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**Redacted**

by **Chierei**

**Summary**

The Penguin dies and re-emerges as the Administrator.
Oswald didn’t know why betrayal still hurt. He’d been betrayed by everyone he had ever kept close to him. It started all the way from the first time Fish told him to bend over for a client to Ed, once again, walking away for a woman he loved more than Oswald.

Oswald should have known—or maybe he always knew. Snitches get stitches—stitching together loyalties and falsities and nothing nothing nothing.

At least with Jerome, he knew where he stood. At least he knew that they were using each other, that they only had lies and fake smiles between the two of them. When Jerome left him in the blimp to die, it had been expected. But when Jim left him on that blimp, terrified, for hours on end —Oswald didn’t know he had the capacity to be hurt like that still.

And when Ed, the man he loved more than anything, betrayed him again at the bank, so small a lie compared to a bullet to the stomach or the feeling of ropes around his wrist, Oswald was just… just...

Done.

He was Oswald Cobblepot, a man alone with no family, friends, or lovers. A man who could not be bargained with. A man that cannot be betrayed.

So when he left the Van Dahl mansion, locking the doors and chaining the gates, Oswald Cobblepot disappeared from Gotham for the last time.
Oswald wasn’t sure what made him come to New York City. Maybe it was how the hustle and bustle reminded him of Gotham, how the darkness on the edges made him feel at home. Or maybe it was because this is where people went to disappear.

The Penguin was dead, and the man leftover needed to bury him.

Oswald chose the first hotel he found that drew him, the elegant and classic decor seeming like the best place for a funeral, to shed his skin and start anew. He could feel eyes on him though, as he hobbled up the marble steps and the doorman ushered him in. The bright purple of his tie spoke of ostentatiousness, the quality of the fabric spoke of wealth, and the cut of his hair of individuality—all an incongruous mix outside of Gotham.

“Welcome to the Continental. How may I be of service?” the concierge greeted.

Oswald leaned his weight on his cane, taking in the man before him with his dark skin, a customer-service smile, and rimless spectacles.

“A room, one night,” Oswald said, adding what he hoped was an acceptable smile. One night to bury that last of him and disappear into the unknown.

“Of course, sir. A name for the reservation?”

Oswald Cobblepot was dead, and he had no other name to give. “Matthew Richardson,” he answered, dredging up an old, unused alias from when he was under Fish. Everyone who would or could connect that name to the Penguin was dead.

The concierge smiled, closed mouth and amused as he presumably typed the name into the computer, the clacking of keys loud in the otherwise quiet lobby. “Of course, sir. A credit card, if you please.”

Oswald set a stack of crisp bills on the counter in answer.

The concierge looked at the bills and back up at Oswald. He didn’t make a move to take the money, but his smile never wavered. “Of course, Mr. Richardson,” he said, handing over a keycard. “Room 830. Do enjoy your stay.”
Charon watched as the newest guest limped away, relying heavily on his cane to compensate for the injured leg. Hobbling was an uncommon injury, one that spoke of personal vendetta and not cold professionalism.

He was likely not a player; he gave no coin as credential but the lack of name and offer of cash spoke of requested anonymity that the Continental was happy to provide. He made a note, however, to keep an eye on their new guest. Perhaps he was a hapless businessman who wandered into the wrong place, unaware, or perhaps he was something more.

Oswald had stripped himself of his suit jacket, brocade vest, and purple silk tie. His cane laid on the bed next to his leather gloves, the custom handle smooth as it reflected in the warm yellow light. Oswald looked at himself in the mirror, removed from his normal armor.

He felt like the scared boy he had been when he first walked into Fish’s club, wearing nothing but his best threadbare dress shirt and pants, hair long and messy over his eyes—his mother had to cut it herself as they couldn’t afford the luxury of a barber.

It wasn’t so different than the image in the mirror now. The shirt and slacks were of higher quality, the shoes a shining black, and his hair groomed; but he didn’t feel any different.

Oswald had to make a plan—he was good at that. He had to do something, and part of him screamed to find the underworld, to start the game all over again until he sat on his throne and people groveled at his feet.

But the other part of him, the one that remembered the loneliness, the backstabs and betrayals, and deaths, wanted to just stop. It wanted to find some corner of the world to make his own, to build a wall around him that was so thick that nothing could ever get in. It wanted to take all that pain and bury it deep until he felt nothing at all.

Inventory first, Oswald reminded himself. The first step was always to figure out what resources he had and make a plan after that.
He had a few thousand dollars in cash and a handful of credit cards that were now useless when he didn’t want to be found. He had an impeccably tailored suit, worth a few hundred to the right tailor and a custom cane sword. And himself.

He wasn’t as young as he used to be, but he had always looked younger than his years. A little makeup and the right clothes and he could pass for six or seven years his junior, a full decade if he played his cards right.

The appeal of finding someone to take care of him was there—the want to close his eyes and be whatever someone else wanted and needed, to shut out the constant screams and needs to be in control and give up. He could, he knew he could. Could dress himself up as some young little tart and find him an older man who wanted companionship. Oswald could talk about music and theater, politics and philosophy. He could make drinks, cook dinner, give massages, and suck cock.

It was an option. An option that was more appealing than Oswald wanted to admit. It would be a simple existence, uncomplicated, and he yearned for a touch that wasn’t going to hurt one day.

Mind made up, Oswald loosened the top button of his shirt and gave a smile, fake and practiced and, just a little, empty.

When Oswald emerged from his room for the second time that night, something subtle had changed—nothing that a casual observer would notice but enough to diminish the untouchable air he liked to project. The new suit, not bespoke but well fitting, was tighter and of a modern cut, hugging his thin body more than his usual fair and accenting the taper of his waist. The black dress shirt was crisp against the equally black jacket, and the maroon tie was flush against his throat.

Instead of gloves, his nails were painted a simple glossy shade of black. His makeup was done with a practiced hand: foundation to cover up the freckles, contouring to make his cheekbones stand out, and dashes of blush to give a more youthful glow. His eyes took longer: a subtle smoke over the lids but lined dark to accentuate his green-gray eyes that he paired with mascara, to make his lashes longer, flirtier.

And then the barest layer of sheer pink lipstick to give them a mussed, bruised look, as though he had finished sucking a man off and was waiting for more. His limp couldn’t be hidden but he left
his cane behind. Predators tended to flock to the vulnerable, and he was painting himself up to be the most delicious of prey.

The lounge was busy this time of the evening, a singer crooning on the stage and the lights dim and reflecting off the chandeliers. It reminded him of Mooney’s, of Oswald’s, and just a bit of his Iceberg Lounge. He took in the crowd, a mix of handsome men and women mingling at tables, older gentlemen enjoying a drink in the corners, and crones tittering in groups. He needed to bait one, needed to find the one who’d come to him, or at least one who showed any interest.

He limped over to the bar, perching himself precariously on the edge and crossing his legs as comfortably as he could. At the bartender’s questioning look, he ordered a mediocre glass of red wine that he sipped. He put on airs that he was waiting for someone, the occasional glance at his watch and the entrance, letting his eyes scan the area as though looking for some companion all while he cataloged the area.

A third of the crowd was carrying weapons of some sort—a pitifully low number. Everyone in Gotham carried a weapon, whether it was a second-hand gun they didn’t know how to use or a rusty knife. Oswald had a new butterfly knife tucked against his inner ankle, sandwiched neatly between his skin and new socks.

He let himself look increasingly flustered as the minutes ticked by, checking and rechecking his watch, checking his phone. He knew he had caught the attention of the bartender when she asked if he wished for another glass of wine. He shook his head, looking embarrassed as he stuttered out that he was meeting someone.

He was almost thinking that this night might be a wash and that he’d need to find some other hotel to try the next night when a new drink was set in front of him—a martini with a single olive. The bartender signaled to the side with a nod, gesturing. Oswald’s gaze followed the line to finally meet that of an older gentleman who had been drinking alone at a table. Oswald took in the sharp eyes framed by a distinguished brow bone, with gray lightly streaked through his brown hair and a strong jawline. “Compliments of the gentleman,” she explained.

Oswald gave him a startled, but welcoming smile, and then, as though hesitating and unsure, hopped off his stool and picked up his drink. He did his best to minimize his limp as he sidled closer, gesturing to ask if he could join him.

At the sweep of his arm in welcome, he sat next to the gentlemen on the bench. “Thank you for the drink,” he finally said, underneath lowered lashes and pointedly taking a sip of the cocktail.
Martinis were not his style, but at least it was the good vodka. “You didn’t have to.”

“Oh, how could I let a young man like you be alone this evening. Waiting for someone?”

Oswald tried to look ashamed, blushing, and muttered, “I don’t think they are coming.” He pretended to fiddle with his cuffs, as though unclear what else to say. What he was really doing was observing the other man, noting the high-quality suit, the aged hands littered with small scars, and the gun that was tucked into a shoulder holster.

Oswald always had attracted dangerous men.

“Well, their loss is my gain, I suppose.” A hand was held out before him that Oswald took, keeping his grip limp. “Marcus, at your service,” he said before bringing Oswald’s hand up to kiss his knuckles.

The blush this time was not faked, and he added a giggle before he responded, “Matthew.”

The conversation turned toward idle chatter, Oswald improvising a backstory. The key to the best lies was to include a hint of truth—yes, he was new to this area, business, personal contractor, oh you wouldn’t want to me bore you with details.

Enough of a hook if the man was interested, and he seemed to be. He took Oswald’s little hints and lies, the way Oswald would reach over to gently touch his arms when he laughed, or let their legs brush. One drink became two, and the bar was slowly clearing out. Oswald had moved closer over the hour, letting their thighs brush together and leaning in when the older man set a hand on his knee.

The invitation for a nightcap was not unexpected, and Oswald accepted with a knowing smile and giggle, flighty but welcoming. He took the offered arm as they exited the lounge, and they kept up the chit chat as they made their way up to his room.

Oswald stepped into the dark room, trying to not act like a mob boss who expected to be stabbed in the back at any moment. Instead, he was Matthew, a whore who was nervous for other reasons, who was following a potential client into a hopefully empty hotel room.

The lights flickered on, and Oswald was greeted by an expansive suite that was, thankfully, empty.
A suitcase was closed and zipped in the corner and a thick woolen coat was hanging in the closet, but otherwise looked no different than any other hotel room. As the door shut behind them both, he smiled his closed mouth, secretive, smile. “Not that your presence hasn’t been lovely, Marcus, but I hope you don’t mind if we settle the bill?”

Marcus’ face didn’t change, no sudden realization and disappointment, no anger or indignation, and Oswald relaxed.

“Of course, my dear,” Marcus said. He pulled out his wallet and thumbed through a handful of bills slowly, letting Oswald count the denomination. When he reached two thousand, he caught Oswald’s eye and set the bundle down on the table. “I hope this should cover the night?”

Oswald moved over until they were almost touching, looking up from below his lashes as he took the bills and slid them into his inside jacket pocket. “It does,” he murmured, leaning up and tilting his head to the side, asking for a kiss. “Now what shall we do all night?”

The kiss was gentle, and Oswald managed to not laugh.

After, Oswald found himself tucked against the older man’s bare chest, head pillowed in the crook of his shoulder. For his age, he had been full of wonderful surprises, hiding lean cords of muscle under the suit and an impressive stamina that Oswald took advantage of. He had been sweet at first, a gentle and generous partner, until Oswald moaned loudly at a too rough bite, and he realized that Oswald wanted it rough.

Things got substantially more interesting after that.

Now, Oswald was letting himself enjoy the moment of cuddling, enjoying the simple skin-to-skin contact. He hadn’t been touched like this since Arkham when Jerome would sneak into his cell at night and wrap himself around Oswald like he was a teddy bear.

He let his hand trail up and down the man’s chest, drawing circles in the graying chest hair and enjoying the feeling of his hair being played with.

“Do you mind if I ask you something, my dear?” Marcus said, voice cutting through the comfortable silence.
Oswald had a feeling he knew where this was going. The man had traced each of Oswald’s scars in turn—the bullet wound on his stomach, the knife scar on his shoulder, the small puncture through his hand, and the myriad of other pains in his life. Oswald sighed in response as he nodded, seemingly satisfied and unbothered, snuggling closer as he let his eyes close. No need to act suspicious. The streets were a rough life, and Oswald knew there were millions of ways and reasons to be hurt in the world.

“Your scars,” Marcus said, his voice a low, nonchalant murmur. “You have quite a lot for someone in your line of work.”

There was suspicion there but only the barest. “My leg?” Oswald confirmed, careful to keep his voice steady and his heartbeat even as he felt the nod against his hair. “I tried to leave my first pimp. She didn’t appreciate it and took a bat to my leg. It never healed properly,” he answered.

Not a lie but not the whole truth.

“And this?” Marcus traced a finger over the shiny knot of a scar on his stomach and Oswald could almost feel the sharp pain of the bullet again and the cold shock of water.

“I thought I loved someone. I took a bullet for them, and then they left me for a woman,” he said with a tremor, willing himself not to cry. It was an act, he told himself, even as Marcus laced their fingers together, a parody of comfort.

The list went on as they cataloged each of his scars, a twisted sort of pillow talk.

Mother’s ex-boyfriend.

Cop who got too friendly.

Client who liked to make him bleed.

None of them were lies, really, in the end.
As Oswald hoped, Marcus took a liking to him. Oswald learned what he liked and carefully kept his mouth shut, purposeful ignorance at the array of guns and weapons he’d carry, at the wounds he’d sometimes come in with, the new scars. He’d call Oswald each time he came to the Continental and would pay handsomely for his company for the duration of the stay.

After the first time Oswald had to beg off work, a shift at a bar downtown (after all, Marcus’ company couldn’t keep him housed and fed when his timing was sporadic), Marcus had offered to pay him an allowance, a hold to keep him on retainer. It was a generous sum, and Oswald didn’t care that it was likely earned through trading death. Actually, Oswald might have liked it more to know someone bled out, had the light snuffed out from the eyes, all so Oswald could dress in designer suits and blow a man twice his age.

Oswald was fast learning about the other side of the hotel, catching gleams of familiarity in the clientele and the flash of gold coins (a currency, a calling card?), the doublespeak, the noise complaints, the broken and bloody men and women who would stumble through the front door with nary a second glance. Please, Oswald wasn’t an idiot.

But Matthew, on the other hand, was someone who had lived the hard life and knew better than to fuck up something good. Mathew was submissive, as shy as any sex worker could be, and desperate for affection after years of abuse and neglect. So he kept his mouth shut, pulled the blinders down, and was happy to keep the company of an older man.

It wasn’t a bad life that Oswald had carved out for himself. He found himself a cushy patron and tried to relax into the life of a kept man. It was a boring existence, and Oswald had to keep himself from enacting schemes, on the plans and contingencies he’d dream up while he had drinks at the lounge or had dinner at a white table cloth restaurant, or even when Marcus was fucking him on his hands and knees.

But Oswald just had to remember where his schemes had last left him, had to remind himself of the smirk on Lee’s face and the conviction in Ed’s face as he left, left, left Oswald again.

So Oswald buried that part of him, again and again, embracing the numbness he pulled over him like a shroud. He read up on the politics of the city, new theories of psychology, the arts and music favored by his patron, and used all of his energy to focus on being Matthew Richardson.

The concierge at the Continental knew him now, knew to simply hand him the key to Marcus’ room with a professional smile that was so mild that it had to be fake.
This didn’t change even when Marcus started bringing him to the back, the real lounge of the Continental. *It was full of killers,* Marcus whispered into Oswald’s ear, and he kept his eyes wide and clutched at Marcus’ hand for comfort. *But no worries, you belong to me here. No one will bother you.*

And no one did. Everyone was unfailingly polite, even when Oswald was left there alone, an abandoned lamb with its shepherd called away. The red-headed bartender, Addy, was quick-witted and a tad condescending but still memorized Oswald’s favorite drinks. Or, rather, Matthew’s favorite drink. Oswald had always been a fan of dry reds or a smooth scotch. Matthew, however, liked sweet cocktails served in fancy glasses or, rarely, a vodka martini, extra olives and extra dirty.

Marcus was fond of him, but Oswald knew where the score laid. He’d shoot him in a heartbeat if it was required—there was no loyalty between them, only sex and money, and Oswald knew it. Matthew was the sweet lover, the adoring boy who maybe was actually in love with the man, but Oswald knew what he was getting and giving and was paid in full.

That’s why when someone put a contract out on Marcus and some dumbass, eager to make a name for himself, thought baiting him with Oswald would be a good idea, he was not surprised at the response.

“My apologies, darling, but I’m afraid not,” a familiar drawl said over the phone. A click and the line went dead.

The barely-competent hitman cursed and then paced, one henchman waiting idly by for more direction and half-heartedly trying to placate his boss. Oswald wanted to roll his eyes but instead masked his lockpicking with a loud sob and tremble. The idiots hadn’t searched him, simply convinced he was a harmless, spoiled little boy and missed the switchblade tucked into an ankle holster and the set of lockpicks he kept in the lining of his coat. He didn’t even need his knife in the end.

Oswald heard the soft click of released handcuffs, making sure to keep his head down and cry a little louder to mask the sound. The henchman had wandered too close as he tried to avoid the path of his rampaging boss and as a result had placed his back to Oswald with his gun holstered on his nearest hip. Oswald was embarrassed on their behalf on how easy it was to grab it and lodge a bullet into his skull. Before his would-be kidnapper could even notice, Oswald had placed two bullets in his chest. He looked at the cooling bodies dispassionately, remembering when killing would make him feel alive, excited, aroused. But now, he felt nothing, just more emptiness to fill the deepening hole in his chest.
Oswald stripped the bodies of anything useful, sliding the gun into his waistband and taking whatever cash they had. He found three gold coins in a pocket, and flipping one in the air, took them with him.

He met Charon at his normal post, his never-failing smile fixed firmly in place, as much a uniform as the pressed suit.

Oswald smiled back, cold and dead as he pushed two coins onto the desk, feeling something that could almost be pleasure the slightest widening of eyes. “Dinner reservation for two. And the manager, if you please.”

Charon slid the two coins off the counter and picked up the phone.

“Yes, sir. Mr. Richardson is here to see you.” A pause. “Of course, sir.” He set the phone down into its cradle, the click loud, echoing. “The manager is waiting for you in the lounge, sir.”

Matthew Richardson was an intriguing young man, Winston considered over his drink, as he watched him walk over to his corner table. Charon had been keeping a careful eye on him since his first visit months ago after he had paid with cash and no gold coin. After that first night, though, he seemed to be nothing more than an escort—a high-class escort, perhaps, but an escort nonetheless. Normally, he didn’t allow such business to take place on the Continental’s front end, but the lad had been discreet and Marcus had taken to him. Goodness knows that man had been in a better mood since he had been able to have sex on the regular.

They hadn’t been able to figure out the man’s real name. Matthew Richardson did exist, legally, but with nothing more than the basics of an established identity, it was obviously fabricated. But, this was the Continental. No one cared as long as you followed the rules, and as long as he brought no trouble to their doorstep, he was as welcome as any other guest.

“Eventful evening?” Winston greeted, motioning for Matthew to take a seat. He spied the blood splatter on the white of his collar and nothing but calm collection in the man’s stormy green eyes. These were not the eyes of a man who killed for the first time today; these were the eyes of a man could pull a trigger without even putting down his drink.

“You could say that,” Matthew responded, settling down on the bench and rubbing at his thigh discreetly. A cocktail was set before him, and he nodded to Addy in thanks before he took a drink,
draining half the glass in a single go. “A little miscommunication and a change to their dinner reservations. I’m afraid they didn’t realize what was on the menu.” The smile was amused now, darkly humored, as he plucked the olive out.

The pretense was gone, no little giggles and shy looks, no touching and flirtation and all the signs of a spoiled piece of arm candy. He was good, Winston had to admit. Very good.

“What can I do for you then, my boy?” Winston was curious. Decades of managing the New York City Continental had made him immune to most shocks, but this man had managed to do something no one had done in a very long time. He wasn’t planning to let him walk away.

Matthew pulled a gold coin out of his pocket and set it on the table between them. “I’m afraid I’m going to need an alternative means of employment. While Marcus is a dear, I feel that things are going to get awkward between us very soon.”

Winston raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

He swirled his drink as he leaned back, casual and unafraid. “Addy seems to be in need of a break. How do you feel about adding a second bartender to her shift?”

Chapter End Notes

Hopping on this bandwagon. Will be endgame Nygmobblepot if we get that far.

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Winston liked to keep an eye on all of his staff, but Matthew was a special case. People came into the service of the Continental in many ways, whether they were born or adopted into a family or as a freelancer, stumbling upon a new world. Winston wasn’t sure which category Matthew fell into.

He was clearly an excellent actor, but now that he knew what he was looking for, he could read the barely-there moments of hesitation at times, as though unsure what to do or what it meant and working on smoothing his lack of knowledge without notice. But there was an air around him of confidence as he walked and weaved among killers; his own kills, he had been told, had been neat and clean—a single bullet to the head and two through the heart.

The Continental logged the skills of all their employees. It was a matter of safety to ensure they could handle themselves on the job. They didn’t need to be up to combatant level, of course, but should be far from helpless.

Matthew had shown an exceptional aptitude of as firearms, in both marksmanship and versatility. He had been able to take apart, clean, and rebuild any number of weapons with ease, only stumbling on a few of the more obscure or out-of-date weaponry they kept on hand.

His leg was the obvious problem. Matthew had learned to compensate for his gait when shooting on the move, but his speed suffered greatly. Winston almost mourned the loss of seeing what the man could have done with two healthy limbs.

Hand-to-hand combat skills were as good as anyone could expect. Matthew showed to be handy with any number of weapons and had excellent improvisational skills. However, the injury, along with his lack of physical strength, meant that he had to rely on surprise—a tactic that he was very capable of.

His most dangerous skill, however, was that mind of his. Winston stroked his chin as he watched the man as he poured a glass of whiskey. He was a real smooth talker, Winston quickly realized. He had this ability to make you believe almost anything, this inherent feeling that he could be trusted with your deepest secrets, that he was on your side, that you were the one and only.

People dropped their guard around him. Between his small stature, vulnerable body language, and apparent physical disability, even the most experienced assassins had a soft spot for him—a very, very small soft spot, but one nonetheless.

It was great for business, at least. No business was to be conducted on the premises, but Winston liked to keep one ear on the outside world, liked to keep track of the who and what and where. All of his staff was good at reading between the lines and seeking out details, but Matthew was the best, extracting information like it was second nature. In the months since he came under his employ, Winston had been given more detail about the lives of their guests than he’d ever gained from a single source.

The lad was smart enough. He knew not to give up all his cards, but he always fed Winston enough information to be assured of his loyalty, a careful calculation, no doubt. He had no real desire to move up, Matthew confessed, but he couldn’t resist the tasty treats he stumbled upon.
In return, Winston turned a blind eye to his more...personal past times. He usually discouraged his staff from getting involved with their guests—romantic entanglements made for messy, messy cleanup—but Matthew was a valuable asset. So if he ignored how many times he’d see the younger man follow a guest up to their room or stumble back down to his shift without having actually left the premises, well.

There were no hard feelings between him and Marcus, as he expected; they both agreed that their partnership should come to its natural end. It was a little awkward to keep fucking when one of them left the other for dead, after all, at least by non-Gotham standards. They flirted amicably when Marcus stayed at the Continental, and the older man always left a hefty tip.

After years of running working in a club and then running his own, bartending and waiting tables was something he could have done in his sleep. So he spent his idle hours memorizing all of the clients—their names, faces, and allegiances. It was expected of him now, as part of the Continental staff, and the wealth of information that flowed down was astonishing.

The Continental was more powerful than he had ever imagined, beyond a chain of hotels that offered sanctuary and services but an entire network and community, with rules and governances and penalties. It made him realize how isolated Gotham had been from the rest of the world, the dark smudge of civilization that even the darkest dare not tread. It made him feel safe, to be wrapped up in the protective shield of the entity and knowing that he lived even where they had not risked to go.

Oh, and the services were something to be dreamed of: state-of-the-art fabrics that blocked bullets and guns of the highest quality in shapes and sizes that gleamed in the light.

And the clientele. Oswald had known from early on with Marcus that the Continental had the most delightful of patrons, men who wore danger on their sleeves and held bloodlust in their hands. Oswald enjoyed baiting these men, loved the edge of danger they could elicit with words or touch, the promise of pain.

Addy, who Oswald discovered was quite sweet and deadly as she seemed, understood the allure.

“Careful, Matty,” she said in a stage-whisper, bumping her hips against his. Oswald had gotten used to her obsession with physical contact quickly and didn’t make a face. “You are playing with fire with that one.”

Oswald smiled, sharp and cutting. “But, you know how I love the burn.”

“Baba Yaga might even be too much for you to handle, sweetie,” Addy said, tone still playful but an edge of seriousness in her eyes.

Oswald’s eyebrows went up, not able to keep his eyes from following the retreating figure, tall and lean and oh-so his type. “So that’s the infamous Boogeyman,” he said, intrigued. “I thought he’d be a bit more...intimidating.”

Addy snorted, bumping him over again with her hips to reach a clean lowball glass. “You don’t want to see him when he’s working. I heard he once killed three guys with a pencil,” she said, low as though sharing a secret.
The more she spoke, the more Oswald was interested. “Three men, you say?” he said, leaning his elbows on the bar top and resting his head in one hand, considering. The sheer amount of speed and precision for that was mind-blowing, his mind whirling with scenarios. “Through the eyes, I presume?”

Addy huffed as she held up the shaker with both hands, the condensation dripping down her fingers as she shook the drink, ice clicking inside. “You are hopeless.”

Oswald grinned in response, watching as she strained the drink before topping it off with the cherry and lime for her.

“That Yamazaki 18,” she said as she started to walk out from the bar to deliver the drink, carefully balanced on a tray.

“Hm?”

She turned her head back, the red curls of her hair shining in the faint light like a beacon. “His favorite drink. The Yamazaki 18-year-old single malt whiskey.” She blew him a kiss. “Happy hunting.”

Oswald considered her turned back before turning to watch the infamous John Wick, Baba Yaga, the legend himself. Oswald knew he shouldn’t play this game again, but he always couldn’t resist the most dangerous, powerful men.


Perhaps, against his better judgment, John Wick would be added to that list.

John Wick had a weakness for helpless things. Oswald discovered that pretty quickly when he half-faked a stumble near him. The man was up in an instant, a steadying hand on Oswald’s waist and elbow, so quick that Oswald couldn’t follow.

“Spasiba, Mr. Wick,” Oswald murmured as he looked up at the much taller than with embarrassed expression even as he shamelessly leaned into the hold as he removed all weight from his bad leg.

“You speak?” the man asked, the Russian rolling off his tongue easily as he helped Oswald take a seat.

Oswald let out a sigh of relief this time, genuine. His leg had been hurting most of the shift, the turn toward cold weather making the bones ache.

“Oh, just a little,” Oswald admitted, swapping back to English. “I was taught some when I was younger, and I picked up a little more along the way.” The Russian is mother had taught him was mostly insults, but Oswald had made a point to scrape the basics of the language down so he could eavesdrop on Nikolei. It was amazing the things people said when they thought they weren’t being understood.

“Can I get you anything? Ice?” Mr. Wick offered, dropping to one knee to look Oswald in the eye. Even then, Oswald was aware of their size difference. It was jarring how sweet the man was acting despite his reputation. But, then again, most people gave the man a wide berth—with the exception
of the staff and a small handful of other guests—so maybe it wasn’t that surprising.

“Oh, no, Mr. Wick. Thank you for your kind offer, but I would not dream of inconveniencing you,” Oswald said, all innocence and batting lashes. The man was popular with the ladies, Addy had told him, but he rarely accepted any offers. Whether Mr. Wick was also attracted to men was still unknown, so he kept his tone closer to friendly and professional rather than flirty. He tried to get up, allowing himself to stumble so he could catch himself on Mr. Wick’s shoulder.

He felt the strong arms push him back into the seat, pulling another chair close to prop up his leg. Before Oswald noticed, Addy has brought over an ice pack and was handing it to Mr. Wick, shooting Oswald a wink over his head.

“Matthew, right?” Mr. Wick asked as he positioned the ice over the ankle, hands gently probing the muscles.

Oswald winced as he nodded, a mix of relief and pain at the sudden temperature change. “Thank you, Mr. Wick.”

“John, please,” he said, offering an uncomfortable smile, hair dripping into his eyes as he looked at him from under his bangs.

It reminded Oswald of Ed for just a split second, that edge of unsure but so charming, and he squashed that thought violently. He focused on the pain in his leg as a distraction, his nails digging into the soft palm of his hand. He covered up the mental misstep by placing his hand over John’s where it was set on the ice pack. “Thank you, John,” he said, this time with a coy smile and his voice a purr, knowing it wasn’t up to his usual standard but desperate to not think. He let his hand linger for longer than appropriate, noting that the assassin didn’t pull away, before returning his hand to his own lap.

“So, teach me how to threaten people in Russian. I’m dying to learn how to tell someone that I’m going to eviscerate them in another language.”

The smile this time was still awkward but real, and Oswald steadily ignored the pain in his chest.

John Wick ended up being a friend—or as much of a friend as anyone in this life could have. He was a regular at the Continental, often shadowing Viggo, but would often take time to chat with whoever was tending the bar. He would bring Oswald new and interesting phrases each time and would never laugh at the fumbling and learning Russian. After Oswald finished his shift, it wasn’t uncommon for him to sit next to the hitman, sometimes joined by others, speaking in stuttering Russian that was rapidly growing fluent. He still had an atrocious accent, he was told, but better than most. Matthew made sure to preen at the compliment.

Oswald kept up his flirty facade, though, more because it was expected of him now than ardent interest. Matthew “Matty” Richardson was a shameless flirt, everyone knew it, just the edge past too friendly. His preference leaned toward older men, blonde with thick muscles and tattoos, but everyone knew he was good for conversation and, for those he favored, could give valuable insight to any problem.

They also were quick to discover that the fastest way to earn his favor was in secrets, and if you were lucky, you might get a secret in return.
(Everyone also knew that he could be...convinced into a private rendezvous with enough attention and flattery.)

The months faded past, and Oswald became less of a newcomer and more of a standard fixture at the Continental. He could easily be found behind the bar, organizing the entertainment, delivering drinks, or chatting with his legs crossed and hands in his lap as he gave his rapt attention to someone.

His reputation for dealing in information grew. Slowly, at first, but before long, guests would come to him for the chance he might spot them information. Sweet talking might garner a crumb; a coin, maybe a taste; but for a real bite, everyone knew you needed to give as much as you took.

Somewhere along the line, he stopped being the bartender and became the Bartender.

Eventually, the Continental had to move him. The unspoken corner of the bar that became his was relocated to a new, second standalone bar tucked into a dim corner. A shimmery crimson shroud blanketed the area, protecting it from prying eyes that loved to read lips or determined eavesdroppers.

No one paid attention when someone would slip away behind the curtain. Professional courtesy, in part, but also because secrets weren’t the only reason someone would talk to the Bartender.

People tended to like him. Even without the business exchange, there was a sly humor to him and a subtle submission that made them feel special. Sometimes, someone would go and talk about the mundane—history or interior design or horticulture, and he’d make a drink and, with those stormy green eyes pinned on them, it was enough.

He was never truly off the clock, but when he slipped out for his shift, dimming the chandelier lights of his corner to curl up on the couch, he’d always find company. It wasn’t uncommon to see him in hushed conversation or sharing a laugh, hand on a shoulder or knee, leaning in.

Sometimes he’d follow them up to their room, but more and more, it became for non-carnal reasons. Some women wanted him to brush their hair, twine them into elaborate braids with his quick hands as they talked; some wanted to do the same to him. Some men wanted to feed him food from their own hand, or count his ever-growing number of tattoos, or sometimes simply hold him to sleep.

There was a vulnerability in him that people rarely saw in this business, something that made people either want to coddle him or hurt him, and the Bartender was amiable to both.

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Even those had known him as Matthew called him the Bartender when he was at work, and slowly, his name faded into the background, another mystery of the Continental to the new generation. He still mixed drinks and flirted with the guests, but fewer and fewer were alive to remember him as the coy thing on Marcus’ arm or the newest staff member to work the lounge.

His reputation became fierce as the years rolled by, a threat on its own. No one lied to the Bartender; he had a way of sniffing out liars and false information like a bloodhound. The first infraction warranted a warning; faulty goods were bad for business, he’d say, and no one realized how terrifying the small man could be. Silver-green eyes that glowed almost supernaturally like the dead, and his smiles were dark smirks, tinged with boyish charm.

The Bartender would cut until there were enough spilled secrets the compensate. He was patient,
scalpels ghosting over the skin, a touch of lips to your forehead.

He was backed by the High Table, and he always won.

John Wick pushed back the curtain, ducking inside the canopy to greet the smaller man. “Good evening, Matthew.”

“Welcome back, John,” Oswald—Matthews, the Bartender—greeted warmly, looking up from where he had been drying a glass with a soft cloth. “Your usual?”

“I’m thinking something a little sour, tonight, or sweet,” John answered, sitting on the high stool. “What do you recommend?”

Oswald took a moment to really take in the man before him. There was a scratch on the side of his forehead, starting to scab but still bright red and sore. He was favoring his right side, almost imperceptibly, and Oswald would bet on bruised ribs. John Wick may be a legend, but he wasn’t untouchable, though it had been a while since Oswald had seen him in such shape. “Rough day at the office?”

“You could say that.”

Oswald tapped a finger on his lip, cocking his head to the side. His finger caught on one of his newer piercings, a set of snake bites that hooked rings over his lips. He liked how they looked and how they felt when he rolled them in his mouth. He had shaved one side of his hair in an undercut not long ago, gelling his hair up and back in a subtle pompadour. He was considering a set of dermals studs along the shaved side, to liven things up a bit.

“Want to talk about it?” Oswald offered as he set a clean shaker on the countertop. He sliced up a lime without looking, keeping his eyes up at John as he worked. John liked to look people in the eye, and Oswald liked to remember the little details.

John shook his head and set his arms on the bar, elbows on the edge and his long forearms resting as he slumped in his seat. “Just another day.”

Oswald made a noncommittal noise as he finished the drink, cracking the egg with one hand as the other poured. He gave John a commiserating smile as he shook the mixture, straining the pale lemon-lime colored mixture into the glass of ice. He set a napkin down before presenting it to John with a flourish. “Pisco sour.”

John took a sip, and Oswald watched him, enjoying the way his muscles moved as he swallowed. He leaned his weight onto his elbows, propping his head up with his hand lightly, looking even younger than his years. “Can I get you anything else, John?”

The hitman slid over two gold coins, setting them squarely halfway between the two of them.

“Two? For moi?” Oswald said, acting flattered as he slid them into the pocket of his waistcoat. “And from John Wick. You must want something quite badly.”

“Heeyoung Bai,” John offered. “Anything on her schedule, her habits, or the company she keeps.”
Oswald clicked his tongue, impressed, lacing his fingers to shift his chin to rest on the bridge of his hands. “The Korean arms dealer? Always aiming high, John.” Oswald skimmed the information that he knew about the woman in his head, sorting through what may be relevant. “How soon do you need the information?”

“Twelve hours,” John said, taking another sip of the drink.

“Generous of you,” Oswald replied. “Come back during dinner, and I’ll see what I have for you.” Oswald was already slotting information in place; informants that worked for him and those he had to leverage, who to squeeze for what information, and his own leads on Ms. Bai’s favorite places in the city.

A real John Wick smile this time, and time had taught Oswald not to swoon. “Thank you, Matthew.”

“Anything for you, John,” Oswald said, grabbing a second glass and pouring himself a finger of Becherovka. “Now, what phrase have you brought me this time?”

This time, when John left, he leaned over the bar to press a kiss on Oswald’s cheek. Oswald didn’t know what that meant, but he squashed the flutter in his stomach with a vengeance.

He waited until John had exited the canopy before he lowered the lights. Anyone who needed him badly enough would know how to find him.

Oswald slipped out the staff entrance of the Continental, stepping into the waiting cab. He could walk, but even with his partially corrected leg, it would be an uncomfortable slog.

The Continental—meaning the High Table—has mentioned that the could fix his leg, or at least try to, at the end of year three. They knew his potential, his gift, saw the strings he could pull, and he had amassed enough of a stash that the surgery would barely put in a dent in his treasure hoard.

Oswald hadn’t ever considered getting his leg fixed. After being tossed in a river hours after it broke and then walking miles on it, he assumed it was a lost cause. Hugo Strange had once mentioned it that he could conceivably assist with the crippled limb, but Oswald knew better than the trust the good doctor.

Here, though, Matthew had nothing to lose and agreed. The Doctor had to re-break his leg, pinning it back together with metal nails and wire and carving out the harsh, stiff scar tissue. Oswald spent a week on heavy painkillers before he hobbled back into the lounge. He had gotten more information in the following two weeks than the entire month prior and called the extra pain a worthwhile cost.

A year and countless hours of physical therapy later, Oswald still had to wear a brace, but he could walk easier now. He hadn’t used a cane since his first day at the Continental, but he no longer felt the need to dig it out when the aches got too much. Chronic pain was still there but dull compared to what he was used to living with for years. The limp would never disappear, but it was a limp now—not the accursed waddle that he hated.

Oswald exited at Tompkins Square Park, barely looking as he dropped a gold coin wrapped in a thin sheet of rice paper into the cup of a beggar as he passed before stepping into the quaint bookstore three stores down.

He exited a half-hour later, a thick paperback tucked against his chest, the receipt tucked between the pages. He hummed to himself as he settled himself down on a bench to read, squinting at the
text and wondering if he needed to get reading glasses soon.

Twenty minutes into his book, a young lady who had been finishing a cup of coffee on the same bench left her empty cup and sleeve next to him.

Ten minutes later, he slipped his book shut and headed back to the street, dropping another coin, this time wrapped in a flimsy receipt, into a beggar's hat and hailed another cab.

Three hours, two more similar drops, and a personal visit to the daughter of the owner of a small cell phone repair shop, and Oswald had everything he needed.

The information was good, as it always was, and Ms. Bai died outside a boutique tea shop in Manhattan after an unscheduled stop for her sister’s favorite tea.

When John Wick returned that night, Oswald was talking with another guest but caught the lumbering shadow hovering outside his gauzy shelter.

“Tulips. She absolutely hates tulips,” he gave the poor man. He had offered one coin, and coming from him, it was not enough for everything he wanted. Oswald’s little hint was enough to go on if he was smart and creative, and maybe this man would surprise him. “Now, Mr. Moore, please enjoy the rest of your evening at the main bar. I’m afraid I have another guest waiting.”

The man, too flabbergasted at the cryptic information, obeyed, still mouthing the word ‘tulips’ to himself. Barely a second later, John stepped through the curtain and raised an eyebrow at the retreating figure. “New?” he asked, opting to stand and lean against the bar instead of sit.

Oswald was already wiping down the counter by that point and shared a look with him. “New,” he confirmed. He turned to grab a Glencairn from behind him, already reaching for the top shelf even as he asked, “The usual?”

“Yes, please,” he heard from behind him.

Oswald pushed the glass of bourbon to him before pouring himself a tall glass of iced tea. “Back so soon, Mr. Wick?” he teased. “I thought Viggo would have called you home already. It has been a whole,” Oswald paused as he pretended to count, “eight hours since your contract was completed?”

“I thought I deserved a little break after that one,” John said, looking at Oswald, intense and focused. John was a man of singular focus, a man who would solve something once he puts his mind to it, and that look sent shivers down Oswald’s spine.

“And you are spending that break with little ol’ me?” Oswald said, covering up with his habitual flirting. The years had made it seem natural, down to the pitch of his voice and the way his eyes would dart down and back up. All tools that Oswald had honed to perfection over the years.

“How did you do it?”
The question came out of nowhere, and Oswald had to catch himself. “Do what?”

“Know that she’d be there at that shop. Her schedule is always iron tight, her guards vetted and loyal to the death, and decoys scattered to throw people off.”

Ms. Bai had been a paranoid one and for good measure. The bounty on her head was high after her last stunt.

“Do you really want to know?”

“Yes.”

Oswald continues to smile, playing with the straw of his drink. “I learn what people love, and then I use it against them. Now, Ms. Bai loved her sister very much, and the younger Ms. Bai requested the very rare Vintage Narcissus, stocked by only two stores in the city. Sadly, the first where Ms. Bai originally acquired the bag, recently sold out. So when her gift was ruined by a rather clumsy and unknown maid last night, she only had one place to go.”

“And I’m assuming you paid off the help and bought the entire stock?” John asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Well,” Oswald said, sly, “You did offer two coins, Mr. Wick.”

“That’s incredible.”

Oswald blinked, startled. “Excuse me?”

“Do you not get complimented often?” John snorted, taking another sip of his drink and leaning forward to rest his elbow on the counter. “I said, you’re incredible.”

The blush was real, hot and flashing. He got compliments regularly, but none had this amazed tone in it, heartfelt and genuine. It was like when—

Oswald cut off the thought when he felt a touch on his arm. When had John gotten so close to him?

“So, Matthew,” John said, breath next to his ear and hand trailing down his cheek. “How about a different phrase tonight?” He whispered something in Oswald’s ear, dirty and full of promise.

The kiss was expected, the hot slide of tongues and the burn of his beard against Oswald’s face. Oswald wrapped a hand around the taller man’s tie, tugging him down, and John nipped at one of his lip piercings in retaliation.

When they parted, Oswald looked into John’s eyes and saw fire and passion, bright and hot and everything Oswald has been lacking. So he kissed him again and whispered against his lips, “Davai.”

Being with John was a whirlwind. Addy had warned him, years ago, that being near John Wick was playing with fire, and she had been right. He was the storm that came through as a rain of bullets, the feeling of a knife sliding over a throat, and the calm aftermath all at once.

After the first time, they fucked almost every time John was in town.
(After the third time, Winston had pulled Oswald aside and told him that he didn’t care who he was fucking, but he’d better get someone to be the Bartender if he was going to be gone so often.

So Oswald chose Addy. She had proven herself more than capable over the years and a trustworthy follower of the High Table. He trained her in interrogation, manipulation, memory—all things that she already had skills in but just how to be better.)

John was a contradiction; sometimes, he’d be rough, fast like their lifestyle was. And other times, he’d be sweet and treat him like a treasure to be held. Sometimes he’d pin him against the door, holding him up when he fucked him, and sometimes he’d let Oswald push him into a chair and ride him.

But they became friends, true friends, and maybe the wound scabbed over enough that the thought didn’t send Oswald shaking in either rage or pain.

“Do you think we can love someone? I mean, really, truly love someone?” John asked one night, Oswald cradled into his chest while one hand trailed up and down his inked back, tracing the lines of wings.

The question startled Oswald, and he tipped his head up to look at John. “John,” he started before being cut off.

“In general, I mean, not...this,” John said, kissing his forehead, the words belaying his action. But Oswald understood what he meant, sex for them was a comfort, a bond of friendship that ran a little bit deeper than most, but not more.

“I don’t know,” Oswald answered, honestly. “I would like to think so.”

Silence, lingering, broken only by the sound of breathing.

“My mother...she used to say that life only gives you one true love, and when you find it, run to it.” The words felt odd leaving his lips after all these years, but he thought that John needed to hear them. He never speaks of his family, ever, and the lightest press on the topic was the surefire way for the conversation to end.

“Run to it,” John repeated, rolling the words in his tongue.

Oswald closed his eyes and focused on the beating of John’s heart.

Six months later, he was not surprised when John showed up at his door, a Marker offered in his hand and the name ‘Helen’ on his lips.

Oswald accepted the Marker and added another name to his list.

Chapter End Notes

Spasiba: Thank you
Davai: Let's go, come on, sure; in this context, can also be slang for 'let's fuck'

Time skips! If it wasn't clear, this spans 5-6 years after Oswald has left Gotham.

(Also, should I tag for Oswald/John? It's brief, and this isn't their story in the end. Thoughts and opinions?)

Comments are the soul of my creativity! Please spare a moment if you enjoyed. <3
The first tattoo had been impulsive.

He had gotten low, in the space between—where there was nothing, only Oswald and his own thoughts and loathing—the worst demon he had. Distractions were ineffective, his mind in turmoil as he thought about Mother, Ed, Jim, JeromeGabeZaszBarbaraFatherFish. His mind spiraled, thinking back to every interaction he had, how much of a fool he was, how no one cared, no respect, no love, no nothing, just pain.

He was always just been the freak holding Ms. Mooney’s umbrella, the Penguin, the bird who can’t fly but flaps his wings for scraps.

He passed by a tattoo parlor and saw the sketch out of the corner of his eye.

He left hours later, his back and shoulder blades aching where the needle had outlined the start of feathers, spread out and dripping down into his skin.

Penguins can’t fly, but Oswald could give himself a different kind of wings.

It becomes a thing, the tattoos. Every time something was overwhelming, when the ache in his chest threatened to want to burst, when Oswald wanted to take a knife and cut out his own heart to make it stop, he’d get a tattoo. It was like taking the pain in his head and putting it on his skin, a catharsis, an addiction.

The ink slowly starts to unfurl—a shield with an eagle and semper fi written in looping letters on the side of his ribs; a fishbone on his left wrist, where he had once offered to open a vein; a burst of lilies on his ankle, half sprightly and half wilting with needle and thread on the opposite ankle.

Oswald aches and adds a pair of sirens on his calf, one with wings spread wide and the other with a curved fishtail, and then a skeleton’s left hand, disembodied, curled on his thigh holding a stained scrap of fabric.
A falcon comes next, its wings open in flight next to a broken crown, and he pairs it with a lock and key on his forearm, intertwined with ribbons and thorns and flowers.

They are joined by a curl of vines on his hand, hiding lightning bugs, spilled coins, and melting ice in the leaves as it drips over his knuckles; and then a caduceus, its twin snakes curled around the staff behind his knee, soft and fleshy and it hurt it hurt it hurts.

He doesn’t watch as a fountain pen takes shape on his pointer finger, ink dripping or when he adds a set of four thick tallies on his forearm, crossed angrily by a fifth right below the soft joint of his elbow.

