two minutes turned into nearly two hours after Lou went to take out the trash and found a body in his business’ dumpster.”

The camera cut, showing the police tape draped across an alley and a dumpster underneath a fire
escape in the background, where the aforementioned man stood in front of it with the microphone almost shoved in his face.

That was the exact alleyway he was yesterday morning. The same dumpster with the dent on top, the same fire escape, the same graffiti in the background… He could practically smell the rotting fish carcasses.

“I just open the lid, ready to throw on more crap, and this guy’s just layin’ there, dead as a doornail,” Lou explained, looking angrily flummoxed, “I got a business to run and now I gotta leave my customer’s hangin’ for two hours during prime-time! I open the lid, guy’s got a new hole in his head - what else do you gotta know?”

The camera cut back to Faith, standing across the street from the police line. The body had already been removed.

“What Lou didn’t know was that the body was that of Muddy Nye, who police believe to be connected to the van explosion by the East Docks on Tuesday morning - where an anonymous witness says they spotted Batman nearby only minutes before. G.C.P.D. decline to comment on whether or not the group killed in the explosion are connected to those found aboard the Chandis, and on the supposed Batman sighting.”

John drummed his fingers against the table surface. A wannabe-mobster shot in the head, a la execution style…

And suddenly, like a trigger pulled in his head, he realized that both he and Tiffany had used the fire escape. She might have used the dumpster. There had been no rain the night before to wash any of their trace evidence away, and the cops were likely going to comb over the alley for anything useful.

That was bad. Real bad. Especially if Tiffany had caused that dent in the top of the lid. Especially-especially since he’d been walking around when he technically shouldn’t have been.

Tiff please tell me you didn’t use the dumpster as leverage yesterday!! He texted, unable to stop his leg from bouncing anxiously.

For what?

The fire escape??? Muddy’s dead

He’s LITERALLY sleeping with the fishes in that dumpster

I touched the fire escape and our prints are gonna be all over the ladder!!!!!

Hang on

How could John hang onto anything? They would have known he left work, and they’d question his boss, who would no doubt lie and say he snuck out to cover his own ass, they’d question him, and they’d suspect John heavily for no other reason than his past history and they’d throw him back in.

He could feel his heart racing. He didn’t want to go back to Arkham. How many exclamation points after that did he have to use to drive that point home?

Okay so 1 I didn’t use the dumpster, I jumped like a normal person, and 2 chill out. Traffic cam got conveniently jammed around 2am so they definitely planned to dump it. They’ll just check the dumpster
John breathed deep, trying to relax. She had a point. Why check the fire escape if the killer dumped the body like a pro?

3 sleeping with the fishes?? That is a terrible pun wtf

But it's not wrong!! He texted, This has classic mob hit all over it.

“Actually…” It did, didn’t it? He could practically see the plan in his head: kidnap to get information, shoot in the head to stop any squealing, drop off at a planned dumping ground a good distance away…with fish, no less. They didn’t go to the harbor where the message would be crystal-clear, despite the large stretch of it not occupied by cops... Yet with a million dumpsters in the city to choose from, and they went to a dumpster with fish?

It was as if…

“It is a joke,” he muttered to himself, believing it more firmly as the words left his growing grin. It was a terrible, tongue-in-cheek sort of gag.

The whole thing was something he couldn’t help but laugh at, escalating from titters to a low cackle.

He tried to stifle it with his hand; the manager was rather keen on a quiet workplace, and he knew ‘random laughing’ had a more negative connotation when he was the one doing it.

The back-room door swung open on queue, and Mr. Prinya stuck his head in. “John, keep it down,” he whispered in a rush, “I’ve got a customer.”

“S-sorry,” John managed, swirling in his chair as he slyly slid his phone underneath the pile of orders, “I just remembered a funny meme.”

The older man frowned like a stern parent. “You’re not on your phone at work, are you?”

“Me? Never. You know, idle hands and all that,” he lied, holding up both hands and wiggling his fingers to show he was empty-handed. “If they’re here for the shorts, tell them to wait - thread got stuck again.”

Mr. Prinya eyed him, his suspicion waning into something like concern. “You need it unstuck?”

“Nah, I’ll get it.”

“Okay...just keep it down.”

“Yes, sir,” John affirmed with a little salute.

The second the manager was gone, John put his phone on silent and slid it back into his pocket. He didn’t really like straight-up lying to people he didn’t dislike, but he tried to think of it like lying to the Arkham staff - if it meant he and his secrets were safe, then it was acceptable.

The door didn’t quite close - it had a habit of not sticking without being given a little slam. He could hear the annoyingly digital door chime and the last customer’s cheery goodbye through the crack in the door. And then another not a moment later, as tinny and loud as ever.

“Ah, good morn-” There was a brief pause. “Good morning, Mr. Nito,” Mr. Prinya said, his accent becoming a little thicker on the ‘i’s and ‘o’s.

“My vest ready?” A somewhat gruff voice replied.
Curiosity may have killed the cat, but John was more of a hyena person anyway. He had no problem taking a peek to satisfy the itch to know.

Mr. Prinya’s small shoulders were clearly tense. The customer looked the rough type, with shaved eyebrows, barbell brow-piercings, and a nose ring. He seemed to have a tan, but the facial features and complete lack of any other underlying accent indicated that he was probably only a little less white than John.

“Yes...” Mr. Prinya sorted through the rack. He was at least a head shorter than ‘Mr. Nito’; what would that make him, five-eleven? Or six? “Here it is.”

“I hope you know I ain’t leavin’ ‘til I know it’s safe.”

There was little doubt it wasn’t drugs; probably coke or heroin, given how much was carefully distributed in the fabric. Or it could’ve been something new hitting the streets.

John thought back to Vicki Vale and her little drug-ring; he’d gotten used to passing information along to Bruce, hadn’t he? His first instinct was to tell him. The handsome billionaire might not be directly involved this time, but it was certainly something he’d be interested in...and probably thank him for.

John could barely see the lumps in the cloth as Mr. Prinya brought to the counter. It looked like an old police-grade bullet proof vest - it wasn’t as big as the SWAT ones he’d seen on TV, or the one he’d worn last year.

He had a good angle. Bruce’s tech had that fancy facial-recognition software on it. It’d be easy to find him through that - or just by combing over his tattoos. One could be one for a recognizable gang.

Flash off, zoom in, and...snap!

The vest was laid carefully on the table. “Of course it’s safe,” Mr. Prinya assured.

Mr. Nito - if that was his real name - snorted. “For all I know you could’ve done shoddy seams on purpose.”

“Of course-” Mr. Prinya stopped himself short.

The tattooed man glared at him. “Of course what? You got somethin’ to say?”

The rudeness of him was one thing, but the way the guy touched his belt, like he was going for a gun, really rubbed John the wrong way. He could see the handle of a blocky pistol under the guy’s unseasonable zippered jacket. He didn’t have to pull it out - open-faced threats of death like that just made John think of the bridge incident, and that memory was one that still made his blood boil.

“No,” Mr. Prinya responded with a slight hitch. “Of course you may look.”

Tamper you instincts, they would say. He tucked his phone away and clutched his hands. Clench, release, clench...

Calm down. (Hard to do that when he knew all too well what it felt like to be on either sides of a gun barrel. There was too much power behind them.)

Think of your future, Dr. Leland had advised months and months ago.
...Bruce...wouldn’t want him to go out there. If the guy talked, people might know where he worked. His private life was meant to be *private* until he was officially released.

But Bruce would surely have taken a bullet for him. And he wouldn’t have let that...that *scumbag* just walk around acting like he could just do whatever the hell he *wanted*.

He mentally crossed ‘hiding’ off his list of options. He certainly wouldn’t go in there and just *punch* the guy - there’d be too much collateral damage.

John would play it cool. *Confident.* Things were different - *he* was different. He could *do* that. *Be* that.

(He’d save the gory imagery of the guy clutching the bleeding stumps of his fingers for a mental replay later.)

So he clutched the door-handle and made a show of entering, swinging the door wide - not *too* wide - with a random piece of clothing tucked under his arm. “Hey, boss-man-” He cut himself off as appropriate, pretending to just see the ‘customer’ behind the counter. The man’s eyes flashed to him, hard at first, and then widening with recognition. “Oh, *sorry*, I didn’t know we had company!” He flashed a grin Mr. Nito’s way.

He looked less horrified than John would have wanted. Not the ‘*oh my God, it’s that crazy guy from the news last year*’ that John expected. More like John was someone he knew, and he just didn’t expect to see him there. Or really, more of a ‘*you look weird, and I’m suddenly not sure of what dimension I’m in*’ sort of stare.

Mr. Prinya, on the other hand, looked almost *disbelievingly* surprised to see him. “D-did you need something, John?” He asked, his accent just as thick as before.

“That darn machine is still stuck,” he lied, “My butterfingers can’t untangle the threads as easily as you.” He wiggled his free set of fingers to show how noodley they were. It wasn’t completely untrue, which sold the bit better - he usually got so frustrated when the knots wouldn’t untie that he’d end up cutting them out nine times out of ten.

Mr. Nito’ had tugged his jacket back over his pistol. He was still staring at John. *Thinking about how much of a risk it was to deal with the Arkham loon. He’d fought Batman and lived. He could be armed. Even if he wasn’t, he was fast, and who knew if he cared about collateral damage?*

John stared right back, feigning curiosity. “Is there something on my face?” He asked as innocently as possible while imagining the guy’s hands being slammed on the counter and stuck there with the whole tomato of pins.

He wouldn’t be able to reach for his gun if his hands were pinned. The thought was so funny it almost made him laugh; he could feel his grin widen.

Mr. Nito looked away and gathered the vest under his arm as quickly as possible, looking like he was trying to hold a toddler on his hip. “If this falls apart on me, it’ll be *your* fault,” he emphasized at Mr. Prinya, glaring with less machismo than before, “Hope you’ll remember that,” he huffed.

He turned and left, leaving John to titter under his breath at how the tough-guy act had dissolved into an immature little bark. The obnoxious doorbell went off and the man disappeared into the city with a disgruntled scowl.

Mr. Prinya watched him go, only relaxing when the man was out of sight. He muttered something incomprehensible in a relieved breath.
“Yeesh, what a weirdo... Whelp, I’ll be in back if you need me!” John spun on his heel, two steps into his return to his lonely work when Mr. Prinya spoke.

“John,” Mr. Prinya said in a similar sort of tone to the one Bruce used when he wanted John to stop and think for a moment, “You shouldn’t...” He paused, thinking further, seeming to soften with every passing moment. John waited for him to finish. “Thank you.”

“It was nothing,” John said honestly. It wasn’t as if he’d actually done anything outside of show his infamous face. He decided to gamble and ask the big question rather than let the chance slip away. “Who was that guy, anyway?”

Mr. Prinya eyed him. He had that sort of gentle-letdown look Dr. Leland used to get when she would tell him ‘no’.  “Don’t get mixed up in this. You have your own life to worry about.”

It was the second time that was said to him in two days...

Maybe fate was trying to drill that into his head.

...or maybe it was just coincidence.

“I swear you guys say that as if you’re not part of my life,” he said with a short chortle, making sure to close the door behind him.

The back room felt much cooler than before, and for a moment he felt like he was back in Bruce’s cave, sitting at that ridiculously oversized supercomputer to dig up dirt wherever he thought a useful little worm of information might be. Only this room was smaller and crowded with sewing supplies instead of fancy tech and stalactites, and there were no bats or handsome best friend around for company.

Still, he couldn’t shake the sense of intrigue that came with the idea. He pulled up the picture he’d taken of ‘Mr. Nito’.

He zoomed in on the tattoos. A dragon tail peeked out of the jacket’s sleeve - it was such a standard thing to get that he figured there wasn’t much to go on with that one.

A large embossed star sat between his neck and shoulder. He’d seen celebrity chefs with the same sort of tat’. Nothing special.

Knuckle tattoos - because of course he’d have those - spelled out ‘PAIN’ on his left hand. He didn’t doubt there was a matching one of some kind on his right. Talk about basic.

There was something peeking out above the v-neck:  the top of a face that looked like it was split in half, with the expressions like the sock and buskin masks in theatre, cast in black and red. Or at least that’s what John assumed they were, given the eyebrow and eye shapes...

That one was definitely more unique. Worth looking into.

He heard the door chime again, but Mr. Prinya didn’t sound so nervous when he greeted them this time. There was no need to go back out or throw the sewing machine at someone. (At least...not yet.)

John had to get back to work. He’d have to sort through a lot of social media garbage to find something like it, but he had a lot of free time on his hands...

*~*~*~*~*
John had been through far too many FriendBook pages. And Chirp pages. And bloggr posts. And he’d posted and searched through the more disturbing internet forums. All in moments snatched where he could at work and travel and in the very few spots in St. Dymphna he could get away with using a contraband phone in to look up gang symbols in the tri-state area and beyond.

And nothing. Not a single thing depicting either the symbol the bodies made on the Chandis or the tattoo on ‘Mr. Nito’.

He was tempted to just ask Bruce (or even Tiffany) and shove the picture he’d taken of ‘Mr. Nito’ in their fancy Batcomputer to analyze, but...they were both definitely-probably busy. After all, they were working on the mysterious-gang-war case, and Bruce was probably dealing with the stupid tabloid article from that morning on top of that, and those were more important than his little investigation.

(Besides, he really liked that expression Bruce got when John had figured something out; surprise and pride and intrigue all rolled into one. He’d gladly comb over a hundred more pages of junk to see that face when he inevitably surprised him with.)

And now he was stuck in group. Unable to do anything but sit and mull over what he was missing, and think about Bruce’s mess of a mystery. He’d looked as far back as the nineteen-twenties for criminally-linked logos that looked even remotely like what either of them should be, but found none. It had to be new, and small enough to fly under the radar…

John had a mental catalog of all the gangs that were and ever had been in the city. Black Mask was much more recent, seizing the opportunistic hole that Falcone had left in his wake and picking up business fronts and those ridiculous protection rackets, and adding in the standard drug trade. He was sure he was an out-of-towner who noticed the lack of a big organized crime unit… Or at least someone who operated outside of the city to get power before moving in on the big fish.

He’d crossed off a lot of the old mafias already, mostly due to them being dead and gone. Falcone’s leftovers weren’t smart enough or loyal enough to organize themselves into some sort of revenge plot; they were the type to follow the new guy. Maroni’s crew tended to be more hot-headed and not take orders from new people, but there were only so many left, and they had their own little territories carved out on the map that Black Mask hadn’t bothered trying to take.

The small-time gangs (seventeen of them at the last count) scattered around the place didn’t really have enough to pull of a stunt like that of the Chandis. They were more the types to make deals with the big time crooks and go down in a blaze of glory if something went wrong.

So unless it was someone new… But why? That was the real question. It felt too personal to be random. Maybe whoever was running Black Mask had crossed paths with someone who had the patience to wait for revenge. Someone deadly. Trained, if the knife-throwing was anything to go by. Maybe it wasn’t a gang, but one person. A serial killer bent on revenge. Maybe B.M. killed someone they cared about, or took something from them.

Maybe B.M. had lit a circus on fire or something. He added it to his little list of things to look up later.

He hated admitting it, but Tiffany had been right in her little insinuation - there was little he could do about this particular thing while he was on the inside...

“John? How about you?”

Of course Dr. Ludgate would call him out while was sitting there thinking. She had a knack for
picking on the quiet ones. She looked it, too, with her severely-sharp haircut and the general attitude that she commanded the room. He wondered if she used to be a teacher or something. (She certainly had the style of those fussy teachers he’d seen on T.V. over the years. Awful floral patterns were her apparently her favorite thing in the world.)

Of course they’d call him out when he was sitting there *thinking*. He hadn’t been paying attention for quite a while.

Complete honestly wasn’t even an *option* here. He’d hate to just say he was just daydreaming or not listening…

“Ah, well, I was just thinking, doc’...”

The doctor was giving him the ‘ah, yes, go on’ look he was used to. It seemed a lot of the group was paying attention to him… Well, who was he to disappoint an audience?

“I still have those moments where things feel like some kind of alternate reality. Like I’m in one of those weird ‘what-if’ comics and I’ve got only so many pages left until I find myself still in…” *That cozy little slice of hell*, he wanted to say. But that was ‘inappropriate’ and ‘disturbing’. Not exactly the picture he wanted to paint for himself in front of a healthcare professional. “Well, *Arkham*.”

Mickey, sitting across from him in their little circle, was watching him like he was actually paying attention. He had a tendency to stare at his lap a lot in group. Or into space.

“But...the past couple of weeks have helped prove that I’m not *there* anymore.” ...*kinda*. He thought carefully. “Like it’s not just the *scenery* that’s different, you know?”

Some thoughtful looks at that. Nice.

He wasn’t going to add on anything too sugary, like his hope for others feeling the same. No, no, that wasn’t his *style*. He leaned back in his chair, unable to hold back the little grin. “Though this place *could* take some pointers from it. Exposed brick is *much* more chic than all this *eggshell*.”

A couple of titters and amused little smirks in the group. *Much* better.

Dr. Ludgate just nodded her head. “It’s good to know you’re feeling more comfortable, John. I think everyone here has days where they don’t feel like they’re really at a better point in their lives.”

John leaned back a little further in his chair. She didn’t seem to completely understand, but that was okay. She got the end message, at least, and that was what mattered. He didn’t really care if anyone else got it or not.

When no one else spoke up after a few beats - clearly no one wanted to delve further into *that* conversation link - Dr. Ludgate pretended to look at her watch. “I think that’s about all we have time for today.” She made sure to look at the group as a whole. “You’ve all made wonderful progress.”

A phrase he’d heard a thousand times, and it still hadn’t lost it’s funny side. He at least managed to swallow the urge to giggle at it.

John strolled out of the room, going straight back to thinking. There wasn’t much he could do with Bruce’s stuff. Back to thinking about the mysterious Mr. Nito as he made his way back to his room. The perfect thinking place.

He hadn’t seen anything resembling the weird theatre masks in his tattoo search, either. It was apparently rather unique. Maybe he had to do some more forum digging for that one…?
“Hey, John,” Devi Hanson waved to him from a little further down the hall clad in pink cheetah-print pants, and he saw a flash of intensely-bright neon green in her hand.

_Nail polish._ It was ridiculously bright, and he was seized with the urge to have it. “Where did you get that _color_?” He asked enthusiastically, already making a bee-line for her.

“Outside, where else?” She joked. “What, you wanna use it?”

He _could_ steal it from her, but she was one of the few people who actively enjoyed his company. “How many ways can I say _yes_? Absolutely, _sure_, _ouï_, _si_, _ja_...”

She gave a light laugh. “Alright, but you have to do my right hand for me.”

“Deal!”

He followed her into the recreation room. It was ten times cozier than Arkham’s; only one orderly to oversee things, much comfier sofas, a cable package with actually _decent_ things on half the time, several board games that weren’t just checkers or some variant of it, and people that weren’t prone to sudden bouts of violence. (Well, _mostly_. He’d seen a _very_ heated game of _Dungeons, Dragons, and Dice_.)

They sat at one of the corner tables, away from the crowd watching that boring “nerdy” comedy John didn’t understand the appeal of.

“So, how’s the sewing gig goin’?” Devi asked casually as she started to paint her left hand with practiced strokes.

“About as well as it _can_ go,” he answered. He wasn’t going to mention anything about what transpired earlier. “How’s the laundry shift?”

“Hot and _borin’_,” she answered back. “They say a job’s a job, but it actually makes stripping seem good again. At least there was fun music and a lot more money in it.”

“_Huh_, I didn’t know you did that.”

“Eh, it was a _lifetime_ ago. It’s how I got into my _nasty little habit._” Devi was rather quick at painting, apparently, already going on her third nail. “I’d rather go back to bein’ a stylist again, actually. I could style and dye hair like nobody’s business.” She shot a look at his hair. “Wouldn’t need to do yours, though. You’re color sure _stays_...”

“It’s _au natural._”

Her eyebrows raised. “Really? _Man_, you’re lucky! I’d kill for a color like that.”

“Maybe _I_ did,” he said slyly, half joking to himself. For all he knew it was true. “We’ll _never_ know!”

She gave him a funny look. Sort of curious and amused. “You don’t remember anything before the last decade, right?”

“Correct-a-mundo.”

“So why do you look like you’re always thinkin’ really hard about somethin’ lately?” Devi started blowing on her nails to dry them.

It was always tempting to tell people to mind their own business, but Devi had half her arms covered in very well-done tattoos. He _could_ use some insight... “Cause I’m thinking hard about things.” John
started to paint his own left hand, deciding on odd fingers instead of all of them. “In today’s case, though… It’s *tats.*”

“So nothin’ to do with the studmuffin that keeps visitin’ you?” Devi was shaking her hand and blowing on it alternatively.

Either she was blowing smoke, or…she saw the tabloid article. “*That?* It’s…just a rumor,” he shrugged off, finding it difficult to say. He’d mostly just avoided the topic altogether, or else rolled his eyes when people brought it up. He hadn’t had one of those stupid tabloid opinion pieces since last year, when it was very easy to say it wasn’t true because it wasn’t.

“Didn’t say anythin’ about rumors.” She admired her nails, looking for imperfections.

John narrowed his eyes. Did she think he was stupid? “You didn’t *have* to. You probably saw that stupid article on the news rack while you were out, and that’s why you lured me here. To ask about it.”

“Not even close!” Devi answered with a little frown, “I actually *like* your company; you’re funny and you’re the only one in this joint who appreciates my taste in color,” she said, gesturing to her whole yellow-and-pink outfit, “And I asked because half the time I see you, the guy’s almost attached to your *hip.* What’s this about an article?”

Oh. *Whoops.* “Sorry,” John muttered, feeling bad at jumping to conclusions, “it’s this whole stupid *tabloid* thing… It’s bad enough they gossip about Bruce, but to just…*speculate* about our relationship like that! It’s enough to…” He breathed in through his nostrils. “It *really* pisses me off.” It was too close to home, too paranoia-inducing...too much that put Bruce on edge, and thus *John* on edge.

Devi gave a sort of half-nod, half-shrug. “That’s what they do. Don’t give ‘em the satisfaction.” He knew she was right, but it didn’t help that she didn’t know everything about the situation. She couldn’t possibly know how messy it made him feel. “Anyway, why were you thinkin’ ‘bout tattoos? Jealous of mine?” She leaned her right arm on the table to show off the prowling leopard and scatter of flowers trailing down from her shoulder. She had someone’s name tattooed under a cross on her opposing forearm, and a necklace of constellations on her collarbone.

Flattery was the best way to go the majority of the time. “Yours *are* pretty,” he offered, watching her sit up a little proudly, “but I’m just puzzling over one I’ve seen,” he said cryptically, finished on his thumbnail. “I’ve never seen one like it before.”

“You got a picture?” She asked, putting her left hand in front of him so he’d get the hint.

John eyed the guard in the corner. He waited until he’d turned just enough away to slide his phone out of his pocket and pull up the gallery, zooming in on Mr. Nito’s tattoo. “If anyone asks, it’s *yours,*” he muttered, nodding to the phone as he started painting her other hand.

“Not allowed one yet, huh?” Devi pulled it across the able and looked. “Hm… That’s new to me.” She zoomed out, much to John’s discomfort. “*Him,* on the other hand, I’ve seen.”

“You have?” John could not keep the excitement out of his voice. “When? *Where?*”

“Here,” she shrugged. “Hang on a sec - hey, *Mick*’,” she called out, leaning to get a view of the only ‘Mick’ it could be in the facility, “Can you come here for a sec?”

John did *not* want to involve him. They weren’t on…well, any *real* terms. It was hard to tell if Mickey liked him...or anything at all, in fact. Mickey was too abrasive to know if he would be loyal to anything or anyone.
Mickey, unfortunately, did in fact come when called, though. Maybe he had a soft spot for Devi, or women in general. “Yeah?”

“You remember this guy? I remember seein’ him, but I don’t remember his name.”

Mickey breathed out, crossing his arms over his plain t-shirt and looking...not very different from his usual gruff expression. His thick dark brows were furrowed together. “I just knew him as Ian.”

“Yeah, that was it... He didn’t stay too long, did he?”

Mickey snorted, smirking a little. “A week.”

John resumed painting, not realizing he’d stopped. “Who was he?”

“A patient,” Mickey replied. He was staring holes down at John. “We shared the same doctor. Why?”

John was getting annoyed, and he was getting tired of being polite. “That’s my business.”

Mickey decided to just sit next to Devi, still staring at him. “You trying to stop a racket?”

John ignored that and started on Devi’s pinkie finger.

“The hotel’s got one, too,” he continued quietly. That caught John’s interest.

Devi gave a slight chortle. “Every bus’ in the docks has one. Stupid to try and get us to be so law-abiding when they put us down there.”

Yes, now John was doubly-interested.

“What kind is it?” John asked Mickey, looking up from his handiwork.

“Drugs and prostitution,” he answered as Devi made a disgusted face, “Yours?”

John decided to be honest as he started on his own right hand. He rather liked the look of his left. “Pretty sure my boss is a drug mule. I don’t think it’s by choice.”

Devi winced harder. “Ugh. I got lucky, mine’s just a secret loan racket in the basement.”

Mickey was watching him. “Are you trying to stop them?”

It was...almost hopeful. Like he actually wanted that. A tough guy like Mickey, who could have easily been in a gang himself, wanted the crime in his life stopped. How...oddly refreshing.

“I don’t like being potentially thrown under the bus for other people’s decisions,” John chose to say, discarding the joke that he still had Batman’s number on speed-dial. “It leaves a bad taste in my mouth.”

Mickey nodded sagely. “You don’t want to go back,” he stated. “I get it.”

“Until you’ve been in Arkham, Mickey, you really don’t.” He hoped it didn’t sound as rude as he thought. “You guys know the name of your employer’s racket group?”

“Some guy named Boata,” Devi answered, blowing on her newly painted fingers.

Mickey looked up at the ceiling very briefly. “Last I heard, it was something like ‘Volto.’”
Interesting. A chain of small gangs working in such a small area? That only meant one thing: they were sections of a *bigger* gang. Especially with such European-sounding names...

The *leftovers*, perhaps. Or maybe they wanted just to *sound* like the leftovers. Cast the suspicion of the Bat off.

One thing was for sure. He had to find Ian’s full name. A last known address wouldn’t hurt, either.

And that meant he’d have to break into an *office*.

---

**Chapter End Notes**

I’m very happy with the first section, but less satisfied with how the second half turned out, and it bent me out of shape for a week to think of how it would end… But I reminded myself that I’m setting up for what’s coming in what should be Chapter 5, and…oh boy, I know *that* is gonna knock some socks off. (Including mine, haha!) So it’s worth the struggle, but I hope I kept everyone’s attention. :)

So, fun facts! I had to look up what the theatre masks were called, and “sock and buskin” are literally names for the masks, taken from the “sock of comedy and boot of tragedy” characters could wear on stage. (I’ve…never heard of such a thing before now, but I *like* it.) And my reference to “a whole tomato of pins” is an allusion to the common tomato-shaped pin-cushion. I’ve grown up with one in the house and rarely see any in sewing stores that aren’t shaped like that, so I thought it was a sort of funny thing to add.

It’s really too bad I can’t just make a whole game for this, because I think John would have some interesting mental-mapping in animation. You’d get to see him connect the strings together like Batman does on his tech, and imagine some things like Bats’ 3D-projecting. Plus he talks to himself, both aloud (like Bruce) and in his head, so the player would actually hear that sometimes, and some of his little vocal memories from other people. (If my alternate-universe self is doing this…man, I hope she’s having fun with it.)

And of course, thank you for all the love so far!!! Every time I get an email notification of a kudos or comment I go like this: (♡nięcia:♡) *✧☆ ✧ * I’ll see you in two weeks, when we rejoin Bruce! ♡♡♡
The lights of the Batcave cast shadows over Bruce as the elevator sank to the bottom. For a few moments, he was plunging back into the cool, comforting darkness, separating him from the rest of the world.

“Samantha, I don’t care what it takes. It’s slander. I want it retracted, and I want a formal apology to me and John.”