(He doesn’t think or feel anything when he adds E-146 on his left collarbone, stenciled thick and black, like a burn.)

He doesn’t stop, just lets the cuts and needles and blood give him his relief.

A broken bottle of wine over a bullet wound.

A line of music note over a scar, wrapped around a broken fortune cookie, crumbs spilling.

A broken puzzle on his foot, pieces scattered and burnt and deformed by his scars.

A question mark, hidden, hidden in the wings over his back where no one could see, where Oswald can pretend it doesn’t exist.

…A riddle over his heart

And then there are the wings.

He covers himself with them, scattered birds along his arms, speckled and intertwined between everything else. Dottings of sparrows and eagles, jays and mockingbirds fill the space in between, stringing everything together in their nest.
Oswald emptied himself of his pain and memories and wrote them on his skin instead, a simple story that Oswald could read each day until he felt nothing.

And nowhere, nowhere, on his body is there a single fucking umbrella.

The tattoos erased Oswald Cobblepot, and the piercings wrote Matthew Richardson.

It started innocuously--earrings at first, just a pair of black studs that he liked, the shimmer of a rainbow as they caught in the sunlight as he waited for his tattoo artist to finish. They were quickly joined by a second pair of lobe piercings because he had never stopped at just one of anything. Then his helix, dotted in a neat row of hoops down the edge of his ear, followed by a vertical industrial, the pain of the thick steel bars making him hiss.

When he ran out of space on his ears, cut and punched and swollen red, he turned to the rest of him. A small line of silver hoops on his browbone that, if he was feeling playful, he swapped out with gunmetal and garnets.

The snake bites came next, the feeling of metal in his mouth foreign for the first few weeks before he grew accustomed. The feeling and look of them gave him a savage appearance and made him feel bolder, more alive, more daring.

The twin tongue piercings came next, half-drunk and careless. The sharp pain of the needle through his tongue aching and feeling so so good.

He started smoking again, a habit he had quit after his mother had thrown a fit after catching him on the fire escape with a half-empty pack of cheap menthols. He had only started smoking after her death, sporadically and when under stress, but Ed had adamantly stomped out that habit during his first few weeks as his Chief of Staff.

Now, though, Oswald smoked, enjoying the sharp sour tang of nicotine in his tongue and the raw burn of smoke down his throat. Sometimes he wanted something harder, wanted to feel the fire in his veins, and those are the days he heads to his favorite parlor and adds another hole in his body.
And he changes and inks and cuts into himself. Over and over, emptying everything until his outsides matched the mess of his insides or his insides were too blank to care.

Or until he could look in the mirror and not see the Penguin staring back.

Chapter End Notes

A little interlude that didn't suit a full chapter, but is vital to Oswald's transformation. For a full rundown of the meaning of each tattoo (though some are obvious), can be found at my tumblr.

Thank you to everyone and their kind comments! It keeps my motivation up more than you can believe. <3
Chapter 3

Life continued even without John Wick. Oswald attended the wedding, and he had never seen John look so happy. Helen is a delight—she wouldn’t be alive if she hadn’t been.

Addy took to her new role like a duck to water, her familiarity with the area and clientele working in her favor. With her taking over much of the front end of the bar, Oswald was free to expand his network.

Information had always been his specialty. One never knew when knowing someone’s favorite stylist was or how often they took their pet to the groomers would be useful. But information required legwork, and Oswald excelled at delegating.

The homeless had always been an easy resource, and Oswald had eyes and ears scattered across the city. The word traveled fast, and they knew that if something of interest crossed their path, someone would pay handsomely.

The rejected, abandoned, and freaks of the city were his agents. He courted the attention of the street kids with kind words and food, warm beds and safety, a place where they didn’t have to watch their backs every second, and they repaid it tenfold in random bits of knowledge.

Oswald recruited the more intelligent of the bunch, those who had enough ambition to do well but not enough to get arrogant. He fed and clothed them, trained them, and then sent them back out into the city with dirty clothes and ripped tarps. The information would funnel to his agents who would then pass it along to Oswald, who would dismember it, cross-check it, and file it away in his mind.

It became too big of an operation, eventually, for Oswald to keep memorized, too much of a liability to be the only one to hold everything.

So he started notebooks, thin-lined composition books with priceless secrets scrolled in small, fine print. Notebooks turned into folders, pictures and blackmail and handwritten scribbles on napkins. They were organized in a way that almost no one understood, squirreled away in caches scattered across the city, the state, perhaps the world. Nothing digital existed, everything hand-packed in innocuous boxes with handwritten labels.
At some point, every Continental hired their own Bartender—hand-selected by Oswald for memory and manipulation, trained in body language and acting and actual bartending—and Oswald became the Broker.

He likes the sound of that much better.

The Broker was approached by the High Table, formally, while he was enjoying a cup of tea at a cafe owned by an associate. A notebook sat opened in his lap and the scratch of a fountain pen was all the noise he made.

A thick medallion the size of a palm slid across the table as the stranger takes a seat, the ridges raised to show off its elaborate pattern with a stylized $M$ gracing the center. The Broker recognized it immediately but took his time finishing his sentence before he capped his pen and closed the book.

“Mentor,” he greeted, with a respectful nod of his head. “How may I be of service?”

“Mr. Richardson,” the Mentor greeted with her own nod, her long black hair only barely streaked with gray and her face carefully impassive. Despite knowing that the woman was well into her fifties, she still had the smooth skin of a woman twenty years her junior and sharp, intelligent eyes to match.

“What can I do for the High Table today?” the Broker said, curious. He had only spoken with a member of the High Table twice before. The first was when he started trading secrets—more for fun than any goal. He had been left with two conditions and their formal backing of his enterprise.

The second was somewhat more recent—when they wanted to expand his system internationally. He had been given whatever resources he wished and six months.

And barely eighteen months later, here they were again. He wondered if this was going to become a habit.

The Mentor kept her hands in her lap, watching the other with careful eyes. “There has been an opportunity that has arisen that you have been deemed qualified for.”
The Broker waited. It was a dangerous game, but he had little that thrilled him these days.

This Mentor wasn't as patient as her predecessor, and a flicker of annoyance flashed between her brows. “The High Table has made its decision, and the seat of the Administrator is yours,” she said.

Now that was a surprise. “Excuse me if I am wrong,” he said, taking a sip of his tea, “but I was under the impression that seats were inherited.” It was a huge fanfare for the entire underworld when anyone was Coronated—twelve seats at the most powerful entity there was.

“Three seats are selected by nomination and approval. The Administrator is one of them,” the Mentor answered, sounding bored.

“And if I refuse?” he asked, just to be contrary.

“The will of the High Table is absolute,” she said, voice flat. A thick piece of cardstock was set in front of him, cream with dark red ink. “You have one week to settle your affairs to handover to your replacement.”

And then she left, as quick and silent as she came.

The Broker set down his cup of tea. He picked up the cardstock, flipping it open to read—date, time, address, and nothing more.

What an interesting turn of events, he mused, folding the invitation back up and slipping it into the pages of his notebook.

Very interesting.

His Coronation was small, private, with no one but the twelve existing members of the High Table and The Broker—or Matthew, he presumed, as the Broker was in an apartment in Midtown
surrounded by boxes and likely trying to make sense of it all.

Except it wasn’t twelve, but fourteen who stood before him. The three Administrators were flanked by the rest of the High Table, three impassive faces dressed in identical black slacks, white dress shirts, and black vest—identical ties to identical posture. They varied in age and ethnicity, height and stature, but were eerily similar in all else.

The center Administrator was of advancing age, light blond hair peppered with white and a face lined with heavy wrinkles along his jaws and his forehead. There were ink stains on his right hand, a red smudge on his left forearm, and a single earring dangling from one ear, red gems with a silver cross. His exposed arms showed off his full sleeves of tattoos, the black ink swirling and dipping into dozens of images.

There was no fanfare, no celebration, just Matthew before the congregation, a lamb waiting for slaughter or salvation.

The Administrator took a step forward. He would have been shoulder to shoulder with Matthew if he took another step, but instead, he raised his right hand out, a flat disk in his hand with intricate markings that surrounded a stylized A. Matthew set his right hand on top, sandwiching the medallion between them.

“"I have served," the Administrator said as he stared into the smoky eyes of his replacement.

“I will be of service,” Matthew intoned.

They flipped their hands over to transfer the coin over to its new master. Their arms dropped, and each took two steps forward, shoulders brushing for a moment before they passed another.

Eleven members of the High Table and his predecessor slipped off into the shadows to leave three Administrators alone in the room, equidistant in a perfect triangle.

A beat, and then as a unit, they raised their arms, placing their hands into the others, identical coins in their right hands.

“We are one,” they said together. “One is we.”
Arms dropped to their sides.

One of them lit a cigarette, taking a long drag before passing it to the right. “Shall we get down to business, then?”

Another Administrator took a lungful of smoke with relish. “Yes,” he said, keeping his face expressionless. “Let’s.”

He was One of Three, the only seat of the High Table split due to need. In the eyes of the High Table and the rest of the world, the Administrator was one person. To be One of Three meant to empty himself of the individual when working, to be of the same mind as his counterparts, to make the same decisions as they all would, to make the decisions as the High Table would.

There always had to be an Administrator on duty, and even the Continental could not rid of the human need for sleep.

The Administrator had the power over all records, all messages, all contracts, every written record of the Continental.

He needed to be able to read a contract in a minute and decide: approve, reject, review. Close contracts, open contracts, determine what is allowed when taking into account the who, when, and why. The Administrator needed to be able to predict the trajectory of each contract and decide whether the repercussions were worth it.

Only the High Table could overrule him, and he was under the highest scrutiny, powerful but kept on a short leash with a shotgun barrel at the end.

The Administrator settled himself quickly, got used to the sound of fast typing keys, the sound of switchboards, and fast-pace of approvals and denials. The days blurred together in a bizarre form of high-stakes monotony, shifting day in and day out to an ever-changing crowd of pink Receptionists and Secretaries, Operators and Librarians.

Until the contract for John Wick stumbled over his desk.
A second, maybe two, of hesitation did not go unnoticed by the waiting Receptionist. A flicker of eye contact, and then he stamped the contract, the bright red brand sharp as a knife over the paper. “Approved,” he said, handing the file back.

His heart pounded, and he took a long drag of his cigarette to hide the subtle shake of his hands. He took a breath and closed his eyes. One. Two. Three.

When he opened them, it was as if nothing had happened. Another file, another stamp.

When John Wick’s name came under his scrutiny for the second time in a week, he took longer than a moment. John’s eyes were staring out of him, black and white and clipped to his profile. He wanted to reject it, for just a second, before he pushed the irrational—emotional—urge away. “John Wick, Excommunicado. Approved,” he said, flat, and handed the file back.

He can’t help checking the leaderboard at the start of each shift, waiting for the day the name “John Wick” would be erased from the top. Instead, the bounty climbs, higher and higher to the point of obscenity, even for the Administration.

He spent his days off in his apartment, chain-smoking at his window. When his phone rang, he let it ring. Once. Twice. Three times, and then he answered.

“Hello,” he greeted, even as he brings the cigarette up to take another drag.

“Matthew,” the voice said, and the Administrator kept his breathing even.

“I’m afraid you have the wrong number,” he answered with an edge of annoyance.

“I need you; I need to find the Elder,” someone—no one—said.

“I’m afraid you have the wrong number,” he repeated, calm. “There is no Rick Blaine here.” And then he hung up, crushed the end of the cigarette against the window sill, and waited.
The Administrator approved the deconsecration.

The Administrator approved the reconsecration.

The bounty climbed, growing larger still with each day that John Wick lived. Soon, the deaths started coming in, and the High Table raged as its members were picked off, one by one.


What are you doing, he thought as he approved another raise in the bounty. The High Table was in disarray, and the Administrator was working blind on pure protocol with no further instructions.

*What are you doing, John?*

Until, one day, the Administrator came in for his shift, and the name John Wick was missing from the leaderboard.

“You have crap to drink.”

Matthew didn't bother turning, just finished dead-bolting the door in practiced movements. John was impressed by his lack of surprise, but the man always had been able to control themselves. “I wasn’t aware that dead men could be so picky,” he said in response, and John hid a smile at the tone.

He watched as Matthew shrugged out of his coat, hanging it in the closet, unhurried despite the high-risk fugitive sitting in his living room. When he finally turned, John took a moment to notice the changes. His face hadn’t aged much in the last five years, and other than the addition of at least four tattoos and two piercings, it was as if they were still back in the lounge, shoulders brushing as they shared a drink and conversation. The only real difference now was the crappy bourbon and the dog that stood guard at John’s feet.
John winced as he tried to sit up, trying to balance the rag on his bleeding shoulder while he still held onto the glass of mediocre bourbon in the other hand. He had already drained one drink and was halfway done with the second, waiting for the alcohol to numb the pain. He knew he looked like a mess—scratches and bruises on his face, blood seeping through his shirt, and covered in so much grime that he was more in danger of dying from infection than blood loss.

“You look like shit.”

John’s grin was a little manic. “Hello to you too, Matthew.”

Matthew didn’t correct him, just as he had never corrected John to use his title.

“Hello, John,” he said, voice casual and unconcerned. “I do hope you aren’t bringing your bloodhounds along with you.” He sat on the armrest and swatted away John’s hand from the shoulder wound. “That bullet is going to need to come out.”

“Thanks for letting me know; I was thinking of just leaving it there,” John said, sarcasm heavy as he traced the shape of his old friend’s face. His eyes dipped to follow the line of cheekbones and pursed lips, the way the rimless glasses rested on the bridge of his nose and the way the ink under his eye seeped into his skin.

Matthew rolled his eyes, a familiar gesture. “You are snarkier than you were before.”

“And you are less.”

“People change.”

“Yeah,” John said, a little softer, “they do.”

Matthew didn’t answer, instead heading into the kitchen. A little rustling before he emerged with two shot glasses and a bottle of vodka. “I need you on the couch,” he ordered, setting the supplies down and digging through the first aid kit for the pliers and scissors.

He re-adjusted the lamp to give him more light to work by and then straddled John’s lap to settle
into the best position to inspect the wound, careful to keep his weight off his legs in case they were injured. John pressed his uninjured arm on his waist, letting him know that it was fine—he knew his leg would be killing him if he sat like that for more than five minutes.

John watched as Matthew cut the shirt and jacket away to reveal the entire wound, watching deft fingers wipe the area down with alcohol. He quickly sanitized the equipment with a hefty pour of vodka and then, without mercy, proceeded to dig the bullet out.

John gritted his teeth in pain, but he was used to it and threw the rest of his whiskey back. Matthew just poured him a heavy-handed shot of vodka in replacement, and John grimaced at the burn.

The bullet clacked on the table when he was done, and John’s arm felt like a tenderize steak. Matthew didn’t give him to be breath before he started stitching up the gaping wound with clinical efficiency.

When finished, he wiped the excess blood away with a clean alcohol wipe and swung his legs off of John. “Anything else need stitching?”

John shook his head. “Just bandages. Might have cracked ribs and a broken finger or two, though.”

They spent the next hour in almost silence, the Administrator cleaning each cut and wound, feeling his ribs (bruised, not cracked) and set his two fingers on his left hand with a makeshift split. They hadn’t seen each other in years—not since his wedding—and now they had nothing to say.

“I’ll find clothes for you to wear for tonight. Get some sleep while you can. You have maybe twenty-four hours before they discover whatever trick you pulled.” Matthew was re-packing the first aid kit, fitting gauze and ointments into the package like pieces of a puzzle. He hadn’t looked John in the eye once since he had arrived. Six years was a long time, and in those years, and Matthew had grown cold.

“There was no trick,” John said, making the other pause. “I made a deal. I stop killing off members of the High Table, and they stop trying to kill me. As long as I don’t stick my head out, I get to keep it.”

“And the rest of the Table wasn’t informed of this deal?” Matthew said, raising an eyebrow skeptically.
“Well,” John said, a little smug. “It was majority rules. Four out of six was all I needed, right?”

An almost smile this time. “I suppose so.”

John stared up at the ceiling, restless, his still nameless dog curled up at his feet. This was the first real rest he’s had in weeks, the first time since that bastard killed Daisy and stole his car that he wasn’t fighting and killing, anger, and revenge filling his entire soul. The room was too quiet, the feeling of soft clean fabric against him foreign, and his insides itched and cracked as the seconds ticked by.

He made up his mind. He swung himself out of bed, grimacing a little at his ribs. The dog stirred, suddenly alert, and John gave it an affectionate scratch and murmured assurance. The dog cocked his head before setting his head down between two large paws, eyes open and watching as John quietly padded over to Matthew’s room.

The man was awake the moment he pushed the door open, sitting up and a gun pointed at John before he recognized the intruder. With a huff, he set it aside, flicking the safety back on. The covers fell back to reveal his naked chest, covered in disparate tattoos that he never explained, and the moonlight shining off against twin metal studs from his nipples. He didn’t say anything as John sat on the edge of the bed, just watched and waited.

The kiss was just the lightest press of lips, John's hand moving to cup his face before pressing in to deepen it. He felt Matthew pull away, and when he leaned back in to take another kiss, two fingers stopped him.

Matthew always has the most beautiful eyes. Everyone always said that, and John had always thought that. An icy blue-green-gray that shifted constantly, twin beacons that were like a lighthouse to a drowning man. They used to be so expressive, coy or teasing or contemplative or angry, but now they were blank. Or maybe they had always been that way, and John had never noticed because his were the same.

“You are still grieving, John. This is the last thing you need,” Matthew whispered. His tone was muted, still almost monotone, but John could almost hear the sweetness and compassion that he used to have.

John pressed his forehead against Matthew’s and breathed. He knew the other man was right, knew
that he was seeking comfort in whatever source he had for whatever time he had. He felt Matthew pull away and press a kiss to his forehead, one hand stroking his hair.

Matthew moved over in the bed, lifting the edge of the blanket in invitation.

John crawled under the covers and pulled him to his chest, burying his face in the inky black hair and cried. He knew that was a secret Matthew would keep.

The Administrator left for work before John is out of the shower. He left a half pot of coffee in the carafe and a bowl of water on the floor, the only indications that this morning was any different than any other, and slipped out his door.

The shift change was always seamless. The Administrators had a different shift change time from the rest of the staff, and their handover was barely noticeable unless under direct observation. The Incoming would wait, standing three steps behind the Outgoing’s right shoulder. The Outgoing would continue to work until the second and then, with no cue, would get up and walk away. The Incoming would take the seat and continue the review, no words, no motions—a seamless replacement within ten seconds.

The day passed in the same monotony as they usually did, files and stamps shuffling in and out of his desk. His razor-sharp mind read, skimmed, cross-checked. He left his shift in the same way as he came, noticing the hovering figure out of the corner of his eye. He flipped through the file until the second required and got up, not looking back. He heard the scrape of a chair as he weaved through the crowd of pink.

He swung by the nearest clothing store on his way home, selecting a haphazard assortment of clothes in a size too tall and broad for him. He was only a little surprised that John was still there when he walked through his door, still in the same clothes from the night before and his massive brown dog sitting obediently by his feet.

He didn’t greet John when he found the man in the kitchen, cooking something from the mix of ingredients in his fridge. He had set the bag of clothes pointedly on the guest bed and returned to watch John cook.

“I wasn’t aware you could cook,” he said, breaking the silence, as the smell of garlic and browning beef starts to waft through.
“Helen was a horrible cook,” John said, voice steady as though the thought didn’t hurt. “Hated cooking, too, so it was my cooking or a lot of take-out.”

The Administrator kept silent and let the admission hang in the air. The man was still grieving, his breakdown the night before was not enough to mourn the loss of the love of his life.

“Do you want to talk about her?” he offered, instead, as he opened a window and lit a cigarette. He took a drag, rolling the small tube between his fingers as he considered his next words. He...hadn’t had company in a very, very long time. “When my mother died, that’s all I did,” he said, and the words didn’t hurt as much as he expected, the admission not breaking a weakened dam as he feared. “I don’t know if helped or not, but if you want, I’m here to listen.”

He thought he was going to be ignored as the silence stretched, but as John added the finely diced onions to the mix on the stove, he said, “She, she used to love peach pie. She never wanted cake for any special occasion—just fresh peach pie. I spent a month baking them over and over to get them perfect. She was probably sick of them by then, but she ate every one.”

Once he started, it was like the levee broke, and he couldn’t stop. Words just spilled from him as he cooked, everything from that she loved to sing along to the radio but only if she thought he wasn’t home to how strong she had been, laying in that hospital bed near the end.

The Administrator didn’t talk much, just the occasional question to prompt him, the occasional comment to assure him that he was still there. Their dinner was taken between silence and more memories until the dishes were washed and leftovers packed away into neat tins.

The Administrator led John to the couch, sitting at one end and then gesturing for him to join. A little more pushing, and John had his head on the man’s lap, still talking and enjoying the feeling of hands in his hair. The dog joined soon after, nestled between John and the back of the couch, head resting on the man’s stomach.

They fell asleep like this, curled together on the couch and fingers entangled.

John ended up staying for a while. He never left the apartment except to walk his nameless dog, but the Administrator would bring him new clothes and toiletries and groceries and come home to a home-cooked meal. It was almost disgustingly domestic, and each day, the Administrator pushed
down his emotions more and more, adding another lock to the box wrapped around his heart that threatened to burst as he watched a man humming under his breath while he cooked, hair dark and long over his eyes.

They shared a bed every night. After that first night, John didn’t try to kiss him again. They spent their evenings curled around each other with the Administrator’s head nestled into his arms, listening to each other’s heartbeats. It was like the cover of darkness gave them certain freedoms, gave them a chance to separate themselves from the world; it was the twilight hour that slipped through the cracks of reality. John recalled little moments of his childhood aloud to him, like how one of the older girls at the Theatre once sneaked him a cupcake for his birthday or the time he missed a shot on his competency testing and got a beating for it. The Administrator offered his stories sparingly in return, offering only the shortest, most intimate, pieces like the feeling of the suit his father made before his death or the way his mother used to sing to him at night.

One night, John asked, quiet as a mouse as he petted the shorter man’s hair, “Have you ever been in love?”

The Administrator didn’t stiffen but didn’t answer for a long, meaningful moment. “Yes,” he finally whispered, “Just the once.” The words felt dry in his throat, voice scratchy and rough with a failed attempt at carelessness.

“Well will you tell me about it?” John asked, shifting to look down at the other. The Administrator wondered why he wanted to know, why he was probing and prying into a part of him that he knew were always off-limits. But, the Administrator knew how much a broken heart could change someone, and John was a friend, perhaps the only real friend he had ever had, and he deserved this little piece of his heart in exchange.

So instead of not answering, he laced their fingers together and brought John’s long callous fingers to his stomach. He traced his fingers around the edge of the bullet wound, letting John’s questing digits identify the familiar shape. “I fell in love,” he said, and the words hurt to say aloud even after all the years. “And he didn’t.”

John pressed a kiss to his hair, laying his hand over the old scar. He didn’t ask again.

John’s injuries healed until the stitches in his shoulder could be removed, and he felt no more than the ache of old wounds. The night after they removed the splints on his hand, the Administrator watched as John sat out on the fire escape and just looked up at the sky, the dark blues alight with the city lights and the sounds of the city drifting inside.
He didn’t join him.

The next day, the Administrator came home with a black duffel and a manila envelope filled with falsified documents and well-worn stacks of bills that he placed on the barely used guest bed. On top of the pile, he set down a Marker with two bloody thumbprints, one old and one new, and joined John in the kitchen.

Both of them knew that John couldn’t—shouldn’t—stay. That night, curled up together in with their usual intimacy, John leaned down to kiss him one last time.

John kissed like water, like the rush of a river and the crash of a waterfall, smooth and sensual. The Administrator tried to fight it, pushing himself rough and hard into the man, asking for a fight, only to be tempered by a firm hand to his neck and the gentle nips of the other man’s lips. The press of their tongues together was intoxicating, slow and caring and he couldn’t—couldn’t like this—

The Administrator pulled away, eyes wide and wet with emotion and breath intermingling with John’s. He could feel the press of John’s erection against his thigh and his own raging arousal, heat pooling low. They stared into each other's eyes, long, holding, and then something shifted, and the moment broke.

John pressed another kiss, chaste, to lips and pulled him back into his arms, cradling the other man as they fell asleep.

John was gone when the Administrator returned the next evening. All that was left was the returned Marker left on his pillow, carefully pressed blue flowers in place of two bloodied prints on parchment.

A week later, the Administrator gets another tattoo—a trail of forget-me-nots down his side, bright and blooming.

And life goes on.
Interested in more thoughts and explanations on this chapter? Head on over to my blog! 

Thank you to everyone for reading! Comments give me life so please consider taking a moment to let me know what you think. <3
The Administrator knew something was wrong the moment he unlocked the door; an instinct in the back of his mind was waving a red flag. The Administrator tensed imperceptibly as he turned the key, pulling out his holstered gun from under his jacket, slowly, hiding the movement with readjusting the weight of his groceries clutched in his arms. He pushed the door open, feigning obviousness as he switches on the lights, and had already brought the gun up, finger ready on the trigger, before he recognized the intruder.

He had met the man only a handful of times in his years of service—at their annual summit and a scattering of other times during a crisis. But never alone.

He dropped the gun abruptly to his side and sank to his knees as gracefully as he can with his leg. “Elder,” he addressed with eyes to the floor and voice supplicant. “I will serve and be of service.”

“Come,” the Elder said, as courteous as though this were his own home and not the Administrator’s. “Sit, please.”

He obeyed, sinking into the opposite chair of his small dining table. His eyes darted around the room, and he counted the guards—all poised and ready to shoot him at a moment’s notice—two in the kitchen, one in the corner and no doubt more surrounding his meager apartment. “What can I do for you, Elder?” he asked, hands folded in his lap and voice the right edge of respectful and curious, with the smallest edge of annoyance for authenticity.

“Administrator,” the man said, rolling the title in his tongue as though testing out the word, accent light but noticeable. “I have an assignment that you are, ah, uniquely qualified for.” His smile was amused as he gestured with one hand, the silver of his elaborate rings flashing in the low light of the apartment.

The Administrator bowed his head, still tense. “I am honored, Elder.”

“We wish to establish a new Continental,” the Elder said, as though it was a common occurrence and not a game-changing one. New Continentals were rare at this age, most established centuries ago and growing with the city. The last newly established Continental had been in Toronto over sixty years prior.
"Are you asking for my recommendations, sir?" It would be a delicate and large operation and would require a Manager with both subtlety and power, business acumen and political knowledge. He could think of two individuals that would be excellent choices, and he could refine the list with a day in the Archives.

"No," the Elder said, smiling, "I want you to head the project."

That was...surprising. The Administrator kept his body still, trying not to betray the increase of tension between his shoulders or any hint of emotion. "Sir?" he queried with the right amount of uncertainty. High Table members were rarely sent on specialized assignments except for the Adjudicator and Arbitrator. Any deviation from the norm was always troubling.

The Elder motioned with a hand, and one of his guards handed the Administrator a black folder. He flipped it open to the first page without reading the label, and his heart stuttered.

Paperclipped to the front was a black and white photo of Gotham, Wayne Tower clearly labeled in the center of downtown and its iconic bridges in the backdrop. He hadn’t seen anything about Gotham in years, his mind shutting down at the very thought when it might have even been mentioned. He avoided newspaper headlines in the streets, changed the channel on the news, never listened to the radio. He thought he was safe from any mention of the place, the High Table deeming it unfit.

He kept his composure, but just barely, his eyes shutting down and pulling the familiar feeling of numbness over him. "As I recall, Gotham City was too...chaotic and barbaric for any value. A city of animals, not worth the effort," he managed to say, voice even, almost bored, as he continued to flip through the file.

"Some new developments have come to light in the last year," the Elder said, unhelpful as ever. "We believe the city might be ready for integration. This is the first chance in decades and should not be ignored."

"And why me?" His voice was still unconcerned, interjecting just the trace of nonchalant curiosity into his words. "A Manager or Concierge would be much better suited for this task."

The Elder leaned back, casual, calculated, before answering. "History has taught us that Gotham requires a delicate touch. It requires someone who is...acquainted with its workings."
“And you believe me to be acquainted with Gotham?” the Administrator asked, one brow raised skeptically.

The Elder smiled, knowingly, and didn’t answer.

But that was answer enough. “Very well,” the Administrator said, knowing he was trapped. He closed the file, setting it back onto the table to fold his hands over his knee. “I assume I may have whatever resources I may need?”

“Of course. Your shift will be covered for the duration of your absence.” The Elder stood and nodded his head in farewell. “Have a good evening, Administrator,” he said, smile sharp.

“And to you, Elder.”

The door closed behind him, leaving the Administrator sitting with a folder of his nightmares and the feeling of a guillotine hanging over his neck.

Oswald—no, the Administrator—sat in his favored spot by the window, glass open to his fire escape and smoked. His hand shook as he brought the cigarette up to his lips to inhale. He had spent years not thinking about the place—years to where he thought the wounds had healed over, where he could hear the name and feel nothing more than a twinge of annoyance. But instead, the thought made him a wreck, made his skin itch and stomach drop.

He finished his cigarette, smashing the stub onto the sill, and leaned back, eyes closed, and just focused on breathing. It meant nothing. Gotham was nothing.

He picked up his phone, dialing the number by memory.

“Administration, how may I direct your call?” the Receptionist said, the din of noise heard in the background of her voice.
“This is the Administrator. Authorization Charlie Alpha Tango 79205-0. Bring all files relevant to Gotham City from the last twenty years to Archive Room 3B by 0800 hours.”

“Yes, Administrator,” she said, with the annoyed drawl that all staff had down to perfection—as much as a uniform as the pink tops and Mary Janes.

The Administrator hung up and reached for another cigarette only to find the pack empty. He took another breath, calming himself, before getting up and slipping on his shoes and coat.

The piercing parlor was open for another hour, and at the moment, he wanted nothing more than the sharp pain of a needle digging into his skin.

Archive Room 3B was the third largest archive room at the Administration and, like all others, had walls painted a drab, utilitarian beige with a series of long, aged wooden tables and creaking olive-green chairs that were forty years out-of-date. A long chalkboard decorated one wall was still covered in nonsensical scribbles that could have been made a week or a decade ago.

As requested, the tables were filled with boxes of files on Gotham, lined up in neat chronological order with sloppy handwritten labels done in black marker. The Administrator leaned against the far edge, hip resting against the table, as he lit his first cigarette of the day and got started.

Hours later, he had forced a Librarian to run out to bring him a new pack along with a bottle of vodka.

The files were a mess. He has been hoping to skim through the first few years because there was nothing like a refresher to open old wounds, but the information was intermixed with nonsense. Informants and agents had thrown whatever pieces they could, disjointed, into a file and called it a report. It was no wonder that the Continental had never managed to get a foothold into the city—they didn’t even understand the basics of her structure, couldn’t even glimpse at the intricacies of loyalties.

The High Table has been sensing low-level informants into Gotham for years; those who didn’t die had never managed to report anything useful. Beyond the interplay between Carmine Falcone and Salvatore Maroni, they had nothing of use. He had countless reports of failed attempts at infiltration into either family which was unsurprising—both families recruited young and locally.
Outsiders would never be able to move up in the ranks under either don’s rule.

The copied police reports were just as useless; dirty cops were a dime a dozen, and no one ever turned in an accurate statement. The best source of information has been the copies of the Gotham Gazette, even as sensationalized it all was, but it provided no new information.

The only thing of note he discovered was that the Court of Owls had been a branch of the Continental who had been tasked with bringing Gotham under High Table control over a century ago but had gone rogue, swept into the madness of the city. Since then, no serious attempt at taking the city had been made. Until now, that is.

The Administrator read the file on what was aptly named No Man’s Land with a carefully composed face, eyes skimming the text at lightning speed. It was a compiled report done by the Continental, and for supposedly containing the information from almost a year of isolation, it was absurdly thin and comprised of mostly news headlines, intercepted military reports, civilian recounts, and police reports.

The Administrator recalled the incident—it was unavoidable to hear about it despite his best efforts. A crazed maniac had given the city six hours to evacuate before destroying the cities. At hour eight, he had blown the bridges instead for reasons unknown. Less than one-third of the city had evacuated at the time. In the following forty-eight hours before the military blockage, another ninety-five percent of the remaining civilians had been evacuated by ferry.

Information after the military blockade was scarce—military reports were heavily redacted or, in many cases, non-existent. The facts, the actual facts, were left at thus:

Twenty thousand people remained in Gotham, including most of the Gotham Police Department and the most unsavory of individuals, the latter of which were quick to carve out their territory in the ensuing chaos.

The individuals known as Barbara Kean, Bridgit Pike, Victor Fries, Jeremiah Valeska, Ivy Pepper, Jonathon Crane, Jervis Tetch, Edward Nygma, and Victor Zsasz claimed the most significant of territories.

Captain James Gordon claimed a sizeable territory and dubbed it Haven and, to the Continental’s knowledge, the only point of contact between Gotham and the mainland.
Approximately a year after isolation, the military blockade was dropped, and reconstruction of the bridges started. Military reports on the days before and after were conflicting.

Some reports reported reunification was approved based on the decline of crime within the isolated Gotham and proceeded as planned. Others reported that reunification was denied, and Protocol 386 was enacted to destroy the city. Regardless, somewhere in the confusion, the military suffered extreme casualties, including the death of General Theresa Walker. There also may have been a mutiny, but it was impossible to confirm in the general mess of it all.

There were copies of statements given by Gotham citizens and police officers included in the files. Useless, the lot of them. The civilians didn’t know enough to provide any clarification, and the police officers were too loyal to their captain to say anything that deviated from their decided truth.

The Administrator knew how the city worked, how the police and its citizens protected their own. The real reports, if they ever existed, were probably stored deep in the archives of station or buried under pounds of concrete.

The Administrator lit a new cigarette, staring down at the spread of reports. This had Gotham written all over it—the contradiction, the secrecy, the insanity.

It made him ache.

The Administrator spent a week in the Archives, combing through, absorbing, and discarding information. The intervening years after reunification had been standard fare for the city with a few exceptions. A handful of criminals were granted full pardons, including Barbara Kean, Tabitha Galavan, and Butch Gilzean—all of which, to the Administrator’s greatest shock, appeared to have taken the chance and renounced their life of crime. To add to the typical Gotham drama, Ms. Kean had a daughter who was born the day of reunification with Captain James Gordon, who had wed a Ms. Leslie Thompson in the months prior—the very same Ms. Thompson she had tried to murder years prior. There was a grainy photo of the trio in the aftermath of reunification, Ms. Kean with her hair cropped short and a bundle in her arms, flanked on each side by the presumed couple.

He wondered what had happened between Lee and—

The remaining criminals laid low for the first year of reconstruction. However, by the time the bridges were reconstructed and the new Wayne Tower opened with its usual grandeur, Gotham had
settled back into its normal cesspool of crime.

News headlines dominated the following decade—environmental terrorism from Ms. Pepper, arson credited to Ms. Pike, murders and robberies linked to Mr. Nygma, a booming drug trade led by Mr. Crane. The papers chronicled their arrests, their trials, their escapes from Blackgate, and their escapes from Arkham that cycled through the years. Criminals would get arrested, and some escaped before trial. Not that it appeared to make a difference; most managed to find their way out of imprisonment through a variety of legal and illegal means.

Even Sofia Falcone had made a miraculous recovery that had Hugo Strange written all over it and proceeded to regain her late father’s territory to mixed results. It was the second age of the Gotham crime families—the mix of the new and old and full of deadly chaos. Crime rates soared to above historical levels despite the valiant efforts of the GCPD.

That is until a year ago when an unknown and masked vigilante—dubbed the Batman by the press—swooped into the city and apprehended criminals to be dropped, sometimes literally, at the feet of the GCPD. Petty crime rates fell, and the more eccentric of criminals escalated.

A man known only as the Joker to the public emerged to challenge Batman, holding hostage to a ferry of civilians before being apprehended and locked into Arkham, where he stayed for three months before escaping with the assistance of a Dr. Harleen Quinzel. Mr. Fries had been returned to Arkham only a month prior along with Mr. Tetch after an in-conceived scheme regarding something to do with water usage in the Narrows, secret shipments from Argentina, and thirty-thousand cicadas.

And that’s where they were now. Mr. Valeska was at large with Dr. Quinzel and, if the reports were correct, Ms. Pepper, while the rest of the funny farm was a revolving door between Gotham and Arkham.

The Administrator crossed his legs and leaned his head back, closing his eyes. He needed a plan.

He paid a visit to the Broker—or the Bowery King as he had named himself years ago—three days later. The man had managed to keep his head on his shoulders by betraying John Wick to the High Table in a masterful double-double that even the Administrator had to admire. He found the man where he expected, on the roof with a cooing pigeon wrapped in his hands and a dozen more nesting in the coop behind him. The man always did have a fondness for the birds—it was one of the reasons the Administrator had chosen him as the new Broker.
“Administrator,” the man greeted, turning, smile wide to show off the stretch of his scars, still pink and shiny as they crisscrossed his face. “Whatever can I do for the High Table?” The pigeon is his cupped hands gave a trill, and the smell of feathers and waste permeated the rooftop, but the Administrator paid it no mind.

“I am afraid I am going to have to relieve you of some of your staff,” he said. He walked closer and offered the larger man a slim stack of three personnel files. “Shall we trade?” he offered, the smile on his face not at all friendly.

“Of course, my friend,” the Bowery King said, taking the files with one hand as he shifted the bird into the inked hands of the other.

The Administration took the pigeon, careful to keep it nestled between his fingers. It wouldn’t fly off, he knew, as this was its home, but the feeling of soft feathers under his fingers and the small beating heart always gave him pleasure. He stroked the head of the bird with the back with one knuckle, ignoring the Bowery King in favor of searching for the small sack of breadcrumbs he knew was stored by the coop.

He offered the pigeon a small handful of them in a cupped palm, balancing the bird on his wrist as it ate the offering. A second pigeon came forth, landing on his other wrist in an attempt to reach the snack, this one with a thin rolled paper tied to its leg. He shifted the newcomer, so he had two on one arm, allowing him to stroke his fingers through their plumage as they pecked happily at the crumbs.

The Bower King was still paging through the three files. “Well, well. Am I to lose these fine men and women to you...permanently? Do I need to be making a few dinner reservations?”

The Administrator looked up at him with little interest, most of his attention still focused on the two birds on his arm. “Oh, no, nothing like that,” he assured in a tone that was not at all reassuring. “They are being reassigned temporarily. I am need of some particularly talented young minds.”

The Bowery King smiled and gave a mocking bow, pressing his palms together as though thankful for the opportunity. “Anything for the High Table,” he said. “You’ll find Jackie by the Golden Unicorn and Razz at Our Lady of Lourdes. Valentine has today off, but he likes to linger around Park and 34th.” He held out the files to return.

“Always a pleasure, Broker,” the Administrator said, sharp and cold. He offered his arm for the
man to coax the two birds off of, flinging the leftover breadcrumbs to the ground, and tucking the files back into his briefcase.

“Best of luck, Administrator,” the Bowery King called to his back as he descended the steps. “Best of luck.”

He found his three potential recruits with little difficulty—most of the informants within the city he had hired personally, and they were all too loyal and ready to assist. It was satisfying, in a way, to see some of his young fledglings grown.

He hadn’t even needed the Bowery King to tell him where to find them—he could have found them easily on his own, but it was only common courtesy when infringing on his terrain, and manner never cost anyone anything.

The three accepted the offer, as he knew they would. Razz has been recruited back when he was barely old enough to reach over the countertop to grab the phone after his mother died from a heroin overdose. The Administrator had picked him up digging through trash in the park and had won his loyalty after he had slid a knife between the ribs of an older boy who had been trying to molest him. Razz was young, loyal, and vicious—precisely the type who had a chance to survive on the streets of Gotham.

Jackie and Valentine were chosen for similar reasons—each personally recruited by the Administrator in his earlier days, each owing their life and livelihood to him, and each with the right amount of ferocity and insanity to survive in Gotham. Topped with innate charisma and sharp minds, they were exactly what he needed. They wouldn’t be enough, he knew, but it was a start.

The Administrator had already chosen his muscle—eight men bound by a Contract to protect him. They would likely die in the next year, and he didn’t feel like risking anyone of worth for his opening volley, but they were the type to follow orders to the letter as long as they were kept healthy in coin.

He had already pulled a Sommelier from Monaco, a Doctor from Buenos Ares, a Tailor from Moscow, a Concierge from Sydney, and Cleaners from Yokohama.

He only had one more stop to make.
“Welcome back to the Continental, Administrator,” Charon greeted, his placid smile as much a part of the scenery as the chandeliers. There was a glint of playfulness in his eyes, though, that the Administrator could see after knowing the man for years.

He allowed a rare smile to cross his lips, side-eyeing a scandalized socialite who was walking through the lobby and staring at his various tattoos and piercings, the mass of black ink easily visible along his exposed arms. “Charon, a pleasure as always. Is the manager in?” he asked smoothly, flashing his identification coin quickly up before sliding it back into his vest pocket to show that he was here on business.

“For you, sir, always,” Charon said, gesturing toward the lounge. “Shall I announce you?”

“If you please,” the Administrator answered. Once upon a time, he might have shot the man a wink, sly and salacious and all in good jest, but those years were long past. Instead, he gave a polite nod in thanks and swept past, barely hearing the Concierge pick up the phone.

He found Winston at his regular table—the man was a shocking creature of habit despite how unhealthy of a trait that was in their lifestyle. A pair of reading glasses were perched on his nose as he examined something in a worn leather notebook that he closed immediately once the Administrator approached.

“Matthew, my boy, it has been too long,” he greeted heartily with a handshake, allowing the man to slide into his booth. “Or shall I call you the Administrator?”

“Winston,” the Administrator said, the fraction of warmth in his voice higher than with anyone else. Winston was one of the few that he allowed to call him by name—a short list of only three names. “Matthew is fine. What are titles between old friends after all?”

“Matthew, then,” Winston said with a fond smile. “What brings you to the Continental today?”

The Administrator flashed his identification again, the flicker of intricate embossing glowing in the dim, green lighting. “Business,” he said, just the right hint of regret in his voice.

Winston crossed his legs and placed his folded hands on his knees. “And what can I do for the High Table today?”
“I am going to have to borrow a member of your staff,” the Administrator said, maintaining a note of apology in his voice as he handed the Manager a thin folder. “She is being reassigned.”

Winston took the offered file, flipping it open and staring down at the text through his reading glasses. “Don’t tell me you are going to take my dear Addy from me?” he said, mock chagrin.

“I am afraid so,” the Administrator said with false apology. “A replacement has already been selected and will arrive tomorrow for her handover.”

Winston sighed, taking off his reading glasses and handing back the file as he tucked the lenses into his breast pocket. “Of course. Anything for the High Table. You know where to find her, but do stick around and have a drink. On the house, of course.”

The Administrator stood, bowing his head in thanks. “Thank you, Winston.”

Addy favored more public venues than the Administrator had when he was the Bartender. Addy rarely used the shrouded nook, the dark crimson fabric replaced with emerald drapes during the remodel. Today, however, was one of the days she was in the back, entertaining a guest by the looks of it.

The Administrator hovered, patient, for his turn, just within sight that she could see someone was waiting but the perfect distance away not to overhear. When her guest exited—a mid-30’s Hispanic man likely seeking information on another player if his nervous attitude was anything to go by—the Administrator smoothly ducked into the alcove.

“Matty!” Addy squealed, running out from behind the bar to wrap him into a hug. The Administrator had anticipated it and simply wrapped one arm around her shoulders in response.

“Addy,” he greeted, giving her a quick kiss on the cheek. “It has been too long. You are looking even more ravishing than I remember.”

Addy grinned and bumped him lightly on the shoulder. “Oh, please. Flatterer.”

“With you? Never, my dear. I only speak the truth,” the Administrator said, dropping a kiss on her knuckles like a gentleman.
Addy rolled her eyes and pulled him over to the bar, ushering him to take a seat. “What can I get you, love? Martini, extra dirty and extra olives? Lemon drop? Greyhound?” she asked, with a happy pep in her step.

“A martini would be quite lovely,” he said and watched her prepare the cocktail. She had the same vibrant touch to her as she always did, the red of her hair contrasting beautifully against the lime green glow of the bar and her movements as smooth as any professional dancer.

“So, Matty,” she said, as she brought the shaker up with practiced ease. “What brings you to our side of town? You haven’t visited in ages, makes a girl think she’s unwanted.” She pouted theatrically as she strained the drink into the chilled glass.

“Business, I am afraid,” the Administrator answered, showing off his medallion for the third time.

Addy just hummed in acknowledgment, sliding the drink over with a napkin and three olives. Her face turned a fraction more serious, and the Administrator was reminded why he was so fond of her as he took a sip of the perfectly made martini. “So, what I can do for the High Table today?” she said, voice casual but lacking her usual playfulness. She had always been good at that, knowing when to be serious and when she could have fun.

“A job offer,” the Administrator said. “I am heading an assignment and am in need of particularly talented staff to assist.” He handed her a folder, the last of the many he had tucked away in his case for the day.

She took it without a word, and he watched her eyes and expression as she read through it, sipping on his drink. Her face was impassive as she read through the offer, another sign that he had chosen correctly.

“Gotham, hm?” she said when she had finished her review. “Sounds dangerous,” she said, raising an eyebrow at him. Dangerous for the Continental was on a completely different level.

“Yes, it is,” he agreed. “Gotham isn’t like the rest of the world, and I need someone I can trust and someone I know who can handle it.”

Addy met his eyes, searching. She had been at the New York Continental for over a decade, refusing promotions by choice. This was her home and family, and the Administrator knew he was asking a lot. She finally smiled, bright and cheery. “I’m in, Matty. How could I leave my favorite
She reached over and squeezed his hand affectionately, and the Administrator was grateful, twisting his wrist so their palms met. He wasn’t the same man who had left the Continental years ago, but Addy didn’t mind and still loved him anyway. For her, he could try to be his old self—or at least the self she had grown to love like a brother.

He flashed her a smile, wicked and dirty and suggestive like one he had given her all those years ago. “Word on the street is that you have a new man in your life. Tall, blond, and with a great big —”

“Matty!” she squeaked out, scandalized, between laughing, pushing him before he could finish. “You have a one-track mind.”

“Me?” he said, innocently as he plucked an olive off the toothpick and rolled his tongue around it suggestively.

Addy giggled and pulled out a bottle of her favorite IPA from under the bar, cracking open the bottle with a hiss. “Well, if you must know, his name is Elias.”

The Administrator listened, avidly, and let himself forget who he was, let himself drown in being Matthew Richardson for just a little while longer.

The rest of the plans went smoothly. He sent Addy in first with instructions to find work at one of the heavily frequented bars not in the Diamond District—The Sirens if she could. Ms. Kean still owned the bar, and it was, on paper, entirely legitimate, but he knew no nightclub in Gotham was completely innocent. Just because the owner didn’t partake in the pie didn’t mean its patrons did the same.

He sent Razz, Jackie, and Valentine in over three weeks, staggered at random intervals.
Razz, the youngest, was instructed to slip in with the street kids in the Narrows—the only possible foothold into the Narrows was with as tight-knit of a community it was. Mrs. Gordon, still dubbed Queen of the Narrows, even ran a clinic there funded heavily by Wayne Enterprises and had a soft spot for the youth. He had drilled the boy in the area, made him memorize maps and routes, names and places. His information was a little out of date, but it would do for a start, and the boy was excellent at improvising.

Valentine was sent to Midtown, where his long unkempt hair and disfigured eye would allow him to blend in with the junkies and panhandlers. The Administrator drilled him on a Narrows accent, the careful way they tended to slur their consonants together and the slang that would single someone out that came from the Narrows. Something as simple as an accent would be enough for most people to slide over him, allow him to fade into the background.

Jackie was sent to Old Gotham to watch the GCPD. She planned to get caught pickpocketing one of the kinder detectives, someone who would throw her into a cell with the younger crowd for a day before letting her go. Just enough to give her an introduction before she played at another desperate runaway who got dumped in Gotham and couldn’t afford a way out.

All three were to take their time and scout for anyone interested in a leg up or, if possible, identify who had already been bought.

In the meantime, the Administrator looked to purchase an abandoned block of buildings in the Diamond District. The old Iceberg Lounge was still vacant and the easiest to retrofit into a new lounge, but it was best to avoid as many parallels as possible.

Instead, he settled on a set of buildings three blocks away from Wayne Tower on the edge of the District. The centerpiece was a four-story commercial building that had been unused for the last fifteen years since the death of Salvatore Maroni, who had used it as a front for his drug distribution, which meant it had plenty of front-end space as well as back-end options for use. It had the bonus of being directly next to an empty lot that the Administrator quickly purchased the deed to—ideal if they expanded into a full hotel.

Permits were pushed through, purposefully suspiciously quick through the easy exchange of money into the right hands. The Continental had no need for secrecy—their power was in knowledge and enforcement of their rules. Construction was done locally, accelerated with more money exchanged into the right hands, before being retrofitted by specialists from the Administration—ensuring no two blueprints matched the actual floor plan.

In the end, the new building was renovated in record timing—the exterior cleaned until the brick facade glowed like a beacon and the interior fashioned into the smooth, classic feel that the Continental favored. The Administrator made sure to include little touches of Gotham in the aesthetics—from the art deco interior to the dim chandelier lighting. It was going to be the most
exclusive club in town, and they needed it to look the part.

The bottom two floors housed the nightclub and lounge, with the third being administrative offices and the fourth the living quarters for the Administrator. The basement contained the workspace for the Doctor while the Sommelier had hidden room behind the third bar on the second floor. The Tailor would, eventually, have space to himself but would share with the Sommelier in the meantime.

The Cleaners had scattered into the wind, picking their way through the underbelly with ease—at least, after a thorough briefing of the best places of disposal. Gotham had its own language in bodies—the docks meant a loud message, the streets meant a nobody, and a disappearance meant it was all in good fun.

And with that, almost five months after the day the Elder walked into his apartment, the Administrator returned home.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaannnnd Gotham makes a reappearance. I’m admittedly nervous about this chapter, but I hope everyone isn’t disappointed at the route I’m taking. (●﹏●)

Comments are always appreciated and feed my creative spirit, so please let me know if you enjoyed. <3
Twelve years and the city hadn’t changed.

That much was apparent when the Administrator stepped out of the private jet and into the open air of Gotham. The skies were their perpetual gray and gloom, and the air had the familiar scent of salt and sour decay. He could hear the sound of seagulls in the distance, overlaid by the sound of traffic and the mechanical hum of industry.

He tried not to think too much about it as he descended the steps, one hand carefully on the railing to keep his balance. His driver was waiting for him at the end, holding up a simple black umbrella to guard against the rain, and the irony burned.

“Administrator,” the driver greeted cordially, opening the door of the town car for him to slip in.
“To the club, sir?”

“Yes,” the Administrator said offhandedly, still drinking up the city.

Driving through the streets was a whirlwind, his eyes dashing back and forth and taking in the new and old. The streets were lively as always, huddled with street urchins and merchants, lazy cops, and working girls. The Administrator took everything in, leaning against the window as his eyes fluttered, and his mind cataloged the changes.

He needed to get his feel for her again, needed to read her streets as he once did before he could make any plans. He needed someone who could give him the information he needed and be able to keep his mouth shut, whose loyalty could be bought.

He needed Victor Zsasz.

The club was beautiful, as it always would have been. It had the classic Gotham flair with a modern, expensive edge that was hard to find outside of a few mansions and perhaps Wayne Tower. The floors were covered in shiny marble, grays and silvers broken up by obsidian stripes.
Wood accents surrounded deep black walls, smooth to the touch, and interspersed by diamond-shaped mirrors edged in gold. Lounges dotted the outskirts; elaborate flaxen brocade fabrics intermixed with maroon trim. Thick lines of gold were etched into the ceiling, surrounding the bronze statue of Archangel Michael with his flaming sword that overtook the bar, a guardian and a warning.

All the lights were on for the inspection, but the Administrator could already picture the atmosphere, smoky with the sound of smooth jazz overlaying the seductive undertone. The entire staff was waiting in neat rows of ironed white dress shirts and crisp black vests, prepared for the arrival of their mysterious benefactor.

And he was mysterious. In the last five months, the Administrator had bought and restored millions of dollars’ worth of property, sniped the best service workers from bars and hotels all over Gotham, and had never been seen in person.

The Concierge—who would be the newest manager of the nightclub—was the face of the entire operation.

Mr. Richardson is a very busy man, he would say, and has entrusted all decisions of this new venture to me. I will be sure to pass along any concerns.

Matthew Richardson was an outsider, but the Administrator knew how to enter in a splash, make everyone keep their eyes on the Continental. He needed to make everyone want to be there and needed to make sure everyone knew he wasn’t to be taken lightly.

His two guards trailing behind him, silent in their perfect bespoke suits and intimidating nature. They towered over the slighter man, an easy six inches and fifty pounds over their boss at a minimum but deferred to him in a way that everyone noticed.

And they did notice. Mr. Richardson was not what any of the staff had expected. With the grandeur and perfectionism, they expected someone like Falcone, an older gentleman of means and class. Or someone like Theo Galavan, young and rich and throwing money and threats around behind a perfectly tailored suit and thousand-dollar bottles of champagne.

Instead, it was a short man with black hair gelled out of his face in unmoving rows and covered in body art rarely seen in Gotham. He wore nothing more than a blush button-up, a loose black tie, and a vest—his sleeves rolled up to past his elbows to show off the multitude of tattoos that covered his arms. One tattoo curled up from around his neck and another dotted under his eyes, only bringing attention to the set of silver hoops looped over his lips or the stud against his pointed
nose.

He looked like a low-level gangster, a troublemaker that you’d find on the streets of Gotham in the Narrows or on the back of a stolen motorcycle. He didn’t look like the wealthy benefactor of the newest institution in Gotham—for from it. He didn’t act like it either.

He was polite, but distant, the emptiness and lack of emotions giving the newly hired staff a cold chill. He didn’t ask for their names but called them up in turn, asking about their families or hobbies as he took a walk around the empty club. He was...kind, they realized despite his lack of smiles, and his sly self-deprecating comments that would accompany a raised eyebrow or a maybe smile.

_I am afraid I am only the manager, the administrator, he would say. The owner of the club has assigned me to oversee the opening and management for the time being. Please, call me Matthew or the Administrator if you must._

_No one ever called him Matthew._

The two weeks before their opening was a flurry. The Administrator would visit daily, overseeing the training of the new staff, the decor, entertainment, the guest list. The staff discovered the single rule quickly.

They found this out the hard way—this wasn’t like the Sirens had been where a beating and stabbing meant you were maybe thrown out or bought a round of drinks or the Iceberg Lounge, where no one cared as long as one was discreet.

The first time someone tried to threaten the staff with a rusty switchblade—a drug-addled ex-girlfriend who had managed to find her way past the construction workers and shifting personnel—the Administrator had snapped his fingers, and one of his guards had pulled out a shot before anyone could have screamed. It was Gotham, though, and they all kept their heads down as they watched their new boss take a quick lap, eyeing each of them in them as he treaded, uncaring, through the blood and gore.

_“The first rule of the Continental, ladies and gentlemen, is that no business is to be conducted on its grounds. This means stealing, threats, prostitution, drug dealing, and killing. This property is, as we call it, consecrated grounds and neutral territory. Anyone found in violation of this rule shall be...terminated.”_ His lips quirked up as he made eye contact, slow and deliberate with each worker. “Please be sure to pass that along to your friends, yes?”
And the rule was enforced with brutal efficiency. On the third day, a construction worker was found trying to skim gold trim from the walls and copper from the wiring. He was found with both hands cut off and set in the center of the lobby all day, rotting and attracting flies before the Administrator had ordered clean-up.

Word got around quick—no one misbehaved at the Continental.

Pity that, in Gotham, this rang as a challenge and not a warning.

Victor Zsasz was bored. He flipped his knife up and down, catching it by the hilt as he leaned his chair back, feet up on the scratched table. No contracts had wandered into his view recently, and his Zsaszettes were equally bored, one of them flipping through a magazine while the other scraped dirt from under her nails with a knife.

That is why, when a sharp knock on the door came in through—shocking because he was in an abandoned warehouse—he responded with a grin.

He took in the two men who strolled in—both tall and muscled in custom suits and shiny shoes. Each had at least four guns on their person, three knives, and he was hoping that was a poison ring on that man’s right pinky.

They were also both professionals, but that wasn’t as interesting.

Victor grinned, not bothering to get up and continued to lean back in his chair, the front two legs off the ground. “Gentlemen,” he said with a grin. “How ever may I be of service?”

“The Administrator wishes to see you, Mr. Zsasz,” leftie said with a bored drawl, standing at parade rest and purposefully unthreatening.

Victor hummed. The mysterious Administrator. He was a man who had built quite a reputation despite never having been seen by anyone other than the Continental staff. Even then, the staff was reluctant to describe him even under threat of harm, which meant they were either very loyal, very scared, or both. “And why should I wish to see him?” he volleyed back, more out of sport that any
objection. He was a curious man, and when the object of his curiosity came knocking, he wasn’t going to give it up. But he was interested if they would try to threaten him or bribe him or whatnot. It was entertaining, and maybe he’d add two more tally marks to his collection and then visit the mystery man.

Instead, rightie pulled out a clean new boxcutter from an inside pocket and showed it off between two tattooed fingers. The man grinned, cordial. “The Administrator said it would be worth your while.” He tossed it over to Victor who caught it with one hand.

He inspected the gift, the industrial steel and smooth outer finish with a substantial weight to it. It was one of his favorite brands, in fact, and one that had been discontinued six years ago when the company filed for bankruptcy.

His non-existent eyebrows went up. “Well, color me impressed!” he said as he sprung up and slid the gift into his back pocket. “How can I say no after such a thoughtful gift?” This man, this Administrator, was intriguing and had done his research. Victor didn’t respond to money or threats —what he wanted was some fun. And it had been years since he had someone who let him out to play properly.

They escorted him, limo and everything, to the Continental, and Victor gave a whistle of admiration when he stepped in. “This is some fancy joint, fellas,” he said. The staff, waiters, and bartenders were getting a lecture from a man in another fancy pressed suit, and he knew a few of them recognized him when they hastily looked away. They escorted him to the dimly lit second floor, directing him to an empty table, plush with soft cushions. “The Administrator apologizes for the wait but will be here to join you shortly.”

As Victor sat, a server hurried in with his head down and placed a tray out in front of him with a sealed bottle of his favorite scotch next to two clean glasses and a bucket of ice with tongs. All of this was nestled next to a steaming silver teapot, an elaborately decorated china teacup decorated with black roses, and three pristine teabags laid out on a silver plate. He gave the tea a sniff—blueberry-pineapple with a hint of green tea, one of his favorites. There was no cream offered, only sugar, just the way Victor tended to prefer.

Whoever this man was, Victor was suitably impressed.

He decided on the tea, dropping all three bags into the pot. He was starting to stir in his fourth spoon of sugar when he heard footsteps. He didn’t bother turning though, instead focused on swirling around the hot liquid to dissolve the sugar.
“Mr. Zsasz,” a man said, and the voice was...different. It made him pause for a moment, with the edge of déjà vu, but he couldn’t place his finger on it. “Apologies for the wait. I am afraid something urgent required my attention. I hope the refreshments were to your taste.”

“Yeah, I gotta say, you sure know how to treat a girl,” Victor replied blithely, taking a scolding sip and finally looking up at the mystery man.

His first thought was hot damn that was a lot of ink. The man was covered in tattoos, his exposed arms a patchwork of black with even more ink sliding up from behind the posh collar of his dress shirt. He took in a pair of glasses, the facial tattoo, and the myriad of piercings, and just said, “Huh.”

“I like to treat my guests as guests, Mr. Zsasz,” the man said, slipping into the opposite chair with a slight but noticeable limp, the dim light only highlighting the amount of metal on his face. Before he could settle himself, the same server came by with his own cup of tea—chamomile, its scent distinctive—and Victor’s eyes were drawn to his fingers as they curled around the porcelain, the shape of his sharp, pointed nails painted black and curve of art that sprawled over the pale skin. “You may call me the Administrator, and I have a business proposition for you.”

Something about this man was off. Victor couldn’t put his finger on it, but it was in the posture and the voice, the way the face would catch at a certain light and made him think that he should know this man. A family member of someone he killed, perhaps?

The Administrator didn’t continue, just blew on his hot tea and waited for the assassin to finish his inspection.

“You look familiar,” the assassin said finally, setting the cup down to lean forward and get a closer look, trying to trace his facial features in the low lighting, trying to pull up where he had seen him before.

No smile, but there was an odd quirk of his lips. “Do I, Mr. Zsasz?” He turned his head, letting the light shine better over him, and that’s when Victor saw it.

“Chief?” The term fell from his lips without a thought. But yes, now that he could see the man in the full light, and he recognized the familiar shape of his eyes and nose, the gray-green eyes, and the quirk of his mouth, the same almost-smile he’d make when he knew something, when he had a plan up his sleeve, and Victor knew it’d be a party.
The boxcutter, the scotch, the tea.

The mysterious disappearance of the Penguin was one of Gotham’s greatest mysteries. By all accounts, the man had tried to rob a bank one day and then vanished the next. Victor personally thought that someone had probably finally taken the man out to the pier, and he was fish food, but in the chaos of the bridges, it had seemed like a paltry thing. However, sometimes Victor would miss the man—part of him always regretted betraying him, regretted believing in Sofia Falcone when the Penguin had always treated Victor well. It had been one of his few regrets in life.

The Administrator—the Penguin?—just took another sip of his tea, not acknowledging the question but eyes never leaving Victor’s, foreign and familiar at the same time.

He could see it clearer now, once he got past the piercings and tattoos, past the cold mannerisms. The man had barely aged in the last decade, but now that he saw it, he couldn’t see anyone other than the Penguin but—

“Your leg,” he said, eyes shooting down to the once mangled limb, the same leg that he had noticed the man favored as he walked.

“What about my leg, Mr. Zsasz?”

Victor’s smile fell off his face. This bastard was some fucked up experiment of Hugo Strange; it had to be designed to throw everyone for a loop. He pulled a gun out and aimed it at the copy-cat’s forehead. “Nice trick, but I’m not sure what you were trying to accomplish by wearing the face of my dead boss. Next time, tell the Professor to do some more research. The Penguin would have never been caught looking like that.”

“Would he now?” the Administrator said, unworried as he settled back down into his seat. “Sit down, Mr. Zsasz, and finish your tea. It’s getting cold.”

“Who the fuck are you?” Victor asked instead, pointedly pulling back the hammer of his gun with a threatening creak.

Victor cracked open the scotch. The little revelation had been unsettling, but he was inclined to believe that this man was, in fact, the presumed dead Penguin. Call it a gut feeling, an instinct, or just being used crazy shit in Gotham. “Chief?” he said again after he had thrown back a finger of scotch, wanting—needing—confirmation.

“Mr. Zsasz,” the man repeated with a raised eyebrow.

It was all wrong, the title, the tone, the complete lack of feeling in his words. The little bird had been the most fun, all easy to rile up and full of snide comments and fire. The Penguin was nothing if not emotional, full of brimstone and half-cocked instincts that weren’t always tempered by the brilliant brain. This man, though, was ice. He shared a face with the Penguin, but there was nothing beyond those eyes except pure calculation.

“Where have you been?” Victor asked, reaching to grab the bottle to five himself another generous pour. “We assumed you were dead.” Especially after the blockade—everyone knew the Penguin wouldn’t let anyone touch his precious city unless he was dead.

“Oh, here and there,” the man said flippantly, and it was infuriating. “Nowhere of importance; however, I am in need of some good help here in Gotham, Mr. Zsasz. My employers are looking to expand their business, and I am afraid my accounts of the dear city a bit out of date.”

“Your...employers,” Victor repeated, skeptical. The Penguin would never have been caught working for anyone, not after the mess with Fish Mooney. Victor had seen the man beat a man to death with a candlestick at the suggestion that he wasn’t the boss.

“Yes,” he said, unconcerned. “I am hoping you will fill in any gaps and answer some of my questions. You will be properly compensated, of course.” He motioned with a hand, and an unassuming man shuffled out from the dark and opened a briefcase stacked with bills, arranged in neat rows. A woman was next to him and opened a small wooden box lined with red crushed velvet to show off a neat row of four gold coins, each embossed with an unknown mark. “Also, in thanks for your...cooperation, I may be persuaded to offer you some additional means of entertainment. I am sure you have been languishing in boredom.”

Victor took a moment to consider the bills, the odd coins, and the offer of fun. He threw back the remainder of his scotch, letting the burn distract him for a moment. “Okay, yeah, sure. Why the fuck not?” he said with a shrug as he threw his glass down carelessly. “What do you want to know, chief?”
“Please, Mr. Zsasz,” the stranger said with a persistent smile that never reached his eyes, setting down his teacup to fold his hands delicately on his crossed knees. “Call me the Administrator.”

The questions were exactly what he said they were—filling in the gaps of what had been happening in Gotham since the disappearance of the Penguin. Victor hadn’t been around for a lot of it first-hand, but word got around quickly. It was something to behold when most of them agreed to a truce to allow for reunification and even more so when they were handing out pardons in the aftermath with candy on Halloween.

“Jimbo would know the most, of course,” Victor said, swinging one leg over the edge of the chair to sprawl in his classic irreverence. The teapots had been refilled with hot water, and the Administrator—he couldn’t bring himself to call this dead marble statue the Penguin—was sipping at his third cup.

“I suppose he would,” the Administrator said, no reaction to the man that he once had a crush on that was a mile wide and as deep as the Mariana Trench. “Now, tell me about the players. One at a time, please, and let’s start with Ms. Kean.”

It was odd, reciting both ancient and recent history to a dead man. His words shuffled between the mundane to the significant—bases of operations and allies to where they had dinner two weeks ago. There was no sign of personal interest in anyone, not when Victor recited how Butch and Tabitha had blown up Haven under the control of Nyssa al Ghul or how Barbara had a daughter, cute little button she was. Not even when he mentioned Nygma—how the man had gone a little mad in the aftermath of his disappearance—or the miraculous recovery of Sofia Falcone.

There was no change in his facial expression, just vague professional interest like he didn’t actually care what was being said.

When he was done, he stood up, brushing off imaginary lint from his pants. “Thank you for the information, Mr. Zsasz. Antonio will discuss the details of your long-term contract as well as the services that will be available to you. However, as a favor from an old friend, I would prefer it if you kept my presence in the city...discreet.” A sharpness in his eyes, cutting and full of dark promises, punctuated the statement. “As a favor, of course.”

The threat was there, and Victor, for the first time in a long time, felt it in his bones. He didn’t know how or what or who, but this man could deliver. He smiled in response, cheery and seemingly unperturbed. “Of course. Wouldn’t dream of it.” He mimed zipping his mouth and locking it with an invisible key.
“Good evening then, Mr. Zsasz,” he said airily and walked away, footsteps soft and, even with the barest limp, nothing at all like the man he remembered.

The Administrator managed to make it to his office before he forgot how to breathe.

One. Two. Three. He closed his eyes and focused on inhaling and exhaling. He hadn’t thought it would be that hard to see him; it was just Zsasz.

Just Victor who had gifted him a brainwashed Butch, who had stood by his side for years after Falcone retired, who had shared drinks and jokes within the Van Dahl mansion, who would sing off-beat disco when bored, who he had trusted Martin with, who—

One. Two. Three.

It had taken every fiber in his being to maintain himself, every inch of him pushing, suppressing, so he would feel nothing, a practiced trait that he had perfected in the years. Nothing, just the Administrator, One of Three, Three of One.

A hand went to his elbow, and he dug his thumb in the tattoo of the tallies, digging his nail into the flesh until he could feel it draw blood. A reminder, a catharsis.

One.

Two.

Three.

When he opened his eyes again, he straightened his tie, took a seat, and went back to work.
Victor didn’t know why he was here, lurking on the roof of the GCPD. Or he did know, and he didn’t want to admit that he couldn’t forget the look in the Administrator’s eyes.

The damn spotlight was on, a bright beacon into the sky like it had all those years ago in Haven. The parallelism was sickening, overwrought, and very much like Jim Gordon.

Which, speak of the devil.

“Jimbo!” Zsasz greeted from his crouched perch over the door, one gun out already in idle threat. He wasn’t going to shoot the man, but Jimmy didn’t need to know that.

“Zsasz,” Jim replied, tense and aiming his weapon at the man with a fluidity that he hadn’t lost with age. Fatherhood hadn’t dulled the man’s sharp reflexes a bit.

Victor jumped down to land on his feet, agile and fluid as any cat. “Is that a way to treat an old friend?”

“What do you want, Zsasz?” Jim asked, exasperated, lowering his gun but not holstering it. The tentative understanding they had gained during No Man’s Land had left its mark even now, lingering like a fungus. They didn’t trust each other, but there was a mutual respect that had never faded.

“You know what? No fucking clue. Just feeling nostalgic, I guess.” He shrugged. The truth was as confusing aloud as it had been in his mind.

“Nostalgic?” Jim repeated, skepticism and sarcasm heavy.

Zsasz smiled, all teeth. “Yeah, you remember how it was back in the day. Back when your baby mama tried to kill your wifey, and you didn’t shoot a little birdie in the head like a good dirty cop. The good ol’ days.”

“Zsasz,” Jim repeated, stern but confused, almost concerned. “What do you want?”
“Like I said, Jimbo, just old memories.” He turned away, making ready to jump down from the roof through the fire escape, but something stopped him. “Hey,” he said, not turning and eyes fixed unseeing in the distance. “Do you ever wonder what happened to him?”

“Hm?” Jim said, still on guard and suspicious. “Who?”

“Oswald Cobblepot,” Victor said, and the name was like a hammer falling, like a ghost who would come when summoned, a name from history, a name with history.

There was a pause.

“No, I don’t,” Jim said, and Victor knew he was lying. They all were—Oswald had been a shining star in the center of Gotham, the burning supernova that would implode and take everyone with it, the constant that you could live and die by. The sky was blue; the sun set in the west; and the Penguin was always out there waiting, lying in wait to reclaim his throne. He had been the link that wove everyone together—Falcone and Jim, Bullock and Valeska, Butch and Thompkins, Tabitha and Strange—the little ties that had kept Gotham from spiraling, and his disappearance had shaken them all even if no one admitted it.

Zsasz didn’t smile. “Yeah,” he said. “Me neither.”

Chapter End Notes

-whistles innocently-

Please spare a moment to leave a comment if you enjoyed! <3
Ed hadn’t thought much of it. He and Oswald had a tumultuous history, and despite their on-again-off-again truce, their friendship was always going to be rocky.

So when he didn’t hear anything about Oswald in the days after the bank heist, he hadn’t thought much about it. He focused his efforts on breaking Lee out and, once that was accomplished, concentrated on keeping Lee. He loved her—was in love with her—and he was going to do anything to make her happy, and if that involved robbing half a dozen banks or not killing an annoying pest of a detective, so be it.

So he hadn’t thought much of it, not even when there were little whispers that the Penguin hadn’t been seen in days. Uncommon, but not unheard of. He didn’t think about it.

At least until Butch, still Grundy-fied, came knocking at the Narrows.

“Oi, Nygma,” he heard the man call out, fists banging loud enough on the door that he would be sure to leave dents.

Ed huffed, annoyed, but opened the door with a flourish. “Butch,” he said with a bright, condescending smile. “What can I do for you? Don’t you have your new master to run to?”

“Where is he, Nygma?” Butch demanded, the white face and white hair making him more than threatening enough to most. Ed wasn’t worried though—as long as Butch worked for Oswald, he was no danger to Ed.

“Where is who?” Ed asked, “Is this a riddle for me? Because—”

“Penguin!” Butch said with a scowl. “Where is he? No one has seen him since the bank and that means he has to be squirreled away here with you.”

Ed cocked an eyebrow. “And why, pray tell, would you say that?”
Butch huffed and shouldered Ed aside, helping himself in. Rude. “Don’t be stupid, Nygma. Everyone knows you’re his only friend. If he’s not with me, he’s with you.”

The words sent a pang of something unidentified through Ed that he ignored. “Well, he’s not here, so I’m afraid what everyone knows is wrong. Now, if you please,” he said, stepping aside to gesture to the open door with a showman’s flourish.

Butch stopped and looked at him, pausing and searching. “He really not here?”

“Really,” Ed said, with an eye roll.

Butch grunted, taking a good look at him and lumbered out. “If you are lying to me, Nygma,” he started to say, voice menacing and low, the threat apparent. “Penguin is my chance to fix this,” he said, gesturing to himself, “and I don’t appreciate anyone standing in the way of that. Got it?”

After he left, Ed stared out the window, wondering, considering.

Oswald had no reason to disappear like this—not when he was working with Butch which was a guarantee of protection. And if Butch was coming to Ed, then Oswald wasn’t with Barbara or Tabitha either.

“The bank, eh?” he said, the puzzle niggling at his mind. “Oswald, Oswald, where are you?”

Ed was getting worried. No, not worried. Just curious, curious as any puzzle.

Butch had been right—no one had seen him after the bank. Ed checked out all of his old haunts, but found the Van Dahl mansion empty—not even Olga—and locked with a new chain around the front gate. The Falcone mansion that he liked to squat in was similarly empty, no Butch, no help, no blood, nothing.

Ed identified which room Oswald had taken over—the grand master suite that was undoubtedly the
late Carmine Falcone’s—and it was as if the man had disappeared into thin air. All his clothes were there, hanging perfectly pressed in the closet, the little dish of cufflinks sitting on the dresser, and his favorite brand of pomade waiting in the bathroom. An unfinished novel—*The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*—sat on the nightstand, bookmark tucked into its pages. There was even an abandoned cup of tea on the writing desk, dried up with nothing but a few dustings of tea leaves at the bottom.

Ed wasn’t concerned. He wasn’t. Oswald was more cockroach than penguin as he once said—he’d undoubtedly turn up somewhere.

Except he didn’t.

Days passed, and Ed spent every spare moment tracking down where Oswald could be. Butch insisted that he had returned to the Falcone mansion while Butch had gone to have his attempted clandestine rendezvous with Tabitha. When he returned the next morning, the Penguin had already been gone. Butch had assumed he was out, some scheme or another until he didn’t come back.

When the bombs came and the evacuation sounded, Ed wasn’t worried. He wasn’t.

When Lee brought up helping Jim with the bombs, he didn’t even care, mind still spinning with paths and probabilities, different ways to track down a wayward bird. He put up no fight with Lee, just agreed—Jim Gordon was the least of his problems.

The kiss she gives him felt like nothing, a fly against his mouth, a distraction.

He was only half-heartedly staring at the drawings that Jim had brought in, ignoring the tension that lingered between the two of them, ignoring the odd way Jim stared at him.

“Have you talked to Oswald, lately?” he asked instead, staring blankly at the lines of the maze, not truly seeing them.

“Cobblepot? No, why?” Jim answered, eyebrows furrowed in confusion at the non-sequitur even as he ran a hand over the map, as though touch would make the answer appear.

“Oh, no reason,” Ed said, trying to remain nonchalant. And then he saw it, the labyrinth, and it was so simple that he was ashamed that he hadn’t seen it immediately.
When Jim Gordon ran out the door, Ed didn’t even notice, mind already returning to the more important—interesting!—problem at hand.

The bridges blew, and Oswald was still nowhere to be found. He barely even noticed Lee, barely said a word to her, instead kept himself locked up with maps and reports and where was Oswald. He couldn’t be dead, Oswald Cobblepot did not go gently into the good night. The man was the very definition of rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Lee said goodbye, and Ed didn’t even notice.

He’d find whoever had done this; he’d rip their hearts out and feed it back to them. Oswald was his to kill, his to see that sweet torment on his face, his to feel the blood on his hands, his his his.

He carved out his territory over the empty Falcone mansion, the last known place that the Penguin was thought to be. He cared not for the masses and squabbling, but he kept the estate untouched, uncontaminated. He was a forensic scientist again, and he combed it for every clue to solve the mystery but found nothing nothing nothing.

Oswald couldn’t be dead.

The idea of reunification kept him distracted enough. Those he had worked within the Narrows flocked to him, and he kept everyone fed and watered with an absent mind. Barbara’s shipment patterns were easy to trace, and her underlings even easier to outsmart, so he was kept high in weapons and ammo. Food had been easily coaxed out of Ivy and clean water from Foxy.

Ed was no leader but he didn’t need to be—he just had to be smart enough to have people leave him alone long enough to solve the real problem.

Ed kept on waiting even as the fight escalated for reunification. He muscled his way into the GCPD, took up a gun, and stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Jim Gordon in the battle for Gotham because he knew if Oswald was there, alive somewhere, this is where he’d be. Oswald would never leave Gotham, would never leave his city unprotected.
Oswald never appeared.

In the aftermath, he is lost. Oswald is dead, he told himself. Oswald is dead, lost to him forever.

He didn’t mean to start again. But before he realized it, he was slipping a pill into his mouth and biting down, the taste bitter like chalk.

Oswald always looked so good in purple.

It was Lee who saved him.

You almost died, she said as she took his pulse in the rebuilt clinic in the Narrows. Unofficially, she was still Queen of the Narrows—the people loved her when she was the Doc, and they continued to love her as Mrs. Gordon.

Overdose, she said. Lucky that someone has been sent to check on you, stupid of you. What were you thinking, Ed?

He didn’t know how to answer.

Oswald Oswald Oswald. It’s the only way I see Oswald still, he thinks but doesn’t say, words stuck in his throat, his heart, his everything.

He’s dead dead dead. Ed knew it, felt it because nothing would keep him away if he wasn’t. And the last thing he could see were his eyes, bright and shining and hurt as though Ed put another bullet in his heart.
He starts the cycle.

He wreaks havoc, nonsensical and taking the police on a merry chase with small games that turn into mania, thoughtless and sloppy and making him feel alive.

One pill, two pills, three pills.

…Floor.

The mania makes him careless, talking and laughing with someone who wasn’t there. He gets caught and detoxes in Arkham. Once sober, he escapes, his mind clean and clear enough that four simple walls can’t hold him.


Again and again and again.

Slowly, the pain fades. He stops looking and turning at every flash of a purple suit or every sound of a cane.

He stops taking the pills, but he never stops thinking about it.

Just once more, he thinks. I just need to say goodbye, just one last time.

Instead, he concocts elaborate schemes and thefts, puzzles built into murders, murders into riddles and tries to find his high in something outside of a bottle.

*Riddle me this.*
What has two eyes but can’t see?

No one ever got the answer right.

He still talks to Lee and Jim—more accurately, Lee and Jim check up on him, makes sure he’s keeping clean, makes sure he’s not on the verge of another overdose. He doesn’t know why they care, but he lets Lee check his pupils and Jim search him for pills, let’s them push him to the guest room that is practically his room, let’s them pretend that he’s not a criminal when he shows up at their door, needing them to stop him before he falls down the hole again and again.

Barbara is different—motherhood has changed her, and Ed doesn’t like the new her. Butch and Tabitha are different too—love, Butch says, and Ed doesn’t like it either. Doesn’t like how all of them will find him when his mania gets too much, doesn’t like how Butch will talk to him slowly like he’s a skittish animal, or how Barbara will pull his head into her lap and hum until the voices stop. Or how they would all visit him in Arkham and bring him puzzles that are too easy or cookies that are too sweet.

He teams up with others sometimes too; Catwoman tends to be his most reliable ally as long as his motive was burglary, and Poison Ivy could be clever when she felt like it. Sometimes he teams up with Joker, and they have a good laugh at the chaos.

The Riddler carves out his corner of the city, and he’s fine. Just fine.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, lookie, it's Ed. <3 (And happy Pride!)

As always, thanks to everyone for reading! If you enjoyed, please take a moment to feed my soul and comment! <3
The Administrator watched the final touches being placed, rows of liquor finally being set behind the bar—all for decoration as he has long learned—and final copy of the cocktail menu was being reviewed.

One week until the opening.

He ran over the most recent reports he received. Razz had made friends, but mostly with the younger kids who didn’t know better. He was getting somewhere though, he said. The kids were trusting him more and more, and he was rounding up a small entourage of vicious ankle-biters what he was becoming rapidly fond of.

Valentine had established himself and was now a regular landmark along the streets. The community wasn’t welcoming, it never was, but they treated him like any other junkie from the Narrows and ignored him. There were a few others, Vincent reported, that might be worth recruiting. Desperate but sharp, were his words, and precisely the type that did well in their line of work.

Jackie had found the most success of the three. The officer she had pickpocketed had been a real Good Samaritan, it so happened, and checked her into a halfway house for runaways. It was a deliciously good place for gossip, and she had two ducklings who whispered her little secrets—about who was hiding where and why and what areas to avoid. It helped that the Wayne Foundation funded the house, so she got to hear some of the more salacious rumors regarding the infamous billionaire playboy. If even a fraction of what was said about the Wayne boy was true, the Administrator had to applaud his stamina.

Addy had not managed to wiggle her way into The Sirens but had found an excellent alternative job at Malloy’s, one of Sofia Falcone’s more popular bars and a frequent spot for her underlings. She made a weekly drop of information, and the Administrator had an eye on every move Donna Falcone made. He told himself it was only in the name of keeping the closest eye on the most significant threat and slid Addy a few choice tidbits about the preferences of a few of the more influential capos and their men. It had been almost too easy for her to have them eating out of the palm of her hand, coaxing secrets from them as easy as giving candy to children.

Opening night had to be perfect. They had to establish their rules and lines—had to know that they would not be negotiated with.
He had eight contractors hired for the event, each with well-oiled reputations within the Continental. Victor Zsasz would also be present, a deterrent and as a symbol—The Continental was not playing games. If Gotham didn’t respect their players, they would respect one of their own.

The Administrator took a breath. He was ready. He had to be ready.

Jim straightened his tie, restless, hating how he felt and looked in these monkey suits. He would prefer a cheaper suit, well-washed and almost threadbare, to the perfectly tailored monstrosity that he was currently wearing.

“Stop fidgeting,” Lee said reproachfully, smacking his hand away to straighten the tie again.

“Do we have to go?” he whined, knowing the answer already as they waited for the limo to pull to stop.

“Yes, we do, Commissioner Gordon,” Lee said with a smile as she adjusted the straps of her floor-length gown that shimmered in a kaleidoscope of midnight blue and silver. She looked beautiful—her hair pulled up in a curled updo and long pearl earrings that accentuated her neck—and Jim was struck again by how lucky he was to have married her.

He leaned in to kiss her, and she smiled into his lips. “You aren’t getting out of this, mister. The babysitter is paid up. Besides, Harvey and Barbara will be there as well, and it’s been ages since I’ve spoken to Alfred or Bruce.”

“Fine, fine,” he grumbled, resisting the urge to loosen his tie again.

The annual Martha Wayne Foundation charity ball was just another night of torture—a night of small talk and mingling with socialites who didn’t know left from right and slippery, slimy politicians. Jim was invited as police commissioner and, to a certain extent, as an old friend of Bruce Wayne. Jim didn’t understand the boy—man, he supposed—anymore; the smart, serious teen he had grown fond of had returned a year ago a different person—all flippancy and airheadedness, throwing around his weight in money in a way he would have been ashamed of a decade ago. Jim had tried to talk to Alfred about it, and the poor man had been just as exasperated.
However, tonight was a unique opportunity to finally meet the elusive Mr. Matthew Richardson, the mysterious businessman who had swept in and bought an extensive, previously condemned block of real estate and then proceeded to spend millions into renovations. Within months, the block had been transformed, and every bar and nightclub in Gotham had been poached of their best talent.

To add to the mystery, no one could catch a glimpse of the man. The staff has been too well paid or threatened to think about taking a cut from a reporter or to snitch to the police. Rumors swirled around the club, among the GCPD and criminals alike. Even the Bat had failed to bring up anything beyond a legitimate enterprise despite all the red flags that were thrown up.

Alfred, as a favor to an old friend, had tipped Jim off that the man in question had accepted the invitation to the charity ball, making this night the first, and potentially only, place anyone would be able to gather intel. Gotham had a long and distrustful history with mysterious and wealthy men moving in, after all.

The entranceway was full of reporters, taking glamorous photos of the entering guests to be plastered over the society pages of tomorrow’s papers. He and Lee posed after they stepped out onto the rolled out red carpet, their press smiles on their faces that they had perfected after all the years.

He was impressed as always when he stepped into the redecorated lobby of Wayne Tower, primed and primped for the ball. Servers wandered among the crowd in a simple uniform—white dress shirt, tie and black vest—passing around hors d’oeuvre and flutes of champagne to the guests. Bartenders were waiting behind temporary bars, mixing drinks with an extravagant show. He watched as one young woman threw up two ice cubes and caught them in a shaker, throwing a bottled over her head and catching it without looking. She serves the finished drink with a flourish and wink to the waiting guest who cooned in admiration behind her gloves and million-dollar diamond bracelet.

A live band was set up on the stage, the singer crooning into the microphone while accompanied by the soothing strum of a bass. Jim stopped and shook hands with everyone who recognized him as he shuffled his way to the bar. He had already lost Lee to a cluster of older ladies, and he knew she was likely wrangling a hefty donation for the clinic out of them.

“Four Roses, straight,” he ordered to the bartender. “And a glass of merlot.”

He leaned one elbow against the bar, people watching as he waited. Something caught his eye, years of instincts as a cop catching when something didn’t belong.
One of the bartenders—something was different about himself. Unlike the other clean-cut and classy looking staff, the man was covered in various tattoos, the ink swirling down his exposed arms where the sleeves—a blush pink opposed to white—were pushed up past his elbows. He could see the shine of metal against his lip and brow that glinted in the low lights. He was in the middle of garnishing a cocktail with an orange slice, his black painted nails long and sharpened to dangerous looking points that were incongruous with the surroundings.

It was too far for him to catch any more detail, but something about his profile was familiar—paired with how much he stuck out in the crowd, he set every cop instinct Jim had off.

He tipped the bartender when he was served his drinks, making his way to absently to hand the glass of wine to Lee while trying to keep his eye on the stranger as he weaved through the crowd, but being police commissioner meant it was a challenge to walk more than a few feet without having to glad hand.

He lost track of the man after he finally managed to escape the clutches of a pair of socialites. He sighed and spun, craning his neck to see if he could find his quarry but was late—he had lost him in the ever-increasing crowd.

Jim couldn't help but keep looking for the strange man throughout the night, something tickling the back of his mind like a memory that he couldn’t pull up. He’d seen him out of the corner of his eye, a flash of black hair and glasses or the shine of a piercing before he disappeared into the crowd, haunting the edges of his vision like a ghost.

And then he finally saw him.

The mystery man was holding a tray of champagne, sleeves still rolled up and passing around the refreshments with a neutral expression. He was garnering sideways looks from the guests, but no one called him out—this was Gotham after all. Jim followed him, keeping an eye on his back and not able to shake the feeling of familiarity even as he dodged around the lingering bodies.

He tried to categorize his characteristics, committing them to memory as best he could. Short, several inches shorter than himself, with black hair that was slicked back in neat, unmoving rows. Tattoos and piercings were memorable enough, and even at this distance, he could see the shape of wings amid the body art and at least half a dozen pieces of metal in his face. He walked with a slight limp, noticeable but not particularly defining.

So why did…?
Jim thought he saw his chance when the man turned and ran almost head-first into Harvey. He saw his old partner set a hand on his shoulder, steadying his balance as the tray of champagne quivered precariously. He tried to hurry to catch him but cursed when his target disappeared again within the crowd.

“Woah, Jim,” Harvey said, placing a hand on his shoulder as Jim hustled over, trying to shoulder past the older man. “What’s the rush, compadre?”

“That server,” Jim said distracted, eyes scanning over the crowd in a futile attempt to catch another look. “Did something seem off about him?”

“Can’t you take a night off?” he said with a grumble. “Honestly? Didn’t have much of a chance to get a good look and feel. Why? What’s going on now?”

Jim sighed, giving up the hunt for now. “Not sure, just something wasn’t quite right about him. It’s probably nothing.” He ran a hand through his hair, an old habit that he had never been able to fully kick.

“Partner,” Harvey said with a resigned sigh as he threw back the remainder of his drink. “If these last two decades have taught me anything is that it’s never nothing with you. Come on, let’s go a-looking.”

The Administrator mingled among the staff—it was easier to gather information when one didn’t know who you were. He mixed drinks, passed around champagne, and lingered on the edges, listening. It hadn’t been his original plan when he accepted the invitation, but he had never been one to pass up the opportunity when it fell into his lap. When someone had mistaken him for a server, he had seized the opportunity to wander among the rich and famous unseen. Accepting the invitation had been a calculated move—the possibility of information outweighed the risk. This method, however, diminished the risks significantly. No one thought to question him as he slid behind the bar and started mixing drinks or when he picked up a tray of champagne to pass around—even with his startlingly different looks and completely different colored dress shirt. It was amazing how a confident stride and unfriendly face managed to belay any questions.

He was careful to keep away from anyone he may have known, anyone who may see him and recognize him. It was doubtful—the dim lighting and the chaos of a party mixed with a decade of time meant that only the most observant might recognize him. The number of people who he had
been close enough to even do so was minuscule, especially when one of that dwindling number was running his security for the night.

Regardless, he didn’t get this far by being careless.

It was carelessness, however, that led him to bump into Harvey Bullock.

“Oh, please pardon me,” he said, eyes downcast and careful to keep his words soft. He had been avoiding Commissioner Gordon all night—that man was like a bloodhound with a scent when he caught a whiff of something.

“Easy there, kid,” Captain Bullock said, voice steady and deep with a distinctive accent, one large hand steadying him by the shoulder.

The Administrator cursed inwardly. Outwardly he just ducked his head further, avoiding eye contact and keeping his face shrouded in shadows. “My apologies, sir.”

He scurried away, twisting into the crowd before the former detective could say anything else.

He passed off the tray of champagne to an actual server, eager to escape. He found his way out to a private balcony, tucked away behind all of the drapery and finery that bedecked Wayne Tower. He leaned a hip against the railing as he fished out a fresh cigarette from his back pocket, pretending that his hand wasn’t shaking as he wrapped his fingers around the cancerous stick. He held the end in his mouth while he looked for his lighter when he heard the click of a flame and a whiff of butane.

“Allow me,” the man offered, one hand cupped around the flame to protect it from the wind. The Administrator leaned forward, rolling the end of the cigarette into the fire and took a long drag, eyes fluttering close in momentary bliss at the acrid taste of smoke on his tongue. It was only when he exhaled that he looked up at his mysterious benefactor.

“Mr. Wayne,” he said with a raised eyebrow, concealing his surprise. The boy had grown up well, tall and posed in a way that suited the richest man in Gotham. His messy black hair, once styled back in loose waves, was slicked back and straight, revealing his stunning blue eyes and sardonic smile.
“I’m afraid you have me at a disadvantage,” Mr. Wayne said, dropping the lighter into an inner pocket of his suit—curious considering the man himself did not reach for a smoke. The Administrator could smell the sharp stench of alcohol on him, could see it in the waiver of his movements, but the young billionaire couldn’t entirely hide the sharp calculation in his eyes.

Interesting.

He considered his options for a moment, disguising the pause with another drag of nicotine. He let his eyes rake up and down the young man’s body, taking into the height and cheekbones, the lean muscle that wasn’t quite hidden by a bespoke suit or lavender silk tie. He smiled up at him from under his lashes, all teasing coyness. The young billionaire did have quite the reputation, but, alas, it had been firmly among women. Pity, as having the man in his bed would have been useful even though seduction hadn’t been in his repertoire in quite a few years.

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“Matthew Richardson,” he introduced instead, lazily, holding out his free hand. “At your service.”

Mr. Wayne grabbed his hand, giving it a hearty squeeze in response that he paired with a dashing grin. “So, you are the mysterious Mr. Richardson. And here I thought you decided to stand us up, but you’ve just been hiding back here all night. You are a hard man to track down.”