“Very well, Mr. Wayne. We’ll see if we can get the Moonrise to release more on their anonymous informant and get back to you,” Bruce’s best lawyer replied as he stepped into the well-lit cave. He wished he could dim the lights, or turn them off altogether to just sit down there, undisturbed, and think...but Tiffany was already down there, fixing Fox-Two on the workbench.

He mentally sighed, knowing he was not going to be alone for long enough to reset his brain’s chemical balance so he could enjoy being social. He was frustrated enough without the unsolicited gossip that had reporters practically banging on his door for a rebuttal. Not wanting to be rude, he said his thanks to Samantha despite not feeling grateful at all and hung up, willing himself to keep going as he had all day.

Tiffany had already noticed him, waiting until he got closer to roll the chair up his way. She was still wearing the same pink button-down shirt he’d seen in the lab earlier at Wayne Enterprises, only rolled up to her elbows. She seemed to be getting away with wearing jeans in the office, too, on top of sporting the dark blue streaks in her hair. “You took your time. Was that Iman?”

Bruce made his way to the coffee machine sitting nearby. Tiffany had made a small pot already. “No, just more bad news.” He poured a full mug and took a long sip, letting the bitter caffeine help wash away some of the headache brewing in his skull. He wasn’t going to tell her about the Moonrise’s latest stint. It raised too uncomfortable a subject. “I’ve looked into the incident at Selina’s gallery in Bludhaven - the security guard on duty was given a heavy concussion, and he’s still in the hospital, but he can’t remember anything. Iman and I confirmed there’s nothing useful in the security footage surrounding the building and not so much as an unusual fiber left at the scene. The weeks' worth of crowds at the gallery don’t amount to anything, either - there’s no repeat visitors as far as we can tell.”

IMPORTANT SPOILER TAGS: death, gun violence, blood, corpse discussion, misuse of medicine
Tiffany’s shoulders sank as she folded her arms. “So it’s a dead end, huh...”

“Looks that way.”

“What about Muddy Nye? I haven’t gone through the police report yet.”

“Neither have I.” Bruce made his way over to the chair, hearing Tiffany’s steps on the metal and stone behind him. “The spent a lot of time combing through Janus Industries’ financial situation.”

“I’m glad you did. You hand me some calculus problems and I can breeze right through - I take one look at accounting sheets and I draw nothing but blanks.”

Bruce felt his mouth quirk up slightly at the remark. “Remind me to add that on to your training.”

“Please don’t,” Tiffany despaired lightly with a wince.

“You should learn to read those someday; it makes looking at background information a lot easier.”

Bruce pulled up the Janus files he’d been sorting through earlier in the day. “He seems to have invested a lot of money in to these long-term projects since last year.”

“Project Bauta? Project Melpomene-Thalia? What are these?”

“As far as I can tell, new cosmetic research for the Janus brand. Bauta is for anti-aging cream, Melpomene-Thalia is for developing professional waterproof makeup. Some of the others on this list belong to the company’s soap and cleaner lines, too. The amount of money he’s diverted into these is too high for something that won’t get results for several years. The short-term projects he has in-progress or already on the market aren’t pulling in enough revenue; the company’s sinking.”

Bruce switched to some of the project details. “All of the project documentation I’ve found seem to point to Janus making cheaper versions of existing products, so they seem legitimate, but some of the chemical substitutes they’re using are concerning.”

Tiffany tilted her head slightly, skimming the chemical compounds in the formulas on-screen. “Do you think it’s related to anything else?”

Bruce thought back to the extravagant purchases Roman Sionis had made in the past six months. They lined up fairly well with investments into the projects, even if the amounts didn’t match. He had a hunch it was more than just that, but he had no proof. “Outside of lawsuits waiting to happen, I’m sure he’s using it as a front for embezzlement. He’s got a few offshore accounts that have grown over time.”

Bruce sat back in his chair, steepling his fingers under his nose. Something else had bothered him since yesterday. He glanced at the fabric flowers sitting there on the desk surface, a reminder to himself to fill John in on everything.

Roman had been too calm and proud during their whole meeting. He’d said the Waynes had done his family a favor years ago, before they were born… He’d been through all of his father’s records, finding very little illegal material; Thomas Wayne had covered his tracks quite well, likely destroying documents after he no longer needed them. Neither of his parents seemed to leave diaries or journals behind, either. Maybe Alfred would know something about it...

He hated the thought that the Waynes had another enemy waiting for their chance at revenge, but it was one of those nagging little thoughts he couldn’t shake.

“I’m not sure if there’s anything else more to it,” Bruce added, not wanting to discuss more potential enemies his legacy made, “but I’ll dig a little more later and send what I have to Gordon.”
“I think an embezzlement scheme can wait,” Tiffany said with a wry smirk, “Doesn’t homicide take precedence?”

Bruce smiled back partway. She had a point; he should wait to shove Roman into the G.C.P.D.’s lap until the more pressing cases were solved, but he felt like he needed something accomplished, so he didn’t like keeping information like that on hold.

Just another thing to hold back.

He breathed out slowly as he opened Muddy Nye’s autopsy report. He scanned over it. “Hm, time of death is undetermined… The muscle tissue shows signs of frost damage.”

Tiffany raised a brow, leaning against the back of the chair as she read along. “He was frozen before he was dumped?”

“Frozen and found in a dumpster… He must have been killed after they’d gotten the information out of him, and frozen until he was dropped off. We might be looking for someone who has access to a meat locker or industrial freezer.”

“What about Victor Frieze?” Tiffany cast a look over at the glass cases nearby, showing off all the bits of memorabilia Bruce had collected from his past major foes. “Could he have done this?”

Bruce frowned. He supposed so, given that the last time he’d seen him he was fighting the LOTUS virus as the Agency prepared to take him away. “It’s possible, but I doubt it. His technology was capable of freezing the whole body at once, and this doesn’t exactly fit his M.O.” He thought carefully. “I doubt the Agency is back in town.”

“I dunno, I think it’s possible - the attack on Selina could have been an attempt to force her back into that...collar-squad Waller was forming.”

That was...highly unlikely. The Agency wasn’t bound to leave some cryptic symbol behind and rearrange bodies. Even if he stretched it to include them hiring a killer, why go to the trouble when they could easily make things disappear? Still, he was glad she was thinking of alternatives, so he was gentle in letting her down. “Rearranging the bodies doesn’t fit in their M.O., either. Waller does things cleanly; she’d be more likely to disguise the deaths altogether.”

Tiffany crossed her arms, looking contemplatively at the keyboard. “I guess so…”

“Whoever our killers are wanted to disguise the time of death…” Bruce scrolled down to the picture of the victim’s head-wound. “The bullet wound is on the side of his head; the entry seems angular, suggesting he was lower to the ground.”

“An execution shot,” Tiffany grumbled. “Great.”

Bruce opened the images of the other four Black Mask members from the warehouse. They’d mostly been shot in the chest and shoulder, indicating someone with imperfect aim. One - ‘Four-Ears’ - had been shot in the leg, and then the head, presumably when he was crawling away. “Bullets taken from the scene are different from the one extracted from Muddy.”

A standard 9-millimeter shot versus a dozen 45-caliber shots.

Tiffany gave a hum of intrigue. “All of them were shot from ground-level… You’d think they’d be up high to pick them off as they came out of the warehouse.”

That was a good point, and one he’d thought of, too.
“Do you think they spotted you?” She asked innocently.

“Maybe. But if they did, why wouldn’t they try to shoot me, too?”

“Because you’re intimidating? It’s either that, or they’re scared of heights,” she shrugged.

No… It bothered him. For one, the fog was fairly thick that night, but it wouldn’t have been too difficult to snipe the group from even a short height. For another… “Why did they bother waiting for them to come out when they had a bomb in the van? And why not just shoot them in the warehouse?” He thought aloud.

If Tiffany was going to answer, she was interrupted by the Batcomputer; a text message intercepted from one of the bugged G.C.P.D. phones. “Head’s up; looks like the Wednesday Nighters are meeting.”

Meeting at 10. Great. Just another thing to deal with. “Computer, trace the last tower ping.”

“TRACING.”

“About time they met up again! Iman and I have waited weeks; figures they’d choose now…” Tiffany was already moving towards the armory, seeming like she was looking forward to the confrontation.

No. Absolutely not. He was not letting her walk in on the Wednesday Nighters. We wasn’t going to shove her into something that dangerous so soon, if he could help it.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Bruce asked, realizing too late how paternal it sounded. (He was not her father. He could never replace Lucius. He shouldn’t have sounded like he was trying to...)

Tiffany stopped, turning back to him with a surprised blink. “Uh, to get changed? Where else?”

“You’re not coming along on this one.”

Her expression shifted, and he could see the spark of anger flare in her dark brown eyes as she stood taller, shifting her hands to her hips. “I really hope that’s just a shitty attempt at humor.”

Bruce was not about to argue. He had enough of a headache. “No. It’s too dangerous for you,” he said firmly, trying to emphasize the concern he felt.

“Too dangerous?” Tiffany scoffed. “I’ve helped you take down Harley Quinn! I stopped John from finishing off Amanda Waller! I’ve dismantled bombs! I’ve had to stand around and guard dangerous criminals while you were fighting Dr. Crane!” Her voice was echoing around him, angry and disappointed and rebellious. “Iman and I have been tracking down the Wednesday Nighters for months, and you want to sideline me like I didn’t do half the work in finding them in the first place?!”

She had a point, but he was not about to back down. “I know you have, Tiffany, but this isn’t just a one-on-one fight. This is a group of corrupt cops with just as much firepower as the gangsters they meet up with. I can’t throw you into something that big yet.”

It didn’t seem to help cool her temper by much. “Well, when am I going to?”

Bruce was getting more frustrated. Couldn’t she see she wasn’t ready for that level of danger yet? That he didn’t want her to be hurt by rushing in? “When I decide you’re ready.”
“I’ve been ready!” Tiffany threw her hands up in exasperation. “I’ve been ready since The Riddler killed my dad!”

*That’s only mental preparation,* he thought to himself. Saying it aloud wouldn’t help.

“You might be training me, but I’m not your sidekick, Bruce.” Tiffany shifted, the hurt in her expression growing with every passing second despite the frustration in her voice. “If you won’t treat me like your partner, then maybe I shouldn’t be a part of this at all.”

He didn’t mean for things to go that way. Just because he didn’t want her in danger didn’t mean he didn’t value her input or want her to work with him. “Tiffany...”

“Don’t,” she said in a softer tone. Her eyes pierced him for a second before she turned away, heading towards the elevator. “You know where to find me if you change your mind.”

He knew if he pressed, things might go too far. It was better to let her go for now. He’d explain later, when they both had cooler heads.

For now, he had a group of corrupt cops to deal with.

*~*~*~*~*

It’d been a while since he had to do this alone. He’d seem to have gotten used to having Tiffany or Iman in his ear, injecting a bit of humor or fact-checking or observations into his investigations, because for the first time in a while, it felt...odd.

Despite Bruce’s desire to be alone to think of something other than the constant barrage of troubling cases, he was feeling very out-of-place with only the Batcomputer’s voice command system listening for key words.

Bruce checked the drones circling the outside of the club.

The Lot was a casino-slash-bar in Uptown with a lot of noise complaints that went nowhere. Bruce could hear the thud of a bass as remixes of pop songs blared from the speakers inside.

The pounding in his feet radiated up to his chest, even through the suit. It reminded him of the Gotham Cemetery, of descending under the graves and finding life thriving underneath.

(Of John, and how he hummed to himself like he was going through an uplifting stroll in the park rather than a potential bust on a ruthless criminal. Now was not the time to reminisce.)

At least this time the music *belonged* here, with people gambling their cares away as they indulged in various toxic substances in a building designed for nightlife.

The night was young, barely going on ten, but Bruce’s cowl could see the crowd inside, sitting at industrial card tables and bar stools and neon-lit slot machines under a high ceiling littered with dimly-lit modern chandeliers. It had the feeling of some kind of rave-cum-casino more than anything, keeping everyone in near-dark and casting the tables in bright, colorful hues while neon paint and tubes lit the rest of the way and auto-tuned music drowned out almost everything. Bruce wondered if the only reason it hadn’t gone out of business yet was that it wasn’t outrageously pricey like some of the other clubs in the area, so his clients didn’t much care for the way things looked.

That, or people had far more terrible taste than he thought.

The two upper floors were rooms the customers could rent by the hour. The continuous signal
broadcast he was receiving on his gauntlet told him it had to be one of the rooms up top… Since it had to be one of those with enough room for a group to meet, it was likely the large ‘honeymoon’ suite. Bruce quickly scanned the others with his drones’ heat-seeking feature anyway, finding most of them empty due to the early hours. (And two that were very obviously not, judging by the shapes the people inside were making. He did his best to ignore those and hope they weren’t relevant to the case at hand.)

The large suite on the top floor had at least seven people inside, all clustered in the living area on pieces of furniture.

Easy pickings.

Bruce glided from his perch on the gastropub next door, feeling the cool air press against his face. Those short bursts where he glided around the city were always the better parts of the evenings. He felt so in control, despite how he was at the mercy of wind when it came to longer distances. He supposed it was like the preparation he did before major meetings, where he used the grip strengthener or stretch bands as he ran through the rehearsal of what points he needed to make or what he needed to listen for if - when - he got bored.

The suite had no balcony, so Bruce had to drop onto the roof and make his way around to the back window, close to the living area. He hooked the grappler in place on the edge of the roof and breathed out slowly.

Three, two -

Bruce kicked off from the edge, going backward as he descended, his cape fanning out behind him as he kicked in the cheap glass window with both feet.

He landed on the pile of broken shards, feeling the mild force of impact on his legs and hearing the grappling wire slide and snap back into its holding chamber in his hand as the sheer curtains settled back into place.

There was no adrenaline rush as people stood en masse to fight him. No frantic energy rattling the room as panic set in. No satisfying feeling of blending in with the dark he was suddenly shrouded with.

Instead, he found himself looking over a group of plainclothes officers and their mob ties’ representatives with slacked mouths and wide, lifeless eyes.

He could smell gunpowder. See bits of blood in the thin strips of light streaming in through the window. Everything was still, including what felt like his heart.

He hadn’t seen any other heat signatures in the room. He quickly scanned over the bodies on display, searching for some sign of life, but they were all the same - dead as doornails with holes in their torsos and heads.

He had seen too many bodies for his stomach to start churning, but the room felt stifling. He couldn’t turn on the lights for fear of someone else coming in - he had to use the light on his small drone.

It was messier than it looked. There were two long couches big enough to hold three people each, and two chairs sitting opposite one another, any elegance the pieces had all lost under the pools of blood underneath each occupant leaking into the fabric.

There were no long streaks of blood on the floor, no bullet holes in the fine wallpaper - no indications that they had put up a fight.
Bruce scanned their faces. All four cops that Iman and Tiffany had correctly pinpointed as members were present, and three representatives from gangs they had suspected of being involved: The White Scorpions, from the Cauldron; the Eight-Bits, from Glendale; and the lesser-seen Rossi mafia from Gotham Village.

All seven group members had bullet wounds to their chests, right over their hearts. A closer inspection on the closest one - Jovan Excnicios of the Eight Bits - had a burn mark around the entry wound. It was likely a small caliber gun held at close range to help muffle the blast; unlikely to be equipped with a silencer, as the mark on the skin was too thin.

He could feel a slight vibration from the bass two floors underneath, but the faint music in his cowl wasn’t going up the walls - it was coming from outside. There had been no 9-1-1 call regarding gunfire - the bedrooms seemed to be fairly soundproof.

The walls could be thinner than the floors. He’d have to see who - if anyone - had booked the rooms on the other sides of the honeymoon suite. They were currently empty, but it didn’t mean that they hadn’t been all night.

There was a coffee table in the middle of the group, various half-filled cocktail glasses and coffee cups featuring light spatter here and there. Bruce took one of the chemical testing strips from his belt and dipped it in the inch of what appeared to be a martini, and ran the bio-sensors in his fingers over the paper.

"CHEMICAL ANALYSIS COMPLETE. KNOWN INGREDIENTS DETECTED: GIN MARE; CONTRATTO BIANCO VERMOUTH; CITRIS LIMON; [VECURONIUM BROMIDE]."

As he suspected, they’d been drugged first with a paralyzing agent. Which meant whoever killed them either had a key to the room, or were invited to stay by the group. There were camera feeds everywhere in the place, so he might actually have a chance at spotting them, or at least investigating the staff.

Bruce cast a look at the lone empty chair. Eight seating places, seven bodies…

The person who killed them might have been feigning interest in joining; this was likely premeditated, so either the killer planned to drug and shoot them all from the beginning, or brought the drug with them as insurance if they were going the meeting route.

The drone scanned the chair, finding it clean of any DNA - only light spatter around the arms and legs, where it might have flown. There were a couple of dark threads that didn’t match the bright blue of the chair cushion. “Clothing fibers,” Bruce muttered to himself, “Hopefully from the killer.”

Bruce breathed out, still feeling overheated, and realized the bodies were still warm under the scan. But the blood spatters are fairly dry…

He couldn’t do a liver-test (that was for the coroner) but he could do an under-the-armpit one. He thought carefully - if the killer sat in the chair, then Jovan Excnicios’ was likely the first to die. He’d give a better indication than the rest.

He wedged Jovan’s arm up and let the drone read it. Ninety-four degrees…

That wasn’t long enough. Not when he saw how dried the blood was. It was now ten-thirty, and if they were all on time and killed anywhere between five and ten minutes after the meeting started…they should at least be ten degrees cooler.

The thermostat. Bruce enhanced the cowl’s vision to read the large unit under the window by the bed
- it was churning out ninety-five-degree air.

The killer cranked the heat to disguise time of death. Like Muddy, partially frozen in the dumpster.

He looked at the bodies around him. It implied the killer was weaker, or possibly more worried about getting killed in this setting. They might have confronted the group after the drug started to kick in. Took their time shooting them all, one by one…

It left a terrible taste in his mouth. He felt his stomach twist at the thought of the killer staging it so carefully, so deliberately, like it was one large taunt rather than a display of their gang’s power.

He had to find out who they were meeting. He had to search the cameras outside.

He had to call Gordon, first and foremost.

Bruce reached for his gauntlet’s contact list, scrolling through the short list, and was just about to press the call button when he heard a ringing noise.

A harsh sort of buzzing, like an old phone had a bicycle bell attached rattling around. Not a normal ring-tone from any of the Wednesday Nighters’ cell phones.

He cast a look over to the bed. The simple modern nightstand had a phone on it, next to a little welcome sign and a tall silver lamp.

The phone’s red light was blinking out of time with the rings, a steady on-off like a signal beckoning him closer.

He knew he should answer it. If it was the staff, he could tell them to call the police for him while he snuck closer to the security room and hacked their feed and database, and made sure no other guards were injured like in Selina’s gallery. Even if he just hung up, he’d at least know.

So why was his hand so hesitant to pick it up out of the cradle? He glared at it, hearing the rattling sort of ring in his ears under the cowl, and snatched it up.

Bruce didn’t say hello. He waited a beat, listening.

No air conditioning hum, no whir of computer fans or clamor of people. Whoever it was wasn’t in the lobby or a security area. An empty office, maybe. But there was someone there, he heard them breathe.

“I knew you would come,” a caller said in a voice so hoarse and quiet that it sent the hairs on the back of Bruce’s neck on edge, even with the cowl. It was masculine with no discernible accent. Calm and controlled. “I suppose it was futile to hope you wouldn’t.”

Bruce clenched his jaw, suppressing the disturbed feeling that tried to seize his chest and stomach. He resisted the urge to tell them he was going to find them and beat them black and blue. He could hear the faint sound of something in the back. A distant *ka-chunk* *ka-chunk* amongst the faint breaths. The killer must have been waiting for him, watching him from outside…

He doubted they would actually answer properly, but asking the obvious question on his mind was always worth a try. “Who are you?”

He turned towards the window, searching out in the city line for any sign of life. The windows on the opposing building were dark, with only a few having blinds drawn.
“Please don’t interfere. I don’t want to have to kill you,” the voice pressed gently.

*Then you shouldn’t have killed all these people,* Bruce thought to himself. They weren’t so narcissistic as to brag about how Bruce should know who they were, or threaten that he might find out later, or give some bullshit flattering description of themselves. The one who’d taken out the gang on the Chandis had been obvious in leaving some sort of signature, and then drilling the message home by shooting all those from the warehouse to boot. This person was different.

He decided it was best to try and coax them out of hiding. Show he wanted to help whatever they were going through that made them do this. “You don’t have to,” he said, “You don’t have to kill anyone.”

The sky-train was behind that row of buildings. He could see the green lights winking at him from the top of the rails, indicating the train was passing.

“Of course I do,” the voice answered. “I would have thought you would understand that.”

Bruce couldn’t help himself. They thought they knew him. That he’d understand this sick display of controlled, remorseless slaughter of people who deserved to face the scales of justice like anyone else. “What about this could I possibly understand?!”

It was quiet for a beat. “So that’s how it is with you…” Bruce saw movement on the building across the street, a mere shadow of a person cast in the blinking green light for a moment, and something in his gut told him that was who he was after.

He could leap into action - go after them, despite the danger of being noticed running from another crime scene.

He judged the distance he’d have to go; he wouldn’t get far before he’d lose sight of the perpetrator. For all he knew, the killer had accomplices.

He needed to get the security footage and payment records before it could be too late. He’d let them go for now and slam their face into the concrete later.

“I will say this only once: don’t interfere,” the voice said sternly, the threat sounding harsh in their hoarse voice. “We’re on the same side.”

There was a click, and Bruce was met with the dial tone.

*~*~*~*~*~

Bruce pulled back into the cave just after four in the morning. He felt drained worse than before. He knew he’d have to get some power-naps in at the office.

As if to taunt him, he could hear the few bats left behind from the colony’s nightly flight fluttering around, active and wild in their element.

Bruce rolled his shoulders as he stepped out of the Batmobile and ascended the stairs, taking everything in quickly. He was alone, it seemed. It was too much to hope that Tiffany had come back to talk to him.

He cast a glance over at the gallery of rogues - seeking out John’s case, with its wide steel-cut smile grinning at him like always, and feeling some minute amount of much-needed chemicals in his skull disperse into his bloodstream at the sight.
Sometimes, it almost felt like John was welcoming him home, even from a distance. And on days like today - nights like tonight - where Bruce wanted nothing more than to collapse someplace away from the rest of the world, the only thing he wanted was to know that John was there somewhere.

Bruce looked at his gauntlet’s contact list. He was unable to stop thinking about the scene he left, even after hours of talking with Gordon and inspecting every inch of the roof he’d seen the killer on, and the streets below. He already had conflicts in his personal life to deal with, with his friendships hurt and his relationship’s privacy threatened, so the added bonus of even more bloodshed put him on edge more than ever. He wanted to be alone, but he wanted reassurance, and the pretty lie of *everything will be alright* never sounded better when it was coming from John.

He dialed him taking a seat in the Batcomputer’s chair and turning to look at the fabric flowers sitting at the console, unsure if he should talk about the old case or the new one, or how sorry he was he didn’t call or text about the stupid article from that morning, or…

“This is John! If I’m not in therapy, I’m either wounded, kidnapped, or in a medically-associated snooze. Leave a message after the beep; if I don’t text back in an hour, turn on the Batsignal and I’ll be bound to show up in a day or two, ha ha ha haa!”

Bruce sighed. Of course it’d be the one time when John was actually asleep. “Hey, John, it’s me,” he started, still unsure of what he wanted to say. He couldn’t muster up the will to lie and say things were fine. He knew he sounded exhausted. “I just… Needed to talk to you.” He leaned his head back, breathing in the scents of metal and earth and fresh water. He was so tired, he could almost fall asleep right there and then if it wasn’t for the suit feeling so heavy. “It’s been a long day. You’re the one person I want to see right now. Call me back when you can.”

The fake orange rose stood out in his field of vision. A symbol of passion, if his literary knowledge of the language of flowers was correct. It seemed that John had all the goodwill, the seemingly never-ending flow of affection he showered Bruce with through praise and insinuations and blatant confessions of love whispered to him when they were alone. He said Bruce was the best, sweetest boyfriend anyone could ask for, but Bruce didn’t think so; not with how often he kept his feelings to himself. John deserved more than just a needy *I miss you*.

“I love you,” he finished, wanting to just go upstairs and find that he could lay next to John for the next several hours. “Call me, please.”

He hung up, longing for the comfortable familiarity of John even more, and stared up at the Batcomputer’s large monitor. He needed to work. Get his mind off it and back into what he came home for.

In seconds, the security camera footage from 9 PM onwards was splayed across every screen, every floor having its own frame. “Computer, run facial recognition on monitors one through four. Timestamp entrances to unit two, unit three, unit four, and unit seventeen.”

“SCANNING INITIATED. RESULTS ON MONITOR FIVE; LOGS SAVED IN ARCHIVE F85H4ND.”

Bruce’s eyes rolled over every screen, hoping for something to jump out. Cameras three and four were pointed in the back, showing the door for the maintenance crew and main exit, and two was posted at the main entrance. Seventeen was right outside room 307, the honeymoon suite.

Groups of people, clearly having a night on the town, came and went. Occasionally a couple or single. He increased the speed on the footage.
At nine-forty, a very noticeable person entered. A woman, with an oversized floppy hat for the summer, a knee-length trench coat the same classic color and style as the one his father used to wear. There was no way to see the top of half of her face, but he did get a glimpse of red lipstick.

No tights under what Bruce presumed to be a skirt beneath the coat. Good high heels, judging by the shape.

He watched the monitors. She clearly didn’t need to check in - she just walked straight to the elevator, her hands in her pockets, and came out on the third floor. She had a key already in hand as she came up to the door.

He shot a look at the monitor - no match. Not a wanted woman.

“Now that’s strange,” he muttered to himself, “Gordon said a Michael Hodgson booked the room yesterday morning.” Bruce shifted through personal records in a smaller window, pulling up what he could. Michael was a married homeowner, and had a handful of traffic tickets and a charge for public drunkenness a few years ago, but otherwise… “He moved out of the Somerset district last year to Grand Haven.”

Everything else about the setup was so…careful. The obvious planning to drug and shoot the lot of them in the most soundproof room possible. It didn’t make sense for Michael to blatantly use his own credit card when he was clearly smart enough to hide his face from view. He would’ve used something more difficult to trace, like a prepaid gift card.

Bruce let the Batcomputer search through card companies’ fraud alarms. “It has to be someone else…”

“I thought I’d find you down here.”

Bruce whirled around, needing to see if his ears could be disbelieved. “Alfred?”

There was no mistaking it, despite the even tan Alfred seemed to have gotten from the sun.

He hurried to stand. “Alfred, I didn’t know you’d-”

“Of course you didn’t know, Master Bruce - I’ve called the house, your mobile, your office, and your car’s personal line, and left messages on every single one throughout the day. It’s only natural you wouldn’t know I was coming to visit.”

Bruce felt himself relax. Alfred’s dry wit was in full swing. It was comforting, despite the obvious digs at his incompetence in juggling his own life. “I’m sorry.” There was no real excuse - he had his phone on silent most of the day to avoid the nosiest reporters who managed to get hold of it somehow, and he was in the cave so often he didn’t think to check the house phone. His car had clearly deigned not to tell him he missed a message; he’d have to fix that bug later. “There’s…been a lot going on.”

Alfred gave the monitors a look. “Clearly. I hope you’re not going to try and feed me some prattle about how your night is just beginning.”

Bruce sank back into the chair. “I have to go through the security footage. There’s another multiple homicide.”

“Master Bruce,” Alfred said plainly, “the only reason I’m up at this hour is because Honolulu is a quarter of a day behind us at the moment. I have no doubt that you’ve spent hours out chasing clues as if the Gotham police force can’t solve anything without you. You have a full day of work ahead
of you tomorrow, and if the bags under your eyes are anything to go by, you haven’t had as nearly as much sleep as you need.”

Bruce felt irked by the insinuation that he couldn’t balance the lot of it. As if Alfred hadn’t just waltzed in out of nowhere and interrupted him, when he already felt so tired and frustrated, and…

Bruce sighed. He couldn’t blame Al’. He was only doing what a guardian did; worry over his ward. And Alfred had flown for ten or more hours just to stay for a while.

“I guess you’re right,” he said, not really meaning it.

“Of course I am. You won’t do the city any good in either of your lives if you’re sleep deprived.”

“Computer, save credit fraud findings for any Michael Hodgson of Grand Haven.”

The Batcomputer gave a short beep as the red light on the console blinked. “INCOMING FRAUD ALERTS SAVED IN ARCHIVE 40F5WRD5.”

“Thank you,” he replied by reflex as he stood to lead Alfred back up to the Manor.

“YOU’RE WELCOME.”

Bruce ducked his head into his palm, trying to wipe away the embarrassment.

“Nice to know you still haven’t entirely lost your manners, Master Bruce,” Alfred noted with a smile. “Though I hope that extends to your housekeeping when it comes to guests.”

He did try, in any case, since Tiffany and Iman came over so often nowadays that they practically had their own rooms at the ready, but… Well, housekeeping was not Bruce’s forte. He never quite understood how Alfred managed to clean so much of the house in a day. “I’ll change your sheets.”

“Already done,” the former-butler said casually. “But I hope that doesn’t mean you haven’t changed yours recently.”

Bruce didn’t want to answer that.

When Bruce eventually did fall back into his own pillow in the dark, knowing that Alfred was once again a stroll down the hall away, the thought of changing his king-size sheets was the last thing on his mind.

He stared up at the ceiling, thoughts of homicidal women blending with scratchy voices and poisoned cups. Board room meetings were stocked with bodies and guns were shooting out knives.

He looked over at the empty space next to him, trying to picture John’s green hair on the pillow next his, and kept the thought stubbornly in place by closing his eyes with the image still behind his lids.

*_~*_ ~*_~*_

Bruce’s eyes snapped open.

He was back in the expansive office of Wayne Enterprises, leaned too far back in his executive chair. Forgotten paperwork sat on his desk, abandoned an hour or two ago.

The sun was getting low in the sky, but not yet setting... How long had he been asleep?

More importantly, why had he woken so suddenly?
And why was he hearing an old carnival organ play what sounded like... *Mack the Knife*?

Bruce’s sleep-deprived brain connected the dots with a wordless scream and he yanked the cheerfully-ringing phone off his desk and answered it with a frantic hello.

“*Bruce! Thank goodness,*” John breathed out. Bruce felt his own lungful of air release along with his. “*I’m so sorry, buddy, I would’ve called back sooner, but today’s been... busy,*” he emphasized, edging on angry, “*But... You called! I was so worried something happened to you! I mean, it’s hard enough finding good reception in this place, let alone a spot I can talk to you without anyone interrupting me, and I know it’s ridiculous but I thought since you hadn’t texted or anything since that you’d be...*” He trailed off, but Bruce knew what he was trying to say: incapacitated, either temporarily or permanently. “*Nevermind,*” John waved off, “*The important thing is that you answered! So, what’s up? Uh...you are okay, aren’t you?*

Bruce had resumed leaning back in his chair when John started to talk. He’d felt his shoulders sink back down and the panic that something had gone wrong had ebbed away. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

“You always say that,” John said with a slight titter, “but I get what you mean. You’re not in any physical pain that you can’t handle, and you’re not on the verge of an emotional breakdown... But you sound pretty tired. Did you get any sleep?”

“I think I got a few power-naps.”

“*Geez, Bruce. You’re worse at sleeping than the guys from the old insomnia ward.*” Bruce felt his mouth quirk up at that. “*I guess that four A.M. call wasn’t the lonely I-need-you call your voicemail implied?*”

Bruce felt his cheeks heat, and was glad John was not there to tease him about noticing it. He thought about what to say, his tongue feeling heavy in his mouth.

He’d called him when he was weak. Wanting solace in someone familiar and understanding, if only for a minute. He’d wanted his thoughts and boundless encouragement in the face of bleakness and confusion. John hadn’t seen Bruce as the overtired, hopeless man he felt like now.

John might be the only one who could understand why he felt like that, but... John might have seen Bruce at some of his worst, but he might not like the kind of worst Bruce felt right then. “Yes and no,” he said casually, hoping John would take the bait.

“...so it WAS a booty-call?” John asked, mildly surprised. Bruce could hear the smile in his voice.

“I wouldn’t do that to you when you couldn’t enjoy it properly, John,” Bruce slipped in with his lower playboy voice, “I just... Wanted to talk to you,” he finished more honestly. He looked at his office ceiling, wishing it was the stalactites of the Batcave. He wanted the cool rush of water and feel of secrecy the hollowed-out piece of Earth provided, not the sunlit office sitting beneath an oversized brand of his family name’s initial.

“Well, I’m all ears for you any day of the week, Brucie,” John answered cheerfully. “*But I can tell - you’ve got something on that big, beautiful brain of yours. Go ahead, lay it on me.***

He felt like he had a hundred things he wanted to say. The crime scene, Tiffany, Alfred... But first thing was first. “You should know, there’s another gossip column article about us, supposedly by an Arkham orderly. But don’t worry, I’ve got my lawyers pounding down the Gotham Moonrise’s door for a retraction.”
“Oh, I know about that, Bruce. It came up on my news feed yesterday. I... I mean, I meant to ask, but...I know you’re busy, with...um, everything else.” Bruce felt like John had reached through the phone and squeezed his heart. “But it’s okay! I read it - did you see the part where you apparently paid the guy to get hours alone with me at a time?” He gave one his low chuckles, genuine and teasing, and Bruce knew he meant it when he said he was okay. “I’ll give the writer some credit: they clearly know we have great chemistry if they think we can go at it for two solid hours.” Bruce felt his heart stir as John’s voice got lower, dipping into the sensual voice he had when purring in Bruce’s damaged ear. “Then again, when I get out of here, we’ll have a lot of time to try that for ourselves.”

“John, I’m still at work,” Bruce said, wishing he wasn’t.

“And I’m still in a mental ward,” John replied silkily, “Still, we could make it work... Unless you’re not in the mood.” He paused very briefly, as if suddenly realizing it wasn’t a good idea to try phone sex while he wasn’t even supposed to have a phone. “You’re not in the mood. So, uh, how about those Knights? Sure are, uh, sporty, the way they get paid outrageously for running around a defined area trying to catch a ball.”

Bruce felt his mouth stretch into a closed smile and a chortle threaten to escape his throat. “John, it’s okay, I’ve got other things to talk to you about.”

“Good, I don’t know how they’ve been fairing this year. So, what else is new?”

“Alfred is back,” he mentioned simply. “He surprised me at the cave this morning. I ended up missing three calls from him while I was out and didn’t notice.”

“Wow, Bruce, you must be tired if you’re this disorganized.”

Bruce didn’t want to comment on that. He was ashamed enough of it as it was. “He’s staying for a little while.”

“Oh, is he going to help out on night duty?”

“A little. I’m not holding my breath. I missed him, but it’s...strange having him back in the house. I got used to having just Tiffany and Iman stop by. Now there’s Alfred on top of it.”

“And on top of your casework, it’s now family drama, huh?” John asked, sounding more teasing than anything.

“I just...” No, John would get it. John got him so well. “I just feel like I need to be alone at home, with everything going on.”

“Well, ‘when sorrows come they come not single spies, but in battalions’, ” he quoted. (Hamlet. Bruce knew the play well, since it was one of his favorites. He wondered if John had gotten hold of some collection recently.) “What sorrows have marched your way, Brucie?”

He considered mentioning Roman and the whole annoying debacle of his insinuations about them, but Bruce wanted explicit proof that it was him who had written the article before he laid out the whole story. Especially considering John might be able to give some insight into last night’s events that Bruce’s tired brain couldn’t quite fathom.

“I found the Wednesday Nighters last night,” Bruce said.

“Ooh, the group of...uh, dirty cops and crooks?” John asked, clearly avoiding his favored word of choice when it came to corrupt people of authority for Bruce’s sake, “Wow, I bet Tiff was pleased
Bruce’s mood dropped further. “It didn’t go well.”

“Oh no,” John audibly sulked, “Tiffany didn’t get hurt, did she? Was that why you called me?”

“I didn’t let her go with me. Four cops, three of the left-hands in gangs - I didn’t want her to walk into that.”

“So, if she’s okay, and you’re okay, and Iman is okay… I’m guessing Tiffany is mad at you for not letting her go along and effectively shunning her from her own case?”

Hit it one, John. “Yes, but that’s not all. The whole group was dead when I arrived. The killer staged the scene and called the room’s phone. They said they knew I would be there.” Without even seeing him, he knew John was paying close attention. “They weren’t bragging, they just...stated it. They said they didn’t want to kill me, and they didn’t want me there...but they thought that I would understand that they had to kill the Wednesday Nighters. That...”

Bruce felt his stomach curdle and a bad taste in his mouth start to form at the thought of saying what came next. But he couldn’t leave it out.

“That they were on my side.”

John was quiet. Contemplative, perhaps. The call certainly hadn’t disconnected.

“I went through all the security footage,” he continued, pressing onwards. “A woman invited them in. They made a meeting with a burner phone, wore a large coat and hat in the place; I can’t trace a car or Ryde from the street, and I didn’t see her get into one a few blocks away, either. I don’t doubt they threw the clothes away afterward. They planned this down to the letter.”

“So the voice you heard,” John started with a sense of contemplation. Bruce heard the underlying anger in his voice; the same sort that he had heard in a distant memory of a dream, at a train station in a ruined city with bloody streets. The sort The Joker had while grinding his heel into Scarecrow’s hand. “Was it not a woman’s?”

“It was masculine, and hoarse, like they had a sore throat.”

“How did they know you were there?”

“They were watching me from across the street,” Bruce answered, shutting his eyes and letting him take in John’s voice. He might as well have been sitting across from him.

“And the scene?”

Bruce breathed out. “Drugged with a powdered version of a paralyzing medication before being shot in the heart. There was no suggestion of a struggle, and they were all shot while sitting down.” He thought a little more, now that he was away from it, and speaking comfortably. “The angles suggest they walked up to each of them. It looked personal.”

John hummed. “Nothing else, huh?”

“They didn’t leave anything useful behind. No DNA, no identifiable picture, no fingerprints. They covered everything - even the time of death.”
“This really isn’t your week, is it?” John asked, a sarcastic smile in his voice. “First someone taunts you by leaving their calling card, then killing your only possible witness, then this…” He breathed out dramatically, practically blowing a raspberry. “Well, I don’t know if it will cheer you up, but I’ve got some info’ for you. I found a couple more of Black Mask’s little subterranean gangs.”

Bruce sat up, eyes wide and heart shaken. “What?”

“Yeeeaahhh, long story short: turns out my friends are working at places where the till has the Black Mask’s hand shuffling around. Seems he gives his little syndicates mask-related names, on top of everything else. Guess he just has a thing for nicknames… Anyway, Volto is in charge of a little get-crunk-while-you-bunk operation at the Lucky Hotel, and Bauta - b-a-u-t-a, you have no idea how much that threw me off - runs the loan op’ in the laundromat next to Stitched Up.”

Bauta.

Project Bauta. He’d been so distracted by the pile of other things he hadn’t thought about looking into the names, they were just another label, another thing on an endless list of things -

“And I’m...ah, well, I’m not sure it’s related, anyway. I’ll let you know what I find, if you don’t figure out before me. Which you probably will, considering it’s you-”

Bruce’s mind was racing, hardly hearing John as he pulled up the Janus documents on his encrypted laptop. “John,” Bruce pressed gently, “what types of masks are they?”

“Oh, uh, Venetian? Funny, actually, Volto is all for anonymity and quiet exits - makes sense, with courtesans and drugs - and Bauta is for anonymous decisions, hence the borrowing of money at risk. I thought they fit rather well; seems our B.M. is a metaphorical type.”

Melpomene-Thalia - the masks of comedy and tragedy in theater, assigned to a project for professional movie makeup. Bauta, assigned to anti-aging makeup. Volto, to an ‘all-natural’ line.

“John...” He felt the rush the solution always brought him. A simple thank you wouldn’t do. “If we’re right, I’m going to owe you another favor.”

“We?” John asked before something clearly clicked, “Ohh, I see! Your train of thought finally left the station after a bout of assisted maintenance, huh?” John snickered, clearly proud of himself. “Well, mister, I hope you’re ready to live up to that… But, uh, can I get a hint at where that train of yours is leading?”

“Janus Industries has projects with the same names, plus more.”

“Janus? As in Janus makeup? Why were-?”

“It’s a long story,” Bruce explained, his mind rushing. He’d have to dig a little more, do some more research into Roman, but he felt confident he could cross two of his mysteries off his list with one stroke. “I’ll tell you everything next time I visit.”

“...so, tomorrow?” John asked a little hopefully. “No, wait, make it Saturday, I should have all my dirt in one pile by then. I would’ve had it today, but...ugh. I had to wait for the Warden and the Social Worker, and those two loooove to take up our time for no reason. Saturday’s much better than Friday.”

“It’s a date,” Bruce teased, his mood improved. He felt sure Roman was Black Mask. He could find more with some careful prodding and a few visits to the syndicates.
“...I just realized I’m going to have to re-organize my crime web, here.” John gave a little sigh. “How come everyone decided to go on revenge sprees at once? Is it the phase of the moon or something?” He chuckled to himself. Bruce heard a faint knocking sound in the background. “Oh, sorry, sweet-cheeks, it looks like I can’t help you untangle the knots right now.”

Bruce didn’t quite balk at the sudden nickname, but it did take him by surprise. That wasn’t exactly his preferred term of endearment…not that he had one. Still, he supposed John meant well, and he didn’t have time to press on where it came from. “That’s okay. Go.”

“Oh, wait, before I forget!” John’s voice then dropped to a honeyed, low tone that Bruce felt sink beneath his skin and drip down towards his heart. “I love you, too.”

It was not the time, nor the place, to think about the sensuality and genuine adoration those words had in them, but even as Bruce pulled the phone away and resumed trawling through the Janus Industries’ documents with the Bat’s cowl practically on his head, it seemed to sit in his ear, all warm and promising.

It was what he needed to hear, just then.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, it took longer than expected, but I am SO happy with how this turned out! And next time...ooh, boy, that’s gonna be fun on a bun. For me, anyway. (°`ω°)

I’ve hidden some little non-batty easter eggs in this chapter. Can you spot them all? (I bet you caaan!)

And ahhhh, I’ve been waiting to reveal the Black Mask! I mean, yeah you know it’s Roman from a mere Google search, but check out the cool theme he has going on! He’s making his own devilish masquerade!

Oh my goooooddds, I have been dying to write John and Bruce having a proper, non-interrupted conversation. I just loooove getting them to talk shop and flirt. (I hope they came off as much of a natural duo as I think they are when I write them…) And I found John’s perfect ringtone, by the way. ”Mack the Knife” played on a 100+-year-old organ is so very fitting for John Doe. It brings to mind the carnival, and old swing, and oh the shark haaaass - pretty teeteth dear - when he shoows them - pearrrly whites! ♪

Next chapter we’ll be back with John...Johnny be good, be good~ Johnnyyy~! (■ ´○`)

♪
The Wheel Still Spins on the Upturned Chariot

Chapter Notes

It's morning in Atlanta, and I'm servin' up a big ol' stack of Johnny cakes with a juice reduction on the side. B)

IMPORTANT SPOILER TAGS: past mention of abuse, mental illness, gun violence, bonding over trauma

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John was quite used to keeping an eye and an ear out for everything. Arkham had its share of nasty surprises in all its forms, and it paid to be well-prepared for anyone rounding the corner or prying their eyes into what they shouldn’t see.

It took him one week to learn St. Dymphna’s camera patterns. Two to learn the normal guard rotation. One-and-a-half to learn the layout.

He was not used to the impromptu schedules they seemed to make for him, however. It was like his doctor saw some psychologist’s note about how repeated structured tasks was supposed to help affirm that the patient’s reality was indeed everyone else’s reality, scratched it out with pen, tore it out of the book, and tossed it out of the window straight into the industrial-size shredder while they knocked back a beer.

Yesterday was supposed to be the day. Instead he was suddenly forced to see - more like wait around for - his Parole Officer and assigned social worker. Apparently he could not get away with saying he was adjusting fine - both of them grilled him so much after the hour of waiting a piece that he felt like he’d been seared to a fine medium-rare.

As much as it infuriated him and made him want to just grab them both by the collars to make it very clear he was ‘okay’, he’d barely hung on. He’d had to clench his toes as much as possible and try to channel Bruce’s enviable ability to keep calm under pressure as he actively stopped himself from clenching his teeth or saying something he’d regret. He knew - knew - a lifetime in Arkham and a small obituary list on his record would always make people question his intentions and sanity, but it didn’t make them any less annoying, and it didn’t do that...other part of him any favors.

It might have been tamer now, but it was still there, and with every new tightly-wound ball of aggravation it was fed he could feel it start to pace. It seemed to take more and more calm-time to get it to stop lately… Heck, he could feel it now, still but almost pressed against the inside of its cage like it was waiting for something to come close enough.

But he would have to deal with it later. Today was the day. He’d had to adjust his schedule, had to account for a few extra things, but here, in the early evening before the sun completely set and Officer Kane was busy doing his ‘personal call’ to the on-duty nurse downstairs, John could make his move.

He watched the camera in the hall as he counted by tapping his fingers against his thigh. It would turn the other way - indicated by the slight shift in the lens’ focus if he could see it - in twenty seconds. He was wedged tight in the corner underneath it, having slid there and made a show of
opening and closing the door so it looked like someone had gone inside.

The felt the familiar anxious thrill in his legs and sides of his head, just like when he was sneaking around Arkham. It was brighter in St. Dymphna, and had less places to hide, but at least if he got caught John wouldn’t be thrown in the hole.

*Of course, they could throw him back. They could lock him up and refuse to house him again later. They could-

John shook his head. He didn’t have time to be paranoid.

This was the time for action! For suspense! For catchy secret agent music!

He’d tapped to twenty, and the *Secret Agent Man* theme started to cycle in his head; he side-stepped carefully against the wall, just to make sure the camera couldn’t see him for the few steps it took to be out of the watchful eye’s range.

He walked on the sides of his feet rather than his heels, reducing the inevitable noise on the not-that-clean tile floor, and made for his target - the door halfway down the hall with the plate that read *Officer Hank Kane, Parole.*

John didn’t have long. Thankfully his office didn’t need any RFID card or fingerprint or anything like the more dangerous rooms in the place. Just a plain, old-fashioned lock.

And John had an old-fashioned method for unlocking.

*Secret - aaagent maan, Secret - aaagent maan!* He hummed to himself, sliding the lost-and-found credit card he’d been carrying around for a while into the gap between the door and the frame, and carefully angling it to wedge in-between the lock mechanism and begin to pry, bending the card out of shape. *They’ve given you a number,* he continued, wiggling the card’s edge into what should be the right angle and pushing, *And taken away your naaame!*

He pushed hard, and he twisted the knob at the same time as his finished the chorus - *click.*

John ducked inside the dim office and almost slammed the door shut just in time. The camera switched positions every thirty seconds - two more and he’d have to walk away like he wasn’t trying to break into the place and wait some more.

The place was just like it was yesterday, and couple have almost doubled as the Arkham Warden’s private office: a couple of slightly-peeling filing cabinets that held useless documents John didn’t need; a bookcase with a couple of ‘law’ books and far too much football paraphernalia for the Gotham Rogues alongside several pictures of the guy’s wife and kids; a pair of wooden chairs that John swore were deliberately designed to be uncomfortable; and a boring desk with the same thin-client PC and sleek monitor as everyone else had, and yet two more family pictures, one of which had a King Charles spaniel John wanted to kidnap on principle of it being way too cute.

The tune kept playing in the background of his thoughts as he took a seat in the much-more-comfortable office chair. He made sure not to touch the arms.

Password-locked. Just as he’d thought.

John had watched very carefully as Hank typed away yesterday. It was something clearly easy for the guy to remember, because unlike some of the doctors and other staff, he didn’t dawdle over the keys or tap them lightly as they waited for their hippocampus’ reflex to kick in. He’d done the same motions several times during his last visit, which likely meant he used the same password for
everything. (Dr. Song seemed to use various complex ones, if her odd typing methods were anything to go by.)

Which was good news for John, because he wasn’t sure what the password was.

He had some good guesses. It was something easy to remember, so something somewhat personal with a series of numbers at the end…so an anniversary of something was pretty likely.

John had remembered the areas of the keyboard Hank had used: somewhere between one and four and eight and the dash sign on the top row; he’d had to use one finger to hold down the shift key for letter on the upper left, clearly not excelling at touch-typing; he was sure he hadn’t used the space or bottom row of letters, too. He had three tries to get it right before the account would get locked.

He took a moment to think.

Two distinct things in the guy’s otherwise very boring life was his family and football.

John knew the tricks to get into people’s protected FriendBook pages; he could try the anniversary of his marriage or birth of his kids, saved in a note on his phone.

Or he could look up the year the Gotham Rogues won last; it was before his time, he knew, because people wouldn’t stop hoping they’d go all the way every damn year.

Orrrr...

John flipped the keyboard over halfway with his palms. No sticky note there, unfortunately. He supposed he could poke around the desk a little more on the off-chance the guy had left it lying around carelessly like Bruce did with cash, but he was on limited time. He could risk looking and get his fingerprints all over the place, but why bother when he could just try to look it up?

Hm. Family, football, family, football...

John eyed the desk. The picture of the dog might as well have been taken by a professional photographer – it was all alone, as happy as could be, beaming up at the camera in a showy grassy yard with the perfect angle. The family portrait was a typical family photo with all the taste of Wonder Bread.

It was probably the dog, plus either the year it was adopted or the current one.

John mapped it out mentally on the keyboard. Woofles2019 seemed to fit pretty well with the pattern he remembered. It was worth a shot.

He put it in, waiting for the little wheel to finish spinning and give the ‘incorrect password’ message.

There was a soft da-ding, and John was looking right at the same outline of St. Dymphna holding the white lily to her chest that functioned as the clinic’s logo.

“Sheesh, why not just use password while you’re at it?” He snorted to himself.

John didn’t have too much time. He continued humming his little theme to himself to help count off.

He recognized the same enormous register of criminals that Bruce had access to back at the Batcave just sitting on the desktop. John was pretty sure Ian ‘Nito’ had done time for something, likely a drug habit if he’d left the facility after only a week.

At least it was a web-based registry rather than a whole program, so John could easily just delete the
history there afterwards as long as he had the time. Well, if it would load fast enough…

John tapped his fingers on the mouse button gently, still keeping the rhythm as the page took it’s time to load. He wondered if Bruce ever had to deal with dumb inconveniences like this before he’d got the super-computer installed. There seemed be a few dozen guys (and non-guys, possibly) named Ian. A quick sort by crime, and the more timely Ian arrested that jumped out to John was Ian Coggs.

There was no ‘Ian Nito’ on file, but ‘Ian Coggs’ made John think of the word in-cog-nito.

It made John chuckle to himself. It was definitely the sort of thing John would do, if he were giving an alias with his own name. Well, if he could make a decent play on ‘John’ anyway. And he had decent makeup to cover his white-and-green tones.

The arrest photo taken several months ago was definitely the ‘Mr. Nito’ that John had seen, only the boring t-shirt Ian was wearing was covering up the tattoos more.

Ian Coggs, arrested for driving under the influence and possession of heroin. Notes included he had traces in his car indicating he might have had the intent to sell, but the charge didn’t stick, as there was no mass quantities in Ian’s car or apartment. He seemed to have served a short sentence and was ordered to check into a clinic.

Hmm… John took a picture of the screen with his phone, making sure to capture the last known address as clearly as possible.

John thought for a second – he could look up Ian’s patient file, too, now that he knew Ian’s full name. It was probably somewhere in some kind of share-drive.

The screen flickered, and a pop up informed him that the operating system was not licensed and please license it, would you? John rolled his eyes – a common issue with those sorts of old OS sitting on the network’s virtual machines. It was wonder they didn’t upgrade yet. The thing was practically a dinosaur.

He ignored it and did a quick search in the X-drive-marks-the-spot had Ian Coggs’ old data just sitting in a folder with his name on it. No handy doctor notes, of course, but there was a discharge form.

John skimmed it, interrupting his little background-tune with an intrigued hum. “Looks like Ian was moving to Bludhaven…”

He’d have to look up the new address later…

John was running out of time. He very quickly wiped away the last few bits of internet history on Hank’s machine and went back towards the door, counting the last couple of beats on his thigh. Three, two…

On one, John again became the ghost of Arkham’s hallways, silent and swift, leaving his tampering unnoticed as he closed the door behind him as softly as can be. Another successful heist on his mental tally; Arkham three, John…

He found himself stopping.

I’m not at Arkham anymore, he thought to himself. He blinked, staring straight down the hall.

Right. Right, it just…looked like the repainted Arkham, sometimes. Sneaking around like this just reminded him of it. That was all.
He resumed walking, clenching his hands and releasing them. He wished he had something else to touch for a bit. Just to make sure.

He reached the stairwell. He needed to get to the library on the second floor. It was open until lights-out at eleven and it was the best place he could get some privacy and a decent phone signal.

It was a short walk to the small room that smelt of overly stale cigarettes and books, with a hint of wood-polish underneath.

St. Dymphna wasn’t new. Arkham wasn’t either, not by a longshot, but at least it had a sizable selection in comparison, even if the tall metal bookcases were all kinds of dangerous. St. Dymphna had short cases, all in soft wood so no one would hurt themselves, all in a room about the size of Bruce’s master-bed-and-bath, half of which was occupied by un-squeaky tables and hushed conversations.

He casually weaseled his way towards the little stacks, pretending he belonged there as much as anyone else, and had a peek at his phone.

Four full bars – the best signal he could get.

Too bad his battery was at twelve percent.

John frowned down at the device, half wanting to break it on principle of it not behaving. He’d charged it just yesterday!

“Old fashioned way it is,” he muttered to himself.

Thankfully the reference section was always deserted. John knelt down and skimmed over the few little books of Gotham history – including one on crime statistics that probably should not be accessible to patients – and snatched the guide-to-the-state map book, feeling the weight and laminated paper cover in his hands.

John thumbed through the soft pages by flicking them like a deck of cards, and stopped right at Gotham.

He’d seen this same map before, years ago, when he was a very bored Arkham newbie who still didn’t know what Gotham was. It was a shiny thing, at the time, a beacon of freedom and mystery, a break from the madness and rust and rot of Arkham. It didn’t take long into cycling through the numerous news segments and headlines for John to realize it was a city with a criminal underbelly so obese that it was a wonder anyone could still be considered an honest citizen. It was fascinating, really, to go back as far as possible and learn just who and what had led to the then-current state of things. The power imbalances and shuffles of gangs, the creative ways people wanted to hurt each other, the things people did just to survive another day… He had hours of fun picking apart the reasoning and motives and predicting outcomes. It was a good thing to delve into when he was stuck without entertainment, which was often on his bad days.

John pulled out his phone and opened the picture he’d taken of Ian’s arrest entry: his old place was at 511 N. Blade Street, Apt. 1005.

He traced his finger around, and North Blade Street was deep in what everyone referred to as “the Cauldron”, and naturally above South Blade Street. What highly appropriate name for roads; the Cauldron was a hotspot for the more basic criminal activities and lower gangs.

Kind of far to travel to get to the humble area of the Eastern Docks, but that was only if he still lived there. He probably did, if he was hanging around town, even if it was just temporarily. He wouldn’t
put it past him to just muscle his way back in, either.

He flipped to the Bludhaven page. Ian supposedly moved to 900 Wanda Way.

Wanda Way was tucked into a tiny corner, off another road, but… There was no nine-hundred address. Wanda Way had addresses in the four-hundreds.

A four and a nine were easy to misinterpret if not written clearly, and the forms were filled out by hand and stamped by an authority figure before being scanned-and-typed in… The only question was, was it done on purpose?

Wanda Way sounded too much like “wander away”, and clearly the guy liked puns on his name, so John had the feeling he’d chosen whatever place was there just to throw everyone off.

The guy was clearly smarter than he looked…

John hummed. Now he just had to get someone to look at Ian’s old place and shake him down.

“Hey, clown,” someone said quietly, poking him in the back of the head.