The Administrator smiled, secretive. “Call me Matthew, please. And stand up the infamous Bruce Wayne? I’d never.” His eyes glimmered in humor, a teasing lilt to his words.

“Well, lucky me,” Mr. Wayne said, this time with a smile that was definitely flirtatious. “Everyone will be jealous that I got the first bite of you. You are the talk of the town. Your, uh, Continental, was it? Biggest news of the year.”

“You flatter me, Mr. Wayne,” the Administrator said. “I’m sure I’ll be usurped quickly, what with all the interesting characters Gotham has to offer.” He studied him carefully as he brought the cigarette back up to his lips. “Especially with, what is he called? The mysterious Batman flitting around during the night.”

“Ha! Crazies in suits aren’t anything new in Gotham,” Mr. Wayne said with a dismissive gesture and carefree shrug. “But a new club? Now that’s what we call interesting. And please, call me Bruce. Mr. Wayne was my father.”

“You Gothamites do have a unique definition of interesting,” the Administrator said with an
amused drawl. “It is quite refreshing.” He flicked the ashes off the end of the cigarette, leaning his back against the railing to look up at the man.

Mr. Wayne laughed, head back and the sound boyish. “That’s one way to put it.”

Neither Harvey nor Jim managed to catch sight of the man again. After questioning the staff, it wasn’t surprising that no one recognized him either.

But despite misgivings and the way the hairs on the back of his neck crawled all night, the remainder of the evening went without any interruptions, a shocking departure from the norm in Gotham.

By the time Jim was able to politely excuse himself and Lee, he was more than ready to go home and kiss his daughter goodnight. It was only as he had stepped out into the fresh night air, ready to flag down a driver, that he noticed her. He sighed and kissed Lee on the cheek, murmuring a quick excuse into her ear. Used to her husband, Lee just smiled understandingly, pulling out her phone to check on the babysitter.

Jim ducked around the corner and into a well-lit alleyway. “Come on down, Selina,” he said, hands on his hips.

He heard the faintest screech of metal against metal and then the soft impact of leather boots on the asphalt behind him. He turned and gave the young woman who he still saw her as the cocky little pickpocket from all those years ago a good stern look. “Not like you to stick around,” he said, raising an eyebrow at her attire. She was in her usual skin-tight bodysuit and not the eye-catching evening wear she normally wore to sneak into these events.

Selina pouted, crossing her arms over her chest. “I couldn’t get in.”

Jim raised a brow, disbelieving. “You? Couldn’t get into an event?”

Selina sighed, blowing a curl out of her face. “Yeah, yeah. Fuckers recognized me. I was almost in too, but then some douchebag security guard caught me and escorted me outside.”
Catwoman’s face was not well-known among the general populous—her distinctive outfit as she wore now, yes—but her real face as Selina Kyle? Not so much. “Bruce didn’t invite you?”

A complicated look crossed her face, the same one she had every time Bruce Wayne was mentioned. He knew that they had an odd on-again-off-again-on-again relationship that was starting to make Jim’s love life look simple, but Bruce usually still let Selina slink in and then turn a pointed blind eye to her presence. “We’re not talking right now,” she said, voice leaving no room for further questions.

“Huh,” Jim said, unsure what else to say and uncomfortable talking about her love life when it was still hard to shake the image of her as a thirteen-year-old girl. But since she was here... “What do you know about the Continental and this Matthew Richardson? What’s the word on the street?”

“ Asking for info, Jim? What do I get?” Selina smirked, smelling blood, and cocked her hip.

“Selina,” Jim said, stern and with his well-practiced Dad Voice.

“Urg, fine,” she said, all attitude, and Jim managed to suppress a smile at the familiar tone. “Not much, really. Just that they take their ‘no business on company grounds’ policy really fucking seriously.” She rolled her eyes. “Staff won’t give details though—all of them are scared shitless or being paid too well to care. Just that the word is to not fuck with them.” Selina shrugged, obviously unconcerned.

“Can you put the word out for more information? Whatever you can find, especially about the owner?” Jim asked.

She gave him a look. “And what do I get in return? A girl needs to eat.”

Jim sighed, but he knew how this worked, and petty thievery was better than murder. “Mayor James is having another fundraiser next month at the Park Plaza. I turn a blind eye when I see you in the crowd, okay?”

Selina smirked. “Deal.”
“Thanks, Selina,” Jim said, trying not to sound grateful even as he walked past her to return to Lee.

“Bye, Jim,” she said, and Jim could hear the smile in her voice.

Selina returned sooner than expected with more information, sneaking into his office from her favorite window barely two days later and perching herself on his desk, tossing a worthless paperweight in the air to entertain herself.

“Hello, Selina,” Jim said, somehow keeping the exasperation out of his voice as he shut the door behind him.

“Is that how you always greet your favorite informant?” she said with mock hurt, twisting herself off the desk in a fluid movement even as she turned the shiny bauble between her fingers in a display of dexterity.

“Do you have something for me?”

“Yeah,” she said with the roll of her eyes, “I do.” She threw down an envelope onto the desk, heavy cream paper with Selina’s name written on the front in careful, elaborate calligraphy. Under her full name, Catwoman was spelled out in equally careful letters.

Jim opened it, pulling out the invitation. “Opening night?” he said, reading what was clearly an invitation to the Continental. It was a generic invitation—date, time, address, with dress code—with the exception that it had a clear warning that mirrored Selina’s words from just a few nights previous—that no business was to take place on the grounds and that it would be enforced with extreme prejudice. The Continental is Consecrated ground, it read, and neutral in all conflicts. Violators will be dealt with at the discretion of Management.

“Who else is getting these invitations?” Jim asked, flipping the thick paper over to see if there was anything else.

“Anyone who is anyone. Criminal anyone, that is,” Selina said, flopping herself down on a chair, one leg thrown over the arm. “They are all personalized. Ivy found hers delivered with a rare plant that she won’t shut up again, and Harley and Joker had theirs sent attached to a jack-in-the-box bomb. I heard Deadshot got his with a pretty new gun, and even Killer Croc got an invite. Whoever
Jim furrowed his brows in concern. Whoever was running this show was gathering support, allies. Gotham hadn’t had a kingpin in over a decade, the strife left after reunification never healing. Sofia Falcone had attempted to overtake Gotham as her own after her miraculous recovery, but she didn’t have the support of the increasingly odd and eccentric criminals. She kept her capos and overtook some of Maroni’s old men, but without the flash, bang, and flair that accompanied the new order of criminals, she would never be Queen of Gotham. She commanded the respect of the old but had never endeared herself to the new. “Have you heard anything else?”

Selina shook her head. “Nope, nada. Been asking around the streets a bit, but no one is talking if they know something.”

“Keep asking. Discreetly,” he ordered, handing back the envelope.

“Yes, yeah, sure thing, Dad,” she said with an eye roll.

“And be careful, Selina,” he added. “I mean it.”

“I can take care of myself, Jim,” she said, but he could hear the warmth in her voice. “Later, gator.” She blew him a kiss even as she let herself out the door, and Jim couldn’t quite hide the smile that crossed his face at the sound of his very confused and flustered secretary.

Jim wasn’t surprised that Harvey already knew by the time Jim was able to speak to him, cornering his old partner in his office at the precinct later that day.

“Yeah, partner,” he said, setting his hat down on the desk and leaning back. “The word is all over the street. That club’s grand opening is very exclusive to the criminal clientele if you get my meaning.”

“Any cops get an invite?” Jim asked. He knew there were still a few dirty ones within the precinct. He tolerated them. He, of all people, knew the benefit of having an ear out on what was happening in Gotham’s underbelly.

“Yeah,” Harvey said. “Pretty sure Ramirez and Wuertz got invites—they’ve been acting a little too squirrelly lately, more so than normal.”
Jim frowned. They couldn’t do anything about opening night for the time being because there wasn’t anything illegal about the gathering. Still, anyone collecting the criminals of Gotham in a single spot spelled trouble. “Anything new on this Richardson character?”

Harvey dug through his drawer, pulling out a thin folder and handing it over. “Bupkis. Well, almost bupkis. All I can say is that he probably exists.”

Jim opened up the file. No photo, just a birth certificate, a basic profile, and some bare-bones school records. A short employment history that couldn’t be verified and then nothing for almost twenty years. “Fake name?” he said, turning to the next page in hopes there might be more.

“Eh,” Harvey said, bringing up a hand to tilt one way and then another. “Probably. But if it is, it’s a pretty damn good one. School records are still there; we tracked down the originals at the school, and those restaurants he worked at? Real places in Gotham, mob-owned and shut down before you joined the force. If these are fake, they are pretty damn good fakes, and this guy has done his research.”

Jim sighed, leaning back and tossing the folder down. “Yeah, that does seem to be the pattern I’m seeing.” He rubbed a hand over his face, tired. “Put officers around the club that night, uniformed and plain-clothed. They aren’t to approach or interact unless they have to, alright?”

“Roger that,” Harvey said with a mock salute. “What about our, uh, nocturnal friend?”

Jim groaned. He hadn’t even had a chance to run this by the Bat yet.

Harvey laughed as he stood, grabbing his hat. “Better you than me, partner.”

Ed stared at the invitation, turning it around between his two fingers. It had arrived in a puzzle box from a man with an Italian accent that was hiding a Spanish accent with nothing more than a bow and compliments of the Administrator.

The puzzle box has been entertaining at least—it has taken him almost five minutes to solve it which was the best challenge he’s been able to find in years.
The invitation though, Ed considered. Custom paper, likely 67-pound weight, commissioned within Gotham—it still had the signature scent of musk and salt, so likely from the stationary store by the docks off 35th Avenue. It was handwritten, easily seen by the spots of ink, almost invisible, between the start and end of some sentences. Non-toxic, black ink, easily found at any distributor.

Its arrival was the real mystery. The puzzle box spoke of someone who knew the Riddler, or at least his reputation, and the method of delivery said someone who knew his dislike of surprises.

Catwoman has already stopped by with her invitation—also hand-delivered and accompanied by a three-carat black diamond necklace. Harley had slid by shortly after to show off her own, slightly singed, invitation. The Falcones had received multiple invitations by the sounds of their scurrying, and it was apparent that the entirety is Gotham’s underworld had received similar treatment.

Curious and curioser.

“The Administrator,” Ed said, rolling the word in his mouth. “A new puzzle?” He grinned, big and wide, and laughed.

_A new puzzle_, the voice repeated from behind him, voice just a pitch higher and unheard except to Ed. _But can you solve this one?_

Chapter End Notes

Meant to have this up yesterday but ran into a few snags with this chapter! The ball is slowly rolling though...

Please take a moment to comment if you enjoyed this chapter! This chapter gave me a killer of a time, and every comment helps give me motivation for the next. <3
The Riddler arrived at the party in his usual style, clad in his signature emerald suit and bowler hat, his trademark grin never leaving his face as he greeted his fellow criminals. He took in the stage at the back of the club, the sounds of mellow jazz washing over the hum of chatter.

The Continental really was taking its claim of neutral ground seriously. He had been divested of his weapons at the entrance—all of them including his cane—and based on the similar looks of discontent he saw, so had everyone else. The guards were fastidious about their search and had even found the slim ceramic stiletto that one woman has tried to sneak in her bra. A foolish endeavor, really, because he knew everyone here had at least one or two more unconventional means of weaponry still on their person. His own was hidden in the lining of his hat, a carbon fiber wire long enough to strangle any man or woman who got too close.

He sipped on his grasshopper as he took in the crowd, enjoying the taste of heavy cream and mint. The atmosphere was shockingly amiable, and maybe this was what they all needed—a gathering of like-minded friends and foes with the right hint of danger and betrayal hidden beneath the thin veneer of civility.

He caught the eye of Catwoman who raised her glass in a mocking toast from across the room, dressed in a short black leather dress and heels that undoubtedly doubled as weapons, and exchanged a polite nod with Firefly who had clad herself in a similar tight-fitting gown of her signature style, missing her every present flamethrower for once

“Riddler,” he heard from behind him, and he suppressed a groan at the familiar voice as he turned.

“Butch, Tabitha,” he greeted while eyeing the couple with a thin smile. “It has really been too long.” But not long enough.

The two had taken the pardon and had lasted a whole three years keeping their nose out of trouble before they started hiring themselves out as freelance bodyguards to whoever could pay. They had even managed to keep themselves off the police radar—thought Ed was pretty positive that was more to do with the fact that Barbara was the mother of Commissioner Gordon’s child than their own abilities.

Butch’s smile was genuine, cheeky and warm. “It’s good to see you, Nygma,” he said as he pulled
Ed into a hug with a pat on his back. Butch had somehow decided that the two were friends, and Ed had decided to not dissuade him of the notion even though part of him still wanted to sink a blade between Tabitha’s ribs. He had (mostly) banished that urge over the years. “You are looking good.”

Ed smiled, tight-lipped and not able to hide the edge of annoyance. Everyone was always butting their noses into his business when he was fine. “Yes, you as well,” he said, hiding his grimace. “Still alive and no extra limbs this time. How is Maria?” Maria, their squirmy seven-year-old daughter, who was as much a hellspawn as her parents, had a distinct fondness for her Uncle Ed that Ed was loathed to admit was mutual.

Tabitha cut in with a scowl, a decade of marriage and motherhood not softening her the slightest as it had Barbara. Ed had doubt that her foul mood was exacerbated because they found the whip she had tried to hide into the lining of her dress—not a bad idea, but she should have chosen a thinner tassel to have been able to pull it off. “Maria is fine. Barbara is babysitting for the evening.” Which meant Jim Gordon was no doubt camping outside of the club now, waiting for an excuse to barge in.

“Fascinating,” he said, tone saying the exact opposite.

“So, uh,” Butch said, wrapping an arm around his wife’s waist and trying to keep the peace. Tabitha was still a little frosty from the whole cutting-her-hand-off thing, and really, she needed to get over it. Ed had, after all, given her a choice. “Any idea what the deal with this shindig is?”

Ed shook his head, taking another sip of his drink as he examined the crowd. “I am afraid not.”

Butch gave a shrug. “Same. Sounds like no one knows anything about this place even though the owner has been dropping special invites like hot cakes all over town.”

“Hm,” Ed said, noncommittal. “This Administrator or whatever he’s calling himself.”

Tabitha straightened up, her bored expression disappearing. “Administrator?”

Ed nodded, eyes narrowing at her reaction. “Yes, my invitation was delivered with ‘compliments of the Administrator’,” he repeated with a raised brow and pitching his voice half a note lower in imitation. “Was no one else’s?”
Tabitha’s lips turned down into a frown. “No, ours was delivered by a big silent ogre who dropped it off at our doorstep with a bottle of Butch’s favorite whiskey.”

Butch cut in. “Rumor has it that Victor Zsasz delivered a few of the invitations himself.”

“Fascinating,” Ed said, voice distant as he reworked his existing theories. If Victor Zsasz could be swayed to his man’s side, this was something and someone very special indeed.

The mystery was put on hold when the lights cut out. Gotham, being Gotham, meant that everyone reached in for whatever weapon they had or started to discreetly exit. Ed simply took another sip of his grasshopper, grinning into his glass as he waited for whatever show—planned or unplanned—to start.

The lights returned a few seconds later, spotlighting a man in a black domino mask on the stage with one automatic rifle strapped on his shoulder and another nestled into the crook of his arm. A quick scan of the room showed all the exits blocked, and Ed resisted the urge to clap. Oh, this would be fun.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the man said, peacockin with his arms spread wide to his audience, “the criminals of Gotham! What a delight to have you all gathered here today. A real delight! And so convenient. We must really thank our mysterious benefactor for doing so much of the work to gather and disarm you all.” The man laughed, and the sound was high-pitched and cocky. “Now, Gotham has gone too long without a King! So I think it’s time we had a little change in the sta—“

The rest of his speech was cut short when, at once, shots, muted with silencers, rang out, so close to another that it sounded like a single gun. The would-be attackers all screamed, hunched over to grab at their newly injured shoulder or legs, the blood seeping out from under their clothing and over their hands, dripping bright red under the spotlight. Before the crowd could react, each member was quickly, and efficiently, stripped of their weapons by suited men who emerged from the shadows to tie their arms and legs together, careless of the bleeding.

Silence, in the aftermath. And then clapping.

“Very good, Mr. Tetch,” a voice said, familiar and haunting. “Quite the show you prepared for us.”

The spotlight shifted this time highlighting the Mad Hatter who took a bow, even removing his top hat as though a maestro at the end of a performance “Whatever can a man like me say?” he said
with a grin. “I’m someone who loves a little play!”

“Yes,” the voice said again, calm and collected. “You are.” A man walked into the raised stage, incongruent even among the staff and criminals. Short-statured, black hair with an array of body art covering his arms and the glint of metal reflecting off his face in the low lighting. Ed straightened, honing in on the new player. He was too far away to make out any details, but there was...something about him, something that tickled the back of his memory.

Oh Ed, a voice whispered from behind him, cackling. Eddie, Eddie, Eddie.

“Good evening, everybody,” the man said, no microphone but his voice carried. There was a magnetism to his presence, and he commanded the attention of the entire room with little effort. “Welcome to the Continental. I am happy that you were able to join us this evening. I am the Administrator and caretaker of this fine establishment. I had hoped that this could be a cordial evening to introduce myself, but it seems some of your compatriots did not heed the warning.” The man took in the crowd at a leisurely pace, pinning them in their places with sharp eyes not quite hidden behind a pair of rimless glasses, and Ed felt his mouth go dry.

The Mad Hatter opened his mouth again, no doubt to weave his hypnotism. Ed, even entranced by the newcomer, rolled his eyes, already starting to stuff earwax into his ears like many of those around him. Did this Administrator really think it was that easy?

“Now, now, my friendly fien—” he started to say before he started coughing, rough wet coughs. He tried to regain his breath, but instead, he steadied himself against the bar, his voice nothing more than a ragged croak.

“I’m afraid I’m not able to allow you to speak further, Mr. Tetch,” the man said, unconcerned. “It is quite rude, after all, to try to hypnotize your host.”

The Mad Hatter continued to cough, his face turning purple, and everyone was beginning to realize that perhaps they had underestimated this place. It was as if the temperature had dropped, a pit sank in everyone’s stomach, and a shiver of danger ghosted over the nape of everyone’s neck.

The Administrator continued talking over the Hatter’s choking hacks and wheezing attempts at breathing. “As all of you have been informed, the Continental is Consecrated ground. It is, therefore, neutral in any conflicts, and no business shall be conducted on its grounds. Failure to abide by these rules will result in consequences at the discretion of Management.” He looked at the crowd from behind his glasses, and the empty eyes that stared back brook no room for argument.
“There are no exceptions.”

Victor Zsasz snuck up behind the still coughing Hatter and drug a knife across his throat leisurely, the blood spilling forth in a grotesque fountain and splashing on his neighbors to the mixed disgust and delight of the other patrons.

Ed wanted to laugh, clap, because this was the show he had been hoping but something stayed his hand and his voice was caught in his throat.

The Administrator made a motion idly with one hand, a signal, and a series of bound and gagged figures were pulled onto the stage along with the still bleeding members of the failed takeover. Most were low-level thugs based on their dress and demeanor, but Ed recognized a few key members. Two of the men were Talons, with their distinctive garb and masks, and Sofia Falcone was in the crowning center.

“Now, Mr. Tetch was, unfortunately, not the only one of your compatriots who decides to abuse our hospitality. Ms. Falcone, for example, had been hoping to dispose of quite a few of you tonight and had hired some assistance.” The Administrator smiled, cold and knowing, as he brushed the back of his hand against Sofia’s cheek, a lover’s caress. The woman tried not to flinch, but even Ed could see the fear and anger in her stance.

“Now, Ms. Falcone,” the Administrator said, tipping her head up by her chin with a finger almost sweetly, “was lucky enough to be dissuaded from carrying out her ill-conceived little plot and has devoutly pledged her loyalty in exchange for her life. However, I’m afraid not all of her staff was so lucky.”

The Administrator released the Donna to turn his back to the crowd, making room at the front of the stage to allow his men to step forward, each pulling a long sword from their back that reflected in the low light. With the barest nod, a dozen bodies slumped over, their heads rolling off the stage and to the feet of the crowd, leaving Sofia Falcone alone among the dead.

Ed had to give it to her—she kept her head high despite the carnage and her own humiliation.

The Administrator returned to face the crowd, sweeping to look down at the blood and bodies at his feet impassively. “Apologies for the interruption of festivities,” he said, voice still low and calm even as he gave a perfunctory bow. “Please do enjoy the rest of your evening. And welcome to the Continental.”
Ed’s attention was trained on the man, watching as he dropped a handful of gold coins into the hand of an unknown man whose crew was sweeping in to drag the bodies away. There was just a second, a moment, where his profile was lit up against the backdrop, and Ed felt his heart stop.

“Oswald.”

The Administrator motioned to Victor, who holstered his gun and followed him up the steps.

Victor trailed after him and whistled, low and impressed once they were alone. “Well, that was quite the show you put on.”

The Administrator hummed, noncommittal. “Ms. Falcone played her hand too soon, too eager. She really should learn to keep better company—or at least company that is not so easily swayed by a pretty face. And Mr. Tetch just needed a little push in the right direction. He hoped to reclaim his reputation after his last debacle. Now, at least, perhaps everyone will consider taking our rule seriously.”

Victor could see the strings—the pantomime and show of power. It needed to be done, needed to show that no one was above the rules. Only a fool would think that this wasn’t somehow orchestrated by the man who stood before him and whatever power was backing him. Victor was only starting to see it himself, the feel of a gold coin in his pocket and the weight of something more bearing down. “And Sofia’s finger?”

He couldn’t see the Administrator’s face, but he was hoping for a reaction, any reaction, to the man’s reintroduction to the woman who had stolen everything from him. He was disappointed when the man continued his even pace, not even a stutter in his step outside of his normal limp and no change in body language—as though the Donna Falcone was as insignificant as a fly.

“I gave Ms. Falcone a choice,” the Administrator said. "A show of her loyalty to the Continental and the High Table or her untimely death. She is more useful to me alive and luckily, the woman’s pride does not outweigh her intelligence.”

Victor wanted to ask if he was disappointed, but the words didn’t come. Victor had once felt
comfortable in this man’s presence, had considered him a tentative friend, but now he always felt on edge, that little voice that whispered to never let his guard down, the same little voice that had kept him alive for this long.

He followed the Administrator the rest of the way to his office in silence, walking past his stone-faced secretary. “Ms. Jones, will you please fetch some refreshments for our guest?” the Administrator requested to Victor’s confusion as he unlocked the door.

It wasn’t until the Administrator was seated at his desk that he spoke again. “Batman, I presume,” he said to no one. Victor had his gun out in a moment and was only stopped by the Administrator’s raised hand. “Don’t forget the rule, Victor.”

The Bat swept in, all dark cloak and cowl and as ominous in an office as he was on the edge of a building. Victor had no fucking clue where he had come from. “You are the one they call the Administrator,” Batman growled, voice distorted to be unrecognizable. Victor wanted a cough drop from just listening to the man.

“Yes, I am,” the Administrator said, unconcerned as he leaned back into his chair. “Please sit. My secretary will be back with some refreshments momentarily.”

The Bat ignored him. “What is your plan?”

The Administrator gave him a skeptical look and for a second it was overlaid with all of the sass and attitude that Victor remembered. “Does that ever work? Waltzing in and demanding answers like that?”

The Bat didn’t answer, but Victor liked to think that was a grimace behind that mask. “Answer the question.”

“Manners never cost anything, you know,” he said as his secretary returned with a tray loaded down with three steaming ceramic pots. She placed one set, including a silver plate laden with a variety of tea bags, down in front of the Batman, the second by the Administrator, and the third, already steeping, next to Victor’s elbow by his post near the door.

“Thank you, Ms. Jones,” the Administrator said, already pouring himself a cup. Victor shrugged and did the same. He didn’t understand the man’s obsession with having tea with everyone, but he wasn’t going to turn down free drinks—alcoholic or otherwise.
Settling back into his seat with his legs crossed and a steaming cup balanced in his hands, the Administrator looked up at the Batman. “And my plan, as you say put it, is actually what I’ve already said. I am here to run the Continental, a place of sanctuary and safety for all. No business is to be conducted on these grounds, which means anyone who sets foot on these premises, is under my protection and that includes you.”

“Why?” Batman demanded, and there was a note of confusion in the word. Victor was glad that even the infamous Batman was thrown by this entire affair.

“My dear Bat,” the Administrator said with the smallest quirk of the lips. “Why does anyone do anything?”

It was Oswald, he knew it was Oswald. It had to be Oswald.

*Just like it was Kristine,* the voice said, whispering into his ear, insidious and slippery. *Oswald is dead, but maybe this is your second chance, just like Isabella was.*

“Well that was a trip,” Butch said, looking mournfully at his empty glass. Tabitha was watching the clean-up with interest, at the fast pace the team took to drag off the dozen of bodies. Within ten minutes, the area would be clean of blood, the band starting up again, and the conversation returned at full force even with the crowd a little thinned out. “You okay, Nygma?”

Ed knew his expression was manic, knew that his eyes were wide and unblinking and— “That was Oswald.”

A flash of concern crossed Butch’s face at the words. “Buddy, Oswald is gone,” he said, tone low like talking to a wild animal or a child as he placed a hand on Ed’s shoulder, squeezing it.

“No,” Ed said, pulling out of Butch’s light touch with a jerk. “That man, that *man* was Oswald.”

Butch frowned but his concern was obvious, pushing his empty glass into Tabitha’s hands so he could reach out. “Nygma. *Ed,* Os—”
“Don’t tell me Oswald is gone,” Ed said, dodging his grip again and voice rising. He knew he was attracting the attention of others and he didn’t care because he was right. He was. “I know, I know. But that man, that Administrator, has Oswald’s face and voice and it’s him.”

Butch continued to ignore him, and he was too quick this time for Ed to avoid, wrapping his arm over his shoulders as he pushed him through the crowd to the exit. “Come on. Let’s get you to Lee, buddy.”

Ed fought the whole way to Barbara’s—insisting over and over that Butch needed to just listen to him.

Both Barb and Maria were tucked in for bed by the time they dragged the protesting Ed through the door. Jim had seen them leave the club and had potentially borrowed a squad car for them to use so they could break a few speed limits. He was already calling for Lee when they pushed open the door.

“I’m fine,” Ed ground out for the nth time through clenched teeth as Lee took his pulse, fingers on his wrist even as Ed tried to pull away. He winced when she shone her penlight into his eyes and grimaced as he heard Jim dig through the pockets and lining of his suit. “I’m clean, I’ve been clean.”

Lee hummed in a way that betrayed none of her thoughts. “But you still think you saw Oswald?”

“I know I saw Oswald! You saw Oswald too, Butch and Tabitha.” Ed protested, trying to push Lee away again to no avail. Butch had pressed one big hand on his shoulder to keep him in place, and Ed resented the treatment.

“Well, your pupils and heart rate are normal. I believe you when you say you didn’t take any pills,” Lee said, grabbing his arm and checking into the crook of his elbow for any telltale marks—not that Ed would have been stupid enough to inject in such an obvious place.

“I’m not taking anything,” he said, ripping his arm out of her hands in a way he knew looked defensive but didn’t care. “I know what I saw. Tell them, Butch, tell them.”
Butch sighed, finally removing his hand from Ed to scratch the back of his head. “Okay, so this Admin guy maybe looked a little like Cobblepot. I mean he was short and skinny and had black hair. But we, uh, weren’t really close enough to get a good look, you know? And maybe he sounded a little like the Penguin if you basically removed any hints of, you know, a personality.” But the way he said it was clearly unconvinced, and Ed wanted to strangle the man for being so obtuse. “But I’m pretty sure the little guy would eat his own shoe before he got a tattoo and that fella was covered.”

That made Jim finally abandon his search for illicit drugs on Ed’s person. “Wait, did you say tattoos? Covered in them? And piercings—at least two on his lips and eyebrow?”

Butch shrugged. “It was a little hard to tell but sounds right. Why?”

“I noticed him at the Wayne Foundation ball last week serving drinks. Something seemed off about it,” he said and then paused, considering his next words. “Just something about him was setting off the old cop instincts.”

“Because it was Oswald,” Ed repeated in exasperation, trying to stand again only to be pressed back onto the couch by Lee.

Jim sighed, raking a hand through his hair. “Look, Ed. I wasn’t that close to get a good look, and yeah, maybe he looked a little like Oswald, but Ed.” His expression drooped, taking a softer look as he knelt next to the couch to look at Ed in the eyes. He took one of Ed’s hands into his while Lee took the other, giving his shaking—damn it—hands a squeeze, as though Ed needed comforting. “It’s been twelve years. No one has seen Oswald since before No Man’s Land, and you know he’d never leave Gotham behind. And I know you miss him, but Oswald is gone.”

Ed shook his head, desperate, but his voice wavered. “It was him, Jim. I know it.”

“That,” Ed said, voice shaking, “was different. This time is different. It was him. I know it, Jim. You have to believe me. It was him.” It had to be him. It wasn’t like the times before. This wasn’t the Oswald of his memories—it was different, new, in a way that he wouldn’t and couldn’t have made up.
Right?

*Oh, Eddie, Eddie, Eddie,* the voice whispered into his ear. *What has two eyes but can't see?*

Word about the Continental spread quickly, the criminal grapevine a force of its own. And it didn’t hurt that the Administrator had his four favorite birdies egging the story on and giving it the right extra flare.

As expected, though, not everyone listened or thought they could escape consequences. The Administrator has been ready though—projecting the image of calm omniscient. The first attempt was quickly foiled with a quick bullet in the shoulder, and the foolish second attempt was treated with three more to the heart, head, and stomach.

The third attempt made it further, going so far as to shoot its intended target in the arm before making an impressive escape. The Administrator has apologized profusely to the injured guest as the Doctor stitched her up, pressing a gold coin into her confused hands in amends.

A contract was put out in the man’s head—half a million for his death, doubled if carried out in the next twenty-four hours.

The man made it five hours before someone claimed the bounty.

And slowly, but surely, people got the hint.

**Chapter End Notes**

A day later than anticipated but I ended up slicing this chapter in half so hopefully the next chapter will be up sooner than normal. <3

Thank you to everyone who has been reading. Please take a moment to comment if you enjoy because I love hearing everyone's thoughts! It gives me all the motivation in the world. <3
“Doesn’t a police commission have something better to do than hang around us grunts all day? Shouldn’t you be schmoozing with the mayor or something?”

Jim pulled Harvey in close for a quick one-armed hug in greeting. “Just stopping by. Got a tickle on something and need to scratch an itch.”

“What am I? Your personal back scratcher, Commissioner?” Harvey grumbled, good-natured.

How Harvey managed to say his title so irreverently was a skill onto itself. He knew that he’d always be a little bit of that cocky rookie to Harvey just as Harvey would always be just a little bit of that lackadaisical old cop to Jim.

“We hear anything on Hugo Strange lately?” Jim asked, sitting down heavily even as he unbuttoned his suit jacket.

Harvey pondered for a moment, and Jim could practically see him mentally flipping through their recent files. “Can’t say I have. He’s been quiet since that incident a few months ago, with the lizard-guy and that,” Harvey made a vague gesture in the air. “You know. Why? Our night time friend hear something?”

Jim shook his head. “No, just something weird. Ed got set off at the opening to the Continental.”

Harvey snorted.

Jim recognized that he had a weird relationship with Ed—he could never tell if they were friends or enemies. Lee had a soft spot for the man, and Jim had spent the first few months of their rekindled relationship stomping down on his jealousy. But ever since he saw Ed in Lee’s clinic, drugged out and incoherent from a near overdose, he couldn’t help but keep an eye on the guy. He had always felt partially responsible for the man’s psychotic break and had always wondered if he had just treated him a little better, a little less like an outsider, he’d still be Edward Nygma and not the Riddler.
Jim had been the first person Ed had told about the hallucinations, about how he saw Oswald as long as he kept using. He didn’t know why Ed entrusted that to him.

Or maybe he did. Jim and Oswald had always had a connection, one that he couldn’t shake that started when he hadn’t shot him at the end of that pier. Jim had killed for the man, and Oswald had been tortured in Arkham for Jim. Maybe that’s why Ed thought he’d understand, that if anyone understood the gaping hole Oswald left behind, it was Jim.

“So, what set the little weirdo off this time?” Harvey asked, knowing all about the weird push-pull that went on between Ed, Lee, and Jim. Jim didn’t try to seriously arrest Ed as long as no one was hurt, and, in return, Ed always had a place to stay with them, always had someone to turn to when the voices got too loud.

“This guy, Matthew Richardson? I guess he goes by the Administrator.”

Harvey laughed. “Seriously? What’ll these guys come up with next?”

“Yeah, but more worryingly is that Ed swears up and down that the guy is a dead ringer for Oswald Cobblepot.”

Harvey leaned back and exhaled loudly. “Well, that’s a name I haven’t heard in a long time. So you want to check on old Professor Strange to see if he’s doing any of his weird-ass experiments again and if we got a crazy Penguin-look-alike running around.”

Jim nodded. “Butch and Tabitha said there was a resemblance, but they were too far to see. It might be nothing—just Ed having another episode—but I figured I’d rather set some feelers out just in case this decides to blow up in our face.”

“Let’s hope, partner,” Harvey said, scratching his forehead with one finger in thought. “I’ll round up a few guys to check in on some informants.”

“Thanks, Harv,” Jim said, knocking his knuckles on the desk in thanks.

“Yeah, yeah,” the old cop said, grumbling, but Jim could hear the smile in his voice.
Ed was determined. This man was Oswald, he knew it. Despite what the others said, what the voice kept whispering, he knew Oswald, he knew the way he moved and his face, and he just knew.

His hideout became plastered with information about the Continental and all of its employees. He traced the path to the chain of hotels, which despite no known link other than the name, he kept in mind. He had every employee memorized, every schedule, and every hour mapped in excruciating detail and that man never left the building to his knowledge.

Ed needed to see him, has to see him face to face. Lee kept calling him, and he knew they all thought he was using again, thought he was hallucinating Oswald again, but he wasn’t. This wasn’t like the other times either—Ed could feel that it was different; his memory and imagination was nothing compared to the real thing that Ed was ashamed that he ever thought it could be.

Ed slipped into the club the following Friday. The place was packed despite the early hour, the novelty of the newest nightclub made every socialite within a twenty-mile radius flock to it. And, after last week’s show, Ed wasn’t surprised to see a few familiar criminal faces among the crowd.

Ed took a moment to give Catwoman a kiss on the cheek before making his way up to the less crowded second floor, eyes alert for his target. He spotted a set of stairs around a corner, roped off with a velvet cord and a sign stating that it was for employees only and a large imposing guard.

Ed sauntered up, smile ready in his face. “Excuse me,” he said, putting all the charm he could into his words, “I wish to speak to the Administrator.”

The man looked at Ed, a sharp glance up and down and an expression that said he was unimpressed. “And you are?”

“The Riddler,” Ed said, taking his hat off and giving a showman’s bow.

The man pulled out a tablet and scrolled through a list, making Ed curse mentally. He hadn’t thought it wasn’t going to be that easy, but he had hoped.
“Ain’t on the list,” the man said as though Ed didn’t already know. “The Administrator is a busy man. Any concerns about services can be taken up with the concierge.”

“I wish to speak to him about a personal matter,” Ed said, trying a different and undoubtedly futile angle.

The man raised an eyebrow skeptically. “Sure you do. Now move along.”

Ed sighed, but turned away, knowing he wouldn’t get any further this night. Instead, he ordered a Midori Sour from the bar before sitting down at a strategic table that has a full view of the staircase in case his target came down. He lingered until the last call, downing two more drinks until the lights flickered with the club’s closing.

He repeated it the next night, waiting and waiting. Every night he’d try to meet with the Administrator, and every night the same guard turned him away.

If Oswald thought he was that easily deterred, he had another thing coming.

Meeting the Bat was always a tad nerve-wracking. Jim never knew if he was going to show or not, but the man had some sort of supernatural ability to know when he was really needed for information versus when it was a check-in. So, he wasn’t surprised that he has only been on the roof for thirty minutes when he heard the familiar sweep of fabric and the soft sounds of boots on concrete behind him—and he knew he was allowed that much as a courtesy.

“Quiet night?” Jim asked, turning to take in the imposing figure.

“Not quite,” the Bat replied, voice low and unrecognizable behind a voice modulator.

“I’m hoping you can do me a favor. Or, at least clue me in on anything you find.”

Batman didn’t reply, so Jim took it as permission to continue.
“Whatever you can find on the Continental, specifically the proprietor, Matthew Richardson. He apparently goes by the Administrator.”

“Why do you want to know?”

Jim wasn’t sure how to answer, so he went with the truth—or at least part of the truth. “Just a feeling.”

There was a pause, as though Batman was deciding on what he should share. “I met him on opening night.”

“Wait, you actually saw him up close?” Jim resisted the urge to step closer and demand more—he considered Batman a friend, more or less, but he was aware of the limits to their partnership.

The Bat nodded, his face unreadable behind the mask as always. “We had a chat and reached an understanding. He keeps everyone in line, anyone who steps foot on grounds is protected, and I don’t interfere with their methods.”

“Is that wise?”

“Perhaps not, but there is more going on than the one nightclub. And a place of peace in this city might be good, even one as crooked as that.”

Jim sighed, running a hand through his hair as he considered what to say next. “The Administrator,” he said, tasting the title on his tongue, “what’s he like?”

“Cold. Calculated. Dangerous. Why are you asking?”

Jim licked his lips, unsure how much to reveal—this was as much of a personal issue as a professional one at this point. “Rumor has it that he looks like an old…” Jim trailed off, not knowing how to describe the man. Friend? Enemy? Criminal? Gangster? “An old crime lord. Oswald Cobblepot, known as the Penguin. He died a decade ago, but if someone is walking around with his face, Hugo Strange is the likely candidate.”
“Cobblepot,” Batman said, rolling the name on his tongue, testing. “I’m familiar with the name but not the face. I can’t help you, Commissioner.”

“Appreciate it anyway. I don’t think there is more than maybe a handful of people who remember that man’s face anymore.”

“This Cobblepot. Was he dangerous?”

Jim almost laughed—dangerous was an understatement when describing Oswald. “More so than you can imagine.”

Okay, so breaking into the Continental wasn’t as easy as Ed had been hoping. He twirled his cane idly as he looked at his array of information, pinned and plastered to one wall of the Riddle Factory with camera feeds projected onto an array of screens—none of his bugs inside had been successful. Still, he had managed to at least set cameras on neighboring buildings to watch all exits and entrances.

His last three plots had failed. The first had been more of a surveying mission, to be honest, but he had been hoping to get a bit further than the second-floor window. He simply hadn’t anticipated that one of the guards was such an expert at bocce ball.

The old Polish woman disguise hadn’t worked on Zsasz a second time, so Ed had only managed to get to the rooftop before he was forced to flee again.

His latest failure was the most disappointing. He had hacked the traffic signals, (temporarily) stolen three otters and a flamingo from the zoo, paid off a high school marching band, and spent four days learning how to polka dance. And even with all of that, he hasn’t managed to meet the elusive Administrator.

Ed tapped the floor with his cane, contemplating. It was time to get serious then.
Addy stepped out the back door of her apartment building, her distinctive bright red curls hidden under a straight blond wig while her kaleidoscope of tattoos was covered under long sleeves. Instead of her usual tight pin-up style dress and heels she favored, she was clad in a pale cream cardigan and ankle-length olive skirt, short-heeled Mary Janes replacing her signature cherry red stilettos. Her disguise was, perhaps, overkill, but it never hurt to be cautious—especially in Gotham, a phrase Matty had instilled in her, and she learned very quickly.

Gotham was everything and nothing like she expected. There were always little rumors about the city that she would hear, crazy things that were so fantastical that they had to be untrue. Gotham was the equivalent of Narnia to most of the Continental—a place where the craziest stories were shunted and pulled out for a laugh. Even with all of Matty’s training and warnings, she hadn’t been fully prepared.

Her first months had been a whirlwind. She had spent most of her life in New York City under the employ of the Continental—and working at Malloy’s in Gotham had been a steep learning curve. Despite her best efforts, she hadn’t been able to wiggle her way into The Sirens—not only was it one of the more popular clubs within the city, it was well known to employ a completely female staff, and it protected all of its girls with a fierceness that Addy hadn’t seen before. This meant that its staff was loyal and long-term; very few of its employees left, which made finding an opening almost impossible.

Which could have easily been fixed with a call and a few gold coins, but Matty had told her to keep a low profile, and murdering a predecessor for her job wasn’t exactly low profile. Finding her place at Malloy’s had been much easier—all it took was stabbing a wandering hand with her hairpin in front of Ms. Falcone, and the job had been hers.

Working and living in Gotham was its own minefield after the sleek order and rules that she had grown used to at the Continental. Despite all her training and efforts, it was hard to not feel like a constant outsider. These men and women didn’t abide by the common rules she had lived and breathed, and the chaos of the city seemed to seep into the bones and souls of its inhabitants. Addy had a strong stomach, but the first time she had the misfortune to meet the Dentist, it took all ten years of training as a Bartender to keep herself from vomiting. Murder and death was one thing, but the sheer joy the city took on inflicting pain was unsettling.

She adapted though. Sofia Falcone wasn’t the hardest nut she had ever had to crack, and it helped that her lieutenants were easy to manipulate when plied with enough alcohol and pretty words. She had to be careful not to get too deep—the last thing she wanted was a fight for her so-called affection—so she was careful to keep her touches friendly and laughs honest, with the right side of push-too-hard-and-I-run to keep them at a distance.

Donna Falcone was something closer to what Addy was used to dealing with—more poise and structure in her dealings than most criminals in the city. But, from what Addy has been able to tell,
that was par for the course given that she was head of the once-defunct Falcone crime family. Sometimes she reminded her of Viggo before the Impossible Task—so self-assured but aware that he was a small fish in a much bigger pond but desperate to prove himself.

Except she didn’t have a Baba Yaga behind her.

The Donna didn’t frequent Malloy’s often—her taste ran more toward more upscale lounges instead of the gritty bars and pits her underlings preferred, but Addy had met her enough times that she was recognizable to the crime lord. Hence, the disguise.

Addy joined in with the crowd, following the heavily trafficked routes as she edged closer and closer to her goal, keeping an eye out for any potential tail. She doubted there would be any, but she didn’t get where she was by being careless.

When she finally reached a block away from the Continental, she slid down the narrow alley, following the shadowed path to the well-concealed side door. She knocked, twice, before slipping a gold coin into a concealed slot. There was the rattle of the peephole before the door was cracked open, barely wide enough for her to slip inside.

“The Administrator?” she asked, taking off her gloves that hid her tattoos and slipping them into her purse.

“Second-floor lounge, Ms. Addy,” the guard—Antonio, she recalled—said as he deadbolted the steel door behind her. “Shall I take your coat?”

Addy shook her head and rested her hand on his upper arm, appreciative of the offer. “No thank you, sweetie. You know how he hates to be kept waiting.”

She navigated her way through the hallways, keeping herself sharp for anything unexpected. She couldn’t leave her guard down here yet—the Gotham Continental wasn’t quite the haven of its counterparts yet.

She smiled when she spied the familiar silhouette of the man, hunched over a table and going over documents as she climbed the stairs.

“Matty,” she called out, the click of her heels hitting the marble floor as she reached the top
landing. She saw a man she didn’t recognize—must be local—hair completely shaved from his face, including his eyebrows, step out and already reaching for his gun. Oh, definitely a local if he was considering pulling out any weapon.

“Mr. Zsasz,” The Administrator said, tone sharp as he stamped out his lit cigarette into an overflowing ashtray. “The rule.”

The man looked sheepish as he reupholstered his weapon. “Sorry. Old habits are hard to break.”

“So I suggest you break them quickly. You may leave.”

The man, Mr. Zsasz, gave Addy a considering look as he passed by her on the stairs. “Whatever you say, Administrator.”

Addy waited until he was out of sight before she finally greeted the Administrator, leaning down to press a light kiss on his cheek. She knew he only tolerated it because it was her, but she loved being able to poke and prod him out of his shell when she could.

“Addy,” he said, with a smirk that wasn’t up to par with the ones he used to give her, but it’ll do. “Nice hair.”

“Matty,” she said, in the same tone and with a look that spoke volumes. “Nice guard.”

“Ah, yes,” the Administrator said with a dismissive wave. “Mr. Zsasz is well known in Gotham—one of the best assassins actually. He’s agreed to a contract with the Continental for the foreseeable future, and his presence will go a long way to give us credence.” He shut the folder on his work, shuffling them into a neat pile before standing, using the table to stabilize his balance before putting his weight on his bad leg.

His leg had been much better in the years, but Addy knew that too long sitting or standing in one place tended to give him pain. “Shall I get some ice?” she offered as she always did.

Matty smiled in return, offering her a hand up. “No, I’ll be fine. But I have been remiss—what shall you like to drink?”
He was already limping over to the bar, and Addy knew better than to argue, swinging herself into a barstool and hooking her heels over the ledge. “Just a beer for me, love. I’m afraid I have a shift this evening.”

He pulled out her favorite from the lower fridge, already pouring it with a practiced hand into a tall chilled stein, before pouring himself a lowball of vodka with a single spherical cube.

“Bad day?” she queried, indicating to his drink choice with the tip of her glass.

Matty tried to give a wry smile. “Every day in Gotham is a bad day, but that’s to be expected. What delicious bits of news do you bring me? What’s the reaction to opening night?”

It was dangerous to do these meetings in person, but some things were better one-on-one as they both knew, so they risked the monthly face-to-face chats. Not to mention, Addy missed being able to talk to her favorite member of the High Table, and she hoped that Matty felt the same about their friendship.

Addy took a delicate sip of her beer, savoring the bitter taste of hops. “Mixed, as expected, but heavily against among the Falcons after that stunt with the Donna. You humiliated her, and her capos aren’t particularly happy about the slight to their Donna.”

Matty made dismissive snort. “She should be happy that she wasn’t killed for trying that stunt.”