John felt a surge of annoyance quick-boil his blood. Couldn’t they see he was busy? He wanted to throw the map book at the offender and start teaching them some manners.

But he grit his teeth and clenched the map a little too hard instead, blinking hard once to help push the urge away. It was still there, but he couldn’t let it out. “What?” He growled, turning around.

Mickey stood there, somewhat bewildered by…well, maybe he was actually seeing the roiling violent urge in John’s eyes. Mickey almost looked sheepish, suddenly, drawing the offending hand he’d poked John’s head with to tuck under his arms lying on the shelf. “Just tryin’ to get your attention,” he muttered, staring at him somewhat innocently with his chestnut brown eyes.

John had softened somewhat, seeing as it was only Mickey and not some new asshole trying to pick a fight. “You could always try saying my name, next time, Mick’.”

“I tried twice. You didn’t answer.”

“Third time’s the charm,” John shrugged with a little titter. “Sorry,” he added, not feeling it at all, “I just tend to get absorbed in things. What ‘cha need from little ol’ me, Mick’?”

“Just wanted to know what you were doing,” he mumbled, not looking at him.

What a terrible liar. He probably got caught with his hand in the cookie jar somewhere and wanted escape. “Miiick’, what did you dooo?” He teased, putting a hand on his hip like he was a disappointed parent.

“I didn’t do anything.”

“Mm-hm. Let me guess – you said something a little too bold to someone and now they’re trying to find you.”

Mickey might as well have been sweating bullets as he turned his head to look around. “Maybe.”

John chuckled. “Who did you piss off? ‘Firecracker’ Fred? Abdul? Abdul looks like he could fight well… Ooh, was it Harper?”

“No, none o’ them.” Mickey turned back, glancing back at the front door, and suddenly ducked to
the ground like he’d been shot. John heard him crawling on the floor around the case, and John could barely contain his curiosity, so he poked his head up above the shelf to see who had entered.

It was another one of the handful of women staying at the place, scanning the room with a hoity-toity sort of anger. Karen McCarthy - addicted to miscellaneous pills, wine, and pretending she was better than everyone else. John had all of two interactions with her, and disliked both of them.

“Don’t let her see me,” Mickey pleaded from the floor. John sank back down and tried to read Mickey’s face. Why on Earth was he scared of a woman less than half his weight class? Mickey grabbed onto his arm, begging like his life was on the line.

John knew that look. He’d seen it for years in Arkham - Mickey was scared out of his mind. “What did you do?” John whispered. Mickey was friendly with Devi, and seemed to keep his hands to himself. But that didn’t mean he was innocent.

“I just said that her art needed work,” he answered, his voice starting to waver. “She just…flipped out.” Mickey breathing awkwardly. “She just started yellin’, and…” His naturally tanned skin was paling more, shaken by the thought of it. “Don’t tell her I’m here. Please.”

John didn’t have to. Hell, he could fake it and just let Karen look around all day long as Mickey found new, more entertaining places to hide.

But Mickey was clearly rattled. He hated loud noises and seemed to put up a tough-guy front with everyone. The fact that he was so scared of a middle-aged woman yelling at him that he ran away to hide suggested he might have a trauma surrounding such a thing.

If their situations were reversed, there wouldn’t be any promise of an eventual life with Bruce that would hold John back if Mickey let him be forced to confront his own traumatic experiences again.

Besides, saving him was the hero thing to do. And John could never be Bruce – not exactly – but somehow John was his hero, and who was he to let Bruce down?

“Go a few rows down and duck close to the stack,” John advised quietly. “I’ll take care of it.”

Mickey looked a little more confident as he gave a stiff nod and snuck away.

John put the map book back casually and stood, stretching his arms and craning his back like he’d been there for a while. Making himself as obvious as possible.

Sure as Batman stalked the night, John only had to turn like he was going to leave when he found Karen in his personal space, her beady eyes narrowed in determined dislike. “Where’s Mickey?” She asked, her French-tipped index finger pointing at his chin. “You know where he is?”

“Y’know, the first question really drove the point home, Karen. There’s no need to ask twice.”

Karen was trying to stand tall. Sort of hard, since she was almost two whole heads shorter than him. “Don’t get smart with me, John. Have you seen him or not?”

John gave a dramatic laugh, like he actually found the idea funny. (It helped that she was trying so hard to be fierce when John had faced the scariest people imaginable on a nearly daily basis.) It seemed to get her attention; her shrewd eyes were watching him carefully and she looked a little confused. “In here? You’re kidding, right?”

“Why would I be?” She asked haughtily, clearly thinking he was insulting her.
“The guy can barely read a street sign! He’s so macho-illiterate I doubt he knows what a library even is,” John lied, thinking back to one of the more feral inhabitants at Arkham. Karen didn’t have to know he was talking about a different guy. “He’s probably hiding out in the men’s room by the fitness joing. It’s closer to home and he’ll think you won’t have the nerve to go in there.”

Karen clicked her tongue and looked even fiercer. “Oh, I won’t have to go in to give him a piece of my mind…”

*Not that you have much to work with,* John thought with all the bitterness he was brewing away inside.

“Thanks,” she said dismissively as she stormed away on her pointless little mission.

“No problem,” John said with a cheerful little wave, “you stupid jerk,” he added quietly, unable to hold it in. He didn’t care if she heard or not, but they were in a library, and raising his voice any more than he already did would be rude.

Once the offending lady was gone, John strolled over to Mickey’s hiding place, finding him with his arms around his knees. “She’s gone,” he said simply. Mickey was not standing to leave. He was staring at the shelves across from him with the same sort of vacant stare that John instantly recognized as dissociative. It wouldn’t be good to just leave him there. He knelt down and waved his hand in front of his eyes. “You *home* in there?”

“Huh?” Mickey came back to reality. “Sorry. I…” He clammed up for a moment. “I’m not good with women.”

“Ha! You and me *both*, Mick,” John joked, nudging him slightly. “You get along with Devi just fine, though.”

“She’s different,” he muttered. “She’s not like…*that*.”

Talk about vague. Still, if John had any guess he’d bet on… “Abusive?”

Mickey drew in on himself a little. “Yeah. She’s calm. Doesn’t yell. Doesn’t belittle anyone. Doesn’t laugh at people for nothin’.”

*Ah.* That explained a few things. “Sheesh, I’m two out of *three*, there. It’s a wonder you talk to me.”

Mickey stared at him firmly. “You’re different, too,” he stated. “And you’ve *been* there.”

John was perplexed, for once. He hadn’t mentioned anything of his relationship with Harley to anyone, much less in a place Mickey could’ve heard.

“I keep thinkin’ I’ll wake up and be *back* there,” he explained, running a hand through his short crew-cut and staring at his worn tennis shoes. “In that *house*. Like nothing changed…”

Ohh, *that’s* what he’d meant when he said he ‘got’ why John didn’t want to go back to Arkham. Mickey had lived in an abusive place he was forced to call *home* for a long time.

John wasn’t going to pry further. He didn’t need to. Mickey had finally cracked open like the other eggs at Arkham, and John could see the yolk swimming in its translucent goo.

Mickey was clearly thinking about that trauma now, seeing as how it was at the forefront of everything. It’s wouldn’t be very good of John to leave him on his own now, even if Karen didn’t come back.
But could he risk letting Mickey in on the big mystery? Mickey wasn’t the brightest crayon in the box, but he paid attention enough. A different point of view wouldn’t hurt, either.

“Well sitting there thinking about it all night’s not going to do you any favors,” John said with a nudge on his shoulder. “Trust me, every doc’ I’ve ever had tells me that! Ha ha!” *Dial it back; that was too light-hearted.* “I know something that will get your mind off it - always works for me, anyway: puzzles. And I’ve got one upstairs I could use some help on.”

“…okay.” Mickey stood by himself, clearly intent on leaving now. “I’ll get Devi, too.”

“The more, the merrier,” John shrugged. “Don’t wait up, I’ve got to make a call first.”

Mickey blinked, apparently examining him for any trace of a lie, and seemed satisfied. “Thanks, John.”

*Finally,* some decent recognition. “You’re welcome.”

Mickey stuck his hands in his hoodie’s pockets and walked away without another word or gesture that would indicate he had anything else to say.

So John did what he came there to do: he pretended to be looking for something in the back rows until he seemed settled on something, and sank to the floor with his phone out.

He had to share his findings with Bruce. He couldn’t keep the knowledge of Ian Coggs’ name to himself for another day – he needed more information, but Bruce needed it even more, and surely he’d be ever-so-grateful that John had tossed a nice bundle of intel’ his way that Bruce would heap some praise onto him in beautiful voice of his.

John stared at his last message from Batman’s number.

> Checking out Sionis’ place. Wish me luck.

John, of course, had wished him the *best* luck accompanied by ten heart emoticons. But that was last night, and there was no news on Roman Sionis suddenly being arrested or disappearing or anything like that today. So more than likely, Bruce was still looking for him...

He scrolled up a little. Apparently the guy whose charge-card was used to book the hotel room from the latest serial murder was claiming it was fraudulent charges. *Naturally.*

John looked at his contact list anyway. Calling Bruce on the job via his cell might interrupt him. He could try the ‘office’ - aka the Batcave - and see if he could catch him early and get him to do a tiny little search.

But he also didn’t want to bother him too much. Bruce had his plate piled high like he had the last clean one at a crowded buffet.

He *could* call Tiffany. She might be mad at Bruce - and somewhat rightfully so - but it didn’t mean she wouldn’t cooperate if he dangled the right bait.

Not to mention, Tiffany was less likely to be busy. He doubted they made up yet, so she probably wasn’t at the cave. He chose her cell, deciding that if she didn’t pick up, he’d try the cave next.

One…two… John gave a low little whistle as it continued to ring, the little theme song cycling back around again. Five…six…
“Rustle, rustle. ...hello?”

“Hi-ya, Tiff,” he greeted, listening for anything in the background to give away where she was, “What’cha doin’?”

“Well I was eating,” she answered somewhat grumpily, sounding like she had her mouth half-full. “You better have something good to interrupt my biryani.”

He could hear a slight hum, like a high-powered fan on a computer. There was no echo - she wasn’t in the cave. Likely at home. (Didn’t Bruce mention her sharing an apartment?) “Can you do me a teensy favor?”

“What kind?” It wasn’t dismissive, but it wasn’t curious enough. Still, he could run with it.

“The firewall-breaching and record-lookup kind. I’d do it, but I don’t have the skills to break into records on a cell.” He tapped on his knee, choosing his next words carefully. “Which is why I’m asking you - you could break into BlackGate’s network with a screwdriver and one of those vendor-locked phones for kids.”

“I’ll have to add that to my bucket list,” she joked. A good sign. “What are you trying to break into?”

“Whatever’s at 400 Wanda Way in Bludhaven.”

Click-click-clack. “Haven’s Helping Hand?”

“Ooh-hoo, sounds legit.” Which meant Ian picked the place. He probably never set foot in it, but it was worth a look just to make sure.

“...so, what’s this for? You got a lead on our Chandis killer?”

“I wish,” John huffed, “but it is related to it. Our resident flying mammal is running around looking for B.M. and his lackeys and hasn’t had any luck; I think I’ve found one of them.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Well, since my friends here are working at places our main baddie has his sticky fingers in, I don’t think it’s a coincidence that mine was recently visited by someone who clearly takes orders from a boss; especially when I’m right down the street from the other little practices.”

“Wait, how’d you know Black Mask is involved with-?”

“Long story,” John interrupted casually, not wanting to delve into that, “Anyway, I also know the guy last lived at apartment 1105 at 511 North Blade Street. Since he’s definitely in Gotham there’s a chance he’d return to his old place.”

“Could be worth a look. Got a name?”

He couldn’t resist a good setup like that. “Why Tiff’, you know I’m called John,” he joked, giggling a little at how she must be pulling that annoyed face.

“...keep going like that and I’ll hang up on you.” She didn’t sound like she really meant it. John ticked off that little checkbox in his head.

“Okay, okay, sorry. It’s Ian Coggs - two ‘g’s.”
A bit of silence followed. John waited patiently, drumming his leg in the same rhythm as the old spy-show tune in his head.

“I’m surprised you’re not running to Bruce with this,” Tiffany mentioned.

“What, he’s not still out chasing the golden goose on top of our other two murderers’ shadows?” Of course he was. John felt it in his gut; Bruce was looking for anything, any shadow, any miniscule thing that might be a break.

“...probably.” It wasn’t quite a scoff - he could practically see her shrugging along like she was pretending very hard not to care.

“Besides, why wouldn’t I tell you? You were part of the team before me,” he said slyly.

Tiffany gave a little sputtering noise. “Doesn’t feel like it. If we swapped places, he’d let you do almost anything.”

That was a little true, but he wasn’t about to say that. He had the perfect opportunity sitting there and he wasn’t going to let it go. “Nah, he wouldn’t,” John answered, knowing there were several things he would absolutely not be allowed to do, “I mean, I might be ‘the adult’ but you’ve got more in the training department. And a better head on your shoulders; mine’s factory defective,” he finished with a giggle at his own joke.

She gave a sort of humph that he took to mean she was mildly amused. Bruce had done the same thing sometimes, with that little upturn in the corner of his lips. John wondered if it was something Tiffany had picked up from being around Bruce so often.

“Of course, you could always prove it to him,” John continued smoothly, pretending to be thinking it over, “If our guy coughs up enough, you’d practically be delivering B.M. on a silver platter.”

She was quiet; she was thinking it over. “You work near the docks; if he’s still in the Cauldron, it’d be a heck of a commute for him.”

“Hey, when the boss calls, you go anywhere.”

“True… I think it’s worth checking out.” John grinned and pumped his fist in triumph, tapping the floor with his shoes as much as he dared. Mission accomplished - he’d pulled the right strings, and now Tiffany was going to search the place for him! “Haven’s almost done cracking.”

John heard an annoying beep in his ear, souring his good mood a little; he pulled away, and sure enough the battery was at seven percent. “Hey, Tiff, my battery’s dying and I get a pretty shitty signal everywhere else; you’ll have to text me what you find.”

“...it’s St. Dymphna, right? Which room are you in?”

Well, he didn’t expect that as a response. “Um, 308.”

“When’s lock-down?”

“Eleven...” He was pretty sure he knew what she was getting at. “There’s no fire escape or anything for you to land on, though.”

“But your window opens?”

“Yeah, a little...”
“Then it’s no problem. I can swing by in about an hour, hour and a half. I’ll be patrolling around there later anyway.”

“Well, uh, if that works for you…” He grinned to himself; a personal report, too? That could only mean he was growing on her, which meant more information on the goings-on, a happier Bruce, and one less stressful relationship for John to mull over.

Of course, she might just want to make sure he was behaving. Or seeing if she could gather any indication as to what he’d been up to and try to analyze him as much as he did everyone else… John shook the thought. Tiffany was a smart cookie, but she wasn’t on Iman or Bruce’s level of psychoanalysis. Even if she was trying to gather personal info’ on him, she wouldn’t know exactly what went on his head.

“See ya later, then, Tiff’,” he said simply, before remembering that Tiffany did not wear the same sort of armor that Bruce did, “And be careful; the guy packs heat on his right hip.”

“Thanks. Later.”

John hung up, feeling a sort of smug satisfaction. He’d be one step closer to delivering Black Mask to Batman’s doorstep and getting Dymphna cleared of any exploitive activity. And Black Mask himself would shed some light on whoever was pissed at him, solving the other puzzle that nagged at John’s already-messy mind.

Though, speaking of Dymphna and puzzles… John supposed it was time to get some other input.

*~*~*~*~*

“Look, it can’t be either of them, either,” John stressed, pointing to the map of Gotham he’d printed out a week ago on his wall, “Falcone’s dead, and when Maroni got shuffled off to the big house, half the city’s territory – these yellow flags – went up for grabs while their leftovers played follow-the-leader with a bunch of headless-”

“John,” Mickey interrupted, staring at him from John’s chair in the corner, “You’re doing it again.”

Devi flicked her butterfly knife open and closed from her spot on the floor, where she was sitting on several pillows she’d brought from her room. John likened it to chewing gum; just a little something to do to pass time. “He’s trying to say Macaroni and Falcone’s old running crews split up into their own groups, Mick’.”

“Then he should just say it,” Mickey muttered, crossing his arms and looking at his feet with an embarrassed scowl.

John resisted the urge to rub the bridge of his nose. “Devi, it’s Ma-roni.”

“I know what I said,” she smirked, flicking the knife open and closed again. “I like him better as a noodle.”

It was funny enough to make John chuckle, but it didn’t cool his temper. John was clearly not meant to be a teacher with how frustrated he was already getting. He didn’t know how Bruce had the patience for it. “Still. They’d normally be good contenders, but their groups are usually the kind to just get reabsorbed into other gangs, and our guy Black Mask-”

“Roman Sionis,” Devi stated, gesturing to the piece of paper John had taped up to the wall.

“- yes, him – likely picked most of the mafia’s less-loyal stragglers up. He’d provide the structure the
need.” John circled the little areas he knew the loyalist parts were active in. “The ones who didn’t are a lot smaller in number now, probably still hovering around these little parts they used to haunt.”

“So what does this have to do with the ship?” Mickey asked, trying to follow John’s map marks. “You said that was Roman’s territory now.”

“That’s my point,” John huffed, deciding it was better to try and walk the annoyance out rather than say something he’d regret, “He’s got all this territory,” he gestured to the map as he made strides to their side of the room, “all these people under him, so why kill the informant? Why leave the drugs behind and make it so obvious that it was a hit when they could’ve just stolen the ship?”

“Woah, back up a sec’, hon’,” Devi interjected, leaning forward like she was interested. “You didn’t say anything about an informant.”

He didn’t? He could have sworn… Well, it didn’t matter. He’d explain it. “Ok, so – there’s five guys in the warehouse, right?” John held up his hand to gesture along, glimpsing the green nail polish still there. “Main guy, subordinate, two guards, and Muddy. Their van explodes – from the inside – and they all race out the one door with whatever firearms they have so they can escape. The shooter snipes the guards first, then the subordinate, but the de-facto leader gets the farthest away – the shooter had to get him in the leg first,” John emphasized with a gun motion at an invisible target’s leg, “then the chest. Muddy should’ve been out before the leader, but he’s captured instead.”

“So…Muddy planted the bomb?” Mickey asked.

“Yes!” John pointed at Mickey. “Exactly! He planted the bomb, he knew to leave last so he wouldn’t get shot up like the rest, and he knew when the ship was coming in!” He paced to them, thinking. “But that’s what I don’t get – if they had a guy on the inside high up enough on the chain that he was trusted with receiving that large a package, why did they kill him? Muddy could’ve provided all kinds of information in the long run - why rely on him for this one thing when he could’ve been their main plant in the whole operation? They could’ve found the Volto and Bauta heads and taken control of the area!” He smacked the map on the wall briefly, continuing to pace as his mind churned out everything he’d been mulling over. “And even if they were done with him, why not just leave him there with the rest?!”

Devi snapped her knife closed. “John-”

“Why make it an execution?! Why give him a gangster’s death twice?!”

“John.”

“And if it was all just revenge, why didn’t they wait until they could meet Black Mask personally to kill him, too?! Hell, blow his whole house up sky-fucking-h-!”

“JOHN.”

John suddenly found himself stopped in his tracks in the middle of the room with Devi’s hands on his shoulders.

“You’re ramblin’ again,” she said, smiling gently up at him and patting his shoulders. “Just take a breath, J’.”

He wasn’t rambling, he was just talking fast and trying to get all the thoughts out that had been piled in his brain for the past several days.

...but it wasn’t worth arguing over. Devi and Mickey didn’t have his sort of brain chemistry; they
wouldn’t get it. It was easier to just ‘calm down’ even if it wasn’t necessary. It’s not like it would 
hurt.

John breathed in and out, clenching and unclenching his fists in time for several beats. Sure enough, 
his 
he did feel calmer. Not that he wanted to, but...still.


“Yeah,” he lied. He wasn’t, he wanted to get it all out, just say everything that had been on his mind for the past several days. Wanted to just make them sit there, a captive audience, and ask everything even if he didn’t get an answer.

“Good. You’re onto somethin’.”

John blinked. “...I am?”

Mickey hummed to himself a little in thought. “I know why.”

John felt more confused. “Why what?”

“Why they didn’t wait to meet Black Mask. You said no one in his gang has seen his face - your guy has.” Mickey said with a little shrug.

Devi gave a little ooh. “Whaddya know, Mick’, we’re on the same page,” she said brightly with an impressed tilt of her head.

That would mean the killer knew Black Mask was Roman Sionis. “But why wouldn’t they just go directly to…” The second he said it aloud it clicked. It was why they left the drugs behind, why they drilled it home it was a hit – a herring in maraschino red. It wasn’t about strictly killing Roman, but eventually taking his place. “It’s an inside job.”

“Ya said it yourself, J’,” Devi shrugged, “Those gangs he picked up ain’t loyal. Besides, you crossed off everyone else.”

Of course. It wasn’t some rival gang, it was someone in his gang, leading them all to believe it was a rival to throw Black Mask off the scent! That stupid sign with the bodies was just another herring!

John had been looking up the wrong thing for days, hunting for a shadow!

Ha ha ha ha ha!

He couldn’t help but laugh at himself. At the whole ridiculous thing. How utterly silly they’d been.

And he caught himself remembering that random laughter wasn’t something most people took kindly to a little too late. Devi was glancing between his eyes as if to guess if he was having a manic episode. Mickey was stock-still, watching him with something similar. “S-sorry,” he said, trying to cover the last bit, “It’s just funny how dumb I’ve been. I mean, really, really dumb.”

They looked a little more convinced.

John rubbed the back of his neck, trying to rub the awkward feeling away as he stared right back at Devi, trying to let her see how sane he was. “Really, I would’ve just kept going in circles without-”

John felt like everything in the world had slowed to a crawl: a dot of red rolled over Devi’s hair where her temple was, climbing up and disappearing like it had never been there in an instant.

It was like something in him woke up – he grabbed her shoulders and pushed her forward, hearing
glass shatter before they even hit the hard tiled floor.

He felt the impact in his knees. Real.

Mickey tumbled out of the chair as Devi swore and John rolled away from her to force his back against the wall between them. He heard the thud of his shoulders hitting the wall. Real.

“What the hell.” she started, losing the rest as she spied the little hole in the wall where John’s head had been seconds ago. “Ohh, what the fuck.”

John was looking at the new shattered hole in the window, hearing his heart in his ears.

Someone shot at him. Someone had a laser scope and a long-range rifle. Someone was sitting out there, waiting for him to reappear, or waiting long enough to move positions and get him while they were sitting there.

“What do we do?” Mickey asked in a less-than-steady voice as he curled his legs to his chest. “What the fuck do we do?”

Devi shifted forward, looking like she was going to crawl for it. “We’re gettin’ the fuck out, that’s-”

John grabbed Devi’s arm and pulled her back with a hard yank. “NO!” She almost smacked back against the wall. “Look at the HOLE!” John gestured slightly to the bullet hole in the wall. “It’s lower than the entry one; they can see the floor!”

“Devi,” Mickey rushed, “You have a phone; you can call the cops!”

No, there was only one of those that could really be trusted -

“Are you kiddin’ me? You’ve seen how that shit goes! I’m black and John was tried insane – your half-Puerto Rican ass is the only one of us that can pass for one of their crowd! They’ll kill us just for sittin’ here!”

They could call Batman, but he was out chasing Black Mask, too far to -

“Well what the fuck are we supposed to do, then?” Mickey interjected too loudly, the sound breaking John’s already fragile grip on his temper.

“Will both of you just shut up and let me THINK?!?” John shouted, slamming his fists on his bruised knees.

Silence settled in, but it felt like the thing inside of John was rattling the cage.

They felt it too, surely – the flight signal had been lit in their brains, but there was nowhere for them to go. John tapped his legs with his fingers one-by-one, feeling the material of his purple slacks as they made impact. Think, think, think – what do you know for sure, John?

There was nowhere to hide. Standing was out of the question. Crawling was just as deadly. They were all like carnival ducks stuck in their stall, brightly lit under a long fluorescent bulb, just waiting for the kid with the gun to aim just right.

They hadn’t been shot yet. Either the would-be killer was waiting for them, or changing position to the wall.

They couldn’t call out for help. Anyone who came in would be shot.
But they couldn’t stay there. If the shooter was smart, they would move after a bit to re-adjust.

So they’d have to throw him off.

John stared up at the long bulb, his mind whirling…

There was the obvious solution: one of them could risk running for the light-switch.

It was almost sickening how easily he could imagine either of them bleeding on the floor by the switch…

When he thought about it, he was used to being by himself, but he was never going to be used to being alone. With his psychosis’ voices blocked out through his anti-psychotics, he’d found he’d missed the constant company, even if they didn’t always make sense or play nice with his brain.

But here he was, with real every-day company again. The kind that did, in fact, play nice and make sense. The kind that didn’t play mind-games or threaten him or let him get too riled up just to see what he would do. The kind that wouldn’t try to kill Batman if the opportunity arose, or kill him if they thought it was necessary. They weren’t constant, but they were there, as real as he was – he could hear them breathing and feel their fear in the air.

He couldn’t treat them like they were just means to an end.

The looked at the large fluorescent bulb in the ceiling, wishing it would flicker for a few seconds like the old Arkham ones did, and felt his own lightbulb power on.

“I’ve got it!” He grinned triumphantly, slapping his legs and feeling the sweet sting it left, “We need to break the lightbulb!”

Devi shot a look at it, then at him. “With what?”

“Something hard enough to shatter the glass?” John suggested with a chuckle. He supposed they could toss her butterfly knife, but it might not be heavy enough; they’d have to hit the right point. “The chair would work.”

Mickey looked at the desk chair by his feet. He was clearly rattled, huddled in on himself and looking pale. “It’s kind of big.”

“Don’t tell me those biceps are for show,” John teased, poking his arm, “Even I can lift that.” Mickey didn’t seem convinced. “Look, Mick’, you’ve got the corner. There’s no way the shooter can see you. You just need to squat and flip it up like it’s a table,” John said, gesturing the up motion with his palms.

“Mick’,” Devi said, “he’s right. You’re closest.”

Mickey stared at them both, then at the chair, and sighed slowly through his nostrils. “I guess there’s worse ways to go,” he grumbled, pulling the chair towards him.

“You’ve got this,” John said, flashing him a thumb’s up.

Mickey sneered a bit, but he still squat down rigidly and flipped the chair up into the ceiling, hitting its mark – there was the tinkling crash of breaking glass and a buzz of shorted electricity, and John instinctively covered his head as glass rained down and the chair clattered to the floor.

When he looked back up, they were all sitting in the dark. It was almost like being back in the Old
Five Point’s office, where he had hidden while the Agency poked their noses in places they shouldn’t have been.

But that was the old John. New John wasn’t scared. Angry, of course, but he was almost…

Thrilled.

Yes… Toeing the line of danger, on a rescue mission for himself and his friends…

John giggled, feeling ridiculous by how excited he was during such risky business. “Good job, Mickey. Got it in one.”

Glass shattered and a *vwoop* noise followed as the shooter fired again, causing Devi to push closer to him with a shout. The shot was a little closer to the edge of the dim light coming in through the window. A red dot disappeared, as if the shooter was turning the scope on and off.

A warning - they could still see in, they weren’t going anywhere.

Like *hell* they weren’t.

“Mickey, can you hand me my phone?” John asked politely. Mickey pulled it down by the cord, as if he thought the shooter could see it sitting there out of view of the window, and shoved it into John’s waiting hand. “Thaaank you!”

Tiffany was already on her way there - he could just tell her to hurry up. Or send that nice drone with the laser attachment.

John tapped his foot along with the rings. It was only three this time before Tiffany picked up, and she was clearly outside somewhere, because he could hear the wind rush by.

“Hey, how far away are you?” He asked quickly, keeping his eye on the window for any glimpse of the laser sight.

“A -” the voice cut off - “*minutes. Why-“

“Okay, I can barely hear you, so long story short, I’m being shot at from someone on the building opposite me and would really appreciate some help.”

He could barely hear her over the wind and occasional break in the line. He was pretty sure it sounded like a surprised “what” and then something unintelligible.

“Yeah, so I still can’t hear you. I don’t know what they look like but I’m guessing they’re on the roof, the shots are angled down.”

Another shot came through the glass, closer to the corner.

“Aaand that’s our queue to leave! *Hurry, okay?!“

John hung up, knowing she’d be there fast enough, but wondering if she’d be smart enough to hit them from behind or not. Unless they had a watchguard, which they could, depending on who they were…

There was no time for thinking about that. It was time to get out before the shooter decided to move enough so they could see them in the dim streetlamp.

They definitely couldn’t just *run* across. The pile of glass in the middle of the floor was a hazard on
top of the fact they’d be seen. They couldn’t get around the little desk, either, since it was likely visible; they’d have to press flush against the wall to go under the window.

Or...they had to completely shroud themselves in darkness.

“None of you happen to have a stapler or somethin’, do ya?” Devi asked, holding something in her lap. “I’m tryin’ to think of how we can pin this to the window....”

John was impressed for a moment, having been thinking of somehow getting the sheet from his bed or the dresser to do it, but the feeling gave way to something more like a sinking stone plummeting to the bottom of his stomach.

She had been sitting on the blanket Bruce had gotten him when he was still in Arkham. It was the first thing he’d given him when he’d been put away; a green cashmere blend so soft that John almost wondered if it wasn’t made from clouds.

John yanked it out of her hands and clutched it to himself. “You were sitting on it?”

“The floor’s cold,” Devi stated plainly, not intimidated in the slightest. “Besides, you borrow my blanket when you sit in my room.”

That was true. He couldn’t resist covering himself in something as wild as neon-orange leopard with little skulls, even if it was only for a bit. But Bruce didn’t give that to her, she didn’t clutch it around her shoulders when she wanted to remember getting it, the cute look on Bruce’s face, the utter satisfaction John felt as he got under it for the first time and thought how finally, it was warm in Arkham...

He gripped it, telling himself that Bruce could buy a hundred more in as many colors and weights as John wanted when he got out. Enough to make the biggest blanket fort possible over the biggest mountain of blankets possible.

There was no stapler or anything handy, and he couldn’t shove them in the corners of the window... But someone could hold it.

John squinted at the window. He could stretch his arm across and cover it like a curtain; the pane and exterior walls were thick enough not to be pierced with bullets.

The chair was still on the floor. He was surprised no one had come running yet, with all the noise... There was a doctor underneath his room, gone for the day, naturally... But surely one of his neighbors might have heard.

Unless they just thought he was throwing a fit and didn’t want to get involved... Fine time for them to be ignoring him.

John rolled the blanket into a thin tube and swept it over the floor, pushing the shards of glass towards the chair as much as he could, flinching as another bullet pierced the wall.

He pulled the leg of the chair towards him by his foot, moving it slowly at first just to angle it right, and then yanked it towards him as another gunshot came through. Just as he thought, they were definitely targeting motion.

“Mickey, you’re gonna have to move.”

The burlier man eyed the chair warily. “I’m not standing up on that.”
John scowled as he stood to his full height, an urge to kick him only outweighed by the knowledge that one wrong move could hurt them both far worse. “For Pete’s sake, just move over next to Devi and stop acting like you’re going to die if you twitch out of line! I’m trying to save you, here!”

Mickey frowned, opening his mouth to retort, but closed it just as soon as he’d started, settling on just glaring back and doing as he was told, shuffling as John stepped over him to the corner.

“Now, don’t move until I tell you,” he emphasized, wagging a finger at both of them, “and when you do, crawl close to the floor.”

Once he stood (somewhat wobbly) on the chair by the corner, just barely out of sight of the window, John stretched out his hand in front of him, draping the blanket over it like he was pulling out the edge of a cape to do a dramatic reveal.

Pieces of glass wedged themselves in his bare arm. He could feel blood dribble out, feel the sting of cut flesh, feel a little spike in adrenaline and a familiar stir in his core that sent a tingle in his head…

Things looked clearer, somehow. His vision was always twenty-twenty, but somehow things felt sharper, and not just because little edges were digging into him. Without thinking, he knew all this, what he was feeling right now, was all very real.

He adjusted it to cover his arm with a little less glass-digging-into-skin, and upon draping it just right, it felt like he was almost a magician, covering the trick box from the audience’s view as the assistant did the rest.

“Ladies and Gentleman, the disappearing bullets trick!” John joked as he quickly shoved his arm over the top pane of the window.

It was just long enough to cover it completely, and there came a wonderful hush in the audience.

He could feel his heart in his ribs, pounding away like it was counting off beats, waiting, waiting, waiting…

Crash!

Crash-crash-crash-crash-!

Beams of light appeared one by one like tiny spotlights as the window. John barely flinched as he counted off the sounds.

At the count of ten, it went quiet.

John waited a beat, then two, and grinned wider. “And, ohh-ho, they’re gone!” John chuckled, “What a maroon… Okay, now you guys can go.”

“…what about you?” Devi asked, not moving.

“Just go,” John brushed off, not wanting to think about possible magazine refills, “Watch the glass.”

There were no more words, just the little thuds and occasional little crunch of glass telling them they were crawling as fast as possible. John held the blanket steady, thinking as he hoped the shooter didn’t decide to pack an extra magazine.

He could he risk peeking out across the way? Was the shooter keeping a few rounds in the chamber, waiting for his face to appear? Had they given up?
He might not see anything, but if he did, he would know at least the vague height of whoever was standing on the building three or four car-lengths away with a rifle, intent on killing him for whatever reason they had.

The door opened, letting in more light from the hallway, and Devi was the first to sneak through. John spied shiny spots of blood on her arms before she disappeared from view.

Mickey scrambled out after her, similar dots visible on his palms as he stood up.

John let the blanket fall to the floor as he heard them both call out for help. The noise faded into the background as he carefully took his phone out of his pocket. The little binocular lens clipped over the camera with a plastic snap, and John breathed in, smelling copper and the spring air of May, and slid his phone’s lens over the edge of the window, zooming in further on the building in the distance.

At first, he didn’t see anything. The camera was great, but it wasn’t exactly made for night use, even with the adjustments he made to the settings. Just black on a dark building, barely lit by the streetlamp.

But he moved it around a little, trying to get the exact angle the shooter must have been at, and he saw it.

A figure in the distance, barely seen at first, just a dark shape.

And then he spotted the drone with a spotlight, flashing over the figure’s back, and John pressed the record button just in time.

The figure whirled around with their long rifle in hand and smacked the drone right out of the air and to the floor, and seemed to hit it again, a flash of light showing off their silhouette again. One more smash seemed to satisfy them, but John could see them suddenly perk up straight, as if they heard something, and then they were gone, a black blob disappearing into the night with a whirl of a…

No. Not a cape. It was as if they were wearing a long coat.

He kept watching, almost hoping he’d see them come back so he could get a proper look at their face, but instead, he saw a figure glide down to the roof, too sleek to be Batman, and seem to rush to check if the shooter was still nearby, a second drone flying from their hip to scout ahead.

“John Doe?” A voice called from the hallway, light but smokey from years of tobacco use. An orderly - Todd something-or-other. “Are you still in there?”

“Yeah,” he called back, tucking his phone back in his pocket, “I am.”

“Keep away from the window. Police are on their way. I’m staying right outside this door, you just keep talking to me.”

“You don’t need to,” John answered, hopping off the chair and stumbling slightly, crunching over bits of broken glass here and there. “The guy’s already gone.” He pulled down the pages he’d taped to his wall, not wanting anyone to start thinking he was spreading some kind of conspiracy theory, and lingered on the piece he’d written ‘Ian Coggs’ visited Stitched Up Alt.’ on.

Something wasn’t right. The way Ian had looked at him that day, like he hadn’t expected him to be there. He seemed to have reported seeing him to Black Mask, but why would they go after him? Why would they care?

What was one mentally ill guy with a forgotten past to a guy like Roman Sionis?
John wasn’t sure what he had expected to happen after an incident like getting shot at by a sniper in the middle of the night, but he didn’t expect to be stuck waiting in St. Dymphna’s medical center. Devi and Mickey seemed adamant about not straying too far from him, despite the lengths the active officers on duty seemed to go to, shoving John in a corner bed as the nurse picked out the glass from his arm and they attempted to ask him questions while he repeatedly told them he wouldn’t talk until his lawyer arrived.

And good ol’ Reggie had practically come running on his short, square legs. He probably smelled a lawsuit waiting to happen. That, or Batman had ‘a talk’ with him about responding to anything to do with John as fast as possible after the whole thing with Dr. Crane.

John suspected it was a combination of both.

He was expecting Bruce, though, who hadn’t shown up yet. He didn’t mind if Batman didn’t make an appearance, but what felt like half an hour into the vocal probing, he found himself really, really wanting some comfort. There was only so many distasteful looks and thinly-veiled remarks he could take, even if they weren’t all directed at him.

“I told you, I’m not movin’,” Devi repeated for the third time, sitting quite still against the back of her own bed several spots over. She had the same sort of gauze bandage as him, only she had them on both arms, and some plasters under her short sweatpants where little glass pieces had stuck to her knees.

“If you’re sure,” Dr. Farms seemed to sigh, “Your sister said she’d be on the way. We’ll keep an orderly at the door in case there’s any trouble.”

Devi snorted. “These two aren’t trouble,” she said with a shrug. “I’m not wearing this t-shirt for nothin’, you know.” She gestured to the word ‘kickass’ spelled there in glittery cursive.

Reggie was quick-reading over the statement John had made, the end of his pen trailing underneath. John had left out the part of him using his phone, of course. He wanted to just grab it out from under his pillow and call Bruce himself. “And this is all correct?” Reggie asked, tapping the fountain pen at the end of the pad of paper.

“Yup.” John swung his legs slightly over the edge of the thin mattress, gently digging his fingers into the fabric. He couldn’t do it too hard, or it’d attract attention.

“You counted fourteen shots?”

“Yuup.”

“...and how did you know when you could let the other two leave?”

“When no more shots came through. Isn’t that obvious?”

“Hm.” Reggie tapped the cap end of the pen against the paper. “This is acceptable.”

John couldn’t back the question burning in his head. The one he didn’t want a bad answer to. “So...what happens now?”

“Standard police procedure, they’ll investigate, ask follow-up questions - the usual,” Reggie answered, “As for your continuing treatment, I believe they’re still figuring out where you’ll be staying until the police clear this up.”
“What?!” Devi leaned forward, a few of her long thin braids falling over her shoulder. “You mean he’s not stayin’ here?”

“He can’t stay in an active crime scene,” the lawyer went on in his no-nonsense voice, “Especially not when he might have been the intended victim.”

“But he’s the reason Mick’ and I are even alive!”

“That doesn’t factor into the decision,” Reggie answered coolly.

“I don’t care,” Devi slid off her bed and joined John’s, crossing her arms and giving Reggie the stink eye, “I’m not lettin’ him go to one of those shitty state homes.”

“I’m afraid that’s not up to you. It’s up to St. Dymphna and the G.C.P.D.”

*Them? They had a say in this?*

No. No, no, no. He knew what they were going to do. What they wanted to do. He felt his lip twitch backwards and his stomach seize as something white hot hit him.

“I’m not going back to Arkham,” John said with all the restraint on the furious being under his skin he could.

Reggie’s fingers had twitched in a flinch, and he cast a look at John. “I’ll give this to Officer Hutton and remind him of that.”

Devi watched him go with a scrutinizing squint. “You doin’ okay, there, John?”

“Ha, no!” John answered honestly, finding no need to restrain his feelings any more. He felt the other end of the mattress sink; Mickey had sat down on his other side. “Just got shot at, interrogated unnecessarily, and now…” He crossed his arms, wanting to feel something remotely comfortable as the boiling point in his started to wind down to a simmer. “I’d rather have faced that sniper with nothing but a paperclip than go back to Arkham.”

Devi put her arm around his back, pulling him into a bit of a side hug. “I’ll kick their asses if anyone tries to put you in there.”

Mickey gave a chuckle. “Ditto.” He gave John a small smirk. “They’re gonna shuffle us round to who-knows-where, but I’ll be damned if I let them throw you back. Not after you saved me twice in one day.”

John felt more of his anger ebbing away. He felt more grateful than anything, but there was that nice warm feeling that came with people doing genuinely nice things for him. “I’m sorry I yelled at you guys earlier.”

Mickey shrugged. “Better than losing my head.”

“Apology accepted. But it’s no big deal,” Devi said with a knowing little smile, “I’ve looked the devil in the eyes while only wearing a thong. It’s gonna take a lot more than that for you to get under my skin.”

John felt a giggle pass over him. “Better not let a doctor hear that - they’ve got scalpels.”

“That’s awful,” Mickey said with a shake of his head.

“Speakin’ of doctors,” Devi muttered, pulling out something from her pocket and sliding it into
John’s palm, “Here.”

It was her butterfly knife. John had almost forgotten how oddly nice it felt to hold one. Light, dangerous, dexterous... The rainbow sheen on the metal was cute, but the fact that she was willing to just hand it to him, all trustworthy-like, was what made him smile, and made that warm feeling grow. “You’re giving this to me?”

“Doesn’t matter where you end up - Gothamites are bound to try somethin’ with you,” Devi said with a little shrug. “Besides, you could always pick a lock with it and run away, if you had to.”

“Run away to where?” John chuckled, “Bruce’s place is pretty far from all the funny farms.”

Mickey gave a short hum of thought and pulled a card out of his wallet. “Here.”

A key card for the Lucky Hotel.

“Better than nothin’.”

“You guys...” John almost felt like he was tearing up. No, scratch that, he was. “You guys are the best.” He put both gifts away (in separate pockets, of course) and laid back to grab his phone from under the pillow. The cops were all discussing matters amongst themselves, not even glancing their way. “You know what this calls for?” He pulled the camera app up and threw his arms around both of their shoulders. “A group shot!”

“Ooh, hold on,” Devi shifted, tilting her head just right for the camera angle, and smiled. “Okay, that’s better.”

Mickey shook his head, an amused smile on his square face. “I knew you two were crazy.”

“Ha ha, like you aren’t?” John ribbed. “Smile!”

A little click, and John thought it was one of the best he’d taken. Definitely one for the album.

And then, in the moment of silence afterwards, John heard it: the instantly recognizable voice that wove in and out of his dreams, good and bad, real and unreal.

Bruce passed through the thin wall of police and doctors with the unmistakable stride of Batman, the sight hitting John like a jolt to the heart. Confidence, determination, power – it all came through in his steps, as reassuring and steady as the sunrise. It didn’t matter if he was in street clothes or bearing a five-o’clock shadow, it was Bruce’s Batman politely telling the doctor in his ‘fuck you’ voice that he wasn’t letting him stay there a minute longer.

John felt a hand push on his back, and barely heard to little ‘go ahead’ Devi whispered to him.

He didn’t care what was in his way. He didn’t stop moving until he was right in Dr. Song and Bruce’s space, not taking his eyes off Bruce for a moment.

“John,” Dr. Song said with a slight cough, forcing his focus over to her, “Bruce has offered to take temporary guardianship of you while the state goes through its’ investigation. As you’re a ward of the state in our care, you don’t have to say-”

“Yes,” John said, noticing Bruce looking him over like he was thinking of possible injuries, “I’m saying yes.”

Dr. Song seemed to have expected that. “Your lawyer and his are talking, but I made it quite clear
that your current treatment is to be followed to the letter. I still want you to report for our scheduled therapy, and you’ll still have to make the appointments set by Mr. Casselli and Officer Kane.”

“That’s fine.”

“Medicine has to be taken strictly by our current regime.”

“Of course.”

“Work hours will still have to be met, if possible.”

“Makes sense.” Dr. Song looked like she was trying to find any reason John wouldn’t agree with. “Really, doc’, you act like I’m not going to come back,” John said with a light chuckle, “I kind of need that certificate of sanity, you know.”

“I just want to make sure you know what you’re getting in to.”

Oh, believe me, I know, John thought to himself, not daring to say it aloud. “I’m sure I can handle it,” he said, sounding as confident as half of him felt.

She seemed a little more at ease. “I’ll draft up the prescriptions.”

The second she was turned away, John trapped Bruce in his arms, intent on feeling the warmth radiate from beneath his plain white button down into his chest, and suddenly felt more…vulnerable than before. He knew he was safe – he was with Bruce – but when Bruce lightly held him back and said ‘it’s okay’ in that soothing, meaningful voice, the little walls in John collapsed, and he found himself clinging onto him for life and falling for him all over again.

Chapter End Notes

Congratulations, John, you officially made two new friends!!! °✧◝°○خاصهوً✧◝°○ ° I’m so proud of you!!!

Thank you all for your continuing support!!! °_DOMO_° ° I hope you can feel my love radiate from the screen!

As you can tell, I had a heck of a time with this chapter. Sure, it’s almost a full week later than previously thought, but look how much stuff happened! It wasn’t originally planned to be this long - but hey, John needs to bond with people, so damn it, I’m gonna write it and make it believable! I had fun making use of the “camera feature” here and adding in investigation choices and a new time-out feature. And I had loooots of fun bringing out our vigilante!Joker in John throughout! I hope I did our boy justice! I reconsidered and rewrote a lot, but I’m pretty dang happy with how much I’ve laid out so far and what this chapter’s accomplished. Especially the little things I’ve hidden in here…Heheheheheheheh!

Next time we’ll return with Bruce, who seems to have a full colony living in his house as two sides of the mystery start to come together… See you (hopefully) two weeks!
Soft orange light from the streetlamps passed through the windows every so often, casting shadows over John’s face.

Bruce couldn’t help but look over at him when he got the chance. His expression was soft and conflicted; John was clearly thinking carefully about what he was going to say, tapping his thumbs together and staring at them or the dashboard before darting his gaze elsewhere. He’d been quiet for ten minutes.

Bruce didn’t want to push, but John was a natural conversationalist around Bruce, never seeming to run out of things to talk about on an eclectic variety of subjects. The last time he’d been this quiet was when they had been on their way to Dr. Crane’s house to investigate.

He’d been like this since they left the halfway house. Even before that he was less talkative than usual, actually leading him back to his friends and letting them tell Bruce some of the details about what happened, seeming content to watch all their reactions. It wasn’t like John. John should be gushing over how excited he was to be returning to the cave. He should be joking how Bruce’s lawyers and swooped in to clinch the save. He should just try to hold Bruce’s hand the second they were alone. He should…

Should just be John.

Bruce knew he could just reach over and touch him, but he’d never seemed so far away.

He debated asking him if he was okay, or why he was quiet, or if he should just delve into asking what else had happened that he obviously couldn’t say in front of his friends. It was hard to tell which of them would fare better. He wasn’t as on edge as Bruce had expected, but there was still something about the nervous taps of fingers that told him he wasn’t really okay. “John? How are you feeling?” he asked instead.

It certainly brought John out of his thoughts. The familiar cackle of laughter echoed in the car. “Now that’s a loaded question!” He trailed off to a little titter of eh heh heh hee as they came to a stop light. Bruce could see his shoulders shaking. “I - hm-hm… I don’t really know.” He looked back at his lap. “It’s a lot, that’s for sure… I’m not sure if I should-”

Acid green eyes looked right at him for a moment, glassy and vulnerable, somehow seeming to loosen the grip that had seized Bruce’s stomach since Tiffany had called him with the news over an hour ago.
But John looked away as if he’d been zapped by an electric probe, and curled his fingers into the fabric of his purple slacks as he pursed his lips. “It’s a lot. A lot, a lot…”

Bruce hadn’t seen him like this before. John was so often watching him or flirting either directly or in his odd, roundabout manner that this new shyness was… Not quite refreshing, like it might have been with someone else. More like intriguing.

Bruce never could resist a mystery. “Why don’t you just start from the top?”

“Intrigue,” John answered after a beat, still not looking at him. The traffic light changed color, and Bruce returned to focusing his eyes on the road, continuing the journey home as John gave a little titter of disbelief. “I mean, I’m still a little upset at almost getting a sudden violent lobotomy, but… I’m still just thinking about it all. All those unanswered questions I have brewing in my skull…”

Bruce listened on. He’d been there more times than he’d like to admit.

“At least I’m not angry,” John shrugged, leaning back in his seat and crossing his arms. Bruce caught a glimpse of John’s fingers tapping in succession against his arm. He still had his sleeves rolled up to his elbow, the bold orange and green stripes making him look all the more pale white. Bruce refocused on the road. “I’ve had more than my share of almost-blinding rage today. Not that’s been a bad day -” he said with an easier-going sort of shrug -“it was going great up until the shooting started.”

Bruce felt his jaw clench. He didn’t like discussing gunfire at the best of times, but John said it so casually. Like it was just something that happened. Like it hadn’t endangered his life and made Bruce abandon his hunt for Roman Sionis and drive to St. Dymphna like a literal bat out of hell. Like if John had gotten seriously injured or worse, it would have just been another thing that happened.

He knew he was clutching the wheel too hard. John didn’t seem to notice.

“I’m...surprised I wasn’t scared, actually.” John was slack and still. “Maybe a little at first, but... Not exactly. Once I realized I could pull the wool over the guy’s eyes and get my friends out, it was…” John was slowly grinning in his peripheral vision, sharp and all the more dangerous from the look in his eyes. “Thrilling.”

Bruce had seen that look before. It wasn’t manic, but the honest excitement there was unsettling. It reminded Bruce too much that John liked danger and violence in several degrees, and it was what had seemingly attracted him to Bruce in Arkham. It made Bruce doubt his recovery, and in turn doubt him, and he hated himself a little more for the very idea of it.

“You almost died!” Bruce turned too sharply; he heard the bump of the tire as it rode the curb. He almost felt like he could break the steering wheel as he jerked it back towards the road.

John was studying him carefully. Bruce focused solely on the road ahead, with all the little strips and gas stations and countless little businesses lining the path off the freeway as he pushed the anger down and reminded himself that John was still adjusting. “I clearly had a handle on things,” John rebuffed.

No you didn’t, Bruce wanted to say, but it was childish. He wasn’t there; he wouldn’t know whether or not John was entirely right. The facts were that John saved himself and two others while sustaining minimal injuries, and he reached out for help the moment he could. But it didn’t change how worried Bruce had been, or how fast he’d turned around from his drive to the last club on
Roman’s list when Tiffany told him what was happening. Or how he’d had a hundred what-ifs pound through his head in a relentless march until Dr. Song’s assistant called him too many minutes later to say John was okay. “You should’ve called me.”

“I knew Tiffany would be closer,” John shrugged, not looking at him anymore. Bruce glanced over, seeing guilt line his pale face in another flash of orange light. “I didn’t want to tear you away from your mission.”

They sped past intersections growing greener by the minute. Bruce only saw blurs of color, navigating home by sheer habit.

The phrase you’re more important sat on the tip of his tongue, but he would never say it. He wouldn’t even think it. He just felt it there, a betrayal of years of training and the morals he’d built up into the hill he’d die on. “I didn’t want to hear what happened from Tiffany -” Bruce couldn’t just stay silent or give some stupid lie, it didn’t matter how angry he was - “or anyone else. I needed to hear it from you, John. Someone tried to kill you.”

Just saying it out loud made him grit his teeth. If - when - he found the person responsible, he was going to shatter the bones in their dominant hand and punch their brachial plexus until it was almost impossible for them to just raise their arm. He’d break their other arm for good measure as well as their nose with the toe of his boot. Bruce could be stopped by the pieces of paper that made up the law, but it couldn’t stop the Bat.

“And I’m not going to let them get another chance.”

Bruce practically felt John’s eyes rolling over him. Seeming to trace over his hands, his neck, his jaw… “And what if they do?” John asked in a voice a little too husky to be considered curious, “Are you going to rescue me, Bruce?”

Bruce. Not Bats or Batsy or Batman. Bruce.

He wasn’t blind. John had been mesmerized when Bruce arrived to pick him up. Bruce had seen that sort of serene awe only once before - and John was certainly no Tibetan monk. He’d gripped Bruce tight and buried his face a little more in Bruce’s shoulder at the attempts at reassurance. Looking back, it might not just have been about seizing the opportunity to hug him longer than conventionally appropriate...

John pressed the auto-drive button on the dashboard, forcing the car to slow down to a more appropriate speed and turn with the upcoming curve of the road. Bruce turned to frown at him, not liking the sudden loss of the one thing he had actual control over just then, and found himself a little less angry than he should be.

Bruce was always surprised by how John could say so much without words. His expression was expectant and affectionate, yet the smirk on his lips was all mischief, only growing wider with Bruce’s half-hearted glare. His question wasn’t just teasing or hinting - he wanted an answer.

“You know I will,” Bruce replied, not in the mood to say anything more or less. He kept his hands loosely on the wheel, not sure where else to put them.

John gave a chuckle and admired Bruce with several degrees of desire. “That’s the Bruce I fell for,” he purred in a low tone that sent the heat in Bruce’s stomach south, “Confident, strong, assertive...yet caring,” he added with a little lovesick sigh.

Bruce would give anything to hear that on any other day. It was a small comfort, rather intensifying
the protective urge that hadn’t stopped coursing through him since the first phone call of the night.

“You’re always there for me,” John continued, sliding his far-too-warm left hand over Bruce’s wrist, “You know I’m here for you, too.” He could undoubtedly feel the way his pulse spiked at the contact. It was why he was starting to give him one of those infernal grins. Why he chuckled at him. “Geez, you’re tenser than I was on inspection day,” he said, gently pulling Bruce’s hand away from the steering wheel and bringing it to his lips. “You shouldn’t be.”

The playboy could never recall an instant when someone softly kissed his knuckles like that. His fingers were used to being taken inside sultry mouths as a warm-up to something bigger - never kissed the way he did when saying a flirty hello or goodbye.

“Let me make it better,” John soothed, brushing the knuckles against his pale cheek. “Let it all out.”

Bruce never felt so conflicted. He almost wanted to give in to the almost entrancing atmosphere being crafted, but he didn’t understand why John was making it in the first place. It was frustrating and confusing, but he couldn’t find the energy to lash out at John when he was so warm and inviting, sitting there next to him in the Batmobile like he’d never left it. “You could have died,” he said, feeling like the wall was being pulled apart as heat sunk into the tense muscle beneath his fingers. John’s skin was soft and as real as he was. “And I wouldn’t have been there to save you.”

John leaned into the touch he was guiding along, his eyes practically glowing as he held Bruce’s hand to him as he ran his other set of fingers down Bruce’s forearm, trailing warm lines that would’ve made another man shudder. “Mm-hmm…”

He watched the hand for a moment. John never had complete control of his feelings, but he usually understood intimacy had a time and place. Bruce stopped the hand trailing up and over, careful about not applying any real force on the wrist. “John.”

“Bruce,” John grinned back at him a little too sharply, “you know we’re alone in a car that drives itself…” He kissed Bruce’s fingertips with a delicate reverence, his dark green lashes fluttering closed for a moment, and re-opened them the same time as his mouth, meeting Bruce’s gaze as he brought three digits inside it and wrapped his lips around them.

It wasn’t the time, but Bruce had been left to himself for seven months with far too little physical contact. Everything grew warm and cloudy, and he found himself succumbing to the act of worship with all his focus shifting to the sensations. John’s tongue was hot and wet as it slowly slid over and in-between Bruce’s fingers; he was gentle in applying pressure with his far-too-perfect teeth; his lips were soft and the utter desire on display in his blown pupils and bright green irises was too much for one man, let alone Bruce. It was too easy to imagine John’s mouth elsewhere, looking up at him with the same gaze.

“John,” Bruce muttered, hearing his voice lower too much to hide the need stirring in his chest, “if you don’t stop, we won’t make it out of the car.”

John grinned, letting Bruce’s fingers sit between his teeth as if he was showing how he could snap them off in a second, and pulled them out and away with another flutter of lashes. “So? You wouldn’t hear me complaining…”

Bruce knew that. He also knew this was becoming a game, and one Bruce would rather see John lose, for both his own pride and his need to see John thrown into ecstasy before he came unwound.