“Yes, I know it, and you know it, but these guys? All they see is Sofia Falcone missing a finger.”

“Which she cut off herself,” Matty said after a sip of vodka. “Or did she conveniently leave that part out of her retelling?”

“Oh,” Addy said, crossing her legs as she leaned in. “She didn’t leave it out, but that woman sure knows how to play the victim.”

“Ms. Falcone doesn’t like playing second fiddle to anyone. Let me guess? She shed a few tears, gave a pretty speech about how the Falcone family will respect the rule of the Continental all while plotting my death.”
“Bingo on the first two, Matty,” Addy said, wondering why she was ever surprised by how well he could read people. “Not sure on that third—she has been pretty vocal about obeying the Continental, but it’s just been making her men more agitated.”

“How about Services? News on that spreading?”

Addy shook her head. “Nothing yet, but it’ll be awhile. You’ve given out, what, maybe a dozen coins to locals?”

Matty hummed thoughtfully, tapping his fingers on the counter in a way that Addy knew meant he was craving another cigarette. “Perhaps I’ll have Mr. Zsasz spread the word among his colleagues about the perks of membership.”

“Is he trustworthy?”

Matty laughed at that, flashing his teeth and ending in a bitter smile. “No, but I know what he likes. And you know how much that matters.”

Victor didn’t like it when he didn’t know all the players. He had spent most of his life in Gotham, and if he didn’t know who someone was, it meant they didn’t matter. This whole thing, this Continental wrapped up with a big fucked up bow called the Administrator, left him uneasy. He’d gotten used to the rotation of guards and staff as he usually did, and the arrival of a newcomer set him on edge.

She called him Matty, and that was the oddest thing of all. Oh, he figured it out quickly that he has been using Matthew Richardson as his alias—and what a weird-ass normal name for him to choose. But Matty? It was like when Barbara liked to call him Ozzie or Pengy to annoy him, except this wasn’t said with derision or condescension but affection and friendship.
Sometimes Victor would watch the Administrator and wonder if he was going crazy because there was no way that man was the Penguin. Nothing about him was the same—not the mannerisms or speech patterns or facial expressions.

Penguin had worn his heart on his sleeve, his anger or happiness never hidden. He’d fly into a rage at a perceived slight and was just so much fun. Whether it was blackmailing someone or murder or plain old torture, Penguin had done it with a self-satisfied smile and pure enjoyment.

The Administrator, as far as he could tell, had all the personality of a brick wall. His emotional range tended to go from nothing to maybe amused to maybe miffed. He gave orders with a monotone, quick and efficient and with no room for arguments. His body language was always tightly wound, calling it closed off was an understatement. Honestly, Victor still wasn’t sure if this wasn’t some android clone of Oswald Cobblepot because watching him was like looking into a funhouse mirror and not even the fun, wacky kind.

His neck snapped up in the direction of the stairs when he heard a laugh, low and mellow and definitely male before being accompanied by the higher pitched titter. Victor crept up the steps, his curiosity getting the better of him.

No, he had been right. It was the Administrator, behind the bar and a smile on his face. But even the smile was all wrong—it was the upturn of his lips, a smirk with a side of playfulness that almost felt real except for the unchanging look in his eyes—noticeable even at this distance. This was the smile the Penguin gave when he was playing someone, that smile he gave when he was wrapping Maroni around his finger, the smile of a coy little thing who wanted attention. Victor hasn’t seen it in years and seeing it again, on a face so familiar and strange and empty, felt wrong in a way that he couldn’t explain.

The Administrator put it off for as long as he was able to. The guilt grew heavier with each passing day, the guilt and shame. He had been in Gotham for almost two months now, and the days ticked by like the tightening of a noose.

He hated being in Gotham—hated how much he didn’t hate it as much as he should. Around every corner were memories that he had spent a decade burying—his only sanctuary was his quarters and office where he had no risk of seeing a half-familiar face in the crowd. But as much pain some memories brought him, he couldn’t help but remember that this had been his home—where he had grown up, where he had found his family, where he had—for a time, however fleeting—found a
place for himself.

He knew it was a futile effort to keep his presence unknown now that the Continental was open. It was mostly luck that no one had made the connection between him and Oswald Cobblepot at this point—he had relied on his tattoos and piercings to distract from the rest of his looks. He had managed to walk through the pain of his leg for the short moments needed during opening night, hiding his signature—albeit muted—limp from a crowd filled with old nightmares. He paid for it the next day, and it was the first time in years that he craved the use of a cane.

The presence of Victor Zsasz was both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, his presence was too familiar, made it almost easy to slip into his old mindset, slip into his old schemes, and call upon the hitman to do his dirty work. On the other, Mr. Zsasz hadn’t treated him like the Penguin since that first night—hadn’t called him anything other than his title or treated him as anything other than the Administrator and the remainder kept him grounded, kept a lid on the boiling pot that was waiting to explode.

Today though, he could be Oswald, again, for a moment. She deserved that much and so much more.

Oswald clutched the bouquet of white lilies in his hands as he stood in front of his mother’s grave. It was just the two of them—just a son and his mother reunited after years—and he didn’t know where to start.

“Hello, Mother,” he said, and his voice hitched. He choked back a sob. “I’m sorry I’m late. I—” he cut himself off, closing his eyes as he took a breath to compose himself. “I—I’ve been away a while, and I’m sorry that I haven’t visited.” He tried to smile, and it was a shaky imitation of the one he used to give her when he was a child.

He hadn’t visited the only person who had loved him, and the guilt weighed on him, crushing him. “I miss you. I miss you so much, and I wish you were still here. I wish I could have been the son you deserved. I—”

“Oswald?”

Chapter End Notes

I did say that this chapter would come quick! <3
Please spare a moment to let me know what you thought! <3 Comments always make me smile!

**UPDATE:** I am donating my time and accepting prompts as part of *Pencils in the Margin*. You can check out details at my [tumblr](https://www.tumblr.com) or just drop me a comment here.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Ed had a routine, and it was a routine he would not interrupt even in his mission to meet the Administrator. It had started soon after fifth (or sixth?) incarceration and forced detox at Arkham and was one of the few things that helped keep him clean.

At first, it had been erratic—he would visit when his hallucinations got too pushy or whiny or needy. Sometimes, he would visit every week, leaving increasingly creative and elaborate arrangements of flowers, and sometimes he’d go months without—stopped by periods of mania or detainment at Arkham. It was during these times that he’d feel guilty, remembering the look on Oswald’s face when he’d asked—the first time and every time after—that Ed would visit his mother.

It was these memories—hallucinations, the voice whispered—that would stay Ed’s hand sometimes, when he’d have a pill waiting in his palm and be moments away from feeling that rush of fire in his veins, feeling invincible—the memory of Oswald asking him to visit the cemetery and the idea that if he didn’t, no one would.

Ed had been free and clear of Arkham for three years, and the first Sunday of every month, he would visit Gertrud Kabulput. It became cathartic, a distraction. He built up an image of Gertrud in his head from Oswald’s old stories and would superimpose her kindness and love over the bitter memories of his own mother. Sometimes he would stay only minutes, enough to clear the area of weeds and rest new flowers against the granite headstones. But sometimes he’d stay for hours, sitting in the grass and talking to a dead woman he had never known about anything that came to mind—sometimes it was his latest scheme, sometimes bittersweet memories of Oswald, and sometimes he’d just sit and sing her an old song.

So after weeks of trying to catch this man, to see him, he shouldn’t be surprised that he finds him here.

“Oswald?”

Ed almost dropped his own bouquet—starlette Asiatic lilies, their centers a deep maroon that faded to a bright marigold and had required some creative threatening to obtain in full bloom this time of year. They were interspersed with stems of light blue irises and white roses—Ed had spent an hour this morning picking and arranging the bouquet as he did every month, but they could have transformed into a pile of rotting chrysanthemums in his hands, and he wouldn’t have noticed.
Because he recognized that silhouette, that profile, and there is no other man in the world who would be standing in front of Gertrud Kapelput’s grave with a bundle of black nightrider lilies.

Ed knew he should have thought of this earlier, but the idea of cornering this man, purposefully, in front of his mother’s grave, sent a tremor of unease through him. This place, full of death and sadness and silence, had become his sanctuary in the years, and some things, even to him, were sacred.

Oswald didn’t turn but stiffened, his back straightening before he bent down to set the lilies against the headstone and bowed his head. When he turned, Ed was struck by the sight of his—his… his Oswald for the first time in years.

It was almost jarring to see the man who, in every memory, was dressed and primped like a gentleman—three-piece suits and perfectly styled hair—like this. It was both easy and hard to reconcile that image with the man who stood before him—dressed in a simple black vest with sleeves rolled up past his elbow to expose a dozen inky black tattoos and with a face full of metal.

A face that was practically the same, barely aged after all these years, but Oswald had always looked much younger than his actual age. Ed couldn’t help but let his eyes trace over the lines that decorated his skin. He took in the set of the wings that crawled up the man’s neck and the sprawling image of vines that started at his fingers and spread upward, looping up and around the flock of birds that shown against his bare forearms.

He saw it now that he was close, the outline of a leg brace under the close fit of his pants.

It was Oswald though. It was the same blue-gray eyes staring back at him behind a pair of glasses, the same sharp nose, the same lips and cheeks. His eyes focused on the two hoops looped over his bottom lip, and the thought of wondering how they’d feel against his own slid into his thoughts.

“Oswald,” he said, breathless and arms already half reaching out, wanting and needing to touch to prove that this wasn’t another dream that his mind had twisted up. “We thought you were dead.” The words were quiet, almost instinctual because despite the weeks of obsessive planning and being convinced that the Administrator was Oswald Cobblepot, he realized he hadn’t really believed it until this moment.

“Mr. Nygma,” Oswald said, and it was all wrong. It was Oswald’s voice, but it was empty, no emotions filtering through the syllables. Even as Ed watched, all he could see was the shuttered
face that used to be so open and expressive and now a blank canvas. “Good day,” he said stiffly with a nod of his head and moved to walk past him and away, and Ed couldn’t let him go, couldn’t let him go again because this was Oswald.

“Oswald,” he repeated and finally reached to grab him. He didn’t have a clue about what he wanted to say, what he could say after all these years, but he only knew that he had to stop him. His fingers barely brushed against skin, and Oswald wretched himself away violently, as though his touch burned.

“Mr. Nygma,” he said, and there was ice in the words. “My staff has informed me of your repeated harassment. Please cease and desist.”

“Oswald,” Ed said again, wondering if he said it enough times the man he wanted would appear from beneath this glacial facade. “I won’t stop. I thought you were dead; I looked for your body. So I won’t stop until you talk to me.” Ed’s voice was quick, panicked, as though he needed to say everything he could before Oswald vanished like an apparition.

There were a few seconds of stillness as they stared at another, at an impasse. Ed would not give up—if he had to camp outside of the Continental every day for the rest of his life, he would.

“Very well,” Oswald said, reading his resolve, “if you insist. Noon tomorrow, at the Continental. Goodbye, Mr. Nygma.” He turned and started walking away, unhurried, with the slightest limp that Ed hadn’t noticed before.

Ed wanted to stop him, wanted to grab him and never let him out of his sight again, but the reminder of where they were at stopped him. Ed wrapped his fingers around the end of his bouquet tighter—he owed it to Oswald to at least let him see his mother in peace.

Ed watched the retreating figure, watched as he paused with a sudden sense of insecurity in the line of his shoulders. A beat and then—

“Thank you,” Oswald said, his words so soft that they were almost covered by the sound of the wind and the rustle of grass, “for visiting her.” And then, as though he hadn’t ever stopped, he continued down the hill and out of sight.

“Oswald,” Ed said. Oswald, Oswald, Oswald.
Ed arrived exactly at noon. Actually, he arrived an hour early and then spent the hour pacing two blocks away as he tried to gather his thoughts.

When he knocked on the front door, Victor Zsasz is the one who answered. “Riddler,” he greeted with an irreverent grin and cocky posture. “The Administrator will see you now.”

Ed followed Victor in, weaving their way around the lounge, empty except for the staff that flitted to and from, cleaning or preparing for the evening crowd. There was silence as they walked over to the stairs, nothing but the sound of their footsteps against marble, the soft shuffle of leather soles.

“You knew, didn’t you?” Ed finally asked to Victor’s back. “You knew it was Oswald this entire time.”

Victor didn’t answer, just continued walking, and that alone was disconcerting. He led Ed past the damnable velvet cord that had been blocking his way for weeks. The third floor was decorated similarly to the others—sleek marble and dark wood with gold accents. It was a mix of storage and offices, with a stone-faced secretary typing away at an old-fashioned typewriter. Ed took in the same pink top that Oswald had been wearing, the line of tattoos and piercings that covered her, and wondered if it was some type of uniform.

Victor led him past her to a thick oak door labeled with The Administrator on the front in an incongruously old-fashioned plastic plaque. It felt almost like being led to the principal's office—the same sense of foreboding and anticipation.

Just as Ed was about to knock, Victor reached out and grabbed his raised hand by the wrist.

“Nygma,” Victor said, his voice serious as he looked at the man through eyes that looked every inch the killer that he was. “Don’t mistake this man for the Penguin. He may look the same, sound the same, but this man,” Victor gestured to the door with his head, “isn’t the one we remember. Keep that in mind.”

Then he let go, stepping back like a good guard dog.

Ed didn’t know how to answer, but it made the knot in his stomach twist. He took a deep breath
“Now, Mr. Nygma. What can I do for you?” Oswald said, as though he didn’t know.

“We thought you were dead.”
“So I have been told. But I am not, so that should clear up any confusion.”

“Where have you been?”

“Here and there.”

“That doesn’t answer the question.”


“Why,” Ed started, hand gripping the handle of the teacup so hard he was afraid it would break. “What happened? Why are you...that?” he gestured to all of him. “I looked for you, afterward, before the bridges. Butch said you never came back after the bank and I looked for you. What happened?”

Oswald paused to take another sip, the pause carefully calculated and face impassive, and Ed wanted to punch him, hit him, scream to make something show. “I left, Mr. Nygma. I ended up in New York City, where I eventually came under the employ of the Continental.” He gestured with his hands to indicate the walls around him, as though that explained everything.

Ed had enough. He tossed the fragile cup, enjoying the crash it made as it splintered into jagged pieces behind Oswald’s head. Oswald hadn’t even flinched at the reaction. “That’s it?” he said, hysterical, laughing. “You just left? Oswald Cobblepot walked out of Gotham of his own free will?”

“Yes,” Oswald said, and Ed couldn’t find anything in the words, the face, the body. “I did.”

“Why?” Ed asked, standing, hands on the desk as he bent over. “Why did you leave? Gotham is your home, your city. You swore you’d never leave her, and you abandoned her, abandoned us? Why?” Ed knew his voice was rising, that the calm facade he had been trying to maintain was nothing but a hopeful memory as the hysteria crept in with each word.
“Tell me something, Mr. Nygma,” Oswald said, setting down his teacup now and placing his hands placidly in his lap. “Why would I have stayed? What was left for me in the city? A dead mother, a ruined empire, and no friends? Not exactly a sparkling review.”

“I was—”

“—My friend? Is that what you were going to say? Because I remember it a little differently. What were the words?” Oswald pretended to think before he smiled a thin cold smile that was as sharp as a knife. “You stand against Lee, you stand against me? Does that sound like something worth staying for?”

“Yes,” Ed said loudly, desperately. “Don’t you remember? There is no Penguin without the Riddler, just like there is no Riddler without the Penguin. It’s who we are, Oswald.”

“It’s who we were, Mr. Nygma.” He pushed up his glasses and stood up. “Now, if you please, I have a busy schedule today.” He gestured to the door expectantly. “Good day, Mr. Nygma.”

Ed didn’t move, only stared, hands shaking. This wasn’t Oswald; Victor had been right. This was just a corpse wearing the face of the man he—

“I thought you loved me,” Ed said, not sure where the words came from. “You said it. You said you were ready to die for me. You gave up Sofia for me. You…” Ed trailed off, lost again.

“That was a long time ago. Now, Mr. Nygma, I suggest you leave.” This time he walked around from behind his desk, undoubtedly to open the door pointedly to usher him out, to accentuate how unwelcome he was, how much he wasn’t wanted.

Ed caught him by the wrist, and before the other man could respond, he kissed him.

There was a second, a second of silence, where Ed could feel Oswald’s pulse under his fingertips, and everything faded away except the feeling of his lips against his, the perfect crane of his neck down to give the barest of nips, and the taste of cold metal.

And then pain.
Ed was pushed away, cheek stinging from where the smaller man had landed a punch, a deep scratch running along his cheekbone from where his ring had left a gash.

Oswald was shaking, that calm facade gone, and instead, there was a rage in those eyes. His fists were clenched, and his mouth turned down into anger. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and his eyes were wild—the way they looked when they killed Mr. Leonard together or when he had beaten a subordinate or when he had outsmarted someone again and again and again. He was beautiful.

“Get out,” he said, rage bubbling in his words.

“Oswal—”

“Get out,” he said, this time louder and punctuated by the cock of a gun that he pointed steadily at Ed’s head. “Get out, or I swear to fucking God I will put a bullet through your fucking head.”

Ed fled.

Once outside and a block away, he stopped to catch his breath, leaning against the dirty wall of an alley. He took a deep breath, looking up at the gray sky.

And laughed. There he was; there was Oswald.

Oswald was practically vibrating, the pistol in his hand shaking as he carefully unloaded it and set it down on the desk.

Victor—Mr. Zsasz, he repeated—peaked his head in. “Uh, should I be stopping him?”

He just looked at him. “Get out.”

Victor Zsasz disappeared.
Fuck him. Fuck Ed. Fuck this city, this town, this club, fuck everything. Fuck the High Table, fuck the Continental. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

How dare he. How dare he, after all these years. How dare he ask why when he was the one who betrayed him, he was the one who chose someone else again and again and against over him.

How dare Ed—

The teapot shattered against a wall, the shards crumbling, and the dark splatter of tea and leaves dripping down the beige wall.

He wanted to kill something, someone. Wanted to wrap his fingers around their neck and squeeze, wanted to take a knife and excise their bones and feel the hot blood dripping between his fingers, listen to them cry and beg and—

He stopped. He wasn’t that person anymore. The Penguin was dead. Oswald Cobblepot was dead. They had died slow deaths with every piece of ink he had carved into him.

He took a breath, shaky, and counted. One. Two. Three. Another breath, and he removed his glasses, and carefully, slowly, loosened his tie, unbuttoning the top three buttons of his shirt and slipping his hand underneath to rest over his heart where he knew the words would be. He breathed again, counting the seconds as he dug his nails, sharpened to points, into the words, feeling the pain, the ache. He scratched and counted and breathed.

When he opened his eyes again, the Administrator was back. He buttoned up his shirt, fixed his tie, replaced his glasses, and wiped the blood off his nails with his handkerchief. He could feel the stinging pain in his chest, and he let it be.

“Ms. Jones,” he called out as he replaced his now-bloody handkerchief to his vest pocket.

The Secretary opened the door, voice impassive. “Yes, Administrator?”

“Send someone up to clean this mess,” he said, gesturing to the broken ceramic and spilled tea. “I’ll meet my one o’clock in the lounge instead.”
And then he swept past her.

One. Two. Three.

Ed felt like dancing. To celebrate, he broke into the Gotham Museum and stole the thirty-carat emerald ring that had been on loan from Metropolis and replaced it with vibrant sour apple Ring Pop and a riddle. He spent the next two days in ecstasy, running the GCPD around town in a merry chase that led them all back at the museum with the priceless ring taped to the back of a toilet about thirty feet from where it had been originally exhibited.

He was reveling in a game well played at the Riddle Factory, his legs thrown over the edge of his gold throne and twirling his cane when Jim Gordon came in.

“Ed,” Jim said, stern and his face showing signs of little sleep for the last two days. The petty part of Ed rejoiced.

“Good evening, Jim,” Ed said, springing to his feet. “How may I be of service?” He spread his arms wide as though a king welcoming a friend to court.

“Jesus,” Jim said, pinching the bridge of his nose. He had dark bags under his eyes, and his shirt showed signs of having been slept in. “I should have figured you’d be in one of these moods, but did you really have to? Two days, Ed, and you make three rookies cry.”

“I am afraid I have no idea what you are talking about,” Ed said with a self-satisfied smile and faux innocence. “But yes, yes I did. Besides, if they can’t handle a little threat of death via electrocution, do you really want them in the GCPD?”

Jim looked like he was seriously contemplating shooting Ed, and it was Ed’s favorite expression, especially when he knew Jim wouldn’t. “Do I want to know why you are in such a good mood?”

Ed grinned. “It’s Oswald,” he said, the glee and giddiness all in his voice as he had to keep himself from doing an actual victor dance. “I was right, and it’s Oswald.”
He saw Jim’s face fall, and he knew what he was going to say.

“No,” Ed said, holding up a hand. “I’m not high. I’m not hallucinating. It’s Oswald unless you can think of another reason the Administrator is leaving lilies on Gertrud Kapulput’s grave. And Zsasz will tell you the same,” Ed said, laughing.

Jim stopped midway through rubbing his face. “Wait, what?”

“I’ll break it down for you, Jimmy. The. Administrator. Is. Oswald! And I knew it, I knew behind that cold little facade, Oswald was there. You should have seen it Jim, the look on his face when he threatened me.” Ed was bursting with excitement. “It was beautiful, perfect. Oh, and it was Oswald.”

Jim didn’t know what to do with this information. There were two options: Ed had fallen off the wagon and was back to hallucinating Oswald. Or two, Oswald Cobblepot had emerged from the dead and really was this mysterious Administrator. Honestly, it was Gotham, so Jim didn’t know why he was still bothered to be surprised that it was even odds on which was the truth.

Which is why he found himself knocking on the door of the Continental after work the next day, a little bedraggled from stress and cleaning up the mess Ed had left in his wake. He hadn’t mentioned it to Lee or Barbara—didn’t want to bring it up until he knew one way or another—but dodging their questions was always something he was abysmal at.

An unfamiliar man opened the door, dipping his head in greeting. “Commissioner,” he greeted, Italian accent strong on his lips. His suit was as impeccable, as were all of the guards’ who Jim suspected were all hired hitman. Not that he could prove anything, but this was Gotham. And, if Ed was right, this was Oswald.

“I’m here to see the Administrator,” Jim said, voice professional as he flashed his identification. Unneeded, as the man had recognized him, but a force of habit after all these years.

“Do you have an appointment?”
Jim raised an eyebrow. “Do I need one? I can come back with a warrant.” It was a bluff, and they both knew it. “Just ask if he can spare time for an old friend. As a favor.”

The look he got was incredulous, but the Continental has been conscious of keeping a reasonably good relationship with the police. “Very well,” the guard said, stepping aside to let him into the empty club. “Please wait here.”

Jim lingered in the main entrance, eyes taking in the club that empty except for a staff member restocking behind the main bar and what he presumed was the night’s entertainment setting up on the stage. It was so reminiscent of Mooney’s and Oswald’s that for a moment, Jim felt like he was a rookie again, asking for another favor from the kingpin.

Jim shook himself out from his memories, taking the rare opportunity to inspect the place without the usual crowds. He, like most of Gotham, had visited the club—it was the most exclusive place in the city, and socialites and criminals alike flocked to it.

The rumors of neutrality seemed to be well-founded. There was never any evidence that they could use on how they enforced the neutrality despite what would be dozens of eyewitneses who never came forward. It was amazing how many people would “forget” seeing half a dozen men beheaded on stage.

But the place was, to Jim’s begrudging approval, doing more harm than good. He had heard cops talking about how they liked to come after shift, the only place in the city they felt they didn’t have to watch their back or worry about getting shot. And the criminals seemed to have the same thoughts—a place where they could relax without concerns about turf wars or alliances. He had even heard a few cops getting friendly with some criminals—which Jim couldn’t protest for his own hypocrisy despite knowing how messy of a tangle it could result in. But, as long as they remained as impartial as possible on the job, he saw no reason to police their social life.

His musings were interrupted when the guard returned. Jim wondered if he had needed to pull the “old friend” line out. “The Administrator will meet you in the lounge. Please follow me.”

Jim followed him up the stairs to the second floor, watching as the decor flowed into the second floor with the gold lines and dim lighting aiding in the old world feeling. The second floor was more tables and booths than the first, and one entire side was taken up by a long bar with a bronze statuette of an angel in the center that was flanked by bottles.

The guard gestured to the table in the center. “Please have a seat. The Administrator will join you shortly.”
Jim took a seat warily. He didn’t think he was in any danger, but old habits were hard to kill. Barely a minute after he had taken a seat, a server set a cup and a steaming silver pot of coffee onto the table, next to a matching bowl of sugar and decanter of cream. An unopened bottle of Four Roses Bourbon was placed next to it with a single large ice cube in a low ball glass.

Jim gave her a startled look. “Thank you,” he said gruffly, surprised at the smile he received in return. He shouldn’t be surprised—all accounts said that the Continental was creepily informed of everyone’s drink preferences. Not shocking, given that they had poached the best staff from every bar or club in the city.

He looked at the bourbon mournfully, but he needed all his wits about him for this meeting. Instead, he poured himself a cup of coffee while he waited, forgoing the cream and going sparingly on the sugar.

Jim had made it halfway through his cup when he hears footsteps behind him. He set the cup down to rise to his feet politely, ready to paste on a PR smile and already half-planning the conversation he might need with Lee about checking Ed into a non-Arkham hospital.

Instead, he was struck by a face he couldn’t forget. Because Jim and Oswald have always had a connection, a friendship or animosity that Jim had spent years denying. He had seen Oswald in every situation from terrified to heartbroken, bleeding and begging to a king on his throne.

But he has never seen him like this.

Even past the glasses and piercings and tattoos, his eyes were so cold and lacking in any sense of recognition. But it was no doubt the face of Oswald Cobblepot.

“Commissioner Gordon,” the Administrator greeted in smooth monotone. “Please, sit. What brings you to my humble club?”

The voice was Cobblepot, but as Butch said, it lacked any hint of emotion. There was none of the elation or smugness or annoyance or anger that usually came with one of Jim’s visits.

“Oswald,” Jim said, trying to keep the uncertainty out of his voice and failing.
The Administrator gave a thin, dark smile. “Call me the Administrator, please.”

And it was a telling request. No denial, no confusion, merely plowing forward and damnit, this was Oswald.

“Oswald,” Jim repeated and stepped forward to try and sweep the man into a hug because this—this was—

He took a step back, eyes narrowing from behind the spectacles. “How can I help you, Commissioner?” he asked, cutting and humorless.

“Oswald,” Jim started, not even sure what he was going to say but needing to say something.

“Why,” Oswald said, voice dropping, and it felt like the room had dipped a few degrees, “must everyone insist on saying that name. Do you think that if you wave it around enough, he’ll reappear like your fairy godmother?”

“Because that’s your name,” Jim said.

“I haven’t answered to Oswald Cobblepot in twelve years, Commissioner. That man is dead, and I suggest you run off and tell Mr. Nygma that.”

“If he’s dead, then who is leaving flowers on Gertrud Kabulput’s grave?” Jim knew it was a risk, mentioning his mother, but Oswald always brought out the reckless side of Jim even after all these years. No one had ever been able to push his buttons like Oswald had, and Jim had always been determined to return the favor.

Oswald stilled, and Jim could read that line of tension in his shoulders, on the way he flexed his fingers. “I’ll ask again. How can I help you, Commissioner? Because if you aren’t here on business, I’m afraid I am a very busy man.” He turned his back, a clear dismissal.

Jim forged forward, ignoring the attempted retreat. He felt as if their roles were reversed from so many years ago. This time, Oswald was the one trying to run away. “You once told me that Gotham was a part of you as much as it was a part of me. So, where were you when she needed you?”
“Maybe,” Oswald said, and his voice was chilly, but Jim thought he could hear the smallest thread of anger that was starting to weave its way in. “Maybe I cut out that part of me when I was left in a blimp full of poisonous gas for hours. Maybe, Commissioner, I cut out that part of me when I came begging you for help, terrified. Or when I begged you that Martin was alive and you put me in Arkham anyway. Or when you left me to the tender mercies of Hugo Strange who tortured and brainwashed me. Or maybe it was when I took the fall for Galavan’s murder or maybe when I had to watch my mother die in my arms, and you stood between me and her murderer.” He turned around and looked at Jim in the eye, steady. “Maybe it was one of those times.”

“You don’t mean that,” Jim said, and he knew it was true. Jim could see the anger and hurt behind the words. Or maybe it was the overlap of memories, wistful projection of an old friend. “What happened, Oswald? What made you run away?”

“Maybe I was tired of bleeding and dying for a city who gave two shits about me.”

“I never took you for a coward.”

This garnered a laugh, and it was high and empty and burned itself into Jim’s mind. “Yes, yes you did, Commissioner. That’s all I ever was to you, wasn’t it?” He laughed, and it was nothing like how Oswald used to laugh. “Why are you here, Commissioner?”

Hell if Jim knew at this point. He hadn’t been prepared for this side of the possibility, but he couldn’t back down now. He never could when it came to Oswald. “I’m here for Ed. He hasn’t been the same since you left.”

“And what makes you think I care?” The old Oswald would have responded with glee, but this one, this Administrator, responded in a flat, careless tone—showing no more interest than as if Jim had been speaking about a fly.

“He was hallucinating you, you know that? Did he ever tell you he started using after he thought he killed you at the docks?” Jim said, confessing one of Ed’s biggest secrets in hopes that he’d see the side of the Administrator that Ed had seen, the side that was still the Penguin. “That he was popping speed because he’d hallucinate you when he was high?”

“Again, what makes you think I care?”
“He almost died, Oswald. He OD’d twice before we got him clean. He almost died because he wanted to see his friend. Don’t you care at all?”

“No, I don’t,” Oswald said, and his voice didn’t waver.

Jim stopped and took in the man before him—everything from the straight spine to the unmoving facial expression. Ed had said that this was Oswald, that Oswald was there behind this facade, but Jim...Jim didn’t know what to think. Barbara had told him once that Oswald had been in love with Ed, and Jim knew—damn it if anyone knew, he did—that those types of feelings don’t just disappear. Oswald Cobblepot may have once loved Gotham City and Ed Nygma, but this man in front of him wasn’t him. Not anymore.

“Then I guess maybe Oswald Cobblepot really is dead.”

Chapter End Notes

Urk. Sorry for that late chapter? But I hope I didn't disappoint! I've had this chapter mostly written for weeks, so I hope everyone is as excited as I was to write it.

As always, please spare a moment to leave a comment with your thoughts. It gives me so much joy and motivation to hear from everyone. <3
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He had to get away. He couldn’t—he couldn’t—

Victor had escorted Jim out, and he had locked himself in his office. His chest felt tight, and he gasped for air, trying—trying—

He should have never returned. He should have turned down the job and taken the bullet to the head because that would have been less painful than coming back to this hell forsaken place. He didn’t want to remember how it felt—didn’t want to remember Jim and Ed and Victor and everyone.

Didn’t want to remember how Ed looked at him in Arkham or the little origami penguins he’d leave around the mansion for him. Didn’t want to remember how Jim would sometimes stifle a laugh behind a glass of whiskey or how Barbara would roll her eyes or Butch would call him Boss and—and—

He shouldn’t have come back.

He hated Jim at the moment, hated him with a fierceness that he didn’t think he had in him anymore, hated him for putting the image in his head of Ed half-dead in a hospital bed and dying—

He had to get away.

He was on the streets before he realized, threading his way through the familiar alleys and letting his feet take him somewhere that his mind didn’t know. He should be at the club—he had meetings and work to do and the club was opening for the night in a few hours and he shouldn’t be out here alone with nothing more than a half-loaded pistol tucked under his waistband and a butterfly knife strapped to an ankle. The streets were dangerous, and he had no title to protect him tonight, no face that made common criminals know to turn the other direction.

But he didn’t care because he just needed to be away. He hadn’t wanted to feel like this again—never wanted to feel like he could just shrink into a corner, smaller and smaller, until he disappeared because not existing would be better than feeling like his chest had been ripped open so someone could play his ribs like a xylophone. He hated feeling this vulnerable, like a raw nerve
that Jim had poked and poked and poked at.

He had gotten what he wanted. Oswald Cobblepot was dead.

So why did it hurt so much?

He didn’t know how long he had walked, didn’t know if he had been wandering in circles, but when he finally stopped, he realized where his body had taken him.

The window was broken where there had once been an iconic umbrella and, before that, the golden outline of a fishbone. Graffiti littered the exterior, and a quick look around showed that the area had fallen into similar disrepair.

He wanted to laugh because of all the places he had run to, it was here—the derelict building that had once been Mooney’s and, later, Oswald’s.

His hand reached out to touch the doorknob, stopping when his hand hovered only a few inches from the rusted handle.

Part of him wanted to pick the lock, make his way up the familiar staircase, and lock himself in a corner so he could pretend that he wasn’t the Administrator anymore. But the greater part of him that waged war with showing any weakness rebelled at the thought and told him to leave the past where it belonged—broken and forgotten.

He closed his eyes, focusing on the pain of his leg and the scent of mildew and trash that was characteristic of Gotham. When he opened them, he pulled his hand back, fished out a cigarette, and started the return journey to the Continental.

Ed knocked politely on the locked club door, checking the time despite knowing it was just after noon.

Guard #3 answered the door—the one with the long blonde hair with a Russian accent that Ed suspected he exaggerated. He was dressed in an expected bespoke suit, black on black on black
that seemed to be an unofficial uniform for all the hired security who were all, very obviously, hired hitmen. Ed quickly noted the bulge of a shoulder harness tucked under his left arm, a second small firearm tucked against his right ankle, three short knives throwing knives against his left ankle, and what he suspected was a short dagger strapped to his forearm whose specifics he couldn’t discern under the layers of the suit jacket.

Ed smiled, all teeth, at the man and doesn’t miss the look of exasperation on his face. Ed was very aware that he hadn’t endeared himself to most of the staff with his antics the last month with his daily visits and increasingly outlandish schemes.

He had been good though! It had been four days since he’d finally seen Oswald, talk to him, kissed him—four days of celebration and renewed scheming. Because it was no longer about proving that Oswald was the Administrator but was about making Oswald his—his friend, his partner, his lover, his everything.

“The Administrator is busy, Mr. Riddler,” the guard said in a monotone, a phrase that Ed had gotten used to hearing day in and day out.

But today he wasn’t here for that—not yet. Instead, he held out an elaborate bouquet of purple Peruvian lilies with purple and white roses that he had wrapped in a black sheet of tissue paper and tied off with a large green and gold ribbon.

“Actually, I was hoping you be so kind as to deliver these to him,” he explained, both hands out to offer the bundle of flowers for him to take.

The guard looked dubiously at the flowers. It was clear he had never been in such a situation. It made Ed want to tsk; Oswald really should be hiring men who knew how to improvise.

“Nothing nefarious in them, I promise. You can even check them over yourself,” he said cheerily with a smile that would have suited his days working at the GCPD, hopeful and guileless. “I hoped he might like something to brighten up his office, and lilies are his favorite.”

The guard still looked suspicious but carefully took the bouquet. He clearly decided that delivering the flowers was less likely to get him in trouble than turning them away. “I’ll pass it along, Mr. Riddler.”

Ed wondered what sort of power Oswald held over them that made them so cautious. The thought
made a shiver of pleasure and anticipation crawl down his spine, made him giddy because Oswald was never more amazing than when he had the fear and respect of a room.

Ed gave a final cheery grin, all teeth, before taking off his hat to give a quick bow in thanks. “Thank you, my good sir,” he said, happy enough that he managed to keep his usual facetious undertone to a minimum.

He whistled a cheery tune as he walked away, resisting the urge to twirl his gold cane and skip back to the Riddle Factory. The day was looking up.

Ed had known he wouldn’t be able to drop off many gifts before Oswald instructed his guards to stop accepting them. He had been hoping to make it passed the fourth day though before a different guard told him in a faintly irritated tone that the Administrator would not be taking any gifts. (He knew he had likely only managed to drop off his third gift—a decadently wrapped box of Oswald’s favorite brand of chocolates flown in the previous day from Zurich and a mix of soft champagne truffles rolled in cocoa powder and dark chocolate raspberry confections molded into roses and dusted with edible gold—because it has been Zsasz who had opened the door. Ed knew Zsasz well enough to know how to coerce him to make the drop though it has been admittedly not as easy as he had hoped—the usually unflappable assassin was legitimately uneasy around the Administrator.)

Now that he didn’t have a way to deliver his gifts—courting gifts, the voice said from behind his shoulder—through the front door, it meant he was back to finding ways to sneak into the building. After five spectacular failures though, he knew that he needed new eyes on the place. He hated to admit when he needed help but, for Oswald, he would do anything.

He flipped open his phone, dialing the number from memory and humming as he listened to it ring. It wasn’t too early in the day, and she should be awake especially with the lack of major headlines today.

“Hey, forensics guy,” Catwoman said over the phone, her voice the signature unimpressed drawl.

“Hey, street trash girl,” Ed bantered in return. He has grown fond of Selina over the years and it helped that she was undoubtedly one of the more reliable rogues in town—well, as long as Bruce Wayne wasn’t up to his usual antics, that is. “I am in need a teeny tiny favor from you.”
Ed could practically see her face in response to that, one eyebrow going up as she cocked her head—a mixture of nonchalance and curiosity, cunning and boredom. “Oh? And what do I get?”

“The code to Jacob Kane’s security system and the safe.”

“You’re bullshitting me,” Selina said, clearly unconvinced. Ed would bet she was even inspecting her nails at the moment.

“Au contraire, my little Cat. An eight-digit security code and a six-digit lock can easily be deduced based on Mr. Elliot’s love of ABBA and his military background. Though to be fair, it’s the code for his tertiary residence where he prefers to take his mistresses, but I have no doubt that it is full of several shiny things you might desire.”

He heard Catwoman huff at the other end and didn’t suppress a smile. He had her.

“Fine, fine. What’s the favor?”

“I need to find a way into the Administrator’s office in the Continental.”

“I’m surprised you need me for that.”

“Ah, yes,” Ed said, the trace of embarrassment weaving its way through his words. “I’m afraid they have grown a bit wise to my methods.” And it made so much sense now on how he had been constantly thwarted—Oswald always knew how Ed’s mind tended to work, knew his common methods of distraction, and the patterns to his reasoning.

“Did you need me to steal something? ‘Cause if so, it’s no deal. I’d really rather not get on the bad side of those guys.” Catwoman was primarily a thief and a smart one at that—she knew when it was better to not poke the sleeping dragon.

“No,” Ed assured her, leaning back to lounge against the wall. “I just need you to find a way for me to get in.”

“Any particular reason?”
Ed paused. He...didn’t want to talk about Oswald to someone else, someone who didn’t—wouldn’t—understand. Jim understood and Butch would too, but everyone else only knew the Penguin, never Oswald Cobblepot. “Let’s just say I want to have a private chat with the man.”

“Okay, okay,” Catwoman said, dropping the subject. She would probably dig into it at a later date; but hopefully, by then, he’d have Oswald back by his side. “Give me a few days.”

“I’ll give you two. And I’ll have another gift for you if you can get it done in one.”

“You are lucky I like you,” she said with faux annoyance and not bothering to disguise her interest in the challenge. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Meet me at the Riddle Factory.” He was going to need her here eventually to walk through her plan, and it was better to expedite to the final step.

“Jeez, fine. Later, loser.”

There was a click as the call ended, and Ed slapped his own phone shut. He let his head fall back, exposing the long line of his throat and he couldn’t help his grin.

Maybe tomorrow he’d get to see Oswald.

Catwoman came through, as Ed knew she would. Or he presumed she came through and her plan would work. It was wholly different than Ed’s own schemes that were full of loud distractions and melodrama. Her plan was based around more subtle means of diversion, avoiding cameras and motion sensors, and good old-fashioned lock picking.

Ed had already made it further toward his goal than any of his own strategies had allowed, balanced precariously on the small edge of a windowsill that had a blind spot that Ed could barely fit himself in.
It was a little harder to do than it has been a decade ago, Ed admitted to himself as he wiped the sweat from his brow. He missed the days he would have been able to sprint across town, climb up a fire escape, and jump between the close-set buildings with barely more than a light sweat and the pleasant ache of his muscles.

Ten minutes later, Ed was sighing in relief as he jimmed opened a window that had been sealed shut from decades of poorly executed paint jobs—nothing a few drops of acid hadn’t solved.

Ed dropped into a clumsy crouch after slipping himself through the window. He pulled himself up, using the open sill for leverage, and stretched his back out. Oh yeah, definitely not as young as he used to be.

He searched for the ventilation shaft that had been on the blueprints—all three sets and one of the very few things that had been consistent in each set of plans. It was barely big enough for Ed to fit through—Catwoman would have had no issue, but she was a flexible slip of a woman who he suspected had an extreme form of joint hypermobility.

It took another fifteen minutes for him to make it to the Administrator’s office. It was blessedly empty, so Ed knew that Catwoman’s little distraction downstairs had likely been a success. The point was for Ed to talk to Oswald, but he wasn’t sure if he would be able to get out of this right space with anything resembling grace.

Once on his feet again, he shot off a quick message to Catwoman with the signal so she could start to round up Poison Ivy and Cheetah while he straightened his suit jacket and hat with his free hand.

He swung off the lightweight pack that he has been carrying during the entire excursion and whose presence had definitely not made this escapade any easier. He set a long thin box that measured precisely 36 inches carefully on the edge of the large oak desk which, despite the quality and obvious wealth of the surrounding, was marked with years of age, scattered with areas of sun discoloration and numerous deep scratches through the finish.

Next, he drew out a carefully wrapped bottle of wine and eleven long-stemmed lavender roses that had been bundled as best he could to protect them in the journey. He gave each rose a thorough examination, lamenting that two had gotten partially crushed but was overall satisfied with their condition. He extracted the emerald green ribbon he had tucked at the bottom and tied the flowers together in a picture-perfect bow.
Finally, he pulled out the last item, a box made of lightweight black acrylic that he opened to reveal two crystal wine glasses cushioned in burgundy crushed velvet. There was a high chance that one of said glasses would likely be shattered before the end of the night, but it was a small price to pay if Oswald notices that it has been the same design as his favorite set at the manor.

He was arranging everything into an aesthetically pleasing manner when he heard the twist of the doorknob. Ed pulled out his own gun from where he had tucked it into his waistband—just in case—and crammed himself into the space to it’s side. He needed Oswald to stay, needed to keep him from calling the guard right away, and that meant he needed to stay out of sight until he could be sure he wouldn’t run.

He wasn’t disappointed in Oswald’s reaction. The door opened, unhurried and the hinges creaking from the friction, and he heard the sound of irregular footsteps, the almost but not quite familiar shuffle. His prey takes a few steps into the room before he notices the spread of gifts on the desk. Before he can call out, Ed was kicking the door shut and putting himself between Oswald and the only exit other than a three-story drop out the window.

Then they were alone.

The Administrator knew that he should have spotted that something was wrong the moment he opened the door. He had been on edge the last few days and he was trying to not think that it had anything to do with Mr. Nygma and Commissioner Gordon. It was simply the stress of running the Continental and making sure not even the smallest infraction was left unpunished. It was that Donna Falcone’s men were getting increasingly agitated as time went on and that there were rumors that the Joker was planning something big that the Administrator had a hard time anticipating. His experience had been with a very different Mr. Valeska—one that thrived on chaos for the sake of chaos—but this one was an unsettling conglomerate of the old and new, a true wild card.

But there was no excuse for how long it took him to notice the array of new objects on his desk or his slow intake of the situation as the door closed itself to reveal Mr. Nygma. He was a second too slow on the draw, and Mr. Nygma had taken the two long steps to restrain him, his large hands in a crushing grip on his wrists that were pulled behind his back smoothly.

He cursed inwardly, careful to maintain a stoic facade, letting nothing show other than annoyance. “Mr. Nygma,” he greeted, letting disdain drip from the four syllables.
“Hello, Oswald,” Mr. Nygma said, much too happy and still wearing that ridiculous hat, as he patted him down. He was perfunctorily stripped of his weapons—the semi-automatic he kept in his shoulder holster, the revolver he kept tucked in his waistband, the baby Browning strapped to one ankle, the butterfly knife strapped to the other, the switchblade concealed in his belt, and even the piano wire he used as a garrote that he had hidden in the heel of one of his Oxfords.

Mr. Nygma gave him one last thorough check, the Administrator ceasing to struggle against his hold. Mr. Nygma had six inches and likely thirty pounds of advantage over him which, coupled with the angle of the hold on his wrists, made escape unlikely. He had best just bare it than waste energy.

He rubbed at his wrists when he was finally released, spinning to glare at the man who dropped all the lifted weaponry into a mysterious black bag that he dropped in the corner. The Administrator scowled at the move—it would take an extra precious few seconds to snag a weapon now, a few extra seconds that would give Mr. Nygma time to stop him.

He buried his anger down, instead aiming for nonchalance with just the right hint of annoyance—like this was nothing more than a minor inconvenience. “How, pray tell, can I assist you, Mr. Nygma? Have I not been exceedingly clear that your attentions have been unwelcome?”

When Stefan had shown up at his office with the flowers, he hadn’t known what to do—this hadn’t been a scenario he had anticipated. He had dissected the memory of the kiss and Commissioner Gordon’s visit until they were nothing more than a piece of history, two blips in his timeline that he shelved away to the very back of his mind. So, when a bouquet, full of purple lilies that he loved—no, once loved—arrived via a confused assassin, he had been stunned into speechlessness for the first time in years. He regained himself quickly, but not quickly enough that it escaped Stefan’s notice, and had them thrown out. Waiting out this storm was the best line of action—Mr. Nygma would find some other object to fawn over as he always did.

Except he was more obsessive than the Administrator remembered and returned the next day—this time with a stack of beautifully bound novels, clearly custom ordered to be bound with deep purple leather with silver edging and lettering. The Case of Charles Dexter Ward was at the top of the pile, the thin novella sparking a sense of familiarity. He had picked it up before he had noticed, flipping through to the beginning and eyes alighting on a message, handwritten in emerald ink.

*You never had the chance to finish this. - E*

He had slapped the book back down on the pile that was still in the hands of one of his guards and instructed them to leave them in Storage 2B—the one furthest from his office and cluttered primarily with extras of their more elaborate, custom decor. Before he was out of range, he carefully, calmly instructed them to accept nothing more from Mr. Nygma.
Which justified his anger when, on the third day, Mr. Zsasz knocked on his door with a flat black box wrapped in a shimmery gold ribbon. He hadn’t even had time to say anything before the assassin tossed the box across the small room, forcing the Administrator catch it or let it hit him in the face.

“Compliments of Nygma,” he said, heedless of the thin ice he was on. “Throw them away if you want, but you of all people know he’s not going to stop.”

The man disappeared before the Administrator could do something, anything. His first instinct had been to yell, stomp, and punish the man, an instinct that he trampled down with a vengeance. No, the Administrator never raised his voice; he was always calm, and it was that calmness that people feared.

He unwrapped the box despite the logic of simply trashing it unopened; there was no purpose to see what was inside. There was no reason that the old sight of perfectly arranged truffles and gold-dusted chocolate would make his hands shake. None.

He dumped the still open box into the trash can and unclenched his fist.

When he received nothing on the fourth day and fifth day, the knot in his chest was of relief and nothing more.

The Administrator pushed himself out of his memories to stare down at the object of his annoyance, in his stupid green suit and stupid hat. When Mr. Nygma didn’t answer him, he folded his arms across his chest and rested one hip on the edge of his desk, raising an eyebrow. “Well?”

“I wanted to see you,” he said, his tone damningly soft in a way that made him want to punch him again. “And give you another present since your guard dogs kept turning me away.”

The Administrator inspected the offerings with an unimpressed air, wondering if he’d be fast enough to grab one of the wine glasses to stab the man with. “I believe I have made it very clear that I do not want anything from you. Not your time, not your company, and not your gifts.”

“They were all your favorites,” Mr. Nygma continued to say, ignoring the Administrator’s words. “I…” he said, trailing off and looking over The Administrator’s shoulder at something. He resisted the urge to turn around and look himself, knowing there was nothing he would see. “I brought us a
bottle of wine.”

The Administrator watched him take a few steps toward the array of gifts and pick up the tall bottle, its cream label a sharp contrast against the dark glass.

“It’s the same bottle. That I was going to bring. That night,” he said, stumbling, his previously confident tone now flustered and unsure.

The Administrator waited, tapping his fingers impatiently against his forearm. He didn’t see where this was going.

Mr. Nygma twisted the bottle to display the label, elegant black scrawls that displayed a vintage from almost two decades prior. “The night I met Isabella—this was the bottle I was going to bring to dinner.”

The Administrator kept his face impassive even as his heart rate jumped. “And why do you think I’d care?”

Mr. Nygma set the bottle down and took the two large steps it took to bring them closer together. The Administrator didn’t move, didn’t want to back down and look weak, so simply craned his neck up to be able to look at him, hating their height difference. He was always the shortest and had gotten used to it, but now it seemed more important than it had before.

Mr. Nygma reached out a hand as he leaned in as though to caress his cheek as he had years ago. The Administrator reached up to slap his hand away, but instead, Mr. Nygma just caught his hand, wrapping his long fingers to envelope his until they were practically holding hands. His grip was tight, skin clammy and familiar. Oswald could smell the scent of his cologne at this distance—lemon and orange blossom rounded out with hints of patchouli—and he hated the memories it brought up. It brought up memories of Ed fixing his tie before a press conference or hours spent pouring over blueprints or, worst of all, the memory that he had once cherished but now only filled him with agony. He could almost see it again—the feeling of Ed’s arms around his, the scratch of his robe on his cheek, and the distant scent of ginger and lemon tea.

He was startled back into the present when a hand reached to cup his cheek and realized that Ed had gotten closer and they were staring into each other’s eyes, close enough that he could feel his warm breath ghost over his face. He felt it, the unpleasant pressure in his eyes that he tried to blink away but he knew, he knew damnit, that he hadn’t succeeded even before Ed brushed away the single tear with this thumb.
“I know you care, Oswald,” Ed said, caressing his cheek with featherlight tenderness and Oswald didn’t notice when he had become the one clutching Ed’s hands instead of vice versa. “I brought it as a way of an apology. I thought...” Ed paused, pursing his lips and bracing himself as if for a hit, “I thought that it was better late than never. I thought you might appreciate it.”

Oswald laughed, on the edge of hysterics. “An apology? Really, Edward? You thought that a bottle of wine and a reminder that you shot me and left me to die would be a good apology?” The Administrator started to pull away, indignant, but Ed tightened his grip and had no intention of letting him go.

Ed pushed him against the wall, his back hitting the plaster with an audible thud. The Administrator tried to push him back, a scornful glare ready but his response was swallowed by Ed’s mouth on his. His lips were hot, incessant, and he felt like he was drowning.

He pushed back, meaning to push him away, but instead his lips parted, and Ed’s tongue slid against his own, demanding. Ed slipped a knee between his legs, pinning him to the wall as his mouth ravaged him, hot and passionate and—

“Stop,” the Administrator said, jerking his face away and pretending the burning in his eyes was from dust.

Ed loosened his grip on his wrists, still pressing them to the wall but with enough give that he could be pushed away. He trailed his lips down to brush them against Oswald’s again, darting his tongue out to lick at one of the rings before placing a series of light kisses behind his ear and down his neck. “Push me away,” he whispered, urged. “Push me away and I’ll stop, but you know you don’t want me to.”

Oswald knew it was true, knew that he could wrestle himself free from Ed’s hands and walk out that door but—

“I love you,” Ed said, staring into Oswald’s eyes and his gaze was serious, focused. “I’m sorry that it took me so long to figure it out. I’m sorry I ever thought that anyone could replace you, but I love you. I love you as Oswald or the Administrator or whatever else you want to call yourself.” He pressed their lips together again, soft, and it was like falling into a dream from back before everything—when he had hoped for soft kisses and tender affections and—

“Don’t,” Oswald said, barely above a whisper between their lips, breaths intermingling. “Please,
“Don’t do this to me, don’t give me this hope, don’t make me feel because I don’t want to love you anymore.”

Ed kissed away the line of tears, tongue tasting the salt and skin. His thumb rested over Oswald’s wrist, right over his pulse point, and he could undoubtedly hear the way his heartbeat threatened to overwhelm him.

Ed brought their lips together again, open mouth and sweet and soft; and he was trying not to cry because it was everything he had once wanted, and it hurt so fucking badly. His eyes shut of their own accord, and he wanted to kiss back, wanted to press himself against Ed because he must be a masochist, must be glutton for punishment because this was going to break him again because he wasn’t allowed to have this, because everything he ever wanted crumbled into dust that started from his mother and continued its way to John Wick only to circle around again to Edward fucking Nygma.

Oswald pulled himself back, slow, and he knew he was crying now, knew he was just barely managing to keep the sobs from wracking through his entire body. “Please, don’t.” But he didn’t push him away.

He didn’t know what he was going to do. Half of him wanted to pull Ed down, to push them together until he felt like he could crawl into his skin, to relive every fantasy he pretended he still didn’t have where Ed would kiss him, press him down onto the antique couches at the mansion and made him feel loved, treasured. The other half wanted to scream—wanted to fight and rebel and how dare he.

The choice was taken away from him. There was the familiar sound of a cock of a gun and then he heard an ice-cold voice, distinctly feminine, and he opened his eyes to look at the familiar face with perfectly painted crimson lips turned down in a frown and her signature red curls framing her face.

“I suggest you let go. Right. Now.”

Chapter End Notes

Urrr, sorry for the wait? I hate having more than a week between updates but life has been a bit hectic lately. Follow me on Tumblr if you wanted to be kept updated on my status. I also sometimes post sneak peaks of my WIPs as well. <3

If you want to know a bit more of what happened in Gotham in the intervening years or my logic behind certain choices, you can check it out here.
As always, thank you to everyone who has taken the time to read and leave a comment. I reread them pretty often, and they give me so much motivation and inspiration to write. <33
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Addy should have known something was wrong when Matty wasn’t in the lounge. She knew how much he disliked being cooped up in an office—years of working at The Bar and then presiding over the Administration meant that he had gotten used to the familiar hum of bystanders and the open space. She knew that he only took the most private of meetings in his office, only used it when he had to, and even that was a rare occurrence.

Antonio had let her in as he usually did, not even blinking at the pale daffodil scarf that she used to cover her hair or the light robin’s egg blue of her demure floral dress that she covered with a cream knit cardigan. He hadn’t mentioned that Matty would be in the meeting, so she hadn’t thought anything of it when he hadn’t been on the second-floor lounge. Instead, she walked past the empty Secretary’s desk with long confident strides and rapped her knuckles on the thick wooden door. She hadn’t thought anything of it when there was no answer—sometimes Matty got lost in his work—and hadn’t thought anything of it when she walked in, unannounced.

She hadn’t expected the picture that greeted her: Matty, pinned against the wall by a tall glass of water dressed in the most outrageous green suit who was kissing him. It wasn’t the first time she had walked in on Matty in a compromising position, and she was, for a moment, only thankful that he was fully dressed this time. She had been about to back out, quietly, and leave her dearest friend be when she noticed the tears, the fear, and the soft rejection—the don’t and please—and she saw red, pure indignant rage bubbling up.

She had taken the few steps to close the distance between them in a mere second, pulling her favorite Norwich 0.32 caliber revolver that Winston had gifted her after her 15th year anniversary with the Continental—with its cast metal grip and specialty engraved image of a wolf on one side and an eagle on the other—out from her lacy handbag. She pressed the barrel against the back of the stranger’s head, the loud cock of its hammer causing both men to freeze. It took everything in her not to pull the trigger—maybe she was reading the situation wrong but based on the absolute wreck Matty appeared to be in, she didn’t think so.

“I suggest you let go. Right. Now.”

The stranger backed away slowly, releasing Matty’s wrist slowly and tilting his head around just enough to look at her. “You wouldn’t. Consecrated grounds, isn’t that what you call it?”

Addy gave a smile, sharp and daring. “Wanna bet? ‘Cause from where I’m standing, I just walked in on you sexually assaulting my friend. So, test me. I dare you.”
“Addy, don’t.” Matty’s voice was soft, soft in a way that she had never heard, and she wanted to shoot this man in the head anyway for making him sound like that. She had never, not once in the last decade and more of friendship, seen Matty cry and she wanted to kill this man for being the cause, consecrated grounds or not.

She tightened the grip on her revolver and kept her eyes sharp and determined. “Go,” she demanded in a low voice, “before I ignore him and shoot you anyway, damn the consequences.”

The string bean backed away, opening his mouth to retort before shutting it at the look on Addy’s face. She wasn’t even bluffing—she’d shoot first and figure out the way around being Excommunicado later. There has to be some loophole around protecting a member of the High Table.

She kept her gun trained on him as he slowly retreated and finally slipped out the door, sidestepping to slide herself in between him and Matty at all times. The slam of the door was like a signal, and Matty crumpled against the wall like a puppet with its strings cut.

She hadn’t been fast enough to catch him before he slumped down the wall into a crumpled heap. She set her gun down on the desk before dropping to her knees and pulled him into her arms.

She didn’t know what to do—this was nothing she had ever had to deal with. Matty had been all fun and flirting—the most serious relationship she’d ever seen him in was the multi-month fling with John Wick. And in the years since, she’d watched as he retreated deeper into himself to where she was lucky to pull a genuine smile from him once every three months.

“Hey, Matty,” she said, pulling him closer so his face was buried into the crook of her neck as she gently carded her fingers through his hair—uncaring of the stiff feeling of gel under her nails. Matty had curled himself into a ball, and she could feel the shake of his shoulders as he tried to stifle more tears. “I got you. He didn’t…?” she trailed off, unsure. It didn’t look like the stranger had gotten very far, but this wasn’t a normal reaction. “I can still make a call,” she offered. In ten minutes, she could have a half-million-dollar bounty on his head.

She felt Matty shake his head, sniffling as he wrapped his arms around himself. He was half-sitting in her lap now, and she could see his short stiletto nails digging into the soft crook of his elbow, leaving behind sharp indents and long red scratches. She couldn’t see his face, but she placed one of her own hands over his fingers, stopping the scratches just as she saw him start to draw blood. She laced their fingers together as she continued to gently rock him, making comforting noises and nonsensical sounds of platitudes as she listened to the muffled sounds of his sobs.
He was a quiet crier, and Addy would have assumed he was only shaking except for the wet feeling of tears through her dress and the occasional sniffle. She didn’t know how long they sat on the floor together, Addy alternating between rubbing his back and pressing comforting kisses into his hair. When Matty finally seemed to compose himself, he pulled away, shifting himself out of her lap to the relief of her very much asleep legs.

His hair was a mess—the usually carefully styled dark hair standing on end in some places, in disarray from a mix of Addy’s petting and Matty’s attempt to bury himself in her arms. She watched as Matty took off his tear smudged glasses to clean them on the edge of his shirt, taking in the redness in his eyes and around his nose. His makeup had smudged, leave dark circles of eyeliner and mascara under his eyes and making his face look sunken and tired. His eyes, normally so bright, had a defeated look that she hated.

She pulled out a clean cotton handkerchief from her purse, holding it out to him wordlessly. She used one hand to help tuck his hair back under control while Matty worked to put himself back together, blowing his nose and wiping away the circles of dark makeup from under his eyes. When he finally perched his glasses back on his face, very few would be able to tell that he had a breakdown except for the lingering puffiness around his eyes and the waxy redness of his nose. But Addy had known Matty for years, and she could see the lingering discomfort in his posture, the embarrassment that was almost painfully easy to read.

“I apologize you had to see that,” he said, and his voice was rough and scratchy. She could see him trying to shut down his emotions, and she reached out to place her hand on his cheek, stalling him.


Matty let out a bark of laughter, foreign and bitter and dark in a way she hadn’t ever heard from him. She didn’t understand what was funny.

“Come on,” she said, pulling herself clumsily to her feet before holding out a hand. “Let’s get you a drink upstairs, Matty.”

There was a moment where she didn’t know if he’d accept her hand. She could see it—him pushing himself up to tuck away any hint that he was human and direct them to the lounge where he would make her a drink, and Addy would, out of professional courtesy and friendship, pretend the last hour hadn’t happened.
Instead, the vulnerability she had seen flashed across his face again, mixed with resignation, and she could easily read how tired he was. He let his eyes close for a moment before reaching up to grab her hand, allowing her to pull him up. To her shock, he dropped his head to rest his forehead against her shoulder, and he gave her hand a strong, thankful squeeze.

“Okay,” he said.

Addy hadn’t ever actually been in the upstairs apartments, and she didn’t think anyone had except potentially for the designer and maybe a single bodyguard. Matty had always been intensely private.

But Addy hadn’t gotten to where she was by being a wilting flower. She wrestled the keys from Matty’s pocket and manhandled him onto his couch—a sleek plush black couch in the classic Continental mid-century modern style—and ignored his protests that were half-hearted enough to make her worry more. She laid a lap blanket decorated with light blush and tangerine geometric patterns over his lap before pressing her hand down on his shoulder and giving him a warning look. “I’ll be right back with a drink, okay?”

The apartment was minimalistic enough and so clearly Continental decorated that it was easy to find the liquor cabinet tucked against a wall. She dug through his fridge and, finding a lack of not only food but also potential chasers, she improvised.

She returned with two long-stemmed glasses in one hand and a nice bottle of merlot in the other that she had found tucked in a half-empty wine rack. She didn’t think straight hard liquor was going to help right now, and there was no way in hell she was going to leave him alone long enough to go downstairs for supplies.

She sat down next to him before serving them two generous pours of the wine while she talked. “I know you aren’t the biggest fan of wine, but that’s what you get for not keeping a stocked fridge.”

She handed him his glass and watched as he drained it in one long swallow. She sipped her own slowly, letting the heady taste of tannins roll around her tongue, automatically tasting notes of cherry and chocolate. Once a bartender, always a bartender.

When Matty finished, she poured him another, less generous pour this time. He didn’t drink it in one fell swoop this time but still took two large gulps, hastily wiping a trail of dark wine away with
the back of his hand from where it dripped down from the corner of his mouth.

She kicked off her heels, tucking her bare feet under her while she reached to tug a corner of the blanket into her lap, letting her knees brush against his calf, grounding. “Do you want to talk about it?” she asked, careful to keep her tone smooth and without pressure as she propped one elbow on the back of the couch to face him.

Matty didn’t meet her eyes, instead choosing to swirl the wine in its glass and watch the slow drip of its legs down the inside of the glass with idle interest. The waxy redness of his face had gone down a bit, and he was looking weary and defeated with dark bags under his eyes and a sallowness to his complexion.

“You don’t have to,” she continued, soft and coaxing, the one she used to pry secrets from patrons and the one that Matty had taught her. “But do we need to worry about him? He assaulted you, and that is never okay, you know that, right?” She pressed her leg against his subtly, making sure he knew that she was there for him.

Matty shook his head. “It wasn’t like that.” He was fiddling with the stem of his glass, and she watched as a finger ghosted over one of his tattoos, nails scraping over the skin and tracing over the sprawl of vines on his right arm. “He wasn’t…” he said, eyes unfocused as the words trailed off. “He wasn’t forcing me, not like that.”

Addy took a hand to brush against his cheek, turning his head with her fingertips to make him look at her. “Sweetie, you were crying when I walked in and saying no. How is that not forcing you?” She didn’t want to upset him, but it was important, vital, that he knew that.

Matty shook his head again, unsure but not pulling away from her hand even as his eyes dropped to look past her shoulder. “I could have pushed him away. He wasn’t holding me down; he told me I could push him away if I wanted to.”

“So why didn’t you?”

Matty bit his lip, toying with one of his snakebites between his teeth in a gesture she had never seen him make before. “I—We—” he stuttered, and he clenched his hand around the stem of the wine glass hard enough that she was afraid it was going to break. “We have history.”

Addy’s eyebrows shot up despite all her training—Matty was almost infamous in how fastidiously
he didn’t talk about his time before the Continental. “Okay,” she said, tone even. “But that still
doesn’t give him the right to touch you like that.”

Matty drained the rest of his glass, setting the empty glass on the side table with enough force that
she thought it was going to crack before pulling away from Addy’s touch. He folded his hands in
his lap, clutching at the scratchy blanket.

“What,” he started, licking his lips, still hesitant. “What have you learned about Gotham’s history?
Specifically, in the last fifteen or so years?”

She blinked at the non-sequitur but allowed the subject to change. “Honestly?” she said,
considering. “Not a significant amount outside the briefing. I’ve focused mostly on the current
players and their recent history. The Donna’s men are chatty though, after a few drinks, so I’ve
picked up bits and pieces.” She paused, her sharp eyes keeping track of his body language, on how
he was holding himself purposefully open against every one of his instincts. “Why?”

Matty continued to stare at his lap, wringing his hands. A chunk of hair fell in front of his face,
almost obscuring his eyes, and it made him look softer. “That man. You’ve heard of him even if
you’ve never met him. Edward Nygma, but he prefers to go by the Riddler.”

Addy tilted her head and brushed a curl of hair out of her face as she mentally shuffled through the
information she had received over the last months. “Mostly high-profile thefts in recent history,”
she said slowly, trying to remember what she could about the newly named man. “Rumored to
have genius-level intellect but his biggest weakness is his psychological need to leave clues in the
form of riddles at crime scenes. Most likely allies: Poison Ivy and the Joker.” And seriously. These
names.

“Yeah,” Matty said, voice distant as he stared mournfully at the half-full bottle of wine waiting on
the coffee table. “Did you look further back in his history? The start of his crimes?”

Addy shook her head slowly, unsure of the direction of the conversation. She took a slow sip of the
merlot to buy herself time, keeping an eye on him over the rim of the glass and careful not to push
and shut down the rare moment of openness.

“Have you heard of the Penguin?” he asked, switching topics in a way that almost gave her
whiplash.
Again, Addy had to flip through her mental files of information. “The Penguin,” she said, letting the unfamiliar title roll off her tongue as though tasting it. “Crime lord that rose to prominence approximately…” She trailed off as she did the math in her head. “Fifteen years ago. Known as the last criminal kingpin of the city and was, briefly, mayor of Gotham. Disappeared and presumed dead before the so-called No Man’s Land.”

“Yeah,” Matty said, voice flat as he picked at a loose thread with one long nail. “Did you ever wonder why I was sent to Gotham? I’m the Administrator, not a Manager or a Concierge who would be undoubtedly more qualified to start a Continental.”

Addy actually had, but she assumed the High Table had its reasons. And she had been in the business long enough to know not to ask questions. She didn’t answer aloud, but the tilt of her head and the question in her expression enough of an answer to any member of the Continental, let alone the High Table.

Matty finally looked at her, and his smile was...off in a way she couldn’t describe—a mix of irony and fatalism. “I kept the information on the Penguin purposefully thin. But his most prominent characteristic was his limp, his... waddle.” There was bitterness there in his words, full of anger and hate, and Addy didn’t understand.

“Matty?” Addy said, lost on how the topics were connected.

Matty had given up pretending he didn’t want—need—more alcohol to get through this conversation. He leaned forward to swoop the bottle up and drank from it directly, his head tipped back to expose the long line of his neck and the curve of black ink that was wrapped around his throat. He wiped his mouth with his hand again, and his laugh was biting. “Come, Addy,” he said, teasing and just the wrong side of expectant. “The pieces are all there for you.” He tapped his bad leg with the bottle, the sound of glass against his clothed brace leaving a dull thud.

Addy blinked, unsure, and then something clicked, and her eyes widened.

“Ah-ha,” Matty said with a smile full of acid, “and the penny drops.” He took another long pull from the bottle, unmindful of the way the wine dripped from the edges of his mouth. “I fucking hated that name at first. God, I hated it. But it grew on me. If they were going to call me the Penguin, then I was going to own it.”

“Matty,” Addy said, unsure what to say, but feeling as though she needed to say something, anything.
“The High Table sent me here because I’m the only goddamn person they knew who could handle Gotham. I've had the city under my thumb once, so why the fuck not again?” He barked out a short laugh, and his smile was full of teeth, threatening and harsh. “I spent fucking years trying to escape from this place, and they force me back at gunpoint. The irony.”

Addy flinched at his language, at how much resentment dripped from every word like every syllable was designed as a dagger. “And this man...Nygma knows you? From before?” Addy knew that Matty had a past, but everyone did. The prevailing theories had been that he was running away from some nameless family he was born into or that he had stumbled onto something while with his newest beau, but those had faded over the years. The Administrator was just a much of a fixture as Winston was. It was easy to forget how he was during the first few months Addy had known him when he was acting like a young, naive rentboy on Marcus’ arm. But she remembered how bad his limp used to be, how, if she thought about it, his walk did resemble a waddle.

Matty nodded. “Ed. He—fuck.” He took another large gulp of wine, and Addy was wondering if she should be taking it away from him. She had never seen him drink like this, crass and unrefined. “It’s complicated.” His laugh was a little hollow and a lot of hurt. “Fuck, it’s more than complicated. He saved my life. He was my Chief of Staff when I was mayor, did you know that?”

Addy knew when a question wasn’t really a question. She just reached out a hand to rest it on his forearm, hoping the feeling of skin to skin and the remainder of her presence would help. Matty ignored the touch but didn't pull away, too distracted by the hurricane of his own emotions as he kept talking, free and spiteful and so unlike him.

“At least until he shot me and dumped me in the river. Do you want to know why?” He didn’t let her answer. “Because I killed his girlfriend who he had known for one fucking week. Because I’m the idiot who fell in love with him. We spent years trying to kill each other and save each other until I thought I could trust him because I’m a moron who never fucking learns. And then he leaves me again for Lee fucking Thompkins. Oh wait, I’m sorry, I guess it’s Mrs. Leslie Gordon now.”

Matty had jumped to his feet and started pacing halfway through his rant, the bottle hanging from one hand as he talked, cynicism growing with every word until he was basically spitting out the name of the Commissioner's wife with more vehemence than Addy knew he possessed. He threw the bottle of wine against the wall, and it shattered, the sound loud and jarring in the small space and splattering the deep burgundy fluid everywhere, leaving deep streaks of color against drab beige walls.

“And now that asshole has the nerve to try and waltz back into my life. As though saying sorry is enough to make it all better? And I obviously don’t learn my lessons because I’m still in fucking
love with him.” His voice slowly lost its rage and indignation—fading down until each word held an almost imperceptible tremor, and his eyes shone, wet with potential tears, and he looked more vulnerable now than he had ever before. “I thought I learned my lesson about how love is nothing but a weakness, that I’m better off unencumbered. But I can’t look at him without remembering how much I fucking still love him, even now.”

He collapsed back onto the couch, leaning into Addy who had long ago set her glass down. She wrapped her thin arms around his shoulders, comfortably.

“I used to dream about him kissing me. For years after I left. Sometimes I’d picture it was him fucking me when I slept with other men. How pathetic is that? He tries to kill me, tosses me aside twice, and I still would have taken any scrap of affection he offered. And now all it takes is a few pretty words and sweet kisses, and I’m half his again already.”

He was crying now, really crying again. Addy scooted herself closer and pulled his head down to rest on her shoulder. His mouth was moving in between sobs, in between his self-flagellation and anger.

She didn’t speak, only lets him cry himself to sleep while she rubbed gentle circles into his shoulder and holds him close. Once he was asleep, she wiggled herself carefully out from under him, careful to not wake up. She tiptoed way across the floor to the bedroom to turn down the covers and then returned to scoop him up into her arms. He was surprisingly, or not so surprisingly, lighter than she would have liked.

He murmured into her shoulder, half-awake, only for her to shush him. She laid him down gently on the bed, taking a moment to relieve him of his shoes, glasses, and vest. She placed a glass of water and a bottle of generic painkillers on the nightstand before pulling the covers over him, tucking him carefully into the bed.

She quietly dug into his closet, pulling out clothing that was definitely not bought by Matty. A loose pair of sweatpants that were too short and an oversized black t-shirt that still had the tags on. She quickly turned off the lights and crept back out to the living room to clean up the shattered glass and spilled wine.

She doubled-checked all of the locks, her bare feet ghosting over the hardwood floors as she ensured that nothing would interrupt them for the rest of the night. Finally satisfied, she changed into her borrowed clothing, tossing her dress and bra over an armchair. She dug out a spare pillow and another blanket from a closet and settled herself onto the couch. She turned off the lamp with a shaky hand, plunging the apartment into darkness that was only broken up by the thin moonbeam between dark curtains.
She had a lot to think about, but Matty came first. And after tomorrow, well, maybe she’d pay the Riddler a little visit.

Chapter End Notes

<33 Thank you to everyone for sticking with me! This chapter and the next few have been giving me trouble which, coupled with my classes starting up again, means bigger gaps between updates. But, we are approaching the end slowly by surely, so I hope you continue with me for this ride!

Again, every comment gives me so much motivation and keeps me from giving up, so please spare a moment to let me know what you thought. <3 Reading everyone's comments and speculations bring me so much joy. <3 Thanks for reading!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Oswald woke up to a headache and a sunbeam shining in his face. He shifted, feeling overheated, and felt his legs tangle into his sheets even as he tried to open his eyes, wincing at the brightness and the way it made his head feel like it had been hit with a two-by-four.

He blinked rapidly, clearing his eyes and the crusty build-up in the corner of his eyes, trying to gauge the time of day from the light.

There was a moment when everything was quiet before the memories of the previous night returned to him. He wanted to groan, a mix of embarrassment and exhaustion overcoming him. He had spent literal years keeping his composure, but five minutes in Ed's presence, and it was like nothing had changed.

His mind flashed back to the kiss—*kisses*—and the feeling of Ed pressed against him, the sensation of his lips, chapped and tasting of mint, and the way his hands had felt holding him, and the way he hated that the memory made his heart beat faster and heat creep up his cheeks.

He wanted to cry. He could feel the pressure building behind his eyes, and he squeezed them shut. He didn't feel like he could cry anymore—he had spent a decade of tears last night in Addy's arms —

Oh god, Addy.

He swung himself out of bed, catching himself on the nightstand with one hand at the momentary lightheadedness. He heard the rattle of pills and finally noticed the glass of water and the little plastic bottle of over-the-counter painkillers that the woman had undoubtedly left for him. He tipped six pills into his hand, throwing his head back along with a long sip of water.

He distracted himself by getting ready for the morning as quietly as possible, all while his mind tried to find a way to salvage the absolute embarrassment he had made of himself last night. Damn Nygma. Damn this city.

He had spent so long learning to control his emotions, learning to tamp down on his greatest weakness—his heart. He had felt too much, too strongly, and that was what had always been his
Oswald stripped, stepping into the standing shower and under the spray of water. The burn of hot water felt amazing on his back, and he sighed in relief at the sting against his skin, the pain a welcome distraction from his thoughts.

He leathered soap over his arm, wincing at the open scratches he had inadvertently given himself from the night before—a long thin welt bisecting his tattoos of the falcon and crown. He turned his wrist over and started to trace the shape of a fishbone with a fingernail even as water dripped from his lashes and into his eyes. He stopped himself before he could continue his search, knowing his questing fingers would end up circling the tight bullet wound on his abdomen, brushing over the tight pucker of skin that still ached in the cold as a constant reminder of his weakness.

By the time he emerged from his bedroom, the Administrator was back in a perfectly pressed peach shirt, his simple black tie knotted in neatly at his throat and covered with a lint-free vest. His hair was parted neatly to the side as it usually was, and his mouth was kept in a carefully neutral flat line.

Addy was already awake and had, clearly, called out for groceries given the sound and smell of sizzling eggs from the kitchen.

He faltered almost imperceptibly, not knowing how to proceed and having half-hoped the entire previous night had been a fever dream.

"Good morning, Matty," Addy chirped, barefoot and wearing a different dress that he had no idea where she had found. Her hair was still wet and pulled up into a messy bun, and her face glowed, beautiful even devoid of her usual layer of cosmetics.

"Good morning, Addy. Who did you recruit to get groceries?" The Administrator started to set the table, pulling out silverware from the drawers, and pointedly ignoring the elephant in the room for the time being.

"Oh, just Antonio. That boy is a real pushover," Addy said while flipping over one egg with a spatula.

Antonio had over eighty confirmed kills and was rumored to have literally torn out a target's throat with his teeth during a job once. He was also precisely the type of man Addy tended to like.
The Administrator rolled his eyes. "That's because he has a crush the size of the Empire State Building on you."

Her eyes crinkled, amused. "Well, there is that." She set two perfectly fried eggs on each plate, assembling the buttered triangles of toast next to the small pile of pre-cut fruit. The Administrator poured them each a cup of coffee, adding cream and sugar to hers while leaving his plain, forcing himself to drink the scalding and bitter liquid.

The atmosphere was awkward despite the idle and familiar chitchat. The Administrator cut into his egg with the side of his fork, but instead of eating it, he only pushed it around his plate, smearing the bright yellow pool of runny yolk around.

He braced himself. "Addy," he started, catching her attention. "About last night…"

Addy softened, wiping her mouth delicately with a napkin. "If you want me to forget last night, I will. Matty is Matty to me—so Gotham or no Gotham, you're still the same man." She paused suddenly, as though a thought just crossed her mind. "Unless you don't want me to call you that."

The Administrators shook his head. "Matty is fine. I haven't been called Oswald in a very long time."

"But do you want me to call you Matty or Oswald?" Addy asked, gentle but insistent. A short curl of red hair had escaped her bun, and she tucked it back behind her ear as she spoke.

The Administrator paused, considering. Neither sat right with him anymore, but he had liked being Matty around her, had enjoyed how the name had let him divorce himself from his failed friendships. His first instincts to her overtures of friendship had been to raise his hackles when all he could think about was SofiaVictorMartinJim. A new name had been like a breath of fresh air, given him the space where he could pretend his heart wasn't shattered and held together with bobby pins and glue.

"I'd like it if you called me Matty still," he said finally, voice firm. "I like being your Matty."

Addy's smile was like taking a photograph of pure sunshine. "Okay, Matty."
There was a moment of silence that stretched before the Administrator dropped his eyes, shoulders drooping.

He both wanted to talk and wanted to stay silent and pretend nothing had changed. He simultaneously wanted to excise the feelings from where they were bursting out of his chest but also banish them into the ether, act like they hadn't existed, were ancient and long-forgotten history. He didn't know when he decided to open his mouth, but once he did, it was as though he couldn't stop.

"I was born in Gotham," he started, still shuffling his food around without taking a bite. "My mother raised me here alone, working three jobs at a time to support us. My first job was with the mob, running errands or cleaning tables for one of Don Falcone's lieutenants. She was like a second mother to me, and I killed her. I was King. I was Mayor. I've been shot at, tortured, crippled here. I used to love this city. I used to think nothing could ever make me leave."

He wasn't crying again; he didn't know if he had any tears left in him to shed. "Until I met Ed. I think I was just tired of being the Penguin and everything it had brought me. Everything I loved crumbled to dust, and I thought I could still rise above it all again, but when Ed left me behind that last time...I just couldn't. I was just so tired. But Gotham is a part of me, woven into my flesh and bones, into my very soul. She called me back, and in the end, she is still my home." The smile on his face was bittersweet.

There was a pause.

"Well," Addy said with a small returning smile. "Your home is a little batshit crazy, you know that? This really explains so much about you, now that I think about it."

The Administrator allowed a chuckle, half-hating the blossom of pride that sprung from his chest. "There isn't any place quite like Gotham."

Addy reached over to nab his untouched toast to nibble at a corner. "I asked last night, but are you sure you don't want me to take care of Mr. Nygma?"

Oswald shook his head. "No, I'll handle it. There were a lot of things left unsaid. It's time for us to finally say what we need to so we can move on."

"And if he doesn't want you to move on?"
Oswald snorted, undignified, and almost rolled his eyes. "Ed always moves on. He'll be swayed by a pretty face in a few months. His predictability was always one of his weaknesses."

Addy just hummed in response and didn't answer.

It didn't take as long as she thought it would to find the so-called Riddle Factory. Luckily, the man wanted to be found, which meant a few musing comments, a few nights flirting with a member of the GCPD, and three gold coins led her practically to his front door. The Riddle Factory—which she had been reliably informed held shows full of morbid humor and violence on an irregular schedule—was housed inside one of the many dilapidated, seemingly abandoned, warehouses. The only real marker of its presence was the crudely carved question mark into the side of one of the doors and the telltale signs of traffic that showed how not-abandoned the space really was.

She walked carefully through the empty halls, picking her way through the fallen and rotting wooden beams and chipped bricks, the sound of her heels loud and sharp against the concrete flooring. She kept her eyes peeled for potential traps, stepping over a cleverly concealed tripwire by hopping up onto a fallen support beam, her balance impeccable.

It took her fifteen minutes to pick her way up two floors and to the main hall, suitably impressed by the creativity of the traps. Not impressed enough to not want to punch him on sight, but impressed enough that she was considering sending Winston a few new ideas.

She knew she was being watched the entire time; she had spied the real security cameras tucked in corners and much better hidden than the decoy camera that hid in so-called plain sight. She hadn't attempted to disguise her approach and walked confidently through the open double doors to be greeted by the sound of a slow, almost mocking, clap.

Addy didn't pull out her gun, not yet, but one look at his smug face challenged her resolve. The Riddler's suit was the same alarming shade of green that she had hoped she had imagined, and the black bowler hat frustratingly didn't diminish his inherently good looks as much as she wished. She didn't know if she could take him seriously dressed as he was but steeled her face to keep herself from outright laughing at the ridiculous image he made.

She took a good, long look at him—taking in the keen, intelligent eyes behind the outdated glasses frames and the sharp cheekbones. He was the very definition of tall, dark, and handsome which, except for John Wick, was not Matty's usual type. She had seen him come and go with a variety of
men over the years, and he had always seemed to favor the blonde and buff type—men who had at
least six inches of height on him and a hundred pounds of muscle. He always seemed to prefer men
who wore danger like an old leather jacket and who could probably bench-press him in a heartbeat.

The man standing before her didn't fit into that category. He was lean and clean-cut, poised with
perfectly gloved fingers and a smile that could melt ice.

"Riddler," she greeted once she had taken stock of her surroundings, her voice flat and unamused
that was paired with a look of thinly concealed disdain in her eyes.

"Miss Adelaide," the man greeted in return with a bow, taking his hat off to hold it against his
chest with a showman's flourish. "How may I help you today?"

Addy wanted to slap the cocky expression off of his face but managed a tight, polite smile in
return. "I just wanted to drop by for a chat," she said with all the faux friendliness she could
muster, "to clear the air, so to speak."

Her smile betrayed her, her predatory stalk only emphasized by the steady clack of her footsteps as
she drew closer to the man like a viper crowding a field mouse in a corner. "The first order of
business," she said as she took the dozen-or-so rapid steps needed to close the distance between
them, hopping onto the stage with an almost inhuman grace in four-inch heels. She took the last
two steps that brought them within touching distance of each other and slapped him across the
face, hard enough to make her palm sting as she dislodged his glasses. The frames flew to the side,
crashing onto the floor with a worrying clatter.

Her estimation of him went up a fraction when he hadn't tried to stop her. He was smart enough to
know what was coming and fast enough to have stopped her but instead took the punishment as she
gave it. She didn't know if she was more annoyed or more impressed by him.

"If you ever," she said pointing one long red fingernail in his face, "ever force him like that again, I
will have you killed before a riddle even thinks about crossing your lips. The only, and I repeat, the
only reason you don't have a bounty on your head right now is that Matty asked me not to. But I
make a call, and I'll have the Baba Yaga himself down here for your head. Do you understand?"

There was defiance in his eyes and the downturn of his lip, the image only aided by the blossoming
red mark on his cheek. His once perfectly primped hair had fallen out of his carefully gelled lines,
and it gave him a feral look, like a stray dog who was inches away from lashing out with a snarl.
"I said," she continued, dangerous and deadly serious. She did not want him to take this threat lightly. Addy did not bluff when it came to matters like this. "Do you understand me?"

"Yes," the Riddler said, voice low and sounding like he had just gurgled a cup of gravel.

"Yes...?" Addie prompted, raising an eyebrow expectantly.

His eyes narrowed, but Addy met his eyes, unmoving, "Yes, ma'am."

Addy didn't smile but lowered her hand from where it had been poised to claw out his eyes. She gave him another assessing look up and down, before bending down to pick up the fallen glasses. She gave them a cursory inspection, noting no damage or scratches before she held them out as an offering—not a truce, but a temporary moment of mutual understanding.

The Riddler looked between the glasses in her outstretched hand and her face, clearly distrustful. His lips were turned down into an unattractive sneer, and he held her gaze for a beat too long to mean anything but that he was waiting for her to spring some sort of trap.

Addy just held her hand out expectedly, a vision with her perfectly coiffed red hair, black pin-up dress, and long legs that were bathed in the green neon light of the Riddle Factory.

He retrieved his glasses from her cautiously, not bothering to replace his hat but instead slicking back his hair with one hand while he slid the frames back onto his face. "Is that all I can do for you, Miss Adelaide?" he asked, voice steady despite the rage she could see in his expression.

Addy snorted, tossing her hair back over a shoulder with one hand as she set the other hand on her waist, cocking her hip. "Not even close, buddy."

She took a moment to finally take in the space, walking a slow lap around the stage to run her fingers idly over the off-centered podium, the giant hourglass, and the infamous "Wheel of Misfortune" before noting the absurd golden throne pushed to the side with a long question mark cane leaning against its arm. She knew she had a judgmental look on her face that she didn't try to hide, the petty part of her wanting to push as many of his buttons as she could, put him on defense in whatever way possible.

The Riddler followed her movement even as he straightened his suit, shifting his shoulders as he
ran a hand down the lapels of his suit jacket and over the long row of buttons, smoothing out nonexistent wrinkles.

"Oswald told you about us," he finally said, no question in his tone.

Addy hummed in response, non-committal. "Matty did," she finally ceded as she tipped the wheel with the edge of a finger, making a point to stress the name.

"Why do you call him that?"

"Because that's his name," she shot back, her tone just the right side of condescending.

"No, it's not."

"Isn't it?" Addy countered, one brow raised. "Have you asked him? Whether Matty wants to go by Oswald, the Administrator, or the bloody Pope—it's his choice." She abandoned her half-hearted perusal to step closer, unmindful of the height difference or the way she had to crane her head up to look at him. "I've known him for over twelve years as Matty. How long have you known him as Oswald?"

The Riddler didn't answer, and Addy didn't need him to.

"He's not the man you remember. Maybe parts of him are, but you," Addie said, stabbing him in the chest with a finger in emphasis, "need to realize that he's not the same so you can't treat him the same."

"He hasn't changed, not really," the Riddler insisted, resolute.

"How would you know?" Addy challenged, voice dripping with acid. "Because it sounds like you haven't spent a lot of your time actually talking to him."

The man opened his mouth as though to argue but then shut it, unable to argue his point.
"Now Matty hasn't told all of your history, but what he has? Doesn't leave me very impressed. And if this were my choice, I would pick half a dozen of his exes over you."

The Riddler's eyes narrowed at the mention of Matty's exes, which were numerous if one had a loose definition of a relationship. Figured that he'd be the jealous type—the kind who didn't like others touching his things but had no problem being free with his own affections.

When it came to Matty's love life (or lack thereof), Addy had always rooted for John Wick—the man really was a giant teddy bear once you got past the legendary assassin part and anyone with eyes could have seen how fond he had been of Matty from the start, even before the man in question had been clued in. Matty never noticed how John had gravitated to the slighter man whenever he visited the Continental, how he tended to invade his personal space with a hand on the shoulder or a brush of the knees, or how John had gotten into more than one non-lethal fight over someone making a crude comment about the other man.

She genuinely hadn't seen Matty happier than those few months that he and John have been sleeping together. Addy would have said the same about John except she had seen John with his wife.

Matty had been genuinely happy for John on his wedding day, or so Addy presumed. Matty had always been an amazing actor, but she had spent years working side-by-side with the man and thought she knew him well enough to read him better than most, to see between the lines, and into the emotions he tended to keep close to his chest.

Addy had never seen him as emotional as she had seen him just a few nights prior. Perhaps she had built up an image of Matty that wasn't the whole story—the fun and sometimes flighty man who sought out good, casual company but hadn't ever been searching for anything serious. And then when he became the Administrator—severe and closed off, unwilling to open himself to anyone, who was content to let everyone think that he was nothing more than a cog of the High Table. And now she was seeing the part of him that was Oswald Cobblepot—violent, passionate, and ambitious and who, when he fell, fell hard. It was hard for her to reconcile these three parts of him: the light-hearted Bartender, the calm Administrator, and the passionate Penguin.

The real man—whatever he wished to call himself—was somewhere in between it all.

If she was honest, she hadn't seen Matty in years, perhaps even since John Wick finished his Impossible Task. He was more and more the Administrator every time she saw him as much as he tried to hide it from her. She had seen his facade slowly breaking down since he arrived in Gotham, something that she had attributed to stress. Any task handed to you, in person, by the Elder was not one to be taken lightly.
And it had been stress, just not the kind she had thought. It had been the stress of a decade of repressed emotions that were primarily wrapped up in a sparkling green bow with "The Riddler" written across it in big, bold letters.

And as a friend, as a sister, she didn't like the situation at all, didn't like all the hurt and bitter memories that the man churned up from the undertow.

"But," Addy continued aloud, reminding herself as well as her captive audience. "It's not my choice."

The Riddler opened his mouth again, and Addy could see the snide remark ready at the tip of his tongue. She made a sharp movement with her hand to silence him, enjoying the way that he obeyed. "And it's not your choice either. It's Matty's choice." She stressed his name again and gave him a significant look.

The Riddler scowled, but it looked like he was actually listening. Good.

"So I'm not going to tell you to stay away from him as much as I don't think you deserve him. But," Addy said, grave. "I'm telling you to shut up and listen to him. And if he tells you to back off, you better back the hell off. But if, and that's a big if, he wants to give you a chance, you better take it seriously. Because it sounds like you have broken his heart enough times."

The Riddler tried to speak again, likely to argue, but Addy cut him off. "I want you to think very carefully about the next words out of your mouth."

The man licked his lips, and Addy could tell she had gotten through to him, that he was actually thinking about what she had been saying. He had lost his act of contemptuous arrogance and was only looking contemplative and downcast after her dressing down.

"I cannot be bought but stolen at a glance. I am worthless to one but priceless to two. What am I?" he said, voice barely over that of a whisper.

Addy raised an eyebrow, unamused.
"Love," the Riddler said, weak and vulnerable. "I love him. I've never loved anyone as much as I love him."

Abby let her lips quirk up, the barest ghost of a smile. "Maybe it's time you actually show him that then."

Ed ended up at Lee's. It hadn't been a conscious decision, just his feet leading him blindly. He could still taste, feel Oswald against his lips. He could still remember the feeling of his heartbeat under his fingers and the sound of his soft moans as he pressed his tongue against the other man's. It was more than he could have ever imagined when Oswald hadn't immediately slapped him away. He had gone in with ideas—he had planned a whole speech, full of eloquent words, elaborate vocabulary and one that he was mostly sure that Oswald would have listened to. However, the moment he saw Oswald's face, all of that had been thrown out of the window. He had fumbled his way through offering the bottle of wine, internally wincing at Oswald's laugh because stupid stupid what had he been thinking? Reminding Oswald of both of their betrayals was probably not the best way to endear himself to the man.

He hadn't been able to help himself, though. He had just wanted to make Oswald listen, tried to make him hear him out. But the moment he had touched the other man, felt his soft skin under his fingertips, he hadn't been able to help himself from stealing another kiss. And when Oswald hadn't slapped him away immediately but had instead responded, however tentatively, he hadn't been able to resist the urge to taste him perhaps for the first and last time.

Ed tried not to betray his agitation and excess energy as he rapped on the door to Lee and Jim's condominium. When no one answered after a few seconds, he knocked again, impatient.

The face that finally appeared through the crack of the door was that of Jim, a look of agitation that swiftly shifted to one of understanding when he saw that it was Ed.