He grasped John’s long, sculpted chin with the saliva-coated fingers and pulled him closer, not having to try to hard - John followed with the gentlest touch. “You’ve been very patient, John,” he
said with a deliberately light rumble to his voice, “but be good and wait a little longer.” He ghosted his thumb over John’s bottom lip, feeling a little tremble at the action. Bruce was glad he didn’t have to drive; he could see all the flecks of dark yellow and mossy green in John’s irises. “I’ll make it worth your while.”

Bruce let go, trailing the tips of his fingers down John’s neck to tease him further, unable to help glancing down at the pale mouth that had opened in return. John was practically melting before his eyes, tilting his chin up to expose his throat a little more. His habit of keeping the top few buttons of his shirt undone drew Bruce’s eyes down a little further, but he wouldn’t touch there.

He wouldn’t. He wouldn’t get sucked into that bone-melting stare. Wouldn’t think about how warm the hand tugging his shoulder closer was. Wouldn’t let himself get pulled in and curl his fingers around the back of John’s neck, brushing the little hairs at the base of his skull… Wouldn’t lean in a little further and watch those toxic green eyes almost disappear behind their lids as their breath mingled together…

Blue light flashed over them once, causing both to pause an inch away from each other, John looking as momentarily confused as Bruce felt.

Another flash, brighter this time, and Bruce turned to look behind them.

A police cruiser was behind them, gaining speed as the red-plated Batmobile sped past an entrance for an upscale suburban neighborhood at least twenty-five miles over the thirty-five limit.

Bruce turned to look at John, taking only a second to look at the wide-eyed, wordless question of what they were going to do about this new problem, and Bruce turned back to the road ahead. “Hang on.”

He punched the auto-pilot button and slammed the gearshift into third, taking off on the simple two-lane road with a roar of the engine and an excited giggle from John. The cruiser’s siren began to wail as the trees lining the road grew denser, further and further into the city limits.

Perfect.

Bruce flicked the lights off, shrouding everything but the dashboard in black.

“Woah, don’t you need to see?” John asked, clutching the door’s handle-bar.

Bruce hit a different switch on the left side, hidden under the wheel, and the wind-shield display changed, showing everything on the road in front of them in shades of green. “We have night vision.”

“And here I thought bats operated on sonar!” John joked, clapping and giggling to himself as he took the display in with what Bruce knew to be the same wonder from the first time he’d sat in the Batmobile’s passenger seat. “Just when I thought this thing couldn’t hold any more surprises, you pull another one out from your cowl!”

Bruce didn’t fight the tiny smile pulling at his lips.

The siren blared behind them, and Bruce could see the blue light flashing in the rearview mirror.

If John thought that was impressive, he was going to get a kick out of what else the car had up its sleeve. “John, press the yellow button.”

“Uh, this one? SB?”
“Yeah.”

John pressed it gingerly, and there was an audible clink before the result fired up - there was a burst of gray smoke sitting in the road, completely concealing the blue light from view. John turned around in his seat to look and let out a cackle of delight.

They passed the guard rails up on the curve, and Bruce counted the points up to ten before slowing down just enough to make a sharp turn at the broken right-of-way marker, clipping it with the edge of his tire and forcing himself to keep straight in his seat as the car tried to lean; John was gripping the door, still laughing to himself and slapping his thigh.

“Ah ha ha! Oh, Bruce!” John wiped the corner of his eye as they drove straight down the hidden path to the cave. “I knew you were fun!”

“What, you doubted me before now?” Bruce asked, feeling unusually playful, “I’m hurt, John.”

“Not exactly. That’s why I said I knew.” The last of his euphoric laughs died down; Bruce switched back to normal headlights, knowing they were getting close. “You are the straight man to my joker, after all,” he teased proudly. “Well… Mostly straight, anyway,” he added with a slight titter.

“That’s a terrible joke,” Bruce answered, not actually meaning it, “You should have run that bi me.”

John laughed anew, shoving his shoulder as he half-hid his face from view. “You…! Ah ha ha ha! – Bruce, you…” John gave another ha ha, biting his lip and looking at Bruce with watery, delighted eyes. “You actually told a joke!”

He supposed so. Was it really that surprising? “Maybe you’re rubbing off on me,” he shrugged slightly, not sure what else he could say.

Deep giggles echoed in the car. “I would,” John managed, still grinning ear-to-ear, “but you told me to be good and wait. You’re making it hard…”

Bruce couldn’t help but feel rather satisfied about that. It wasn’t that he needed to impress John, but the fact that he had gave a much needed burst to his mood. It was a welcome change from an hour ago.

The hologram covering the cave entrance in front of them disappeared. The lights lining the cave turned on ahead of them, illuminating the parking bay.

“Bruce?”

Bruce pulled the car to a safer-than-usual stop, not wanting to force John forward in his seat.

“Yeah?”

“I…” John was staring at him with half his usual grin, clearly debating with himself over something, tapping his fingers together in succession. “I know I’m all over the place right now and you probably think I’m off my meds or something, but…” He cast his eyes down at his hands as he pressed his fingers together. “I can’t tell you how grateful I am,” he said slowly, meaning every word. “I mean it. You…” He clasped his hands together and met Bruce’s gaze with a tender determination. It stirred the fire still burning low in his core, and for a moment all Bruce felt was the urge to hold him. “You saved me.”

But Bruce hadn’t been there… He hadn’t shown up until it was too late. He couldn’t have saved him.
John put the tips of his fingers to Bruce’s lips just as he opened his mouth to ask. “Don’t,” he pressed gently, “I just wanted to thank you.”

Bruce wanted to ask why he wouldn’t explain himself - he didn’t quite understand why it seemed like that was what John had been nervous about asking - but John had been through enough already for one day. He deserved to be in a good mood.

Speaking of which… Bruce took John’s hand and kissed it softly in return, not tearing his gaze away. “Any time,” he answered, meaning it more than he might have meant anything.

John hummed into a giggle, seeming more star-struck than ever. “You know, I think now would be a good time to kiss me,” he said with a little bat of his lashes.

“Not in here.”

He frowned, and without asking, Bruce knew what he was going to say - why not? John might have been temptation personified, but Bruce didn’t want to ruin his seats with seven months’ worth of pent-up lust when there was a perfectly good bed up a few flights of stairs. “If I start now, I won’t be able to stop.”

“I hope that means ‘I want you comfortable for what I’m about to do to you’ rather than ‘Don’t ruin my custom leather seats’,” John said in what must have been an imitation of Bruce’s voice as he pulled away, opening the door but still maintaining eye-contact. “You’re lucky you’re such a hunk,” he teased with a flirty wink as he slunk out the door, “or I’d be…”

Bruce could fill in the blank easily, but he wasn’t sure why John had paused just outside the car. He opened the driver side door, wondering just what John had been focusing on, when he heard the explanation loud and clear:

“IMAN!” John shouted excitedly, causing a few of the straggling bats from the colony to scatter and squeak as his voice echoed. “What a surprise!”

Bruce felt his teeth clench, and immediately felt guilt pile on with it. He shouldn’t be upset at having company when said person was a serious help. But it didn’t mean he wanted to see her now, with John in arm’s reach and the mountain of stress on his shoulders that clearly wasn’t going to leave any time soon.

“You didn’t tell me she was going to be here,” John said to Bruce, leaning to look back in the car with no trace of malice. Bruce hadn’t expected him to be genuinely excited to see her.

Then again, what did he expect? John was always somewhat unpredictable, even now in his final phases of his recovery. “I didn’t think she’d stay this late,” Bruce muttered truthfully, flexing his hands in preparation for casework and shifting his mindset to Batman and away from ideas of what else his hands could be busy doing.

John practically bounced up the stairs with his hands in his pockets, not waiting for Bruce to follow. “I haven’t seen you since Easter!” He called out, “How’s my favorite rogue agent?”

She’d visited him on Easter? When he was still at Arkham?

That was news to him. Neither had mentioned it. Bruce shoved down the reflexive bite of jealousy; he didn’t need another headache. He could ask them later. Separately. So they couldn’t collaborate on anything, if there was something at all.

“John, I haven’t been in the Agency for over a year, now,” Iman answered with a patient smile. She
had scrubbed her face and changed her work clothes to comfortable sweats since Bruce had left for the night. There was an empty china plate next to her elbow with traces of herb gravy and bits of potato, meaning Alfred had quite kindly made up a dinner plate for her after she’d arrived to cover for Tiffany’s absence.

“That’s why you’re my favorite! Yeesh - looks like those bags have been cycling the carousel for a couple of days, huh?” John pointed to her eyes, which did have some dark circles underneath.

“I’ve been trying to piece together what I can on all these new cases,” she explained, her low ponytail swishing slightly as she turned back in the chair to look at the screens. The monitors were littered with information on the past weeks’ worth of cases and notes scrawled in a shorthand that was certainly not Bruce’s, as well as one full screen showing six different cameras in select Bludhaven and Gotham parking lots. “That, and since Bruce had to turn around and pick you up, I figured it would be easier to keep an eye on points Roman was liable to be seen in and wait to hear the details from you while everything is still fresh.” Iman’s bright brown eyes honed in on the white bandages on John’s arm. “I didn’t know you got hurt.”

“This? Oh, that was just glass,” John said with a poke to the wound. His eyes flashed at the touch and he grinned slightly wider. “Nothing to worry about.”

Iman seemed to finally notice Bruce. Or, rather, she was finally acknowledging he was there. He hoped it was just because she was clearly tired. “You came back fast. I’m guessing the lawyers sorted everything out?”

“Temporary release into my care until the investigation makes an arrest. Any sign of Roman?”

She gave a weary sigh, crossing her arms and leaning back to stare at the camera feeds like they would suddenly show Roman sneaking across the screen. “Not so far. He’s keeping a surprisingly low profile.” She narrowed her eyes at the screen. “I underestimated him. I’m getting rusty.”

“Don’t beat yourself up, Iman,” John soothed, leaning against the workbench with a drone in the midst of being put back together. Bruce squinted at it – it was the one from the docks, with several obvious new parts. Tiny highly-illegal lasers had been crafted on; the sort that could cause serious inconvenience. “The guy’s a mixed bag - he’s too smart to be caught, but I’d bet a donut he’s someplace too dumb for anyone else to stay.”

“Dollars to donuts,” Bruce pointed out. John cast him a confused look. “The phrase. It’s ‘you’d bet dollars to donuts’.”

John blinked. “So… I’d just buy donuts with the amount of dollars I’d be willing to bet?”

“Pretty much.”

“Still a donut, then, with my pitiful wages,” John shrugged off with a joking smile. “I’m guessing the first place you guys looked was his house.”

“Twice,” Iman pointed out. “Bruce was on his way there for another physical sweep before Tiffany called in on your situation.”

John’s shoulders sank slightly; Bruce crossed his arms, not wanting Iman to twist the knife any deeper than it was already.

Iman seemed to have noticed how defensive he’d gotten, because she quickly changed tracks: “I know you’ve been through a lot, John, but I need to know - did you see who tried to shoot you?”
“See? Oh, yeah,” John dug his phone out of his pocket and tapped the screen, “I got a video.”

“What?!” Bruce’s voice echoed in his ears, sounding an awful lot like Iman’s. “You didn’t tell me that!”

“Well, I didn’t really have time, Bruce,” John explained with a raise of his brow, “Every wall has ears. I didn’t show Mickey or Devi, either.” He turned the phone screen towards them to show the brief video play – taken from the window, with the zoom lens set to max. Bruce could see the shadow of someone with a long range rifle of some sort in their hand.

“Computer, enable remote connection,” Bruce said, watching the shooter whirl around to hit the drone with the barrel of their gun. He couldn’t see the face, but maybe with a bigger screen and some enhancements…

“SAY OR INPUT DEVICE NAME TO CONNECT.”

John darted his eyes to the screen like it was a person. “JokerPhone.”

The computer gave a little beep, the light by the keyboard flashing red briefly. “SCAN COMPLETE. DEVICE CONNECTED.” A duplicate window the exact shape of John’s phone screen popped up, covering the window with the crime scene report from the Chandis.

“Thank you!” John beamed, looking more delighted as the computer gave the standard ‘you’re welcome’ in return.

The video was short, playing on a constant loop like one of those “Root” videos Bruce caught Tiffany sneaking peeks at when she thought he wasn’t looking. The shooter whirled around to hit the drone flying behind their head. Both arms were visible, but they were cast in absolute shadow, and the brief flash of a profile showed something impossibly flat, with a slight curved protrusion too smooth to be a real nose.

A mask.

Bruce watched as the shooter hit the drone again for good measure. Their arms were visible, and he could see them run away as another figure flew down to land on the roof a moment later.

There was a flap of material fanning outward. Not quite like Batman’s cape, which moved over the shoulders. There was something odd about the almost round shape. It didn’t fan completely behind them, like it closed in front of the waist like a coat, but it billowed behind them in a way that made him feel…nostalgic.

“Pause it,” Bruce ordered, and the video stilled without another second.

Rounded, not pointed like his wings at all. Too clingy to be like his cape, too loose to be like John’s old Joker coat...

Instead, he could see his mother running after his scarf on the lawn in the late November snow, seeming like a picture out of a high-fantasy story - the crimson cape she’d thrown over her black winter coat was billowing behind her in a funny shape, her arms stuck through the gaps in the side, moving with her as she ran…

It was a cape… Just not like his.

A cape and a mask.
It didn’t sit well with Bruce. Someone was going to great deals to hide their identity and he couldn’t help but wonder…

“Hey, Bruce, you never did tell me - how did you know Roman Sionis was Black Mask?”

“...are you trying to imply that Black Mask might have been the shooter?”

“It could be,” John shrugged, crossing his arms casually and regarding Bruce with a curious stare, “I mean, that name can’t be for nothing, right? And this guy is clearly wearing something. So, how’d you find out?”

Bruce couldn’t tell him the whole story - not with Iman sitting there. He had to trim out the specific bit regarding John, but he filed away John’s suspicion of Roman for later. “He came to my office on Tuesday to offer to sell me Janus Industries. When I refused, he threatened to go to the tabloids; that was where Wednesday’s article came from.”

“So that was him, huh…” There was something dangerous in that new spark in his eyes and the little lift of the corner of his lip. Like a simple punch to the face wouldn’t satisfy John’s vengeance.

Bruce didn’t want to think on that further. He continued: “I thought it was strange that he’d want to sell me the company unprompted, so I started to look into Janus Industries as a whole.”

Iman was already pulling up the projects. “Thirteenth Street has three of the operations affiliated with the projects,” Iman explained, pulling up a map of Gotham, “The rest are scattered around the Docks and creep into the Cauldron. The shipping detail we’d picked up on is also listed here, disguised as a warehouse for the products’ storage.”

John seemed to be reading through the list. “I see,” he nodded along, a proud smile curling on his lips, “So it was my lead that broke the case, huh? Well, you’re welcome,” he said with a knowing look thrown Bruce’s way.

“IT’s not exactly hard evidence,” Iman pointed out, instantly deflating John’s mood, “It’d be nice if we knew where he was hiding so we could confront him directly.”

“Oh, Tiffy will have something to that end,” John answered, looking up at the short stalactites protruding from the cave’s ceiling.

Bruce narrowed his eyes. John knew something he wasn’t telling him. “Why Tiffany?”

“Weeell… Remember when I said I’d have some information for you?” John hoisted himself on the empty spot on the workbench and started to swing his legs a little. “I found a name for Stitched Up’s drug-runner. Tiffany looked up the last known address - since she was so close to my neck of the woods, she went to go check it out.”

Was it just Bruce’s overly-suspicious mind that made the idea of Tiffany and John willingly working together sound off, or was it just the general stress of the day creeping in and making him angry and paranoid? He’d thought it was strange when Tiffany had said she willingly talked to John the other day… The fact that Tiffany had taken initiative to follow a lead he’d suggested was even more peculiar.

Was John trying to use her for his own gain? Was it the other way around?

The red light by the console keyboard flashed slowly, drawing Iman’s attention. “Speaking of - looks like Tiffany’s finally back.”
The roar of a motorcycle echoed in the cave, and Bruce turned to see Tiffany slow down and park safely outside the revolving landing pad now hiding the Batmobile.

He hadn’t seen her for two days. The fact that she’d come back to the cave for this rather was encouraging - though he wasn’t sure if she was going to talk to him.

“Wait, Tiff’ has a bike?” John asked, hopping off the table as he watched the bike’s plated casing shift from a dark blue to a light gray, “I thought she drove a car.”

“She got an upgrade last December,” Iman answered, “Compliments of Wayne Enterprises secret accounts.”

“So did you get a swanky new ride, too? Or can you not because of the whole...?” He gestured to his ears in a vague attempt to convey her deafness.

“I can. I just don’t have the excuse of field work to bill Bruce yet,” Iman teased coolly.

Bruce resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “You know you can just ask.”

Tiffany hung her helmet off one of the bike’s handles - it was a sleek dark blue with a yellow visor, somewhat matching the newly-colored lightweight armor she’d made for herself. Bruce could understand wanting navy blue to better blend into the dark, but the section of dark orange in her chest plate puzzled him. She’d argued that she wanted it that way and that she wasn’t going to change it, and Bruce had dropped the subject if only to sneakily bring it around later on when he would bring her into the field more regularly.

Tiffany had strapped a duffle bag to the back of the bike. She had undoubtedly brought the drone home with her.

“Tiffy!” John beamed wider than ever, holding out his arms like he was expecting a hug - he dropped them a second later, as if realizing both that she wouldn’t want one from him and that she was too far away. “The lady of the hour!”

She froze for a second, nothing short of surprised, and met John’s glowing smile with a puzzled sort of relief. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Ha! That’s what I said! Today’s just full of surprises.” He leaned against the railings, looking like he was actually enjoying himself. “Speaking of - blue and orange! That’s a look and a half for you; really compliments the hair.”

“...thanks.” She seemed unsure if that was a genuine attempt at flattery or not. She picked the duffle bag up carefully with both arms and made her way up the stairs.

Bruce didn’t like standing by doing nothing when there were questions to be answered. “Tiffany, did you find anything on the rooftop?”

“I’m fine, thanks for asking,” Tiffany answered with an annoyed look thrown his way as she ascended the stairs, “And no, I didn’t.”

“What, they weren’t nice enough to leave their business card?” John joked, deepening the annoyance in Tiffany’s expression.

“They didn’t leave anything. I couldn’t even get a good look at the guy.” She frowned to herself. “He smashed my drone and ran.”
“Uggh. Why couldn’t someone narcissistic and careless try to kill me? It’d make things so much easier.”

Bruce frowned at the dark humor, but Tiffany actually seemed to relax more. Her shoulders sank slightly and she wasn’t carrying as much tension in her face. She almost looked like she was going to smile.

“You’re telling me, that’s two drones I’ve lost this week and no known faces I can punch for it,” she remarked as she plopped the duffle bag on the short workbench, “I followed this guy into the alleyways behind the building, but I turned the corner and they were gone.”

The second person who seemed to vanish into thin air after fleeing a scene… Bruce mentally shook the thought away; despite her excellent running times, Tiffany was still a novice in trailing people actively. “And you searched the roof?”

“Oh, no, I thought I’d leave evidence lying around for a couple of days to let it ripen,” Tiffany said dryly; John snickered quietly into his hand. “I haven’t been following you around learning how to do this for almost a year for nothing, you know. If I’d found something, I would have said so.”

Bruce only wanted to be thorough. He hadn’t meant it to sound like he was doubting her skillset, but he couldn’t bring himself to apologize for asking - not when she was still his protégé. He thought about bringing up the question of any vehicles in the area, but she undoubtedly checked for that, too. “Did you find anything at Ian Coggs’ place?” He asked instead, watching her eyebrows raise minutely.

“How did…?”

“I mentioned your brilliant detective work,” John piped up, folding his arms and leaning back against the railing, “You know, how you found the last known address and that clinic he was supposed to go to.”

Tiffany looked…peculiar. The recognition in her eyes didn’t feel as recollective as it should. “Oh.” There was an odd feeling, like something else was being said wordlessly after it. “So, Ian was supposed to go to Haven’s Helping Hand, but he never showed; his last apartment was on South Blade Street. He wasn’t there, but…” She squinted, a habit of when she was contemplating something she didn’t quite understand, “It was like he hadn’t been there in a while. Everything was in place, but… It felt stale.”

“How does a place feel stale?” John asked with a little tilt of his head.

Iman answered patiently. “There’s mildew, dust in usual places, stagnant air - like when a room is closed without any fresh air for too long.”

Tiffany folded her arms. “And I expected more half-open bottles and empty pizza boxes, but I didn’t even see a loose chopstick. It was weird... Especially since his last rent payment bounced - I ‘asked’ the landlord,” she added with air-quotes in Bruce’s direction, “Ian’s two days away from eviction.”

John hummed, tapping his toes against the metal floor. “That is weird. He doesn’t seem to be the type to clean up after himself…”

Bruce crossed off any kind of maid service being responsible. South Blade Street - or even its northern counterpart - wasn’t the type to have apartment-controlled mandatory cleaning. Either he or someone else cleaned up enough to stop other people from inspecting any potential infestations for a while, which meant Ian didn’t want himself to be found. But even if he had stayed in Gotham all this
“Why keep his apartment? “Did he still have clothes there?”

“There were a few empty hangers, but his closet looked pretty full. I mean, I get why he abandoned it if he escaped en route to the clinic, but to leave that much stuff behind… Even if it’s Roman Sionis bankrolling him, I don’t know anyone who would be that willing to leave everything they had behind.”

“What, even his toilet stash?” John asked.

“I checked - if he kept anything there, it was long gone. Same with the air vents.”

Bruce slowly let the air out of his nostrils. Whether or not he’d abandoned the place, it was odd to leave it clean when he had so much left behind. Tiffany was right to be concerned. It sounded like he’d have to cross Ian Coggs off his list of potential leads to Roman’s hideout. “I’m guessing the landlord hadn’t seen him in a while.”

“No, but a guy at the Lucky Hotel did.”

Bruce was taken aback a second time that night. His gut instinct was to tell her she shouldn’t have gone alone. That she should have said something before just following whatever trail led her there. But before he could begin to argue, Iman chimed in. “What lead you there?”

“I figured it was worth a try. I wouldn’t be surprised if he was hiding out there under an alias, given his addiction, and the hotel being a host for Roman’s projects in proximity of some others. He wasn’t there, but a guy from the front desk was nice enough to tell me he’d seen him,” she said with a sly smirk that spoke of more than just a simple conversation occurring. “It took some convincing, but I’ll even get a head’s up if he sees him again.”

She’d put serious forethought into her actions and got results. He could still feel the flickers of anger at her for leaving on her own, and more for using what was likely force without proper guidance, but Bruce was honestly impressed. Finding Roman might just be pushed aside for a later time than he’d like.

He decided not to let his stress get the best of him. She was looking at him expectantly, waiting for some kind of reaction, and there was only one he felt she deserved at the moment: “Good work, Tiffany.”

Tiffany smiled, the light in her eyes shining confidently.

“But I’d appreciate it better if you told me when and where you were investigating beforehand next time.”

“I’ll try to remember that,” Tiffany answered with less enthusiasm. “Everything’s uploaded to the BatComputer if you want to look for yourself. I’m really only here to fix my drones.”

Bruce didn’t buy it for a minute. She’d come back to help; she just didn’t want to admit it outright. “You’re room’s still here if you want to stay afterwards. I know Alfred would like to see you.”

“I’ll think about it,” she said, carrying the newly-broken drone to the farther workbench, out of sight from the computer console. Bruce caught a glimpse of clothes stuffed in the bottom of her bag - she’d planned to stay from the beginning. Iman gave a yawn.
“Speaking of rooms, you should probably get some rest in yours,” Bruce pointed out, “I’ll take over surveillance for a while and go over some of the case details John’s missed out on.”

“That’s the best idea I’ve heard all night,” Iman sighed and stood, rolling her shoulders back and forth, her joints audibly popping with the movement. “I’m not used to running these twenty-hour days again… And at least with Alfred here I know I already have clean sheets.”

Bruce rolled his eyes. (Did everyone have to criticize his homemaking skills?)

“Ooh, if you’re giving me the low-down on everything, Bruce, I’ll have to get a seat to sit on the edge of,” John joked, ducking around the corner to grab the other rolling office chair from the workbench.

Iman was giving Bruce a knowing look. “You have to let Tiffany grow on her own,” she advised quietly, “She’s come a long way since Waller wanted to recruit her.”

Bruce knew that. He’d been training her himself - far better training than what she would’ve gotten with the Agency. But how on Earth could he not worry about her on her own? Didn’t Iman see the danger all of them were in? “I told Lucius I’d take care of her. I can’t break that promise.”

“No one’s suggesting you do, Bruce. But if you don’t let her work without your input, she’ll put herself in worse scenarios than just looking at an abandoned apartment or roughing up a wayward hotel employee.”

Bruce didn’t like the idea of leaving her on her own. There were too many things she hadn’t perfected yet, too many scenarios she didn’t have backup plans for… But Iman was the best psycho-analyst he knew. She was, in all likelihood, right - especially since both women talked outside of work enough.

“Don’t stay up too late,” she added, giving Bruce a pointed smirk as John rode his chair back over to them backwards, giving Tiffany a thumbs up until he was out of her line of sight and stopping dead an inch away from the edge of the computer. “Goodnight, John.”

“Night, Iman!” John called back with a cheerful grin and a little wave as Bruce took back his seat. It was hard not to miss the yawn he gave not a moment later. Bruce was surprised he wasn’t tired out earlier, after all he’d been through.

“What, a life-threatening shoot-out and thinly-veiled police interrogation isn’t enough to keep you awake anymore?” Bruce teased.

John laughed, echoing out into the cave and in Bruce’s ear as he whirled the chair around to sit properly; it wasn’t uproarious or over-dramatic, but it still sounded loud to Bruce. “You know it does! But I can’t help it, Bruce, those voice-away pills I take have their side-effects. Last time I just had the benefit of some vigorous activity to jolt me awake,” he answered, sliding his thin fingers over Bruce’s thigh. Bruce found himself letting it linger there, drawn in by its comforting heat. “It’ll take more than the sandman to keep me away from all this.”

Up close, Bruce could see the signs of exhaustion creeping in on John. His eyes didn’t have that lively spark they usually did when giving him that come-hither look, and the tender skin underneath them was a few shades darker than usual. “I don’t mind if you actually want some rest. You shouldn’t force yourself to stay awake.”

“Look who’s talking,” John shot back, already sliding the little remote keyboard over to his side to pull up the coroner reports. Bruce felt his leg cooling too rapidly and pushed away the thought of
putting John’s hand back.

“I’m serious. It’ll be here tomorrow.”

“You’re always serious. I don’t want rest,” John protested in a childish grumble, “I want to help you.”

“You know if you fall asleep like that, you’ll fall over in the chair.”

“You’ll catch me.”

“You don’t know that.”

John waited a beat, and Bruce hoped for a second he convinced John to think it through.

The thin man gently plopped his head against Bruce’s shoulder. “There. Can’t fall over if you’ve already caught me.”

The soft strands of seaweed-green hair almost brushing his chin, the weight nestling on his shoulder, the faint scent of limes - it brought back memories of similar little moments of intimacy in places far more comfortable than the Batcave.

Bruce opened his mouth, ready to gently argue that John should fall asleep somewhere he wouldn’t potentially crack his skull against, but John shifted, looking up at him from the odd angle, and the argument crumbled before he could even say a syllable.

“Don’t make me leave you, okay?” John mumbled, the screens’ light making his irises look pale and more pleading than Bruce thought was possible. “I don’t want to be alone.”

It was probably wrong to find him so mesmerizingly beautiful when he looked so vulnerable. He looked like the soft, anxious man Bruce had glimpsed a year ago at that cafe, the one who needed answers to questions well out of the vigilante’s level of expertise. He might not switch emotions as fast or have the same concerning lack of self-control, but he was just as peculiarly sweet and mysterious with an edge like a knife underneath. The urge to kiss him manifested itself again, just as dangerous as the last time they were this close, but in an occupied Batcave there were no noisy tiled hallways and corners that made it easy to know when someone else was approaching. Bruce let the feeling sit in his lips, keeping him on edge.

“I won’t.”

John smiled gently, looking as sweet as he would undoubtedly taste on Bruce’s tongue, and began to read the screen he’d claimed for himself at an angle. “I hoped you’d say that.”

Bruce wanted to drape his arm around his shoulder to keep him there. He wanted to touch him, comfort him, soothe everything away for the both of them… Instead, he forced himself to go back into his self-proclaimed investigation-mode and resume what he’d sat down to do - look over Tiffany’s findings on Ian Coggs. It might not go anywhere, but it was worth a look, and it was a distraction from the urge to just collapse against John in return.

Ian Coggs had been checked into St. Dymphna New Life Home on April 15th for drug use, following a court order for rehabilitation at a clinic his insurance company and the state would comply with. He’d filled out a form two days later to transfer over to a Bludhaven address matching a district clinic, Haven’s Helping Hand, on April 22nd, citing a sister living near there that Tiffany’s note said didn’t exist according to hospital records. The clinic reported him never arriving and a police report was filed for his disappearance in Bludhaven by Dr. Brandi September, and another in
“He has tattoos...”

John hummed. “Several.”

“Did you see any of them?” Bruce pulled up the pictures Tiffany had scrounged up. Some were FriendBook photos, but the main one seemed to be his mugshot. “Like this one? The star?”

John shifted to look. “Plain as day.” He seemed to narrow in one taken at someone’s apartment. Ian was shirtless in front of a mirror, posing with his stomach sucked in to emphasize his abdominal muscles and his free arm in a classic body-builder pose. Not that he had much to show off - Bruce figured a good punch to the kidney would take the wind out of him. “Zoom in on his phone.”

Bruce did as he was told, wondering why John bothered to point at it, too, like he couldn’t follow a basic direction.

“Hey, Tiiiff’?” John called, shifting away to roll the chair backwards enough to see the workbench. Bruce instantly missed the warmth, feeling the cold draft of the cave hit his shoulder. “How long ago was Ian’s terrible selfie taken?”

“How am I supposed to know?” She called back.

“What, you didn’t look at the upload date? That’s shoddy work, Tiff,” John admonished in a gruff transatlantic accent, like he was a stereotypical lone detective in an old film. “You’ll be busted down to patrol if you keep that up.”

“I'll bust your ass across the room if you keep talking like that,” she warned. Her mild annoyance only fueled John’s inevitable laugh.

“I like your moxie, kid,” he joked, continuing with his little self-made play, “I might put you up for promotion with the Chief, if you give me a guess!”

Tiffany huffed. Bruce could easily picture her expression - bothered more at how she was finding it hard to feel any real distaste than John’s actual teasing. “April, maybe? I just grabbed them from FriendBook.”

Bruce ran a quick search by name and location; the same picture was used as his profile photo, so he was easy to find. “Looks like April thirteenth.”

“Ooh, the plot thickens,” John commented normally, drifting the chair back over to Bruce’s side and pulling up a picture on his phone, “He’s missing his chest tattoo, see? The weird sock and buskin masks.” He nuzzled into Bruce, clearly enjoying the opportunity to cuddle. The photo he’d taken was clear, and Bruce could just see the mask tattoo peeking out above Ian Cogg’s shirt. It looked like a single face split in two, with the malevolently-happy half rising above the tragically-angry one.

“Mesopaline-Thalia. One of Roman’s projects.” Bruce pulled up the report. “For water-proof theater makeup.”

“Ha, a rose by any other name...”

Speaking of names, something had been bothering Bruce for a while. He hadn’t gotten any opportunities to really ask until now. “John, how did you find Ian’s name?”

“I poked around the Parole’s room.”
It set a bad taste in Bruce’s mouth. The thought that John had risked getting caught in the worst place he could be seen breaking into - John might have been kicked out, or arrested, or any number of actions that would set his recovery further back. “You what.”

“Don’t get your undies in a twist,” John said quietly, “It went just fine.”

Bruce was sure he was smiling about it. He had never been so annoyed at him for seeing a funny side to something so incredibly unamusing. “You could’ve-”

“I knew the risks,” John interrupted with a sharp hiss, pulling away to glare at him almost nose-to-nose, “Don’t think I didn’t,” he emphasized with a light jab to Bruce’s chest, angry sparks flashing in his poisonous eyes. “I went over the same paranoid what-ifs that constantly stream in your head long before I did the deed, mister. And I got over them.” He plopped his head back on Bruce’s shoulder. “Like I said - it went. Just. Fine.”

“Why did you do it?”

“...why do I do anything?” John answered obtusely, not moving his head from Bruce’s shoulder. “I was tired of the soup du jour. I wanted to stretch my brain. I wanted to help you. Take your pick - they’re all true.”

Bruce felt his petty anger soften. He knew it was likely all true, but in different degrees - and he wasn’t modest enough to think that John didn’t put Bruce at the top of his list. John knew it could damage his chances outside and he did it anyway, just for a chance that it could help Bruce find Roman Sionis.

But it also put a light on Bruce’s other suspicions. “Is it also why you got Tiffany to go look at his apartment?” He continued in a voice low enough so Tiffany wouldn’t hear.

John tilted his head to look at him, eyeing him carefully. Waiting.

“I know the recap you gave was your own work. You would’ve found his last address on the arrest record in the Parole office. You would’ve seen his transfer form, too. You knew where both places were and told her. It’s how she knew to go there.”

John grinned at him, his too-wide smile sending an uncomfortable little burst of adrenaline in Bruce’s brain; he wasn’t sure if it was like the feel of an incoming fight or the promise of intimacy. “We both know you can’t prove that,” he muttered, hot breath ghosting over the flesh of Bruce’s neck, “But it’s nice you think so highly of me.”

Of course he didn’t admit it. He just gave a proud, satisfied glance at Bruce and went back to reading the coroner reports as if Bruce had openly praised him.

Bruce cast a look over his shoulder at the workbench around the corner. He should feel guilty about the prospect of John manipulating her into helping, but he didn’t. He was honestly grateful for it. It saved him time and proved Tiffany could be trusted to investigate somewhat on her own. Whether or not John intended to give Tiffany a confidence boost from it was still up in the air - and Bruce knew John wasn’t going to answer that.

He let the air out of his nostrils, knowing he wasn’t going to stay mad at John for long, and returned to examining the information on Ian Coggs. If he didn’t have the theater-mask tattoo before his arrest, Ian likely had joined the gang after leaving for Bludhaven… But how did he get slip out from under the clinic’s radar?

Bruce pulled up the related paperwork. Planned transport was by the court-appointed-lawyer,
followed by a patrol car. He could have easily slipped the patrol, bribed the lawyer… Could have even bribed the patrol, too. No one would be the wiser.

He looked at Iman’s map of the Black Mask gang. Roman did have a luxury apartment in Bludhaven, and it was clear that a good chunk of his gang could be traced back to the city. It was highly likely that Ian Coggs had joined the gang shortly after his escape. He had a drug addiction and was suspected of selling; he would be an asset to Black Mask that they could keep under their thumb.

“John, what did you see Ian doing when you saw him?”

The other man didn’t shift - just continued to scroll through the death reports like it was the morning paper. “Picking up a vest.”

“What kind?”

“Padded,” he added, “You could see the drug packets when he squished it around.”

Roman had no steady girlfriend and what little consistent company he kept were either ignorant of his violent life or so loyal they pretended to be. Bruce had paid all the ones he knew a visit, but even under pressure, none of them said they saw him. He had a list of crossed-off names, and it seemed like the elusive drug mule Ian Coggs might be his only chance left…

“So our getaway-van-provider shot himself, huh?”

The picture of Ryan Hubbard Jr. that he and Tiffany had taken was just as disturbing as it ever was. There had been no detectable drugs in his system aside from a few shots of whiskey. Bruce had run himself ragged analyzing the samples he’d procured for anything that might show inhibited senses, but there was only one thing about the scene that really stood out and proved - in Bruce’s mind - that it wasn’t suicide. Even now, he could zero in on it. “It was meant to look that way, but the index finger isn’t positioned right. They forgot to bend it into the trigger.” He felt disturbed just saying it. And worse when he knew he wouldn’t make that same kind of mistake.

“That helps proves my ‘warehouse shoot-em-up was an inside job’ theory,” John said with a yawn, scrolling down to the next body found. “And Muddy was really frozen?”

John had pulled Muddy Nye’s crime scene and profile photos pulled up on the middle screen. “Partially. We checked surrounding industrial freezers, restaurants, ice storage units… I couldn’t find anything conclusive.”

“...why?”

“Because there wasn’t any trace evidence.”

“Ha ha, no, no,” John protested weakly, sounding more drained than before, “Why was he frozen? Shot in the head, dumped with the fish… And now put on ice. Even I think it’s over-the-top.”

“It disguises the time of death,” Bruce explained, not quite understanding where John’s train of thought was going, “The summer heat makes the body decompose faster than normal. Freezing would prevent the decay.”

“It still doesn’t make sense…” John barely stifled a yawn, settling a little further into Bruce. The green hairs ticked Bruce’s neck, and it took a moment for the billionaire-playboy to recompose himself. “Muddy was the mole. Why kill him so early?”
The mole…? “You think the Chandis murders were coordinated by Muddy Nye?"

“Maybe. The warehouse, definitely,” he emphasized with a little point at Bruce, “He planted the bomb, ran out of the warehouse last, got ‘kidnapped’, and wound up executed anyway. His dumping ground says ‘mobster’ like they’re trying to point the finger at someone else.”

It suddenly clicked why Muddy’s final resting place was so odd to him. He’d been dumped close to the scene not just for convenience, and not just to make sure he was found, but to send a message. “He was ‘sleeping with the fishes’…”

John giggled a little, turning to him with a proud little grin and a light pat on Bruce’s knee. “See, I knew you’d get it,” he said, his eyes sparkling like emeralds for the brief moment they held Bruce’s gaze, “They want to shove B.M. off his pedestal and take over, so they do it themselves and shuffle the blame elsewhere. But why kill your information guy afterwards…?” he sighed slightly, his weight sinking further into Bruce, “That’s what I don’t understand…”

Muddy’s loyalty certainly wasn’t a factor - if he had helped plan out the murders with whoever the killer was, he wouldn’t suddenly switch sides. He might have wanted some bigger cut of whatever money was promised in their future in exchange for his silence. If he was one of the members with more clout, he would be too useful to get rid of, but… “He was a liability. They couldn’t let him be seen alive if he was with the rest of the gang at the warehouse - he’d be suspected of treachery.”

John was silent, which Bruce took to mean he hadn’t thought of it and was mulling it over before responding.

Bruce glanced at the middle screen, still seeing the video John had taken of the shooter in the corner. It was a very different modus operandi, but something about the figure reminded Bruce of the person from Selina’s art gallery. The screenshot he’d taken of the security footage had a similar build and the same sort of cape, but the shooter didn’t have the slight protrusions on their head.

Bruce suppressed a shudder. They had to be goggles, or a trick of the light, or something other than his cowl’s short ears. He couldn’t rule it out until he had proof, but every fiber of his being denied it being some sort of copycat.

The gallery assault was far too familiar to the Chandis killings to be tossed aside, but if it was the same person, why would they suddenly switch from throwing knives to using a long rifle? For that matter, why not use the rifle to try and kill Selina in the first place? “What kind of message do you think it sends to throw knives?”

Silence.

“John?”

John was breathing slowly, not moving from the spot on Bruce’s shoulder. Bruce slowly waved his hand in front of John’s eyes to verify what he already suspected - John had fallen asleep.

Not that Bruce blamed him, but they couldn’t stay like this all night. All it would take would be one little shift, and John might slip off his shoulder and onto a very hard surface; he had to be moved to a proper bed.

The only question was: the guest bedroom, or the master?

His first instinct was the master bedroom. He wanted to wake up and see the seaweed green head of hair on the pillow next to his. He wanted to just lie next to him and let the man’s chemically-lime scent sink into his sheets. He wanted to gently kiss him awake and pick up where they left off in the
car, taking things slow and leaving John breathless and starry-eyed.

But Tiffany and Iman were staying the night in their own guest rooms, and Alfred wasn’t too far from the master bedroom - any one of them finding a man who had been overly obsessed with Bruce lying next to him would raise too many questions. Even more so if Bruce once again found his arm draped over him like his body’s internal magnetism was set to the polar opposite of John’s.

Bruce knew his decision. He let out a small sigh as he gently scooped John up in his arms, ignoring the warmth settling against his chest and the guilt already burning in the back of his head. “Come on,” he muttered, half to himself.

There was no way he couldn’t pass Tiffany. He forced his face to be neutral. He couldn’t dwell on unfulfilled desires of any kind.

“Well that didn’t take-” Tiffany smirked for half a second, until her eyes drifted to John’s unconscious form in his arms. Then her face flushed as she tried very hard not to laugh out loud.

Bruce really didn’t see what was so funny. “His anti-psychotics make him drowsy. I’m carrying him to the extra guest room.”

“I figured that much. It’s just-” Tiffany snickered, “You’re carrying him like that,” she gestured to his arms, holding John up bridal-style. “It’s like a bad drama scene or something.”

Bruce was glad John wasn’t awake enough to hear that. He wasn’t sure if he’d be mad about it or just further dramatize himself for fun. “Are you going to bed soon?”

“Not yet. You should, though - you look like you’ve been awake for a week.”

“That feels about right,” Bruce commented, making his way to the elevator. “Don’t stay up too late.”

“Right back at you,” Tiffany teased, returning to solder some newly-replaced wires in her broken drone.

The manor’s hallway lights were lit - a courtesy of Alfred, no doubt - but John didn’t stir the whole walk up to the guest room nearest the master suite. Bruce had no trouble carrying him, but he did notice how firm the arm pressed against his stomach felt. John had always had lean muscle, but somehow he was strong enough to lift Batman off the ground with a grappling gun. How on Earth could such a delicate-looking man could be so strong was one of those mysteries about John that kept Bruce on his toes; he knew he’d never get the proper answer, but it made him want to study him and test him and experiment anyway.

The room Bruce chose was the one John had attempted to sleep in the first time he was at the manor. Only now the king-size four-poster bed had proper curtains on it to shield the room’s vast size from John’s view. Bruce knew John would inevitably sleep over when he got out of St. Dymphna, and Bruce had long entertained the idea of sneaking in and out of John’s room during those stays when the others were sleeping over, so when he finally broke the news they were a couple it wouldn’t come as much of a surprise.

He laid John down carefully, only removing the man’s shoes and both his personal and clinic-regulated phones so he could cover him with the lightweight sheet and thin-knit summer blanket. The curtains surrounding him were thin enough to let the air-conditioning in, but thick enough to block light from the windows.

He looked incredibly peaceful. Bruce brushed the perpetually-stray lock of hair away from his forehead, shoving away the urge to lay next to him anyway, and told himself that this was the best
thing to do for now.

“Goodnight, John,” he muttered, drawing the last bed-curtain closed before making his way to his own bed in a house that, for once, felt full.

*~*~*~*~*

Bruce’s brain was wired a certain way - when something hit him by surprise, rather than turn to discover what it was, he would grab anything in reach and use the defensive techniques he spent years training in to get the culprit under his control.

In one moment, he felt something hit the back of his head with enough force to wake him up, and in the next few, he’d used his left hand to grab the assailant’s arm still attached to the object, twisted it and his left leg to hoist them up and fling them to the large empty space on the king-size bed next to him, and rolled with the action to pin them down.

Of course, in all the chaos, he didn’t think about things like who or what or why, so the flashes of purple, green, and white in his peripheral vision didn’t register fully until he was looking at the culprit face-to-face.

John was staring up at him, the too-bright greens looking as surprised and star-struck as if Bruce had suddenly kissed him out of nowhere. He grinned devilishly slowly, shifting to test the restraints that were Bruce’s hands and legs, and Bruce suddenly felt very exposed as he realized he had habitually slept in his underwear. “Ooh-hoo, now I know I’m not dreaming,” John said with a throaty little chuckle, “Only the real Bruce grips this tight.”

Bruce felt his face warm at the bizarre insinuation, but he wasn’t going to let such a small thing like embarrassment get the better of him. He saw the pillow clearly used to hit him was crushed under his elbow. “You shouldn’t wake me up like that.”

“Well if you hadn’t left me alone you would’ve gotten something nicer,” John shot back, his grin shrinking as his tone shifted to something more serious. “My mind’s messed up enough without the sudden panic of not knowing where I am.”

Bruce suddenly remembered John had mentioned having violent nightmares - specifically how he thought his brain was punishing him by ‘twisting’ his worst memories. Guilt hit him like a fist to the face at the realization that he’d left John to wake from a nightmare alone in a bed he wasn’t used to seeing. He loosened his grip on John’s wrists and shifted his weight, feeling worse about pinning him down so suddenly, and wondered if he should apologize.

“Wait.”

Bruce paused, knowing that if John had his hands free he would’ve grabbed his shoulder to plead with him, the same glimmer of regret shining in the acid pools of his irises. Instead, John slid his leg up against Bruce’s outer-thigh in an attempt to tantalize him into staying; even through sheets, the action sent a little shiver over his skin.

“I got my petty revenge; I’m sated,” he added, nodding his head to one side as he grinned anew, “But don’t stop now.” He hooked his leg up and over Bruce’s hip, looking exactly as he had hours ago in the Batmobile with Bruce’s fingers between his teeth. “You’re already halfway into making it up to me.”

Bruce never salivated over anyone. As he’d never felt it, he never understood how a person could trigger such a primal display of hunger and call it any degree of romantic. He’d lusted and loved and
yearned, but never *drooled*.

But it was the only thing he could feel described the sudden pang of desire that flooded his mouth and caused his hands to suddenly want to clutch like a needy animal. All because of an infernal grin and a leg around his waist.

He pushed raw instinct aside, filing it away the urgency for later exploration. His first logical instinct was to apologize for leaving John on his own without thinking of the consequences. His second was to question how John could be horny at a time like this, especially if he was actually angry just a minute ago.

John was slowly pushing away the sheets that Bruce had accidentally dragged with him, and Bruce decided that for once, he really shouldn’t think about what to do next.

The man beneath him gave a little *hee hee* as Bruce sank down to press them together. “Is this what you had in mind?” Bruce teased, puffing air over John’s mouth to tease him.

“You’re definitely getting warmer.”

He kissed his cheek.

“Mm, *warmer*.”

His ear next.

“Cooler - come *on*, Bruce!”

“Are you sure about that?” Bruce muttered, taking a moment to suck his earlobe.

“I… Stop making this hard.”

“I thought that was the whole point,” Bruce shot back, kissing his jaw.

John laughed, and Bruce let the sound reverberate in his ears, thinking of nothing as he just took the sight of John in, of his green hair messed into the pillow, of the utter delight in his eyes...

He let go of John’s wrists and took a slow breath as they kissed properly for the first time in too long.

It was as if all the aches practically living in Bruce’s shoulders were melting away with the soothing heat. He kissed him slowly, drinking in the feel of soft lips moving with his, of the warmth against his chest, of the fingers now wandering over his back. He traced over one of the longer scars, moaning when Bruce sucked on his lower lip.

He dipped the tip of his tongue between John’s lips and pulled away to tease him a little more, but John didn’t have the patience - he pulled Bruce back in and all but jammed his tongue between Bruce’s teeth with a frustrated grunt.

Their last kiss had been pure passion, born of too little contact allowed between them and a pair of tight purple jeans that made Bruce’s libido go off the rails. That kiss had electrified him and set his whole body on fire, and once he had started he had found it difficult to stop until a door opening had knocked sense back into him.

This time the ache for more was burning slowly, steadily climbing higher as their tongues ran up and over one another, igniting moans and short gasps between them. They didn’t have to worry about
wayward strangers finding them pressed against the wall - he could take his time enjoying all the sounds John made without worrying they would attract attention. He didn’t have to stop the hands scratching shallow lines down his back or his own hums of pleasure from leaving the back of his throat.

John pulled away, his eyes glazed over. “Is there a Batarang in the sheets, or are we just happy to see each other?”

Bruce smirked, drawing up to kneel over him. “Let’s find out.”

No sooner did Bruce finish his sentence than a knock came at his bedroom door.

“Master Bruce, breakfast is waiting downstairs.”

He hadn’t heard that sentence in months. It almost negated the annoyance at being interrupted with John for the second time in less than six hours. Almost.

He grit his teeth, willing himself not to be mad at his father figure for interrupting something he didn’t know was happening. He breathed in slowly, pushing down the urge to tell him to go away in any matter of words. Even if they were inconvenienced, it didn’t change the fact that John was underneath him, warm and real and loving… But he found it difficult to keep the bite out of his voice when he wanted to set all conventional niceties aside and satisfy every urge John brought forth in him. “I’ll be down in a bit, Alfred.”

“Only a bit?” John muttered, trailing his fingers down Bruce’s tailbone with a wide smirk. “I can work with that…” Bruce shuddered, wanting far more than what an implied quickie would give.

“You haven’t seen Master John, I presume?” Alfred asked, “The guest rooms are all empty.”

Bruce grasped for an excuse. Telling him John was with him wasn’t even an option at this point - to say it would raise Alfred’s eyebrows was an understatement. “He’s probably exploring the manor,” he suggested, watching the door for any sign of movement.

John slid his fingers under Bruce’s boxer-briefs and squeezed his behind, sending a jolt to Bruce’s chest as he gasped.

“I suppose I simply could’ve missed him earlier,” Alfred mused.

Bruce’s blood was pumping in his ears as he became hyper-aware of the presence behind the door. “What are you doing?” he hissed.

“Exploring the manor,” John murmured back, grinning as he smoothed his hands over the sensitive skin.

“If I may ask, sir,” Alfred continued, “What are you going to do about tonight?”

Bruce felt like he could barely hear him, though he heard every word perfectly. He shuddered as John pushed his briefs down with his thumbs and palmed his rear end. The sensible part of him that wanted John to stop was clashing with the possessive ache to touch him in return, canceling out into a tense arousal flaring under his skin.

“You’ve got a nice basement,” John teased in a hushed voice, giving a light squeeze.

“Sir?”
“W-what about tonight?” Bruce managed, shutting his eyes to not look at either of them. It wasn’t the best idea - it seemed to amplify the sensation John’s hands were creating.

“Well, I am impressed with how much you arranged with my absence,” Alfred continued - Bruce was barely holding himself together as John’s fingers scraped gently over the curves - “but it really okay for John to be here? Surely a man of his condition would be better...away from such a crowd.”

John’s hands stopped, slacking and pulling away and leaving Bruce to simmer uncomfortably in the air.

It looked like he was seeing something farther away than Bruce, with a heart-wrenching expression of understanding. It hurt Bruce more than if he’d stabbed him.

Bruce decided to focus on the main point rather than ask what exactly Alfred was driving at. He could hardly kneel there let John be chastised for nothing, regardless of what John was to him. “John will be fine; he’s improved drastically from last year. He’s handled more than you think.” He looked down at John, who barely looked any better. “Besides, the house feels more livable when he’s in it,” he offered, shuffling his position to stroke John’s hairline.

John flashed him a bit of a smile, but it didn’t have his usual spark of life. He looked up at Bruce almost mournfully, as if Bruce had sugar-coated some terrible news.

Alfred gave a small sigh. Bruce had the feeling Alfred was rubbing the bridge of his nose; a habit Bruce had picked up from him years ago. “We’ll discuss it more later. Your pancakes will get cold at this rate, Master Bruce. I’ll tell Missus’ Tiffany and Iman to expect you shortly and bring Master John down if I see him.”

He heard a few soft footsteps under John’s weary sigh.

“He brought me down, all right,” John huffed, “Talk about a mood killer.”

“John, you know he… He just needs time to adjust.”

“What? To the whole ‘almost killed you’ thing? He’ll never forget that,” John spat dejectedly. “Not that I blame him… It’s not like I can forget.”

Bruce hated how right that was. Alfred was not liable to forget operating on Bruce at any time, let alone when he repaired the hole in Bruce’s left side. He knew all too well that it was John’s fault it was there in the first place. It wasn’t a stretch to think that Alfred may never truly forgive John for hurting Bruce that badly, though Bruce wished desperately that he did.

He couldn’t fruitlessly tell John not to worry about it when it clearly bothered both of them, but he couldn’t stand to see him like this. He felt like he’d never wanted to comfort someone more. “He’ll come around,” Bruce said, cradling John’s cheek so he would look at him, “Just be yourself.”

John snorted into a short laugh, his smirk at Bruce far too harsh to be relieving. “Where have I heard that before?”

“Hey, it got me to like you.”

“Yeah, but I only need one guy to like me the way you do,” John joked, seeming a bit more like his usual self.

He shot a small smile back for a moment. “John... I mean it,” Bruce emphasized, running his thumb over his cheekbone, “He’ll like you. I know he will. He just needs some time.”
“...you know, the more you say something, the more you’ll believe it - but it doesn’t make it true,” John said, “Still, it’s nice to know you believe in me so much,” he added, following with a slap Bruce’s right butt-cheek and a light smirk that didn’t completely seem genuine. “Now put your pants back on, stud. I’m getting pancakes.”

Bruce wasn’t sure what startled him more - the light sting of the hit, the sudden flirty term of endearment, or the way only John could lay out harsh truths so simply and openly.

Either way, Bruce hitched his boxer-briefs back up and let John leave ahead of him, unable to stop himself from watching him. The green-and-black checkered pants would start to slide past his hips if Bruce undid the belt and fumbled with the zipper, but he’d have to undo all the buttons of the short-sleeved shirt to get his hands underneath; it was unnatural how he managed to make the pink paint-like streaks in the purple fabric stand out, and even more how he made it look so good. He wanted to pull John back to bed and leave everything on a heap on his floor so he could show John how much he wanted him there.

“John?” He called out instead - John looked back from the doorway, not knowing Bruce had been watching him. “I meant every word. It doesn’t matter what anyone says - I want you here.”

John stared, looking too serious, but Bruce couldn’t guess what he was thinking about. “Yeah, I know,” he answered with a slight shrug, staring at the floor for a moment before darting his line of sight straight to Bruce’s groin, “I can tell,” he added with a hint of a cheeky smile.

He shut the door behind him, holding Bruce’s gaze until he was completely out of sight - leaving Bruce to torture himself by collapsing where John had been beneath him, as warm and wanting as Bruce had imagined in countless fantasies in varying degrees of sordidness. He breathed in the faint scent of laboratory-simulated limes still clinging to the pillow, forcing himself to put on the mask of the gracious host of the manor and push away the needy longing that had been burning in his heart for months.

*~*~*~*~*

Once Bruce had thrown clothes on, he had, by habit, headed towards the kitchen, thinking nothing of the smell of browned butter that filtered into the hallway. But the kitchen was almost empty - Alfred was the only one there, frying a pancake over the stove, clad in his summer white linen dress shirt and forest green plaid pants.

“I’d thought we’d have breakfast in the dining room for a change, Master Bruce,” Alfred said, spotting him as he turned to fuss with a pot of tea, “I don’t believe you’ve had any overnight guests eat there since your last college girlfriend.” He dunked the strainer of tea a couple of times in the pot, as if it would let loose any further flavors stuck inside. “Whatever happened to Miss Beaumont?”

“She broke up with me,” Bruce answered flatly, “Over breakfast.”

“That was right before you left to train in Japan, wasn’t it? After you’d gotten your Master’s... I almost thought you were going to announce an engagement at the time, since she’d stayed the week...”

Bruce had long gotten over the heartbreak, but he still remembered grappling with going on that trip at all, finding himself almost wanting to abandon the mission he’d worked towards for years in exchange for what he thought was a real chance at a relationship - instead she’d chosen to leave Gotham behind for good. “It wouldn’t have worked out anyway,” he said, not wanting to think about the small possibility that that wasn’t true. “I’m honestly grateful she dumped me when she did - it drove me to focus on what was important.” He could tell by the look in Alfred’s eyes that he
disagreed, so he quickly switched tracks, choosing to ask something close enough to the subject to dissuade the eventual argument that would ensue. “I’m surprised you’re bringing her up. I haven’t seen her in six years.”

“Just the droll of this old butler reminiscing,” he said simply, turning to plate the last pancake with his usual precision timing. “It’s nice to have more people staying in the Manor for more than a few hours at a time again.” Bruce took the plate pushed into his hands as Alfred practically spun on his heel to pick up the large silver tea-tray that was normally reserved for special dinners. “I did miss the hustle and bustle they provide. Even if it’s only temporary.”