"Ed?" Jim asked, opening the door further to welcome the other man in.

Ed stepped into the entryway, heading straight to the kitchen to pour himself a drink with a shaky hand. Lee was cleaning up their dinner (meatloaf, likely the recipe from Lee's maternal grandmother) and hastily interjected when Ed reached into the top cabinet to pour himself a generous finger of scotch.
Lee took the bottle away, instead pressing a hot mug of tea into Ed's hands—likely intended initially for Jim as Ed could smell the calming scent of chamomile mixed with a spoonful of honey. Lee tended to favor fruit-infused black tea, and Barbara always preferred coffee even at such a late hour. The lack of Barbara Junior meant that the girl was likely with her mother for the evening, leaving Jim and Lee alone for the night.

Ed was grateful for the small fraction of privacy it provided—Barb was an adorable delight, but he needed something else tonight, some reassurance or guidance as he floundered.

Ed didn't say anything, merely taking the cup of tea with one hand as he slowly loosened his tie and stripped away his outer jacket with the other. He automatically handed his suit jacket to Jim, who subtly checked all the pockets for any illicit substances before hanging it up in the hallway.

Lee and Jim let him settle himself; they knew him well enough that he needed a moment to gather his thoughts when he was in a mood. Lee hustled him onto the couch, pressing him into the cushions before she disappeared around the corner, presumably to get her kit. She always got her kit out when he arrived, always ready to check him over if he showed any signs of relapse, and the part of him that was annoyed by this was met in equal measures by the part of him that was grateful. He didn't like to admit it, but her mothering and fussing was...nice, especially after years of being on his own, years of feeling like no one cared for or loved him. Lee's fussing and Jim's insistent searching him was almost calming sometimes; it was a rare constant in the last few years that he could rely on even when it grated on his sensibility.

Lee took her customarily seat on one end of the couch, looking comfortable in the oversized gray sweater and black yoga pants she preferred to wear in the evenings. She curled one leg under her as she blew over the top of her tea, cooling it while she watched Ed with one eye.

Ed leaned into her, feeling more lost than he had felt in a long time. He had spent the last few days of vacillating between joy and depression, surety and indecision. Oswald—Matty, Administrator whatever—had wanted him; he had to.

Kissing Oswald was something out of his dreams—so close to his desires that sometimes he still wasn't sure if he hadn't made it up, that it wasn't another byproduct of his wistful and unstable mind. But this Oswald was perfectly imperfect—he hadn't yielded to Ed's every touch like his hallucinations did, didn't melt against him while tasting of salt and decay. This Oswald didn't act like his fantasy which is how he knew—hoped—he was real.

Ed could remember the feeling of their lips together, how Oswald's lip piercings were hard lines of pressure against his lips, how when Oswald's mouth had open, almost involuntarily, he had gotten his first real taste of the other man—got to feel the surprise ball bearing of what could only be a tongue piercing as it slid up and against Ed's tongue, making Ed groan and press himself closer.
Oswald had looked so beautiful, those ever-shifting gray eyes wide and wet and full of emotions just as Ed remembered, tears trailing slowly down his cheeks for Ed to kiss away and taste the salt on his tongue.

The part of him that was more Riddler than Ed had thought that he'd never been more beautiful—pinned, confused, and begging. He would've had him there if Oswald hadn't stopped him—would have made the beautiful bird in his arms his, hoisted him up ravaged him against the wall because Oswald was his.

The part of him that was the old Edward Nygma had almost been relieved when the mysterious redhead had interrupted—Ed knew that he couldn't trust himself. He had been fractured for over a decade, and Oswald had been the best, sometimes only, thing that pieced him back together. But the Riddler didn't like to be denied; he liked to take what he thought was his and Oswald had always, always, been his.

So Ed had fled for the second time that week and didn't stop until he had made it back to his hideout, lungs pained from exertion and hair in disarray in the way he hated because it reminded him of when he had been the not-smart Ed, before Oswald glued them back together like Humpty Dumpty with nothing more than just a name.

It's scared Ed; it scared him how badly he ached for Oswald. He had forgotten this pain, the slow drift into oblivion from when he had believed the man was really dead the first, the second time. It had been his obsession and now that he had the object of his fascination within reach—

He wanted him, wanted to take him apart, piece by piece, to find out what made him so astounding, wanted to lock him away and keep him to himself, wanted to sear him into his very soul because their lives were intertwined in ways they never understood.

He had given the Continental a wide berth in the following days, distracting himself with another, admittedly lackluster, staging of the Riddle Factory and investigating everything he could about the unknown redheaded woman.

Oh, how his blood had burned at her familiar address, at the possessive way she called him "friend" or how protective she was—how he hated to be reminded that Oswald needed protection from Ed when he still woke up in a cold sweat to the memory of Oswald's bright red blood seeping between slim fingers and him falling falling falling back from the pier and disappearing under murky waters. Or how sometimes the voice sounded like Oswald, with all the usual sass and venom or how he'd see the flash of a purple suit from the corner of his vision and pretend it didn't follow him with a singsong voice and all-too knowing words.
When Miss Adaline Roth—which was so on-the-nose that it was undoubtedly a fake surname—barged into the Riddle Factory, he had still been spinning, not even able to compose himself to pose a trademark riddle or rhyme to his uninvited guest. And when she left, he still hadn't known whether she had been there to help or hinder him. She was terrifying for a slight, slim woman; she held herself with the same assurance every member of the Continental did—with the knowledge that they were backed by something bigger.

Which is how he ended up at Lee's and Jim's apartment with the comforting presence of two of the few people that he considered friends.

"Ed," Lee said, after a few minutes of sitting in silence. Jim had re-emerged sans jacket and with a healthy pour of whiskey—double-barreled and aged ten years as were his preferences when under undue stress—and perched himself on the arm of the couch, a steady heat against his wife's shoulder. Lee rested one hand on her husband's leg even as she addressed Ed. "Are you okay?"

When Ed didn't answer, she tried to exchange a look with Jim who wouldn't meet her eyes, opting to instead take a sip of his drink, which made her eyebrows shoot up. She diverted her attention from Ed to give him a look, The Look that Ed had known all-too-well during their short and ill-conceived romance all those years ago and which meant she knew something was being kept from her.

Jim cleared his throat and continued to not meet Lee's eyes. He coughed in a failed attempt at avoiding the subject. "So, Oswald?" he offered instead, commiserating with Ed.

Ed nodded, twisting the ceramic in his hands as he watched the bobbing of residue tea leaves in the pale yellow drink, taking comfort in the heat even as he didn't take a sip. "I kissed him. Again."

"Wait, what?" Lee interjected, twisting her head to look between Ed and Jim, her long black hair flying at the speed of her movements. "What am I missing? Oswald Cobblepot?"

Jim nodded, slow like he was handing down his own sentencing at a hearing. "Ed was right. The Administrator is Oswald Cobblepot. I, uh," Jim said, hedging, "spoke to him a few days ago."

Lee was giving Jim her full attention now, and Ed was grateful for the reprieve. He had wanted to be here, but he hadn't known where to start. The confidence from the previous days had dissipated, evaporated like a shallow puddle on a hot summer day and left him floundering.
"Did you now? And when were you going to tell me this?" Lee demanded as she snatched Jim's glass from his hand despite his weak protest. She glared at him and took a sip of alcohol pointedly as she waited for Jim to answer her question. Ed was not surprised that Jim hadn't told Lee; she wouldn't have understood. She had never known Oswald as anything other than the Penguin, had never understood how their strings of fate were wrapped up in the man or how important, vital, he had been to them.

Jim let out a heavy sigh, making a face. "I dropped by the Continental after work last week. And yeah." Jim combed a hand through his hair, messing the typically carefully groomed blonde locks and looking more tired than he had even after Joker and Harley's latest scheme. "It's Oswald. But," he said, hesitating as he tried to pick his words carefully, "I don't know. Just because it's Oswald doesn't mean it's Oswald, you know?"

Ed found himself agreeing despite himself, eyes distant as he continued to stare down into the mug as though it held the answer to his problems. "He's not the same and... " He didn't know how to articulate it all—how he wasn't the same, but he wasn't quite a stranger. "He's not the same, so why do I still love him then?"

Jim and Lee shared a look, weighty with their own past. Lee gave a soft sigh, passing Jim's glass back up to her husband, so she could unravel Ed's hold on the neglected tea and thread their fingers together. "Just because someone has changed," she said as Jim gave her shoulder a hard squeeze, "doesn't mean you can just stop loving them. It also doesn't mean you don't or can't love who they are now." Her voice was full of old memories, and Ed didn't know if he hated or appreciated that she did know what she was talking about, that her and Jim's history—while not as complicated as Ed and Oswald's—hadn't been a fairytale romance.

Ed squeezed her hand a little tighter and didn't respond.

"Lee," Jim said softly, touching her arm, "will you give us a moment alone?"

Lee shared a long beat of silent communication with her husband and then acquiesced. She released Ed's hand and pressed a chase kiss to his cheek before doing the same to her husband. "I'll be in my office if you need me."

Lee swept out of the room, as regal as any queen even in her casual clothing, and Ed listened for the soft click of a door closing behind her.
Jim took her seat, shooting a glance back at the closed door before handing his glass to Ed, exchanging it with the cooling cup of untouched tea.

Ed took a grateful gulp and winced at the acrid burn of the whiskey, hating the smoky aftertaste but needing the feeling of alcohol in his veins to have this conversation. He jumped in. "How did you know you still loved Lee?"

Jim gave a wry smile. "It's not quite the same, but, in the end, she was still Lee. It was just different sides of her, but it was still all parts of her that I loved."

Ed hesitated but asked anyway. "What about Barbara?"

Jim sighed, taking back the glass to take his own gulp. "Barbara was a very different woman when we met. Who she became after was so far removed from the woman I fell in love with that loving her became...difficult."

"But you still love her," Ed said, pressing.

"Yes, but not how I used to. I'll always love Barbara as a friend and the mother of my child, but we can never go back to how we were. Both of us have just changed too much to be able to reconcile that." Jim leaned back, voice growing distant as he spoke about his once-fiance.

"So," Ed said, licking his lips. "How do I know if Oswald is my Lee or my Barbara?"

"I can't tell you that. You need to figure it out yourself." Jim offered the glass of whiskey back to Ed, who took it gratefully.

"How?"

"You need to talk to Oswald. And I mean it, really talk to him. And I get that it's hard, God knows it is 'cause he still knows how to drive all of us insane. But you need to lay out everything, and see if there is still something there, something worth taking a shot at."

Ed curled up, tucking his legs to his chest and nursing the glass in his hands.
Jim gave him a pat on the shoulder. "Give it a thought."

Chapter End Notes

<3 Sorry I'm a day late, so thank you, everyone, for your patience. Some of you wanted some more Addy and the return of the Edward Nygma Defense Squad so hopefully, I didn't disappoint! You can follow me on Tumblr if you want status updates or sneak peeks of chapters as well as other insights. Just two more chapters to go! ...probably.

Thank you again to everyone who is still reading! Please spare a moment to let me know what you think. Comments help keep me motivated! <3
Chapter 13

The night air in Gotham was cold and damp, smelling of sea salt and the sour tang of rot. The Administrator stood at the edge of the roof, a lit cigarette held up to his pursed lips as he looked over the edge and to the surrounding cityscape. He inhaled deeply, welcoming the harsh smoke in his lungs before blowing a cloud into the chilly night air.

He could hear the sounds of the crowd below from his perch, could see the bustling movement of club patrons coming in and out of the Continental’s front doors if he just leaned over and looked down. The muted sounds of chatter mingled with the smooth piano’s melody, and the noise made the Administrator close his eyes. It reminded him of when he was Ms. Mooney’s umbrella boy, of times he would hover over her shoulder with a waiting decanter of red wine and be able to watch the night’s performance—how sometimes on slow nights, he’d find a partner to lead across the dance floor or to coerce into sharing a drink.

The memories clashed with those from the Continental where most nights were spent chatting and flirting from behind the bar, the same smooth music in the background, but spoiled by the ache of his leg or enlivened by Addy’s teasing banter.

Both memories felt bittersweet now.

He didn't turn around when he heard the rustle of fabric from behind him. He didn't acknowledge the presence of the nocturnal vigilante. Instead, he fished another cigarette from a half-crumpled pack. He had already taken two long drags in silence, letting the seconds tick by, unconcerned, before he finally turned to face the masked man.

“Good evening,” he greeted with half-lidded eyes from behind a cloud of smoke, leaning back to partially sit on the bricked ridge. “What an illustrious visitor. Had I known you were arriving, I would have prepared some refreshments.”

“Administrator,” the Bat said, voice pitched low and distorted.

The Administrator gave him a critical once-over as he always did, but he was met with nothing more than a blank stare and a downturned mouth clad in pitch-black armor. This wasn’t the first time the Gotham Bat had chosen the Continental as his perch, and they had an understanding, a quid pro quo.

So the Administrator returned his silence with a sardonic smile, returning his cigarette up to his lips, and blew another slow, leisurely cloud into the air. “How many I be of assistance?”

“Sofia Falcone.”

The Administrator hummed, flicking the ash off his cigarette as he contemplated. “Sofia Falcone,” he repeated, letting the syllables roll out of his mouth, smooth and nothing more than idle intrigue in his tone. “I assume you mean she’ll make a move soon?”

The rogues had, broadly, shown either support or apathy for the new institution. The Falcone crime family, on the other hand, only had gotten more vocal about their distaste.

The Administrator was both surprised and not surprised. The older, more traditional, crime families
were the bedrock of the Continental and the High Table, and a thinly maintained veneer of civility and friendship had been the hallmark between the Falcone and Maroni family for years. He could remember the interaction between the men—the way they conducted their business together, how it had followed the unspoken rules of engagement. He knew those rules well; he had exploited them for his own interests many times.

But he also knew Sofia Falcone. The woman was cunning, a snake that tried to fall back into sheep’s clothing. Her greatest weakness had always been her pride—she had always been so determined to prove herself that it made her blind to when she needed to back down. And her anger had only festered in the last years since she awoke. The Rogues had no real respect for her and she knew it—she was an afterthought, the last holdover from a bygone age. She was quickly becoming obsolete, destined to fade into history like her father.

Addy's reports have been following the growing malcontent that Donna Falcone was fanning. She had moved past her meeker facade, her simpering and false humility, and had moved on to pure indignation—how dare she, a Falcone, be treated as such.

The Administrator had anticipated as much, had marked and measured exactly how long Ms. Falcone’s ego would allow her to take the insult he had given for what it was. And Ms. Falcone was right on time.

“I presume she’s put out the word? So, how much is my head worth? A million? Two?” He chuckled, shifting his weight to recline with his weight on one arm. No one worth their salt would accept the contract—he had made sure that every killer for hire in Gotham knew the price for going against him and, thus, the Continental.

The Bat didn’t answer, but the Administrator hadn’t expected him to.

He smiled, and it was reminiscent of a shark who had found fresh blood. “I’m not concerned about Ms. Falcone, but I appreciate the tip-off. Now, what is it you wish for in exchange?”

“The Joker,” the Bat said.

“Now, now, my dear Bat. I’m afraid your little morsel isn’t quite enough for me to deal with Mr. Valeska.”

The Bat stayed silent, a menacing looming figure half-obscured by the shadows.

The Administrator just raised an eyebrow and waited.

The Bat was too dignified to sigh, but the Administrator liked to think he wanted to. “I’ll owe you a favor.”

The Administrator’s smile widened. A favor from the Bat was something quite special indeed. “Deal.” He took another long drag from his cigarette, closing his eyes in thought and tilting his head back. “I’m afraid Mr. Valeska doesn’t frequent my establishment,” he continued, eyes still closed.

“Let us not pretend your influence ends at the club doors.”

“You flatter me, sir,” the Administrator said, dropping his voice to give it an edge of flattery as he opened his eyes and fluttered his lashes at the other man.

The Bat didn't look amused.
The Administrator hummed under his breath, letting the silence hang between them, intermixed with the distant din of the partygoers below. He stubbed out the butt of his cigarette, dropping it into the ashtray as he spoke. “Rumor has it that Miss Quinzel has been seen in the company of Dr. Crane lately along the East Bank. Give me a day, and I can give you more.”

“I’ll be back tomorrow night,” the Bat said.

The Administrator didn’t know what prompted him to speak next but it was out of his mouth before he realized, before the Bat could pull one of his Infamous disappearing acts. “Did it help?”

The Bat turned his head to show the profile of his face, the sharp angle lit by the moonlight. “Did what help?” he asked.

“Running away. Leaving Gotham.”

There was a long pause, and something shifted behind the mask. The Administrator could almost see the cogs, the scenarios that the young man was running internally—how much to reveal, how much to deny, how much to just not say. But the Administrator didn’t falter, just waited.

“No,” the Bat said, and the low growl was almost gone from his voice, and he sounded more like a tired man. “No, it didn’t.”

The Administrator closed his eyes, tilting his head skyward, knowing that he would see nothing but gray clouds that were dimly illuminated by the cityscape. He took a deep breath and resisted the urge to pull out another cigarette, craving the short high of nicotine.

“No,” he said to nothing and no one, “I didn’t think it did.”

The Administrator stared at himself in the mirror, taking in all of the changes that have accumulated over the years. Behind the ink and metal, his face hadn’t changed much—his hair was a tad longer and he had an extra scar or two, but underneath, it was almost the same.

There was no putting this off. He needed to do this—needed to end this.

It took him longer than he would have liked, removing all of his jewelry, standing in front of the mirror with a pair of small pliers and working through the careful twists and bends needed to separate the two halves of each piece. He dropped each piece carefully onto a simple black tray, lining them up in meticulous rows, before replacing each with a clean acrylic retainer.

He washed his face gently, moving around the newly irritated areas of his lips. His piercings had been part of him for so long that removing them was like missing a piece of himself and made him feel naked.

The first was the easiest part.

He pulled out his makeup and went to work on covering his tattoos. He retreated inward with every movement—layering a thick layer of concealer under his eye, blotting it with a sponge and spreading the color down his neck. Under his careful watch, the set of wings peaked over his collarbone slowly disappeared, leaving nothing but a blank canvas.
He brushed his hair with long, gentle strokes of the brush, careful to not look at the mirror any more than necessary and ignoring the shake of his hand even as he reached for the pomade. Slowly, familiar even after years of disuse, he styled his hair. His fingers worked quickly to shape his bangs into long feathery spikes that he draped carefully over his forehead before tussling the back of his hair to spike it up to resemble a feathered crown. He tried not to think too hard about it.

He made his way over to his closet and pulled out a long, flat box from the top shelf. He had spent the last few years with very few personal possessions yet somehow, he had never been able to dispose of this.

He laid it out on the bed before lifting the lid to reveal the bespoke three-piece black suit with deep plum lining, a set of crystal clear amethyst cufflinks, and an elaborate brocade tie. He couldn’t help himself from running his hand along the length of the bronze cane, fingers brushing against the familiar beak at the handle.

The Administrator breathed in and steeled his heart. He lifted each piece out, holding them at arm’s length as though each was a ticking bomb.

His hands worked on autopilot, buttoning up the vest and knotting the tie, the feeling of the fabric like a noose around his neck. Slowly his tattoos disappeared under layers of expensive fabric. It fit well enough, a little baggy in the waist that hinted at years of little appetite but well enough for a decade-old suit.

He bent down to slip on the black and white brogues before finishing with a supple pair of deep purple leather gloves, hiding away the last of the Administrator.

It was only then that he allowed himself to look into a mirror, and the sight was jarring.

It was the Penguin, from the hair to the shoes and the tilt of his cane.

The Administrator stared into his reflection and didn’t know who stared back.

The trip was done in silence, the Administrator’s face set into a carefully blank mask as he sat in the backseat of the rarely used town car—cane carefully laid across his lap. The gloves felt awkward on his fingers after years of required dexterity and paperwork, the press of his long nails against the seams at the fingertips uncomfortable and making them just a hair too small. The lack of his normal jewelry made him feel stripped of his armor, the comforting weight of the metal in his ears and face replaced with lightweight plastics designed to disappear. Even the heavy layer of concealer didn’t help him feel any less vulnerable—the ink had become a part of him as much as anything else.

Once upon a time, the suit would have been enough—his shield against the taunts and teasing of bullies in his youth. As the years had crept on, he had taken in the confidence a three-piece suit gave him and soaked it into his walk and his demeanor, the arrogance and attitude, and it would have been enough until it had all been stripped of him in a night, leaving him open and raw like an exposed nerve.

But the Penguin had unfinished business, and he would return for just this one night.
He felt the town car slow and then come to a full stop.

“Administrator,” his driver said, turning his head to address him. “Shall I wait for you?”

The Administrator considered his options. Finally, he nodded. “Park up ahead. This won't take long.”

His first step out into the street was disquieting. The tap of his cane against the concrete mingled with the sensation and feeling of hair in front of his face and brought up memories he had hoped he had forgotten. He exhaled sharply through his nose, trying to calm the quickening beat of his heart that threatened to burst from his chest. He needed to do this, had to, in order to move on even though he knew it would break his heart all over again. But maybe it was for the best—maybe this would finally teach him how weak his heart made him, teach him to finally excise the organ from his chest and throw it in the trash.

He had time to his arrival perfectly—Ed was being quietly followed and would not arrive home for another thirty minutes. He couldn't hide his presence—the multitude of disabled traps left in his way would give anyone away. But he didn't want to hide this time.

He made his way up to Ed’s private residence without issue—the Riddle Factory may have been his hideout but he knew Ed—knew who he had been and known that an empty warehouse was not where Ed would have chosen to keep his private life, his personal experiments and little knicks and knacks that he liked to hoard and arrange in ways that no one understood but him.

He didn’t know how he felt when he learned the man preferred to spend his evenings at 805 Grundy.

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Ed knew something was off when he first walked in. It was obvious—the intruder hadn't bothered to cover their tracks, leaving all of the normal precautions disabled. The lights were off and the door was locked, however, which he was unsure of whether that was more or less comforting.

Ed had been on edge for the last week, since his interaction with the stunningly terrifying redhead and his subsequent talk with Jim. He had been avoiding the Continental and Oswald pointedly, needing the space to think and gather his thoughts only for him talk himself into circles.

The indecision was driving him mad. A large portion of him wish to confront the other man now, wanted to ignore any amount of sense of decorum, and let his impatience rule his actions. The Riddler was always waiting, in the backdrop, goading calmer part of Edward Nygma to take what he wanted regardless of the consequences.

But the part of him that was unsure, the part of him that knew how fragile hearts could be, was at a loss.

Which is probably why he had not considered the possibility that Oswald would be the one to make the first move.

His gun was up and pointed at the shadowed figure even as he fished with one hand to turn on the lights, and his mouth went dry and his heartbeat stuttered.

The sight before him was one he was once, so very long ago, accustomed to—Oswald Cobblepot in
all his glory, down to the signature hairstyle and the finely pressed suit and elaborate tie, leaning against a penguin headed cane that was all highlighted in the neon green light.

It wasn’t real. It wasn’t.

The piercings were gone, the quickly familiar look of snake bites and eyebrow piercings gone and only showing smooth, pale skin. The smudge of black under one eye that he had determined was a tattoo was missing, and the creeping sprawl of more ink was missing from the exposed skin over the collar of the suit. It was Oswald as Ed remembered him—the Penguin as though pulled straight out from his memories.

His aim faltered, and the pistol hung limp in his hands by his side. He couldn’t stop himself from glancing over his shoulder, wondering if he’d see another Oswald there, hovering over his shoulder and dripping dirty salt water and algae. But no, the image didn’t change when he looked back, there was no whisper over his shoulder, no bitter taste of powder lingering on his tongue—none of the telltale signs of an unbeknownst relapse.

“You aren’t real,” someone said, and it’s only a second later that Ed realized it was himself.

“That’s not how Oswald looks now.”

And Oswald smiled at this, and there is something off about it, even though it’s the same upturn of lips, the same smooth unblemished skin, and same long tendrils of perfectly styled hair that falls in front of his face that was always the perfect mix of charming and ridiculous. “Come now, Ed,” he said, leaning his weight against the cane with a fond smile, the very image of teasing exasperation. “Isn’t this what you were looking for?”

Ed didn’t know what to say, because yes, it was. This was the Oswald he had wanted, the one he had been hoping he’d find. But—

Oswald stalked forward, and Ed couldn’t help but take a single, half-aborted step back. A voice sneered at him from somewhere behind his shoulder that he ignored.

The distance between the two was closed in short order, and Ed could feel—feel!—Oswald’s hands on his lapels, could feel the pressure of the two gloved hands as they ran from his collarbone and tracing the sharp lines of his signature green suit.

“Oswald,” Ed stumbled out, his glasses slipping down his nose. His hands were up, hovering tentatively over Oswald’s but not touching, not sure if he’d feel anything except fabric, not sure if that was better or worse.

The kiss came too suddenly and too slowly all at once—Ed was looking at Oswald’s face, at the eyes unhindered by spectacles and into those beautiful clear eyes, and then they were kissing.

And it was everything Ed had wanted again. He could feel the warm weight of Oswald against his front, the feeling of hands running from his neck and down his torso. A growl emerged from his throat when Oswald nipped at his lower lip, and Ed was alive again.

Oswald tasted like nicotine and vodka, and their tongues slid together, open mouth and impatient. His lips were warm and soft, inviting and teasing.

Ed pushed and pushed, trying to devour Oswald, as though if he just kept going, the man would never leave, that he’d crawl into his skin and be his. His hands were everywhere, fist ing the front of his jacket to combing through his hair, raking his nails on the other man’s scalp and feeling the dried grains of gel between his fingers.
Oswald moaned, low and heady, and the beast in Ed roared in satisfaction.

His hands reached for the back of Oswald’s thighs, and Oswald’s took the hint, bending his legs to let Ed pick him up, mouths still tangled. He was so light, a small part of his brain murmured, too light considering his leg, age, and known eating habits.

Ed laid Oswald out on the bed, never breaking contact even as he settled himself on top and between his legs. Ed fisted one hand into Oswald’s hair and pulled, enjoying the keening sound of pain and pleasure that Oswald made into his mouth. Oswald was here, right here and now, and willing, oh so willing and he wanted.

Ed pulled away to breathe, wanted to savor this moment but he barely managed another heavy breath before Oswald pulled him down again, one hand on the nape of his necking pressing, urgent, and Ed was helpless but to follow.

It was only when he felt a hand move downward and fumble at his belt that he came back to himself and managed to pull away, resisting the tempting urge to kiss him again when Oswald let out a needy whine at the separation. Ed pulled Oswald’s hands away from where they had started to undo his belt, trying to gather his thoughts.

“No, wait, Oswald,” Ed managed to get out, mouth dodging the way Oswald tried to entice him to return to kissing. “We—we should talk first.” Ed sat up, leaning back on his heels to let Oswald sit up. The image of the Penguin, hair messed and lips puffy and red, completely disheveled on his bed almost made Ed forget why he had stopped.

Oswald propped himself up with his arms and cocked his head, a smile on his lips. It was playful and knowing and made Ed want to press him against the sheets and continue. “Come now, Ed. This is what you wanted, isn’t it?”

Yes. No! Yes.

Ed let himself being pushed onto his back as Oswald swung one leg over his lap to straddle him, sitting on his groin in a way that made Ed want to curse and beg at the same time. His hands automatically went to grip Oswald’s hips as Oswald leaned down, rolling his body in a slow sensual movement.

Oswald’s ghosted his lips over Ed’s, teasing with the tip of his tongue, letting their breathes mingle. Ed was staring right into Oswald’s eyes and this was wrong, everything was wrong. Oswald’s eyes had been the most expressive, the most emotive, full of rage or happiness, sadness or regret. And these eyes were empty, cold and impassive, even while its body was wanton and begging.

“Osw—“ Ed tried to say, only to be cut off by the pressure his Oswald’s tongue against his again, by the hot friction between them.

Ed was short of breath when they parted.

Oswald smirked, and it didn’t—still didn’t—reach his eyes, but Ed didn’t stop him when his hands slowly trailed down his suit jacket to rest at his beltline. Oswald pressed them closer to kiss him, and Ed was powerless to stop him. “Please,” Oswald whispered against his lips. “I need you, Riddler.”

That that was what made Ed freeze, hand shooting down to stop Oswald in his tracks, grip tight.

“You don’t call me that. You never liked to call me that.” Not like that, not with those words that
had meant so much to him, had set him free, it wasn’t like that, wasn’t supposed to be like this.

Oswald pulled back, sitting on his heels in a move that would have been impossible twelve years ago, in a way that Ed should have noticed earlier. Oswald didn’t pull his hand away but didn’t try to distract Ed again. “But you want me to call you Riddler. You’ve always wanted me to. So what is the problem?”

Ed didn’t know what the problem was, but this wasn’t right. “I didn’t want to hear it like this.”

And Ed saw it now, saw what was wrong because it was Oswald’s face but the Administrator’s words that came up, the Administrator’s curious cock of the head. “So what did you want then, Ed?” He swung himself off Ed’s lap so he was sitting on the edge of the bed, legs crossed primly and watching Ed like a specimen in a jar. “I thought you wanted Oswald Cobblepot,” he said making a sweeping gesture to indicate himself. “So I brought you Oswald Cobblepot.”

Ed sat up. He could see it now that his head was cleared of distractions and the almost desperate longing—could see the clear markers of where the piercings had been, the way his makeup was caked onto his face and down his neck to hide the tattoos, and the way the suit hung on him, a tad too loose and nothing Oswald would have been seen in before because the Penguin would never wear anything that was less than perfect.

He shook his head. “I wanted Oswald, the real Oswald.”

The smile he got in return was cold and cruel. “That man doesn’t exist anymore.”

“I love you,” Ed said.

Oswald scuffed and rolled his eyes. “So you say,” he countered.

“You love me too. You love me still,” Ed said, reaching out to set his hand on top of Oswald’s. He sounded more confident than he was, but he had to believe that Oswald still loved him—had to believe that he wouldn’t be here if he didn’t.

“You say it like it matters,” Oswald said, pulling his hand away as though the touch—even through two layers of gloves—was a virus.

“How could it not?”

There was silence and then a shift, something in Oswald’s posture, his face—a resignation, like all the fight was out of him. “Do you know why I have tattoos?” Oswald finally asked after a few long seconds of silence. “No, of course, you don’t. I got tattoos because what was in here,” Oswald said, tapping his chest, “hurt so much that I wished I could carve it out with a knife, wished I could remove my each of my emotions until I felt nothing at all. So each of my tattoos was a way for me to take one of the wounds in my heart and put it on my skin because I didn’t know how else to deal with the pain.”

He stripped off his gloves as he talked, revealing the swirls of black that bled into the pale flesh. Deft hands unknotted his tie before shrugging out of his suit jacket while he undid the buttons of his vest.

“Fish Mooney,” he said, holding up his wrist to show off the outline of a fishbone, before pushing up his sleeve to reveal his forearm, pointing to a crown. “Sofia Falcone.” He did the same to the other forearm, indicating a small cluster of tally marks at the soft joint of his inner elbow. “Victor Zasz.”
Ed didn’t know what to say as Oswald continued to unbutton his dress shirt to reveal his collarbone, the edge of where the makeup had stopped down his neck. He stopped halfway down, pulling the shirt to the side to reveal four lines of text in an elaborate cursive that was inked directly over his heart.

_I can’t be bought,_

_but I can be stolen with a glance._

_I’m worthless to one,_

_but priceless to two._

“Edward Nygma.” The expression on Oswald’s face was complicated, sardonic and reminiscent, resigned and amused. “So yes, Ed, I do love you, and I think I will love you every day of my life, just like my mother loved my father every day of hers.”

Ed’s eyes were trained on the riddle, eyes tracing every loop and curve and his head felt light and his mouth felt dry. “Oswald,” he started to say, reaching out slowly, unsure, wanting to trace the letters with his fingertips because—

“But that doesn’t matter,” Oswald continued and he started buttoning his shirt, hiding the declaration from sight. “You once said that love was our most crippling weakness, and you were right. I can’t do this again, Ed. I won’t. Because this cycle? Of us trusting each other and then betraying each other? _It never ends._ There is no happy ending for us, Ed. Maybe there was once, but that time has long passed.”

“But,” Ed said, almost a whisper, unable to move as he watched Oswald meticulously gathered his clothing, shrugging on the suit jacket with a nonchalant air and brushing imaginary lint from his shoulder.

“Love isn’t for men like us, Ed. It’s time we both accept that.”

The silence in the aftermath was deafening, and Ed could hear the time pass with the loud tick-tick of the clock. It couldn’t end like this—Oswald couldn’t be saying this, not when—not after all these years and all they have been there and they were so close. He couldn’t just _give up._

The rage bubbled up in his chest, and he was running out the door before he realized it.

He caught Oswald on the street, no more than a few steps away from his driver who was waiting with the town car's back door half-open.

“Coward,” Ed practically screamed at his turned back. “You are a coward, Oswald Cobblepot.”

That made Oswald pause, and Ed counted it as a victory. He turned, eyes sharp. “Excuse me?”

“You are a coward. Just because you think this,” Ed said, gesturing between the two of them, “might fail, you don’t even want to try?”

“It _will_ fail, Ed, not might.”

“You don’t know that,” Ed said, body shaking.

“Yes, I _do,_” Oswald said, teeth clenched and his fingers curled into a tight first. “This _infatuation_ of yours will fade, and I am not going to stick around for when that happens.”
“I love you, Oswald,” Ed said, breathless and desperate, “I’ve never loved anyone like I love you.”

“That’s what you say now but your track record precedes you,” Oswald said with a sneer. “How many ‘loves of your life’ have you had? Go find someone else to bat their lashes at you, and you’ll forget about me in no time.”

Ed didn’t allow himself to falter—couldn’t, not yet because he might never have this chance again. “You are different, Oswald, and you know it.”

The laugh he got in response was disbelieving, a snort and so familiar. “Do I?” Oswald said with an incredulous look on his face. “No, Ed. Thinking I was special, thinking I was different, is what got me into this mess to start. I, unlike you, learn from my lessons.”

He moved to turn away—to leave—and Ed took a few steps closer, intent on stopping him when he finally noticed they weren’t alone. He almost snarled at them, a young lanky man in a long olive green trench coat, when he noticed the gun.

The first shot was like a firecracker going off, and Ed didn’t think. He heard two more shots go off in quick succession, even as he took the last step needed to reach Oswald and push him back, acting as an instinctive shield between him and the threat.

Three shots total, he cataloged mentally even as he cursed himself for not being armed. A revolver, make and model unclear from his vantage point, but likely six rounds maximum based on the size.

No, four shots. The third and fourth had been almost simultaneous but the deeper crack of a larger caliber weapon was clear. The shooter, young and stupid and clearly unpracticed with firearms, was already on the ground, screaming as blood seeped into the concrete from what used to be his hand.

Ed spun around and his hands were already patting Oswald, making sure that he was uninjured. He was frantic, words coming half-cocked out of his mouth and he could feel the blood pounding in his ears—he couldn’t lose Oswald again so soon after he had found him, even if Oswald never wanted to see him again, he couldn’t lose him.

“-d. Ed!” Oswald said, finally breaking past his panic, hands wrapped around Ed’s own, grounding him. “I’m fine. Just a graze.”

“Oh, good,” Ed said with a sigh of relief as he pulled Oswald into a tight hug. He felt faint, the adrenaline rushing through him, and his head buzzed, feeling foggy.

“Ed?” Oswald said, his voice muffled in Ed’s shoulder. He sounded...off. “Ed, you’re bleeding.”

Ed pulled away, just now noticing how his hands had been pressing against his side where a burn, sharp and incessant, was making itself known. Dark blood had soaked through his suit, dripping onto his gloves, and that...that was a lot of blood.

He looked up at Oswald, whose eyes were wide.

“Oh dear,” Ed said. “Oh dear.”

Chapter End Notes
Thank you, everyone, for being patient with me at how long it’s been between chapters! But we are reaching the end--we have one more chapter and than an epilogue for our boys. For those who haven't, you can follow me on Tumblr for status updates, sneak peaks, or just to chat!

Please take a moment to leave me a comment to let me know what you thought! I love love love knowing everyone's reactions, and it gives me so much joy and motivation to know you guys are still with me. <3
Oswald had been so desperate, so eager to get away that he got careless. He should have known, should have kept his guard up, because he knew the bounty that was on his head. But Ed had always made him reckless, had always been the weakness that made all his carefully thought out plans crumble into dust.

Oswald had been careless, and now Ed was paying the price.

“Ed,” Oswald said, wrapping an arm around his waist as the taller man stared at his blood coated hands, the dark green leather almost black.

“I’m fine,” Ed said, though Oswald could hear the strain in the words. “Just a flesh wound,” and the smile on Ed’s face at the reference was incongruous with the situation.

“You are not fine,” Oswald said, voice pitched high. “You were shot!”

“Least I could do,” Ed said, wincing as he tried to take a step. He made it two small steps toward the car before he stumbled. Oswald struggled to catch him in time, crumpling under his weight and taking them both down to the ground.

“We need to get you to a doctor,” Oswald said, trying to keep calm even as he cradled Ed in his arms. He stripped off his jacket quickly, bundling it up to press against the bleeding wound. He maneuvered onto his knees, pressing down with both hands and his body weight as he tried to staunch the blood flow.

His driver—useless, moronic man—reached down to try to lift Ed up, and Oswald snapped, pinning the man with his sharp eyes. “Don’t just stand there! Call the hospital, for god’s sake,” he snarled, tone brooking no argument.

He turned his attention back to Ed. He was bleeding too fast, Oswald knew. His jacket was already soaked through, and Ed’s face was pale and ashen as he lost more blood. “Ed, I need you to stay with me, okay? A doctor will be here soon, so I just need you to stay with me.” His voice shook with each word, almost frantic as he tried to think of a plan, any plan, to keep Ed’s attention.

Ed’s eyes were blown wide, pupils large and lips parted. He brought up a gloved hand, slow and clumsy, and Oswald caught his hand with his own. He gave it a squeeze even as he tried to blink back tears.

“You can’t do this to me, Ed. I can’t lose you like this,” he said, sniffling and ignoring the way the tears dripped down the bridge of his nose. He couldn’t lose Ed, not like this. Ed was supposed to move on with his life, find someone else to love, and live out his life without Oswald. He wasn’t supposed to die here on a dirty sidewalk, wasn’t supposed to protect Oswald, wasn’t supposed to bleed out in his arms. He couldn’t lose Ed like this.

He couldn’t.

Time passed in a blur.

Oswald only vaguely remembered the arrival of the ambulance, at the non-idle threat he had made
when the first responder had tried to separate him from Ed, and the hurried rush into the hospital. He remembered making more threats, wanting the doctors to make sure whose blood would be spilled if they didn’t save Ed. He remembered making a call to the Doctor, only barely remembered seeing the Doc rush past him, flanked by Continental staff whose stony gaze and brandished weapons brooked no argument.

Ed’s blood was still cooling on Oswald’s skin when Jim Gordon arrived.

Jim was in the middle of a meeting with the DA when the call came. When the caller ID flashed over the screen of his phone, he could feel his heart drop to the pit of his stomach.

He excused himself quickly, pulling on his jacket as he jogged to his car. He tried not to break too many traffic laws, but he still made it to Gotham General in almost record time. A flash of identification at the receptionist got him quick directions to where he wanted to go. He took the stairs two at a time, rounding the final corner and meeting the surprising sight of a dazed Oswald (the Administrator?).

Oswald was standing, eyes unfocused and unseeing, in the center of the otherwise empty waiting room—dressed not in his normal pale pink button-up and black vest, but instead in long charcoal sleeves that that covered his tattoos to his wrist and a familiar pinstripe vest. His hands were smeared with crusted blood, blood that had seeped into his clothing and darkened his sleeves up to his elbow. It was odd how it was jarring to see him now without jewelry and with his tattoos half-hidden by smudges of makeup. It was an awkward hybrid between the Penguin and the Administrator that was unsettling.

“Oswald,” he called out when the man didn’t turn to acknowledge his presence. “What happened?”

Oswald’s face was a wreck, filled with an anguish that he didn’t think he had seen since he had stepped between the barrel of Oswald’s shotgun and Theo Galavan.

“James,” he said, and there was a hitch in his voice, a familiar strain and crack that Jim recognized from years of fatherhood.

Jim didn’t think too hard about his next move, body moving automatically to pull Oswald—because this was Oswald right now, without a doubt—into his arms. The shorter man fit snugly into his embrace, and he settled a hand against the back of his head to press Oswald’s face into his chest. Jim could feel the tremor of the smaller man’s body as he took choked breaths, shoulders heaving from barely repressed sobs. He felt Oswald reach out to tangle his bloody fingers into the lapels of Jim’s jacket, smearing them with Ed’s blood. It was almost a reversed parody of most of their past interactions, and the incongruous thought almost made Jim want to laugh.

“What happened? Where is Ed?” Jim asked gently. He was still rubbing slow circles into Oswald’s back, providing what little comfort he was able to a man who wasn’t quite a stranger, wasn’t quite a friend.

Oswald pulled away, and his eyes were rimmed in red, his make-up smeared enough to reveal the start of the black crescent that was inked below one eye. Jim plucked a tissue from a nearby box, offering it to Oswald, who took it with a shyly grateful look.

“We—Ed—" Oswald started to say, using the tissue to wipe his smudged eyeliner away from
where they had left dark circles. “We were arguing outside and someone, fuck, someone tried to shoot me.” His voice broke, and he took a slow breath, collecting himself again. “Ed pushed me out of the way but got hit in the side. He’s in surgery now.”

Jim wanted to ask about the shooter, but he had no doubt that the man was likely dead or soon to be. “Has the doctor been out to talk to you yet?” Jim asked instead.

Oswald shook his head. “I sent in the Continental doctor about fifteen minutes ago to assist, but neither has been back with an update.” He paused, and his expression shifted as though a thought just came to him. “What are you doing here, James?”

“He and I are Ed’s emergency contacts,” he said, ignoring the look of surprise on Oswald’s face at the pronouncement. “He’s been clean for a few years, but he went through a phase where he’d near overdose every few months. We worry about him, and it was the best way to make sure someone would be there for him.” He pointedly didn’t mention why they might need to be there. “The hospital knows to call one of us if Ed is brought in,” Jim explained.

“I’m surprised you were okay with Lee caring so much about Ed, considering their past relationship,” Oswald said, trying to sound nonchalant, but Jim could recognize the unasked question.

Jim shrugged, glad that Oswald was steadier now that he had a chance to gather himself. “I’m not going to say it was easy, but you didn’t see how obsessive he got over your disappearance. A blind man could have seen how uninterested he was in anyone other than you.”

This blatant statement made an uncomfortable look cross Oswald’s face. Jim knew enough of their history—mostly during Ed’s manic or half-doped episodes—to somewhat understand how complicated their entire relationship, friendship or otherwise, was.

“Hey,” Jim hesitantly ventured, breaking the silence that stretched between the two of them. “I know it’s not my place, and I don’t know everything that’s been going on between the two of you, but,” Jim paused, running a tired hand through his hair and setting the other on his hip, “give Ed a chance. I’m not exactly the poster boy for healthy relationships, but I wouldn’t trade anything for what I have with Lee.”

Oswald didn’t answer for a long moment, focusing on cleaning some of the blood from his hands with a clean tissue. “What about Barbara? Do you regret her?” he finally asked, and the words cut through the silence like a knife. His tone was casual, but he refused to meet Jim’s eyes.

Jim managed to hide a wry smile because Ed and Oswald had always been on the same wavelength. “Barbara and I didn’t work out,” he said, ignoring the snort that was 100% Penguin at the vast understatement. “But, no, I don’t regret what I had with Barbara either. I wouldn’t be here without her, wouldn’t have my daughter, probably wouldn’t be with Lee. We may have crashed and burned, but I think both of us are still grateful for the good times we had together.”

Oswald looked as though he was about to answer when two women emerged from behind the set of doors, both in crumpled green surgical gowns and their facemasks pulled down to their chins. Two men in suits trailed after that, their matching crisp black outfits indicative of Continental hires. Jim could spy the outline of a gun under each of their suit jackets and had no doubt that there were multiple other weapons hidden on their person.

The younger of the two women spoke first, and her ill-concealed look of wary as she tried to ignore the armed men that were her tail made Jim assume she was the hospital surgeon.
“How is he?” Jim asked quickly before Oswald could start his own interrogation.

“Mr. Nygma is stable now,” the doctor answered, and her posture relaxed minutely as she recognized him. “The bullet missed any major arteries and organs, and the tissue damage, while severe, should heal without any complications. We’d like to keep him for monitoring for a few days, but there should be no long-term effects.”

Oswald looked at the other woman who Jim could only assume was the Continental’s in-house doctor. She nodded in agreement. “The wound was relatively minor, sir. Some tissue and muscle damage as expected but no internal bleeding. He is still under sedation but should wake shortly.”

Oswald tipped his head in acknowledgment, and Jim found it amazing how his expression and body language shifted so drastically from only a few minutes prior. Had he not been witness to it, he would have been hard-pressed to recognize this as the same man who had been almost catatonic in worry.

“You’ll stay here until he wakes and as long as needed,” Oswald said, his tone firm and inviting no opposition. He gestured to one of the men behind them. “Sergei, you’ll accompany the Doc until Mr. Nygma awakens.”

Both of them nodded, and the two of them immediately turned on their heels to presumably return to Ed, trailed by the bewildered and half-terrified surgeon.

Oswald gestured for the last remaining man to follow him. He flipped open his phone, heading toward the exit before Jim could decide his own course of action.

“Wait,” Jim asked, and he couldn’t keep the half-bewildered tone out of his words. “You aren’t going to wait for Ed to wake up?”

Oswald paused, half-turning to give Jim a look. There was a sharp look in his eyes that spoke of retribution, and Jim suppressed the shiver than ran down his spine. “I’m afraid not, James,” he said. “There is something I need to take care of.”

The first thing he needed to do was change, even though a large portion of him wanted to rip Sofia’s heart out with his bare hands. Now that he knew Ed was safe, that Ed was alive, the all-consuming worry was replaced by rage. But he couldn't do what he needed to do with Ed’s blood still cooling under his fingernails and the Penguin’s face still staring back at him from the mirror. He couldn’t be the Administrator feeling like this. The moment Ed had slumped against him—

It was like his mother all over again—the person he loved bleeding out in front of him. He had been so useless; no amount of power and influence had been able to save her.

He had hoped it wouldn't hurt so much, wouldn't hurt to say goodbye to Ed. He had spent so many years trying to cauterize the wound, and he had hoped that when push came to shove, he’d feel nothing.

But he forgot how—how Ed made him feel. Ed, even when they were enemies, challenged him, made him feel special, had looked into his soul, and just known who he was. And even his mother didn't know him like Ed had; only Ed had seen him at his best and at his worst and, despite their fights and arguments and betrayals, had still wanted to be near him.
And even now, Ed was the only one who can make him feel like this—angry, sad, worried, distressed. He had spent the last few years in a fog, lost in the routine of the Administrator—days full of calculations and appraisal, phone calls and executions—and Ed made him feel so much and it hurt it hurt it hurt.

When he finally stepped back down to his office, very few would have noticed anything different. His piercings were all carefully replaced, and his hair was back into his usual immovable sweep. But his steps were no longer the slow unconcerned pace of the Administrator who strolled as if nothing was ever important enough for him to be in a rush. Instead, he took long, purposeful strides, each step sure and almost vibrating with concealed anger.

He snapped his fingers as he passed his Secretary, and he saw the mild look of shock over her face before she schooled her features back into the usual blank stare. “Yes, Administrator?”

“Send Victor Zsasz to my office,” he ordered. He slipped past her, not waiting for her to reply.

He settled himself behind his desk, lighting a cigarette and taking a slow, long drag with his eyes closed, giving him a moment to decide the best order of actions. He flicked off the end of ash into the half-full ashtray before picking up the handset of the old rotary phone that sat on his desk. He balanced his cigarette between two fingers as he cradled the handset between his ear and shoulder, dialing a number by memory.

“Administration, how may I direct your call?” a Receptionist answered, her tone a perfect blend between annoyance and boredom. He could hear the familiar din in the background, the sound of clacking keys, ringing phones, and slow drawls.

“This is the Administrator, authorization Charlie Alpha Tango 79205-0. I need to open an account,” he said in an even monotone.

“Name?” the Receptionist said, and he could hear the hurried tapping of long nails on a keyboard.

He gave the information in short, clipped tones. He had just been put on hold, knowing that the file was being run to the Administrator on duty for approval when Victor chose that moment to arrive. He waved the man in with his free hand, ignoring how the ash at the end of his cigarette fell onto the carpet as he took a moment to take another drag.

He heard a click on the other end of the phone, the typical static silence disappearing as he was brought back on the line. “The account has been approved,” the Receptionist said. “Have a good day, Administrator.”

He hung up, enjoying the satisfying clink of the handset back into the cradle. He set the edge of his cigarette down against the ashtray, the end still smoldering, as he opened up the bottom drawer of his desk, pulling out a sizeable stack of folders. He set them onto his desk with a resounding thud, the weight of the files evident.

“Administrator?” Victor ventured, a non-existent eyebrow raised as he waited for his orders. His posture was outwardly his usual irreverence, but the Administrator could read the tension in his stance, could see it in the way he kept his weight on the balls of his feet or how his hands moved restlessly as though they were itching to grab his sidearm.

“I’ve put the word out for Sofia Falcone,” he said, keeping a careful eye on Victor at the declaration. He knew as much as anyone that Victor Zsasz was only loyal to a point and that his greatest weakness had always been his loyalty to the Falcone family. At his lack of any outward reaction, he continued. “I want her brought to me alive.”
“So, you want me to get her?” Victor asked, seemingly unconcerned at the newest target.

“No, I have another job for you.” He gestured to the stack of folders. “The names and addresses of every one of her capos. I want you to bring them all to me, Victor. Alive and by any means possible.”

Victor whistled, impressed. He nicked the top folder, idly flipping through the information. “This is a hefty list you have.”

“Will it be a problem?” the Administrator asked sardonically.

Victor grinned, showing off the pearly whites of his teeth. “Not at all. Anything else?”

The Administrator shook his head.

Victor saluted him mockingly. “Got it, Administrator,” he said. He grabbed the folders, tucking them under his arms as he cracked his neck, likely already making mental plans on their capture.

“Oh,” the Administrator said, voice casual as though he just remembered something. “Victor, one last thing.”

“Hm?” the assassin said, half-turned back around and curious.

The Administrator leaned back into his seat and crossed his legs, and he wasn’t smiling. “You betray me again, and I’ll make you wish that I’d have killed you all those years ago. Understand?”

Victor paused, meeting his gaze. The silence stretched, but the Administrator didn’t break. He needed Victor to know that he was serious, that he was letting bygones be bygones, but he wouldn’t allow it a second time.

Victor nodded, and the tension broke.

“Got it, chief.”

The sound of his steps on the concrete floor was ominous. The lights flickered overhead, the shoddy fluorescents cutting in and out and casting the barren room in every shifting light. He walked a slow circle around Sofia, not saying a word as he took in her bound and blindfolded form. When he spoke, his voice was low and even, not unlike a schoolmaster about to scold a pair of miscreants.

“Do you know why we have rules, Ms. Falcone?” the Administrator asked.

“Oh,” he drawled, unconcerned, “just an old friend. Back to my question, Ms. Falcone. Do you know why we have rules?” He continued to pace a leisurely circle around her, watching as she tried to follow the sound of his voice. He reached out to ghost his fingers along her shoulder as he walked, letting her long brown hair slip through his fingers and enjoying how she flinched at the
“Please. I don't know what you want,” she said. Her voice was shaky and desperate, and she made the very image of a damsel in distress. But the Administrator knew better than to be fooled.

“Rules,” he continued as though she hadn’t spoken, “is what separates us from the animals. And you, Ms. Falcone, broke the rules.” He pulled a long switchblade from a pocket, opening it with a casual flick of his wrist, and then drove it into her thigh to the hilt.

She screamed.

He leaned down, eyes cold, as he spoke into her ear. “But if you want us to be animals, you should know who you are letting out of the cage.” He untied the blindfold, letting it drop to the floor.

“Hello, Sofia.” He smiled, sharp, like a cat with a mouse in its clutches.

“Administrator? What—”

He pressed a tattooed finger against her lips to stop her. “Shh, now. I suggest you drop the act. I know all about the contract you put out on me.”

“I don't know—” Sofia tried again, her words broken up by small sobs of pain. Her hair, usually falling to her shoulders in model-perfect curls, were in a haphazard tangle, long strands sticking to her lipstick and lending her an overall disheveled appearance.

He snapped his fingers, and a man dressed in a prim, navy suit emerged from the shadows, an open laptop in his arms. The screen was covered in paused videos of her men, all in varying states of disarray. He pressed the play button on the first video and let it play through, let her listen to one of her top men give her up with such ease. “You were saying? Or should I have you watch the rest? I promise that it makes for a riveting watch.”

She dropped her facade abruptly, knowing she was beaten. Her pretty face curled into a sneer, and there was no sign of the weak simpering fool that she had been trying to pass herself off as anymore. “So what? Who do you think you are? You know nothing about Gotham. If not me, then someone else would have.”

“Oh, Sofia,” he chastised, tapping her on the nose condescendingly. “Time has really done a number on your memory. The answer is right in front of you.”

Her anger and confusion were evident. “What are you talking about?” she said with a snarl.

He backed up, purposefully tilting his face so the lights could better illuminate his features. “To be fair, you've been on borrowed time for a while, but you made it so easy. I didn't think I cared about revenge after all these years, but now that we are here, I think I'm going to enjoy this.”

There was still a look of incomprehension on her face.

He sighed, exasperated. “You really are slow on the uptake. But let's recap—you pretended to be my friend, kidnapped someone close to me, and then sent me to Arkham,” he said, counting off each transgression with his fingers.

Her eyes widened. “Penguin?”

He smiled, and it was all teeth. He snapped his fingers again, enjoying the look of horror on her face, and another suit came out bearing a tray of medical implements.
“Hi, Sofia,” he said, glee evident. “Long time no see. I just can't wait to catch up.”

He left hours later, blood soaking his sleeves to his elbows and dark red streaks of it splattered across his face, lending him a savage appearance. He handed a coin to the Cleaner who was waiting at the door before fishing out a clean handkerchief to wipe away some of the blood. He could taste the iron on his lips, and it made his heart sing. He had forgotten how that felt—to feel the hot blood of a victim run through his fingers, to feel the shift of muscles under his hand as he cut into them, and then the slow stop of their heart. It was exhilarating.

The ride back to the Continental was a blur, the adrenaline pumping through his veins making his head foggy. He could feel the fast beating of his heart, and he had the urge to fight—or fuck—felt a desperate need to remove the excess energy. When they finally arrived, he barely waited for the car to pull to a stop before he practically threw himself out the door and into the Continental.

Addy sprung up from where she had been chatting at the bar and fell into step behind him, taking the steps two at a time to keep up with his hurried pace. “Matty? What’s—”

He cut her off without bothering to look at her. “It's not mine. The blood, that is.”

He headed straight behind the bar in the upper lounge and poured himself a generous glass of whiskey that he slammed back before pouring himself another. He refrained from downing the second drink; instead, he allowed Addy to steer him to sit down at a booth where she took a seat next to him.

“What's going on?” she asked, and he just now noticed that she lacked her typical disguise she donned when she visited the Continental. “The Falcones are panicking. The word on the street is there was a coup, but no one knows who or how.”

He laughed, and it was a low, wild chuckle. “Oh God,” he said, wiping the tears away, “I forgot how that felt.”

Addy looked worried, and he smiled darkly in response. “Sofia Falcone is dead. Her capos are all either dead or mine now.”

Addy looked stunned, and he laughed again, knowing that he was probably looking more than a little unhinged to her. He forgot how unusual the turnover probably looked to outsiders—where loyalty changed hands as easily as cash, how easy it could be to bring down an empire within a day with just the right push. He himself had emerged from the carnage, pushing out Salvatore Maroni, Carmine Falcone, and Fish Mooney in the span of a night, once upon a time.

“How?” she asked, pulling his still half-full glass from his hands to take a sip for herself.

He waved to one of the staff, making a vague gesture that he hoped they interpreted as to bring him a new drink. “Sofia put a hit out for me, and some moron decided to try and collect. Ed tried to protect me and got shot for his trouble.”
“Is he all right?” Addy ventured, her tone unsure.

“Stable. No major damage,” he said, trying to sound unconcerned but knowing it came out more wild and manic than he wanted.

“And that’s...good?” she offered.

“Yeah,” he said. And he knew the adrenaline was fading because his voice faltered. Ed’s condition was as much a relief as it stirred more unwanted emotion. “Yeah,” he repeated, softer this time.

He raked a hand through his hair as he bent over, head between his knees. He felt Addy place a hand between his shoulders, rubbing slow, comforting circles into his back.

“Fuck,” he said, squeezing his eyes shut, trying to ignore the burn. His shoulder shook, and he didn't realize he was laughing until the first chuckle burst from his lips. “Fuck, what am I doing?”

He sat back up, wiping the tears that managed to squeeze out of the corner of his eyes with the back of his hand, unmindful of the streak of blood that he knew he probably just smeared across his face. “Fuck. This is a mess.”

Addy reached over and brushed his hair off his forehead. “Want to talk about it?” she asked, tone level. He had always loved that about her—how she was able to roll with the punches, how she was like a steady rock in the middle of a rushing river, grounding him.

“Not really, no, but why not?” he said sardonically. He ruffled his hair again, scrapes his nails against his scalp. “I'm not sure where to start. I guess, fuck. I went to Ed's place. I wanted to, I don't know, put an end to this. I thought if I gave him what he wanted; he'd leave me alone.”

Fuck, he didn’t know what he had been thinking. Maybe it had been a mix of desperation, a blend of his own masochism and the hope that it would help him finally rip out his heart for good.

Addy listened, keeping her face non-judgmental. A waiter dropped off a pitcher of water and a clean napkin that Addy accepted gratefully, handing off the still half-full glass of whiskey. She dipped the corner of the fabric into the water and went to work, cleaning the blood off his face as he spoke.

“I was so prepared to let him fuck me. I thought it'd be good for both of us. I could stop dreaming about it, and he would stop thinking with his dick. But he—” He broke off and could feel his hands start to shake. “He's so sure that he loves me.”

“Is that so bad?” Addy asked, taking one of his hands in hers as she gently cleaned between his fingers, the soft ivory napkin already stained bright red.

“I don't know if I can do this again,” he admitted, hating the tremor in his voice. “Everything I touch, I destroy. Everything I love eventually crumbles to dust, and all I bring is a plague of misfortune to everyone I love. I’m—” he snapped his mouth shut, unsure how to continue. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath because it hurt to admit it, hurt to say the truth aloud. “I’m just not meant to have nice things,” he said with a resigned smile and unshed tears.

“Oh, Matty,” she said, and he could hear the sorrow in those three syllables. She set down the dirty cloth and held both of his hands in hers, giving them a gentle squeeze.

“I don't know if I can do this again, Addy. I don't know if I can give him my heart for him to toss it aside and yet—”
Yet he wanted to. He wanted to try even though he knew that at best, it’d end up in heartbreak, and at worst, he’d end up with another bullet to the stomach and dumped back into the river.

“You don't know that it'll be like that,” Addy said.

“Don't I?” he asked, cynical.

Addy’s smile was knowing. “Didn't you just say that he took a bullet for you?

“I…” He trailed off, biting his bottom lip. “He did. Why would he do that?”

“Oh, Sweetie,” Addy said, holding onto him a little tighter. “Isn't it obvious?”

Was it?

When the announcement came, he had been waiting for it. Honestly, he was surprised that it hadn't happened earlier—he had spent the last few days waiting for this moment, unsure of what he'd say or do when it came.

So, when Edward Nygma walked through his front door, he thought that he was prepared.

Ed had regained much of the healthy color to his skin. He looked tired. He had shadows under his eyes that his glasses didn’t entirely hide and was clearly favoring one side over the other, but he had lost the deathly white pallor to his face and, most importantly, he was alive.

“Please, sit,” the Administrator offered, leading the man to his coach. He had considered having this conversation in his office, but something inside him protested about doing this in the stark clinical room that was more Administrator than Oswald. He ached to reach for a tumbler of scotch, wishing for the familiar burn of alcohol and the subsequent fogginess it gave him. Instead, he pulled out a cigarette, lighting the tip with a slim metal lighter as he took a seat on the edge of the couch.

“How are you feeling?” the Administrator asked after he had taken a long drag. His hands shook, and he hoped the other man didn’t notice. He avoided meeting Ed’s eyes, instead trying to focus on the mundane—the taste of tobacco on his tongue or the scent of smoke—anything to keep his attention on anything but Ed.

“I could be better,” Ed said, and his voice was as unsure as his own. He took a seat on the couch next to the Administrator who noted that he left a careful amount of space between their thighs.

“The bullet missed the vital organs but still had to be removed. Your Doctor left me some alarmingly effective medication that has been helping with the pain.”

“The Continental has its own internal research branch for medicine, firearms, and other goods of interest,” the Administrator said. “We tend to run about a decade ahead of the commercial market.” He had never been the sort to ramble, but he didn't know what else to say.

They lapsed into silence, nothing except the steady tick of the clock that echoed in the room that seemed so much bigger than it was before.
“Oswald,” Ed finally said, reaching out to place a hand on the other man’s knee. He flinched, unable to stop himself. He didn’t know why but hearing that name now—

That name was every issue that hung between, every moment of their history—the good and the bad, and it burned.

“I heard about what you did to the Falcones, to Sofia,” Ed said, sounding like he was waiting for something, fishing for some answer that the Administrator didn’t want to give.

The Administrator didn’t answer, just let the statement hang between them.

“What do you want me to say?” He wanted to turn away, but Ed's face was so open, honest, and it was so much like the part of Ed that he had fallen in love with all those years ago, the part of Ed that had sat with a ring of bruises around his neck and a rasp in his voice, the part that had glowed in the light of the fire and had him falling so hard and fast.

“They hurt you,” he said, looking straight into Ed’s eyes, and the words were shaky, mixed with anger and regret. He flipped their hands to press their palms together, to lace their fingers together and squeezed. “They hurt you,” he repeated, and he could feel the hot tears, and he was crying, damnit, why was he crying. “I held you in my arms as you bled, and I was—”

He broke off, taking a deep breath as he tried to gather himself, tried not to think of what would have come next. “If you had died, you—” He couldn’t continue, ending in a strangled choke. He simply squeezed Ed’s hand tighter, reminding himself that Ed was here. Ed was alive, warm, and safe.

“Oswald,” Ed said, so soft, gentle. He brushed away some of the tears with his thumb, the touch was so damn tender that it made his chest hurt.

“I thought I was ready to say goodbye, but seeing you there, faced with the possibility of a world without Edward Nygma,” he said, trailing off. He broke eye contact with Ed, not able to handle the heavy weight of his eyes on him to look at the wall, eyes blank and unseen. He replayed those few frantic moments again and again in his mind. They haunted him.

“Why did you protect me?” he asked. He needed to know—needed to hear it from Ed because it made everything he had thought, every excuse he had been clinging on to—it changed everything.

“I thought it was obvious,” Ed said. He brought their clasped hands up to press just to the left of the Administrator’s chest, right above the line of words that he had shared with him only days prior. “Didn’t I say that I would do anything for you, Oswald?”

He wanted to pull away because he could feel the flutter of his heart at the words. “But I’m not
Oswald anymore, not the one you remember. And maybe I’m not exactly the Administrator either, but I’m still not the man that you recall,” he said.

“Doesn’t matter to me,” Ed said, leaning in.

“Well, it should!” he snapped, and he wanted to snatch his hand away. Another tear slid down his cheek, and he wiped it away hastily with the back of his hand. “You are in love with a memory, a ghost, a man that doesn't exist anymore. How do you know you'll still love me as me—the me that I am now.”

He had a decade of memories, hurts, and celebrations. A decade without Gotham. He wasn't the Penguin anymore—no more clean-cut suits or over-emotional outbursts, no more sly power plays to claw his way to the top of an empire, and no ambition other than to live his life.

No one ever loved him as him, no one had ever known him and stayed.

He had lived most of his life molding and shaping himself to be what others wanted. His mother, bless her kind soul, had wanted a son, a boy who she could always dote on—a sexless paradigm of the old world that would stay with her forever. Her little Cobblepot.

Fish had wanted a sycophant, an adoring audience at her heel. She had wanted someone who edged along that thin line of fear and respect, admiration and jealousy, but who would never, could never, outshine her.

Maroni had wanted the fear—the golden goose of a snitch who had learned his lesson and who knew that his place was on his knees. He had liked to emphasize how much bigger he was—liked it when Oswald begged, it was too much, please, sir, it hurts. Maroni had liked to feel big in more ways than one.

Jerome had wanted the Penguin—had wanted the feeling and satisfaction of having the King of Gotham on a leash, having him as a puppet to dance and sing for his amusement. He had loved Penguin’s violent emotions—fucking Jerome had always been half a fight, full of teeth and nails, threats and pain. But he had always wanted the soft aftermath, the press skin to skin and the steady sound of their matching heartbeats, a substitute for someone that Jerome wanted more than anything else.

John Wick had been the closest he had gotten to losing his heart again, the closest to finding someone who might want him as him. Perhaps if he been just a little less jaded, had been burned just one less time… Maybe if things had been a little different, he could have offered John something more, something real and lasting.

But John wasn’t like them. He wasn’t like the ragged and charred souls that Gotham liked to churn out. John had, despite his profession, been as good of a man as Oswald had ever met. He was a killer, yes, but he didn't take any joy in the act. Dealing in death was purely business for him, while Oswald would always be a child of Gotham—would always love the feeling of blood under his fingers, the disgusting squelch of broken flesh, or the spike of adrenaline he got from snuffing out a life.

John Wick had wanted Matthew and his sharp intellect or the quick wit. He wouldn’t have wanted the part of Matthew that was still Oswald, the part that wanted to lick a dead man's blood off his face or the part that would have liked John to fuck him with a knife held to his throat.

It always came back to Ed. He had thought, had believed to his core, Ed had been—would always be—the one. Ed had seen Oswald at his lowest, had seen him as the sniveling, pathetic mess he’d
been after his mother's death. Ed had held him up during his campaign, stuck by his side through the resulting highs and lows. That is until he saw who Oswald really was: a petty, jealous soul who took and took and took.

So, when the Riddler—who had taken all he could dish out and returned it in kind—came back to him, his heart had dared to hope. He knew Ed's love was out of his reach. He knew that the fairytale romance that he had always wanted was just that—a fairytale.

But he had hope that they could maintain a friendship, a relationship of platonic affection and respect, and he would have been happy to stay by Ed's side in any capacity. He had thought that would have been enough. He had foolishly thought that Ed had felt the same—that they were meant for each other—as friends, as partners, as everything.

To have that torn away from him—

He didn’t know if he could do it again, didn’t know if he could take the chance that Ed would look into him and find him lacking.

Ed's brows furrowed, and some of what was going through his head must have shown through. But he cupped his cheek anyway and stroked his thumb against the soft skin. “Okay, I can't promise that but don't you think we both deserve the chance to find out?”

It was all too much.

“I don’t know what you want from me, Ed,” he said, trying to turn away only to be stopped by Ed’s hand, by the tender touch that he craved and abhorred almost equally.

“I want you to be honest with me,” Ed said, tenacious.

“I'm scared!” he snapped, trying to stifle his tears. “I’m scared because I don't know if I can handle another heartbreak, Ed. What if we are always destined to crash and burn, always destined to stand on opposite sides and make each other bleed?”

“And what if we aren’t?” Ed countered. He pressed their foreheads together and closed his eyes as though in prayer. “I'm just asking you to give us one more chance, one more chance to show each other that we can make this work.”

“A chance,” he echoed, letting his eyes close. He tried to focus on the feeling of their fingers tangled together, on the steady thrum of Ed’s heartbeat under his thumb. There was so much still left unsaid between the two of them, so many words and feelings. “Where would we even start?” he said with a disbelieving laugh, not sure if he was actually going to agree with this crazy, insane idea.

Ed gave a smile, tentative, but it was like the first ray of sunlight breaking through a cloudy day, and the sight made his heart flip. “How about dinner? Nothing else, just dinner.”

He felt overwhelmed, felt like this was either a lifeline being held out to a drowning man or the final knot of a noose tightening around his neck. He was scared, so scared, but—


Chapter End Notes
We are almost done, everyone! I have a short-ish epilogue left for some last loose ends which *should* be out within the week but this is the final *chapter* chapter.

Thank you again to everyone for your patience as my updates have gotten further and further apart! This chapter is definitely the longest of the entire story, so I hope it was worth the wait for everyone! As always, you can follow me on Tumblr for more detailed status updates, sneak peeks, etc.

Again, please take a moment to leave me a comment to let me know your thoughts. This was a real nerve-wracking chapter for me, given that it was the last official chapter of the entire story. Please let me know what you think! Comments really drive me and keep me motivated, and I wouldn't have gotten this far without all my amazing readers. <3
Epilogue

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Word got around quickly in Gotham. It didn’t take long for the rumors to make the rounds that the elusive and mysterious Administrator was the infamous Penguin. There was no hiding it after his display with Sofia, no hiding it after he had swept through a packed Continental dressed in a three-piece suit with blood on his hands.

Those that had never worked with Penguin flock to the Continental out of curiosity—the man had fallen into practical myth over the years that catching even a glimpse of the once King of Gotham was enough to send the underworld into a twitter.

Those that had known Penguin—the Rogue Gallery and the cops alike—are more torn in their opinion. Law enforcement broadly decided to ignore the revelation; the Penguin had always been a divisive topic. A criminal, yes, but no one can deny that his tenure as mayor and criminal kingpin had been one of the safest and most stable times for cops in Gotham history.

The Rogues, on the other hand, had been close to eager to welcome one of their own back into the fold. The Iceberg Lounge had been a popular gathering place, and the Continental was quickly becoming its successor. Not every Rogue sought him out, but there was undeniably a new undercurrent in the air whenever their eyes might meet across a room.

Selina had been, not shockingly, the boldest. She had sauntered in and, apropos of nothing, lounge on the nearest bench, her signature curls and claws out on display, as she threw out sarcasm and wit until she was acknowledged—every inch of her namesake.

Others were a little more cautious.

“You know, I don’t think I really believed it was you until now.”

The Administrator merely raised an eyebrow, the twin garnets pressed against his brow sparkling in the low light. “Butch,” he greeted, “please, join me.”

He gestured to the seat across from him, waving at a waiter to bring his guest a drink. “Whiskey, if I recall?”

“I think you already know,” Butch said as he took a seat, sinking slowly into the plush cushions. He unbuttoned his suit jacket, stretching his neck as needing to unwind after a long day. Which, for all the Administrator knew, he was.

“Well,” the Administrator said with a placid smile. “It’s always polite to ask.”

“You always did care about manners,” Butch said with a huff, accepting the glass from the waiter. “Glad to know some things never change.”

“And somethings do. I was gratified to hear that our dear Professor Strange was able to cure your condition,” the Administrator said, leaning back and crossing his legs. “And, of course, other congratulations are in order. Married life and fatherhood suiting you?”

Butch brought his hand up to scratch his cheek almost sheepishly. He always wore his emotions on his sleeve, and the man couldn’t keep the pure affection out of his voice. “Yeah. Tabby and I got
married maybe, uh, a year after reunification?” he said. “Our little girl, Maria, turns nine this year.”

The Administrator didn’t bother to restrain himself from touching the outline of a fishbone etched on his left wrist. He allowed a smile—a real one to shine through. “I think Fish would have been flattered. Or annoyed. You could never tell with her.” There was a wistful note in his voice that he couldn’t suppress.

He saw Butch’s eyes hone in on the tattoo, and he didn’t try to hide it. Instead, he turned out his wrist to show it off to the other man. Butch, and likely only Butch, was the one person who would understand.

“You remind me of her,” Butch said, his own voice taking on a rueful note. “More so now than before, to be honest.”

“Oh?” the Administrator said, head cocked in curiosity. “How so?”

“Fish always did have a certain flair,” Butch said, making a broad gesture with his glass to indicate the Administrator. “Though, I’m surprised to see you out of a suit, to be honest. And you are probably the last person I’d have pinned to be inked up.”

“A lot has changed over the years, my friend,” the Administrator said, folding his hands over his knees. “You are one of the last people I have guessed to have embraced domestic bliss and fatherhood yourself.” Which was actually a lie—the greater surprise was that Tabitha had consented to marry the man and have his child.

A misty-eyed look overcame Butch—the same lovestruck look the man had been struck with whenever Tabatha had been mentioned in the past.

The Administrator rolled his eyes. Apparently, some things don’t actually change.

It was surprisingly easy to fall back into pace with the other man—that first opening volley had been accepted, and Butch easily chatted about the time missed. His relationship with Butch always had been one of easy acceptance—betrayals and backstabbing were par for the course, but somehow, they always knew that they could depend on the other when truly needed.

He observed Butch, considering. He licked his lips and cocked his head, making his decision.

“I had always considered you a friend, Butch. You’ve known me longer than anyone else,” he said, cautious. His voice was subdued, and the even tone caught the other man’s attention. “So, I want you to know…” He paused, the words feeling ungainly on his tongue, but he forged forward, pushing past the uncomfortable ache in his shoulders. “I feel like you should know where I stand as things are.”

He wasn’t smiling anymore. “Tabitha killed my mother,” he said. “And I will never forget that. Had things stayed the way they were, had I stayed in Gotham, I was going to kill you.” He saw the way Butch started, the jaw-slacked look that came over his face and the way his hand jostled his drink in shock at the revelation.

The Administrator kept his tone level. “Tabitha took away the one person I loved more than anything,” he said, “and I wanted her to feel my pain. It’s why I had allowed your affection for that woman all those years, why I had never taken the shot when I could have killed her a dozen times over. Because I had wanted her to suffer like I had.”

“So,” he said, eyes narrowing, “you need to know that. I’ll never forget or forgive her, but I’ll let things lie for now for the sake of your daughter. But if she ever crosses me again, no affection or
loyalty between us will stand in my way. Do you understand, Butch?”

There was a pause, and the tension hovered in the air like a miasma. The Penguin had not been a forgiving man, and the Administrator was only just.

Butch finally nodded, and the look in his eye was one of understanding and respect. “Got it, boss.”

“Everyone is waiting,” Barbara said, sliding directly past his staff. She slid into the neighboring barstool, setting her no-doubt designer purse onto the bartop as a waiter hurriedly brought her sparkling water with a lemon slice perched on the rim.

“Hello, Barbara. It's good to see you. So glad that we could catch up,” the Administrator said in a dry drawl, not looking up from his work. He continued filling in the neat lines of numbers in brilliant red ink, glasses sliding down the bridge of his nose as he wrote.

Barbara smirked, flipping her long red hair over her shoulder. She looked every inch the successful businesswoman she was dressed in her black and white sheath dress and sky-high black pumps. “I’m digging the new look, Ozzy,” she said, taking a sip of her water, her bright red lipstick managing not to leave a mark on the rim.

“That's the Administrator to you, Barbara,” he answered, his voice flat and still not bothering to look up.

Barbara pouted theatrically. “Spoilsport.”

He finished the last line of the accounting and blew over the page gently to dry the ink before snapping the book shut. He handed it off to an employee and motioned for a drink of his own. “How is motherhood?” he asked, leaning back to give her a smirk. “Imagine my surprise when I'd heard who the lucky father was and that you've given up your illustrious life of crime.”

“And imagine my surprise when I heard who was behind the mask of the mysterious Administrator,” Barbara said, matching his expression with one of her own, just the right edge of amused and mocking. “Had I not heard it from Jim himself, I would have thought our dear Professor Strange was up to his old tricks.”

“What do you want, Barbara?” the Administrator asked, giving her an unamused look from over the rim of his glasses.

“Can't a girl want to check up on a dear friend?” Barbara said, pressing a hand to her chest and her face full of mock hurt.

“Please, Ms. Kean,” the Administrator said, “do not take me for a fool.”

“Fine, fine,” Barbara said, acquiescing with a dramatic huff. “I thought I'd swing by, see if you'd let an old friend in on your plans. For old time’s sake.”

“Plans?” he repeated, raising a skeptical brow as he crossed his arms over his chest.

Barbara rolled her eyes. “Yes, plans. You have half of the underworld on edge. Everyone who is anyone is waiting for your move. It's driving down business.”
“And here I was under the impression that you were out of the business,” he countered, not hiding his smirk even as he took a sip of his scotch.

Barbara gave him a flat look.

The Administrator pursed his lips and set his glass down, folding his hands over his knee. “There are no plans,” he said.

“You? Not have a plan to plant yourself back on the throne? Please, spare me.”

“I'm afraid it's the truth,” he said.

Barbara gave him a long, searching look that he met imperiously.

“Holy shit,” she finally said, leaning back to drape her arm over the bar top. “You are serious.”

“I have my hands full running the Continental. I doubt my employers would appreciate any extracurriculars,” the Administrator said with a dismissive shrug.

“Employers, huh? Never thought I'd see you barking to another master after all these years,” Barbara snarked.

“We are all under the High Table, Ms. Kean,” he said with a barely hidden, sardonic smirk.

“Try pulling the other one, Pengy,” she said with a snort.

The Administrator chuckled. “I am no longer interested in ruling Gotham. Those days are long past for me.”

“So what?” Barbara said. “You are just going to let someone else run your beloved city while you live in domestic bliss with your string bean of a boy toy?” She snorted. “Never thought I'd see the day.”

“Like I never thought I'd see the day Barbara Kean was the cozy mother of Jim Gordon's child that she co-parents with Leslie Thompkins, but these are new times.”

Barbara pressed her lips together, considering, and then smiled. She lifted her glass for a toast. “To new times,” she said.

The Administrator smiled in return and brought his glass up, clinking it gently against her own. “To new times, indeed.”

Addy coughed, waving her hand as she tried to chase away the cloud of dust and cobwebs that flew into her face. “I thought you had a housekeeper,” she said between sneezes, stepping over the threshold and into the Van Dahl mansion.

The Administrator fumbled for the light, an action of pure muscle memory. “I did, but no one has been around since I left. We are too far out of the city for squatters, and I was never legally declared dead, so it’s been sitting here untouched the last decade.” He blew at the dust that surrounded a table lamp before reaching to switch it on. The bulb clicked on without a fuss, illuminating the area in a soft yellow glow.
Addy gave an impressed whistle as the space slowly lit up, and the Administrator started stripping dusty white sheets off of the furniture. “Swanky place. You grew up here?” she said, peering up at the portrait of Elijah Van Dahl.

Oswald shook his head as he balled up the sheets to drop them into a pile on the floor. He’d send someone to pick them up later. “The mansion belonged to my father. I didn't meet him until I was in my thirties. He died shortly after but left me this.”

“I'm sorry,” Addy said, resting her hand on his shoulder at the note of melancholy that wove its way into his voice.

Oswald gave her hand a grateful squeeze. “It was a long time ago, and I got my revenge.” He still got a dark thrill of satisfaction at the memory. “Come, help me air this place out.”

It was an odd, comfortable hour as Addy pulled faded sheets from the furniture as the Administrator opened the curtains and windows, letting out the musty, stale air. Addy made idle chit-chat as they moved through the house, exclaiming over various trinkets or details that spoke of old money and luxury. She filled the space up with her energy, calm and reassuring, and it was just enough to keep the ghosts at bay.

Once, he would have sent one of his men to clean and ready the mansion, but now...

It was nice to do this with Addy.

Walking into his old room was disquieting, however. Everything was as he remembered it, and it was like visiting an old, blurry memory. His dresser was still filled with thick silk ties and rolls of socks, and his little dish of trinkets still held a pair of amethyst cufflinks and a deep Tahitian pearl tie pin, both covered with a liberal layer of dust.

Addy sensed the change in his mood. She watched as he ran his fingers over the furniture as she worked open the windows. She stopped at the bedside and gently lifted up the two framed photographs that he had carefully set there so long ago.

“Those are my parents,” Oswald said, unprompted and stepping closer. He stopped himself from reaching out, from running his fingers along the youthful visages of his parents. “They never saw each other again, but I know they loved each other until they each died. I wanted them to be next to each other, even if it was just in photographs.”

It didn’t hurt as much as it used to talk about them.

Abby smiled. “Well, I see where you got your looks,” she said, using the edge of her dress to wipe away the dust from the glass. Satisfied, she set the frame back down, making sure to tilt the image away from the sun.

Oswald chuckled, and the sound was wistful and fond. “My mother would be horrified. She always said that tattoos and piercings were for hooligans. She might have had a heart attack had she found a tattoo on me when I was younger.”

“It's been so long since I've seen you without any ink that I don't know if I can picture it anymore,” Addy said, making her way to another door, curiosity needing her to explore. She opened up his closet and gave a delighted little noise She wasted no time, running her hands over the array of suits. “I should have known you'd have expensive taste. How many suits does a man need?” she teased.

She pulled out one of his more ostentatious pieces: a cropped jacket accented with a deep purple
fur collar. “Why don’t I ever see you wear anything like this anymore? All it’s been is button-ups and vests from you and that was even before you joined Administration.”

The Administrator ran a hand through the soft collar. He could smell the dust and musk in the fabric, and the fur was as soft and smooth as he remembered. “It’s a little much, don’t you think?” he said with a teasing smile.

Addy rolled her eyes. “I’m pretty sure you didn't buy any of these to blend in, Matty.” She held it up to the light, inspecting the details before handing it to the Administrator so she could continue her nosing through the closet.

He let the fabric flow through his hand. He remembered wearing this in the days after his second stint of Arkham. It had reminded him so strongly of Fish, and it had been comforting to imagine her protection wrapped around him. It had been a different type of armor that he needed during those days.

He slipped the jacket off the hanger as he walked toward the floor-length antique mirror, its edges gilded in gold and the surface still dusty.

He slipped it on, the fabric settling over his shoulders as though no time had passed.

His reflection was...odd. He slipped off his glasses and ran a hand through his hair, giving it a casual tussle to break it out of his usual style, and it felt better. The jacket clashed with his tie, but he could already picture the look if he swapped in a purple paisley tie and a single drop earring.

He didn't look like the Penguin or the Administrator, but he didn’t not look like them either.

Addy leaned against the mirror, a black and gold brocade vest hanging from one hand and a gray pinstripe suit in the other. “Looking good, Matty,” she said.

Oswald smiled, just a little, and his reflection mirrored the small upturn of his lips.

Yes, it did look good.

“You know,” Oswald said, not looking up from where he was opening an envelope with a lethal-looking gold letter opening, “you can’t just run and hide here every time you have the Bat on your tail. I also have a front door for a reason, Ed.”

Ed brushed himself off, slapping his knees to dislodge the dust and dirt that collected from the mad scramble he had done over the rooftops before launching himself through the open window. “I don’t see why not,” he said. “It’s not as if I’m the only person who comes here seeking a little sanctuary.”

“You are, however, the only one who insists on poking the sleeping bear and leaving a trail of clues that lead directly to your front step,” Oswald said, setting down the unread letter. He tipped his head back, letting Ed give him a quick peck on the lips in greeting.

Ed pulled away first, pressing a second kiss to Oswald’s forehead. “I need something to keep life interesting.”
“I’m sorry,” Oswald teased, brushing Ed’s disheveled hair back and out of his eyes. “Am I not interesting enough for you?”

Ed spun his chair around and dropped to his knees, bringing them eye level with each other. He settled himself between Oswald’s knees, hands on the armrests to box him in. “Never, my dear,” he purred before pressing their lips together again, softer, slower.

Oswald sighed into the kiss. He wrapped his arms around Ed’s neck, deepening the kiss. He traced the tip of his tongue over Ed’s lips, groaning when Ed allowed him entrance. Their tongues slid together, soft and heady, and the knot that tightened in Oswald’s chest whenever Ed wasn’t around loosened.

Oswald tilted his head to give them a better angle as the kiss escalated. He ran his hands through Ed’s hair, trying to press himself closer. They took their time, exploring each other’s mouths and enjoying the little sounds of pleasure they could elicit from the other. Oswald caught Ed’s bottom lip between his teeth and gave it a playful nip, drawing a loud groan from his partner.

He smirked against Ed’s lips, a chuckle escaping.

Ed growled in response, pressing harder against Oswald. He wrapped a hand around the back of Oswald’s neck, cupping his face and taking control over their kiss.

Ed was always more domineering after one of his games—when his blood was pumping and adrenaline still running through his body. It was a scenario that Oswald always enjoyed taking advantage of.

As if to prove his point, Ed grabbed a fistful of his hair and pulled, tilting his head back as he ravaged Oswald’s mouth, his tongue rough and insistent as the seconds passed.

He felt Ed fumble with his tie, and Oswald took the opportunity to slide his hands underneath Ed’s jacket in the meantime, raking his long nails down his sides in a way that he knew Ed liked.

Ed had just unknotted his tie, tossing it aside, when a knock sounded on the door.

Oswald pulled away, ignoring the whine that the action incited in Ed.

“Ignore it,” Ed begged, trying to pull Oswald back into another kiss.

Oswald extracted himself from Ed’s embrace easily, scooting his chair away to give him space to stand. “You are very aware that they know not to bother me unless it is important,” Oswald scolded teasingly.

He picked up his tie, knotting it back around his neck in smooth, practiced movements. He smoothed down the wrinkles in his vest and paused for a second in front of the mirror to tame his hair back into order as he ignored his pouting partner. He pressed a quick kiss to Ed’s cheek in apology.

“Hold that thought, darling,” he said, voice musky and full of promise. Ed made a sound that was a cross between a growl and a whimper, and Oswald gave him one last kiss, ending it with a gentle nip to his lips.

He stepped outside, closing the door quietly behind him. “Yes?” he said, waiting for an explanation with a flat stare.

“Sir,” Sergei said, looking nervous. “The Batman is requesting your presence on the roof.”
Oswald hummed in acknowledgment and waved the man away. There were few people who were significant enough to warrant a late-night interruption. The Bat was one of those few and not exactly a surprise visitor given the Riddler’s recent activities.

The night air was chilly, the temperature dropping quickly as fall slowly faded into winter. Oswald almost regretted not stopping to grab a jacket, running his hands over his upper arms in a weak attempt to keep warm. He heard the telling rustle of a cape from behind him, and he turned.

“Good evening,” he said, pasting on a mild smile. “What has brought you to my proverbial door tonight, my dear Bat?”

“The Riddler,” the Bat said in his usual distorted growl.

“What about him?” Oswald said, feigning innocence.

“Ignorance doesn’t suit you, Administrator,” the Bat said, tone flat.

Oswald smiled, guileless. “I don’t know what you mean.” Ed wasn’t the only one who liked to play games with their resident caped crusader.

“So, it was some other tall man dressed in green who just crawled through your window?”

“A man has needs,” Oswald teased.

The unamused glare he got in return spoke volumes. “I would appreciate it if you could reign in your boyfriend, Administrator.”

“A bored Riddler is a dangerous Riddler, my dear. You know he’d be devastated if you decided not to play with him one day. It’s a little harmless fun,” Oswald said.

“He held a baseball team hostage. For thirteen hours.”

“He couldn’t pass up a good bat pun, could he?” Oswald said. He could almost hear the Bat’s mental sigh of exasperation. “You and I both know that Ed needs to keep himself busy. Ed taking you on a merry chase through town is much less destructive than potential alternatives.”

Oswald smirked, crossing his arms over his chest. “And we both know that you already know all this, so we also both know the real reason for your visit.”

The Bat didn’t answer, so Oswald continued.

“I would have never pegged you to be so petty,” he said with an amused tilt to his lips. “Interrupting our... bonding time.”

The Bat gave an almost-smile in return, and Oswald could almost see the young man behind the cowl in that instant. “Just returning the favor.”

Oswald laughed. “Well, please give Ms. Kyle my regards.”

“Have a good evening, Administrator,” the Bat said with a nod.

“And to you,” Oswald said, not bothering to watch the man pull one of his disappearing acts. He had better things to be doing tonight.
The visit wasn't exactly a surprise. There had been hints for the last month that the High Table was getting restless. His mission in Gotham had been an overall success, and they were ready, even eager, to affirm their presence in other ways.

“Elder,” he greeted when the man walked into his office. He dropped down to one knee gracefully, dipping his head respectfully. His bangs fell in front of his eyes, and the bright streak of purple was easily seen even in the dim lighting. “I have served,” he said. “I will be of service.”

“Rise,” the Elder said, and his voice was a mix of amusement and boredom. “I presume you know why I am here, Administrator.”

Oswald pulled himself back to his feet, keeping his head bowed and body language respectful. “Yes, Elder,” he said. “You wish for me to return to the Administration.”

“If you are so aware, then why have you been neglecting orders,” the Elder said, arms carefully folded as he watched Oswald with impassive eyes. “The Adjudicator insists that you are willfully ignoring orders, Administrator.”

“Yes, Elder,” he said. There was no point in lying. “That is correct.”

“Oh?” the Elder said.

Oswald took the invitation to explain. “I wish to remain as Manager of this Continental. I find myself reluctant to leave Gotham after all these years.”

“You wish to resign as Administrator?” the Elder said. His face was carefully blank, giving no idea to what he was thinking.

“My substitute has been suitable for over a year now, Elder,” Oswald said, keeping his tone logical and firm. “I find no reason that I am needed in the Administration, and my skills are much better suited here in Gotham.”

“And if we are to disagree?” the Elder queried with one raised eyebrow.

The Administrator smirked. “Then I'll have to insist. You'll find it very difficult to maintain a presence in Gotham without me, and even harder to force me to leave.”

“Is that a threat?” the Elder asked, sounding more amused than angry. That was a good sign.

“No, simply a statement of fact. You chose me to return knowing what I was capable of, and I have abstained from reclaiming my throne. But if you try to remove me by force, I will have little compunction in resisting. It is a loss for both of us—the High Table loses their foothold in the city, and I have to get my hands very dirty.”

The Elder watched him under half-lidded eyes, considering.

Oswald met his gaze, steady. “Gotham is my home, sir. I am disinclined to leave her again.”

The silence stretched.

“Very well,” the Elder said finally, and his lips gave the vaguest impression of a smile. “Your replacement shall be Coronated formally at the end of the week, and you'll be handed the mantle of Manager at that time.”
Oswald bowed his head. “Thank you, Elder.”

The guards opened the door for the man, and Oswald could see Ed stop mid-argument with his undoubtedly disgruntled Secretary.

The Elder gave a vague gesture to his guards for them to fall in line, his decadent robe sweeping along the floor as he walked. “Have a good day, Mr. Cobblepot,” he called over his shoulder.

Oswald smiled. “And to you.”

Ed gave them a look as they passed, his sharp eyes narrowed at the unfamiliar sight. “What was that about?” Ed asked, curiosity and distrust in every word.

Oswald leaned up to give Ed a quick kiss and smiled. “Nothing, my dear. Nothing at all.”

Chapter End Notes

And that's a wrap!

Thank you to everyone who has been sticking with me after all these months. I can't even begin to describe how much it has meant to me. Knowing you guys were enjoying each chapter is one of the things that kept me going! This is, without a doubt, the longest story I have ever attempted, and the longest story I have ever finished. This story has really rejuvenated my love of writing, and I would have never, ever made it this far without everyone who has read, kudos, commented, or dropped a note on my Tumblr. <3 Thank you so, so much!

A special shout out to goluboiwcmosol for making me some beautiful Administrator!Oswald art!

I know there is a lot more to this story that I didn't have a chance to cover! Therefore, as you can see, this is now officially part of a series! I have two companion pieces planned out so far—a longer, slower look at Oswald and Ed's evolving relationship and the long-awaited return of John Wick. As a thank you to all of my readers, I am also taking prompts for moments that you wanted to see in Redacted but I did not cover! Please feel free to drop a prompt request in the comments or at my Tumblr. <3

<3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!