Bruce was glad Alfred didn’t see him wince behind his back. How was he supposed to tell him that John’s stay eventually wouldn’t be temporary when Alfred clearly didn’t consider it a possibility?

He followed him out, breathing slowly and telling himself that he would tell him when the time was right - preferably when John was a free man and he’d had a chance to grow a bit more on Alfred.

As they neared the dining room, Bruce could hear John’s voice filter into the hallway.

“-gotten up to that part of the autopsies; just going off of paper...I’d say they felt like executions.”

“Then we’re on the same page,” Iman said. “I don’t think it’s a coincidence that they were displayed like that. It felt too personal. They planned this down to the letter.”

“...I don’t know how you guys can talk about murder while you’re eating,” Tiffany grumbled as Alfred entered, acting like he’d never stopped being a butler at all.

“It’s something you get used to, in this house,” Alfred said, using the corner of the table by Iman’s chair to pour a cup out for her.

“You can’t control your special interests, Tiff,” John said with a wag of his fork, “And mine stops my brain from going into those nasty dark spirals.”

Seeing everyone sitting at one table made for a strange picture. Iman and Tiffany were sitting next to each other, Tiffany still in her sushi-patterned pajamas and Iman already dressed in a beige summer suit. John sat opposite Iman near the head of the table, where a clear space was made for Bruce. Alfred seemed to have planned to sit by John, though the chair was slightly farther apart than the rest.

Bruce didn’t want to sit at the top. He got enough experience looking down a table at people at Wayne Enterprises.

“Hey, buddy! You took your time getting down here,” John greeted with a wave like it was any other day; Alfred seemed to be watching for stray flecks of syrup on the family linen.

Bruce put his plate next to John’s seat, much to his obvious delight and Alfred’s slight surprise.

“Deciding to sit among us commoners, huh?” He teased.

“It’s easier to talk this way,” Bruce shrugged, putting his mug in it’s rightful spot, “Besides, I never liked the head chairs’ uncomfortable armrests.”

Alfred had seemed to make the full spread - bacon and eggs sat under the set of silver cloches that Bruce hadn’t seen in...two years? Or was it three? It had been long enough that he’d nearly forgotten about them. He could see the thin lines of stubborn tarnish around the handle’s bases; the rest of the pieces were shining from a recent polish. Bruce piled the protein high on his plate, wondering at how he didn’t smell the bacon fat from the kitchen. “You didn’t have to go to so much trouble, Alfred.”
“I’d hardly call feeding yourself and three guests trouble, Master Bruce. It’s a welcome change of pace.” He took a sip from his teacup, looking like he hadn’t had a decent cup in a while. He looked right at home at the top of the table; with no plate of his own, Bruce guessed Alfred must have eaten while he was cooking. It wouldn’t have been the first time. “Especially considering I don’t have much to do for the Gala.”

Gala…?

Bruce suddenly lost his appetite as the old familiar pressure of stress hit his head. He clutched his forehead and massaged his temples to push it away and hoped Alfred had mixed up his Saturdays, but he knew it was pointless - Alfred always had an impeccable sense of time.

“Bruce, don’t tell me you actually forgot something for once,” Tiffany ribbed, looking almost pleasantly surprised.

Bruce breathed out slowly, trying to hold in the urge to smack himself, and feeling it ebb away as John gently rubbed his back.

“It’s okay, Brucie,” he soothed, “I’ve forgotten worse things. Besides, you arranged all the fancy white-glove teams last month, remember? You’d stressed about arranging it since February.”

He did remember. He had a rental team of servers and caterers and a second maid service to finish cleaning the ballroom after their initial sweep and polish almost a week ago. But it was the social grace he’d have to put on instead of the suit he wanted - needed - to wear that really made him hate the idea of throwing the Wayne Charity Gala now. “I knew getting up this early wasn’t normal,” he grumbled.

Alfred took another sip of tea with his usual refined grace. “Bats might be nocturnal, Master Bruce, but the services you hired are not. They’re also non-refundable, if their websites were anything to go by.”

Bruce took his hands away from his head and crunched on the nearest piece of bacon, feeling John retract his calming ministration a moment later. “Someone please distract me with some good news.”

“Well, let’s see - these pancakes are really good,” John offered, spearing another bite, “You still look handsomely rugged with stubble… Ooh! And I know why Muddy was frozen.”

Tiffany poked her plate with an odd expression. “I didn’t know that was a mystery.”

“Of course it is! Shot in the head, frozen, then dumped to rot with fish carcasses? He’s just missing concrete shoes and a thumb cut off,” John said with a wink, “I mean, why freeze him and wait a day? Why not just put him in a trash bag or a suitcase if you had to wait all that time?”

Bruce found himself watching John. The way his hands moved as he gestured, then tucking into excited fists to rest on the table and lean forward, the gleam of true, unbridled excitement sparkling in his eyes and sitting in the corners of his cheshire grin.

“So, I started thinking of what you said last night, Bruce,” he emphasized with a look, the little curl at the corners of his lips lifting a fraction more, “about disguising the time of death. And those annoying little thoughts in my head! Why bother killing him hours after picking him up? Why not just kill him outside the warehouse? And then it hits me!” He emphasized with a shrug. “You guys only thought you saw him in the warehouse Tuesday morning; he was already dead.”

Already…? Bruce’s mind whipped around corners, thinking back to Monday night and the eventual Tuesday morning.
He’d seen Muddy in the warehouse. Tiffany watched him on the camera feed until the van exploded and she followed outside with her drone. They’d both recognized him from police footage; there was no mugshot and Bruce had never bothered to look into his personal life. “I saw his autopsy photo,” Bruce said, “and the crime scene. That was Muddy Nye.”

“Well of course it was! That’s my point. The real Muddy is dead. The fake one is still running around Gotham - sans makeup, of course.”

It was an intriguing idea. It explained why his death was so elaborate, why he wasn’t left dead on the pavement with the others… Makeup in the short term would make sense in this case; Muddy was still fairly new, so whoever it was had to know him well enough to sound like him and pick up any noticeable tics.

Tiffany didn’t look convinced. “John, I saw him on the drone camera. That was definitely the guy from the dumpster.”

“But you can’t prove it,” John said slyly, “Neither of you can. You’re going by what you think you saw, not what you actually did.”

“Yes, I’m saying I’m lying?”

“No, I’m saying that unless you show me the footage you took of the warehouse, I’m not trusting your memory of a minor character in a big scheme over a very reasonable answer.”

“I don’t know if I’d call it reasonable,” Iman said coolly, “but it’s certainly possible. I’ve honestly been so focused on the Wednesday Nighters and Black Mask that I haven’t thought about Muddy Nye enough.”

“Oh?” John rested his chin on his hand, looking as excited as a schoolboy going on a field trip. “I’ve missed a lot of details on those! Do tell.”

Iman had somehow quietly cleared half her plate already. “The only lead we have with the Nighters’ murders is the payment method and the woman on the camera footage; I’ve run checks on the card owner and all his female relatives. I couldn’t find anything suspicious - first marriage, two young children, no late-night texts, no calls, no burner phones, and no suspicious deaths in his background. His mother and sister live in Florida and his wife was with him all evening. His in-laws were having dinner out on the other side of town, but they seem unlikely; his mother-in-law is sixty and the woman at The Lot was at least half her age. It’s not much to go on. There wasn’t any DNA on the eighth glass found in the bathroom.”

Iman swiped around on the tablet between her and Tiffany’s elbows. “But I did find Roman on last night’s footage,” Iman said proudly, turning the screen towards them - a close circuit camera showed a little fleet of small yachts sitting in the harbor. They were the kind that the upper-middle class social climbers bought to join the local clubs and rub elbows while they bragged to their friends about how they owned a yacht. Bruce knew from experience the yacht would be smelling of wood polish and old rat poison. “He was staying on a yacht - it belongs to Circe, the latest model for Janus Cosmetics.”

John barked out a laugh. “Her name is actually Circe?”

“I’m pretty sure that’s just a stage name,” Tiffany chimed in, “She’s from that black and white ad with the weird eyeshadow-stripe of red that’s all over the city.” The young woman smiled to herself, and Bruce knew she was going to tease him before she even opened her mouth. “Maybe she’s working with Roman because Bruce turned her down at last year’s Christmas party.”
Bruce struggled to remember her. She was either the forward bottle-blonde who couldn’t keep her hands to herself, or the coy natural-blond who’d swept him onto the patio and asked for a private tour. Both women had similar faces and builds, and all he really remembered was putting on the Batsuit after the party was over and glimpsing John through his Arkham cell’s window. “I honestly can’t even picture her face.”

Alfred scoffed. “Of course not. Who else would remember the only woman bold enough to wear chartreuse yellow in winter?”

John snickered, and Iman had to politely cough behind her hand to cover her smile.

Bruce’s embarrassment at not remembering such an obvious person was overshadowed by how obviously Alfred was enjoying himself - despite worrying over Bruce’s life choices, he never did miss an opportunity to give one of his dry remarks. Bruce attributed it to a lifetime of answering to others.

Tiffany smirked at him across the table. “Not only that, but she spilled wine on my dress and blamed me for standing there on her way out. She was pretty pissed.” She stabbed a piece of scrambled egg with her fork. “So was I; that stain never came out.”

“I clearly dodged a bullet, then,” Bruce shot back, feeling slightly guilty about forgetting - at least until he caught John’s eye. He seemed rather satisfied with Bruce forgetting all about it.

“Bruce’s romantic life aside,” Iman interjected, “I couldn’t trace his car the whole trip to wherever he was heading, but I did triangulate the area it should be in. It hasn’t been seen again since five, but it’s something.”

“Mm!” Tiffany almost slammed her fork down on her plate and swallowed thickly. “Speaking of cars! I found Selina’s this morning - or at least the one she used to meet you in the parking garage.”

Bruce didn’t need to have peripheral vision to know John was looking very pointedly at him.

“You saw Cat Lady?” He asked in a clearly disgruntled tone, “First I’ve heard of it.”

“You fell asleep before I could tell you,” Bruce explained, noting John’s sharp look and how grip on his fork was harder than it needed to be, “She handed me security footage of her gallery in Bludhaven - she got attacked last weekend. We think it’s the same attacker from the Chandis.”

His sharpness didn’t soften, but Bruce could tell John was fascinated by the relaxation in his expression and the new light of realization in his eyes. “The same…?”

Iman passed him the tablet. “See for yourself - the knife points in the walls are the same blade-width as the victims from the ship.”

Bruce cast a look at Tiffany. “Why were you looking for her car?”

“Because she knows way more than she lets on,” she answered around a bite of scrambled egg, “and Iman and I agree that everything with the murders at the docks and Selina’s attack seem to go back to Bludhaven.”

Bruce’s mind surged in the new direction of the mystery at hand. He did think Selina knew more about her killer, but she wouldn’t work with him to tell him… But Bludhaven did seem to be at the center of everything. Half of Black Mask’s gang seemed to originate there or visit Bludhaven at some point. The shipment was moved from there. Roman Sionis had extended stays there. Selina Kyle had opened her art gallery there. Black Mask’s gang was a target, and if John’s theory was
right in that someone in the gang was committing mutiny in secret… “Do you think Selina might have been working with Black Mask?”

“I’ve thought about it.”

Iman hummed. “I think she met Roman before, at the very least.”

Alfred was pouring himself another cup of tea already. “You say she’s running an art gallery?”

“Yes, the Estella Art Gallery in Bludhaven.”

“Roman Sionis always came off as the sort to accumulate things based on monetary value, rather than their actual worth,” he said with the air of someone who had most certainly remembered Roman well, “I believe that Roman bought something from Miss Kyle’s gallery. Likely the most expensive thing in the place - seems rather up his alley.”

It was highly likely. Which meant Bruce likely had to talk to Selina again...but he wouldn’t have time. He had to finish preparations for the Charity Gala and keep his eyes peeled for any sign of movement from Roman Sionis, and look over anything he might lead him to Roman or the Wednesday Nighters’ killer.

He could already feel a headache forming as a phone went off with an unpleasantly shrill ring.

John scowled as he fished his second cell phone out of his pocket. “It’s always at the worst time!” he grumbled aloud before sighing at the name. “Of course. Don’t wait up, honey,” he said in what might pass as a joking tone, clapping Bruce on the shoulder as he passed. “Hello, Officer Kane,” he greeted in falsely-pleasant tone. “Yes; I’m fine-with-a-capital-f. And I would know - ha! - I pass a mirror every couple of minutes here!” he laughed, shutting the door behind him as he walked to who-knew-where.

“Well that settles it,” Tiffany said, taking her tablet back from where John had laid it in the middle of the table, “I’ll go pay Selina a visit.”

Bruce narrowed his eyes across the table. “You are?”

Tiffany was clearly gearing up for a fight; he knew the determined look on her face when she was confronted. “Yes, I am,” she said sternly. “You told me to tell you where I was going next time - she’s staying at the Motel 11 on Augury Road.”

“You should wait until I can come with you.”

“I never said you were invited along,” Tiffany huffed, crossing her arms. “If I wait for you to come around it’ll be too late.”

“I just don’t want you going alone,” he emphasized, feeling the flares of powerless anger stir, “Selina’s not someone to be taken lightly. And if her attacker is still out there-”

“I’d be in just as much danger as I would be last night. I can handle myself, Bruce!”

Of course she would think so; she didn’t have the field experience he did to know what could go wrong. “I just don’t want you getting hurt,” Bruce said as carefully as possible, trying to keep the edge out of his voice, “John got lucky yesterday. I don’t want to find out you’d been hurt, too.”

Tiffany seemed to be chewing the inside of her cheek. He could practically hear the ‘then you won’t find out’ she was sorely tempted to say.
But Iman - who had been pointedly ignoring the awkward conversation by pretending to read something on her phone - had said he should let her work on her own, lest she fall into her own rebellious, solitary vigilantism. And he knew how well *that* went last time…

Bruce sighed, feeling angry at himself for it all over again. “Just...take one of the grappling guns with you. John won’t be using his.”

Tiffany relaxed, but still pouted. “His is *weird.*”

“It still *works* fine. Look at this way - if it breaks, you won’t have to repair it,” he offered.

“As long as he doesn’t bite my head off about it,” she grumbled, “I’ll get dressed and finish fixing the drone from last night; I should be out in a couple of hours, as long as her car doesn’t move. Thanks for breakfast, Alfred,” she finished with a glowing smile.

“Any time.”

Bruce wanted to stop her from going. Or follow her to make sure. Or tell her to keep her drone behind her for surveillance. Something, *anything,* to make sure she would be fine.

But he didn’t want to risk losing another partner’s trust in him. “Just be careful, Tiffany.”

“I always am,” Tiffany answered with a slight shrug and a slight smile.

Iman stretched her arms as Tiffany made her way out, leaving the door cracked open behind her; Bruce couldn’t hear anything in the hall, which meant John had moved to a different room for his talk with the parole officer. “I still have some Enterprise work from last night to finish,” she said wearily, sounding like she never wanted to even think about it. “I’m going to borrow your office for a while, if that’s okay. I’ll keep my eye out for any movement from Roman and use the drone closest to there to see where exactly he is. Do you want me to text you what I find?”

Bruce felt odd about letting someone else in there, but he supposed it didn’t hurt. “Sure, I’d appreciate it.” But there was something nagging at him from yesterday he wanted to clear up. “I’ve been meaning to ask - why did you visit John over Easter? He hadn’t mentioned it until yesterday.”

She was definitely thinking about how to answer. He could read it in her eyes. “I’d been thinking about why Waller wanted him for her...disposable squad,” she answered, “It never sat right with me. I wanted to know if he could remember anything before Arkham. And I figured he could use the extra company; he can’t always be isolated to *one* friend on the outside.”

So that was it. She was investigating his background. Not that Bruce hadn’t done the same, trying to find any scrap of information or picture that even resembled John - it was just odd for them to hide it. “He’s always said he never remembered anything before he woke up there.”

She was definitely thinking about how to answer. He could read it in her eyes. “I’d been thinking about why Waller wanted him for her...disposable squad,” she answered, “It never sat right with me. I wanted to know if he could remember anything before Arkham. And I figured he could use the extra company; he can’t always be isolated to *one* friend on the outside.”

He stood to leave. “If he does remember something, he didn’t tell me, either.”

Bruce wasn’t sure he believed that. John liked Iman for her obvious rebellion against the person who had tried to kill him and was half of the cause of his breakdown. He was liable to trust her over Tiffany, and since Iman was certainly not Bruce, he might have felt comfortable enough to reveal something that he feared might chase Bruce away or hint at a backwards step in his recovery.

“I’ll let you know if I find anything,” she continued in the tone she used when she wanted to leave a conversation.
Iman was hiding something, but she wasn’t the type to get information abruptly bullied out of her. Tiffany would let something slip when she was riled up enough - Iman was far too cool-headed to loosen her tongue at mere words, and Bruce didn’t have the heart to treat her like an enemy when she was doing so much for both sides of his life. “Thank you,” Bruce said as sincerely as he could manage.

“Let me know if you need anything, Miss Avesta,” Alfred chimed, “I believe Bruce will have his hands full until this evening.”

“Thank you, I’ll keep that in mind.” Iman flashed them a brief smile before heading away, closing the door after herself.

“At least there’s someone here with a good head on their shoulders,” Alfred quipped. “I understand she’s been a great help to you as of late.”

Of course she had, but so had John and Tiffany. Normally, Bruce would’ve brushed the comment off as something very normal, but with Alfred’s random mention of his last long-term girlfriend, he couldn’t help but wonder if Alfred was trying to push an unnecessary romance onto him. “They all have. I don’t know where I would be without all three of them. And you, Al’.”

Alfred swirled his tea gently in his cup. “I imagine you’d be quite lonely.”

Bruce looked at the three mostly-empty plates on the table, traces of maple syrup and bits of salt and pepper scattered on them. The sight was foreign, and it brought about an odd feeling: he was comforted to know that people were there for him, for his mission in life, for Batman’s pursuit of justice - but at the same time all he wanted to do was be alone to collect his thoughts. “I imagine you’d be right,” he said, “but I could really use a break from the constant socializing.”

Alfred gave a chortle as he set his teacup down in the saucer, rattling it slightly. “You don’t have the luxury for that, I’m afraid. I don’t mind pitching in, but you’ll have to be the one to direct the hired services around again. How did that fair last year?”

Bruce felt his nose scrunch reflexively at the memory. “At least I know where everything is supposed to be placed this time.”

“Hm… Speaking of placements -” Alfred set his teacup down with a light rattle - “far be it from me to tell you who you admit as a guest in this house, but I hope you’re not letting John take advantage of your generosity.”

Bruce didn’t know how to answer. There was no possibility that Alfred thought John was taking advantage of him physically. Was Alfred thinking that John should have been thrown back in Arkham? Was he thinking that Bruce was being too generous by invoking the law and taking charge of a man who had no one else? “I don’t know what you mean,” he said carefully.

“You know exactly what I mean. I won’t say I understand the entire recovery process, but I don’t believe having full access to the home of the subject of his obsession is entirely healthy,” Alfred explained with a disapproving frown, “Especially since you’ll have several hundred guests tonight.”

Bruce could feel the embers of last night’s anger glare up. It didn’t matter if John was still ‘obsessed’ with him or not - John was better. “You think he’s dangerous to others.”

“I think that a man who stalked you and believed so much in your crusade that it broke him is inherently dangerous. He was obsessed with you as a celebrity and as a vigilante - and the events with Dr. Crane last year don’t exactly put my mind at ease.” Alfred was looking at him scrupulously.
“The police and the general public may believe that Dr. Crane crawled his way into that train car...”

He knew where that was going. No one knew the truth besides John, Dr. Crane, and himself - and he wasn’t about to let Alfred accuse John of anything. “What happened there was Crane’s own fault,” he growled, “No one else’s.”

Alfred was staring him down with all the paternity of his blood-born father. “Can you swear that to me?”

He felt like he was back to being fourteen, staring down Alfred with all the burning righteous fury of his adolescence. He’d reassured Alfred multiple times that the fight he’d been in had been on someone else’s behalf and not a test of his budding fighting skills. Alfred had thought he’d only wanted to prove himself. And of course he had, but Bruce had always been clever enough to wait for the appropriate opportunity to get justifiable vengeance and self-worth in one package.

And now he was staring him down, fighting for someone else again. “Yes.”

Alfred’s dark eyes flickered between his slightly, looking for any sign of a lie. “You can be quite good at lying,” he said, his shoulders sinking slightly, “but I know you’re being honest.”

Bruce hadn’t been holding his breath - even if Alfred thought he was lying, it wouldn’t matter. John would be staying.

“I just don’t know if you’re being honest with yourself. He seems quite...protective of you, considering what Tiffany and Iman have told me.”

Bruce wanted to say everything on his mind. That Alfred didn’t know anything. That none of them knew the full story. That he was just as protective of John. But he knew it would only make things worse.

“I just...” Alfred breathed out worried sigh. “I’m not worried for you, Bruce. It’s other people I’m worried about. He seemed like he was holding back quite a temper when I saw him this morning.”

Bruce wasn’t even thinking about telling him John had overheard Alfred’s doubts about him. He supposed the best thing was to be honest; at least as much as he felt he could be, when it came to John’s privacy. “I’m not surprised, given what he went through last night.” Bruce could read the doubt in his father figure’s eyes. “Trust me, Al’ - he just needs a little time to adjust here.”

“He doesn’t have time,” the old butler said with a slight shake of his head. “You can’t believe he’s ready to be around a large crowd so soon after what happened to him. Especially not with you as the center of attention.” Alfred stood to start clearing the plates. “I know you believe in him, Master Bruce - but a snake can’t change its pattern, even if it sheds its skin.”

Bruce frowned and forced himself to breath slowly. He thought of John, sitting in the medical ward of St. Dymphna New Life Home with the new friends he’d kept safe, watching Bruce as they told the exciting story, his expression curious and observant and admiring - but most of all, sane.

But as wrong as he thought (knew) Alfred was about John, he did have a point - John shouldn’t be at the Gala. It was always a stressful event, and Bruce had never seen John socialize with a crowd that size, let alone with people who would undoubtedly scurry away or turn up their noses at someone who was once deemed criminally insane. He wasn’t sure what John would do or say, but even on his best behavior it was always clear when someone had said or done something to aggravate him, and he tended to point out rudeness to people’s faces. Bruce didn’t want John to stress himself into a meltdown because of someone who wasn’t worth ten of him saying something rude.
Almost as if on queue, John came back in, his smile quirking into place at the sight of Bruce. “Uh, sorry about that. Can’t really turn down a convo with the warden,” he said with an awkward chortle, scratching the back of his neck. “So, who’s not coming to the Gala?”

Bruce swallowed slightly, hoping John didn’t notice. He couldn’t lie to him. He just hoped John would understand why he couldn’t go. “You,” he started, “St. Dymphna and the G.C.P.D. hid your move here, but we can’t entirely trust them - especially after last night.”

“What, you can’t say ‘attempted murder’?” John grinned wider, “It’s okay, Bruce, I know it wouldn’t be very sneaky of me to parade around your manor with Gotham’s who’s-who prowling around. And I might think it’s Roman who tried to shoot me, but...it could be anyone,” he said with a shrug. “This is the one time ‘better safe than sorry’ actually sounds do-able,” he added with an arched brow and thoughtful look into the corner ceiling.

Bruce couldn’t help but smile back at him partway, feeling the embers of his own temper dampen and cool. He didn’t care if Alfred noticed or not.

“Say, um, Alfred - let me help with those.” John didn’t wait for a response, he simply started to gather the dirty tableware on the opposing side.

Alfred blinked, pausing for a moment over a plate to look at John like he was checking to see if he was serious. “There’s really no need, Master John.”

“We’re technically both guests - it’d be rude not to help.”

“Very well.” Alfred held out the plates, which John stacked under his half-eaten one. “Carry these and follow me, please.” The butler carried the full tea tray and the emptiest cloche-covered dish as he made his way back towards the kitchen.

Bruce found himself half-wanting to escape to solitude and half-wanting to follow, just be with John for a little while longer. “I have a lot to do, but my phone’s on if you need me, John.” He lowered his voice enough so Alfred couldn’t hear him from the hall. “You’ll do fine,” he reassured, giving him the same thumbs up he so often received.

John met his gaze with a warmth that made it feel like all the stress was worth it. “Right back at ya, buddy,” he answered, flashing the gesture in return.

Bruce took the sight of him in, of the purple and green with the splashes of pink and checkered black, of the earnestness of his expression in his too-white face, of the slightly mussed seaweed-green hair that shone softly in the light - and not for the first time, he felt a rush of protectiveness come over him, and it was all he could do not to make a fool of himself then and there.

So he didn’t stop John following Alfred out, or comment on him noticeably snatching another bite off his own plate on the way. For the second time that morning he had to let him go while wanting nothing more than to bring him back and breathe him in like he was a hit of fresh air.

Bruce breathed in, smelling only a rapidly cooling breakfast as he thought of all the pointless, inane work that Bruce Wayne had to do in the grand scheme of things, and let it out in a sigh as he stabbed his partially-eaten eggs and fixed his daytime mask back into place to prepare for what was inevitably arriving on his doorstep.
Sooo…about the update times…yeah, 2 weeks isn’t working out, is it? Let’s go ahead and say it’ll be 3-4 weeks for future updates. This last long hiatus was temporary - as mentioned, I had to pass an exam. (I thought I was done with that since college, but nooo, it was work-mandated. At least I can slap someone with my CompTIA A+ certificate around if someone tells me I don’t know what I’m doing.) Thank you so so so so so much for all your kudos and comments during the past 2 months! You don’t know how happy I was to keep getting notifications while I studied my butt off and tried to drag my muse back into the saddle by their metaphorical hair.

And what a nice feel it is to be finished! It’s rather difficult writing such major characters all interacting in one place. I’ve done a few rewrites, lemme tell ya… I originally considered the other route for waking Bruce up (which would’ve more romantic and smoochy off the bat) but I was like “you know what, let’s make Bruce suffer a little more and show off player’s consequences”. I couldn’t not have them make-out, though, because I thought of the whole “[John] must be exploring the manor, Alfred :|” exchange and almost laughed myself silly at the idea of Bruce going through that while his dad was nearby. Then I turned it sad because there’s important character development afoot! That’s just how it goes! <;3c

Of course, since we’re talking about routes… Even as Bruce’s love interest, this Selina spends a lot of time away from Bruce and thus wouldn’t really live in the manor. She’s always come off as a come-and-go sort of person who doesn’t like being pinned down, so John having to visit her is still relevant to the story - especially if he’s still villain!John rather than our version of John here. Naturally, the whole scene with John waking Bruce up wouldn’t exist if you didn’t get the “BFF’s for life” ending in S2 or make up with him early on in S3/AtBoM, and thus have John stay with you, but it’s only this saucy if you chose to romance John in AtBoM. ;)

And I’m sure you can see the potential for having this new Bat Fam around. Some of my design for this storyline would make playing the game much harder for the player who chooses to go the evil route. So you want to be a really cruel Bruce, huh? You want to jail Tiffany? You don’t care about what happens to Iman? You chose being Batman over having your father figure’s loving support? You gleefully sacrificed Selina and forced John into a dark path? Well then you’re not getting fun scenes, buddy. Your going to have to go through boring shit and suffer, pal, because that’s what Bruce will have to put up with. You will face the consequences of your choices just as much as the character you chose them for does, and that will be your burden to bear.

But now that’s all said and done, and do you know what that means for the next chapter?? The chapter I’ve been building up to and dreaming about since the beginning of the story???

It’s the mother-fucking WAYNE GALA, guys!!!!! The tropes!!!! The sharp tuxedos!!!! The surprise guests upon surprise guests!!!! THE METAPHORICAL DANCING!!!!!! It’s gonna be so great!!!!!!!!!!!! My whole smile just thinking about it is like one big exclamation mark!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! (So please look forward to it! ❤)

As always, please leave your feedback - if you think I used an excess amount of exclamation points talking about how I feel about writing the gala, you don’t want to know how many heart emoji I feel when I see my A03 notifications… See you lovelies
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!