The Wendigo and The Lionheart
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Summary

People in Gotham disappear all the time. Why should Selina Kyle be any different?
Somewhere in the distance a couple of sirens were whining out of sync too far to alarm the few people left on the empty dark street, the stragglers and the dealers and the tourists who had taken a wrong turn. The latter always confused her, (why would anyone in their right mind choose to visit Gotham?) but they made the easiest targets and she was nothing if she wasn't an opportunist.

There were only patches of light, fluorescent pools of a sickly violet making everyone look paler and more miserable than usual and the steam that rose up from beneath the streets was thick and opaque. 

*Perfect hunting conditions.*

She should've known it was too good to be true.

He looked like any other mark, the way he was standing, a coffee cup in one hand his phone in the other, completely oblivious to his surroundings. Her instincts had pricked at her as she'd quietly followed him around the building into the alley. There was something off, but between his open computer bag and the shiny gold watch on his wrist, she couldn't help herself. It had been over a week since her last good hit and she was getting desperate. She couldn't just let someone else take such an easy get.

She was almost within touching distance when she heard the quiet roll of the tires against the asphalt. She bit into her lip; it was tempting to continue following, but that little voice, the one that had never let her down, was telling her to let it go.

*Walk away.*

Resigning herself to the loss of such a seemingly easy mark, she was beginning to turn away when she felt strong fingers clamp around her wrist.

"Where you going Sweetheart?"

The shock of being caught only lasted a moment, before she aimed a swift boot to his groin that left him on the pavement, but she didn't stop to enjoy the view. By the rolling sound of the van door and the clamoring of booted men, she knew her troubles weren't over.

*Run!*

Ignoring the direction she came, she turned again, letting her feet carry her further into the alley. A hollow sound cut through the air and she felt something sting her calf, but she ignored it. She could check it later, she needed to get off the street and fast.

The alley was nearly empty, long and narrow with tall straight walls, something she had overlooked
in search of easy prey and her heart was beginning to beat double at the realization. She didn't have the time to feel regret at her foolish ambition as she continued to move and scan the alleyway. A spark of hope suddenly bloomed in her chest as her eyes landed on the beautiful rungs of a drawn up fire escape.

It felt miles away as she doubled her speed, preparing to launch herself at her last means of escape, but as she neared the ladder her legs began to shake. Nearly breathless, she jumped for the bottom rung only to feel it barely brush the tips of her fingers. She stumbled, her knees almost buckling as she made impact with the ground. Something suddenly felt very wrong.

Gruff voices and heavy breathing compelled her to jump again, but her limbs felt like they were full of lead, like she was trying to jump through water. Feeling her knees begin to give, she stumbled into the brick wall of the building beside her.

Her vision was swimming and the world began to tilt. Blinking, she glanced behind her and could just make out three men walking in her direction. Their gate was deceptively calm, but she knew different. Using the wall she moved, stumbling, and gripping every available groove to propel her along. She had to keep moving.

"I think you may have to shoot this one again," drawled a male voice from somewhere close.

Had they shot her? She didn't feel shot. Nauseous and exhausted, but not shot. She swallowed, digging her nails into a tiny groove as she moved another step forward.

"Think it's safe?" asked a familiar voice. Was it the man with the shiny watch?

"Yeah, the lil' bitch aint got much left in her."

She could hear their footsteps approaching slow and muffled. She didn't turn to face them, she couldn't spare the energy. Fighting the bile at the back of her throat, she blinked at the empty alley ahead of her. She couldn't run.

This was it. If she was gonna get away she had to find another way.

Taking a series of deep breaths, she stood still, she conserved, she prepared. She smelt him, cheap cologne and cigarette smoke, before he reached her, and the moment she felt fingers against her arm, she swung at him, her fist connecting with his eye socket. She couldn't even enjoy his howl of pain as her legs finally gave up and she crumpled to the ground. Her arm barely saving her from a cracked skull as she landed curled onto her side.

"Feisty little thing isn't she," someone laughed.

She had to move. She had to run. She tried to push herself back up, but even her neck had stopped supporting her head.

"Feisty?" growled the thug she'd blinded, and she barely felt the boot landing against her side turning her onto her back. "I'm gonna gut the stupid little c-"

"That's enough." ordered a third voice, a stern voice. "Hands off the merch!"

She felt something mist against her cheek and she could only assume she'd been spit on. She stared up at the quickly fading black sky and the thick clouds that always seemed to hang over her city. She could hear the sounds of the van, the men moving around, and suddenly someone was leaning down beside her. She struggled to keep her eyes open, the world minimized to a fuzzy titling slit, as someone lifted her, her body thrown like a rag doll over their shoulder.
"All right, put her in with the rest," was the last thing she heard before the world went black.

The first thing Selina Kyle realized as she swam back to consciousness was that wherever she was it was cold, dark and empty. She grimaced against the constant pounding in her head as she tried to stand up only to slide back down her muscles not quite ready to cooperate yet.

Leaning back against the stone wall, she turned her head from side to side, taking in what she could in the darkness. It was windowless and narrow, barely more room than the twin mattress she was sitting on and the large bucket that sat in one corner. Her vision lingered longer on the site, but she chose to overlook it, and her eyes continued to adjust and scan the walls.

She felt a welcome rush of energy cut through her exhaustion as her eyes landed on the archway. Quickly crawling toward it, she gripped the cold black bars feeling her way up to the lock and felt a wave of disappointment almost overwhelm her. It was something she'd never seen before, solid and well built and above her skill level. She knew without looking that she had nothing to pick it with nor would she even know how.

Feeling her heart beginning to quicken, she abandoned the lock and ignoring the pointlessness started to jerk at the bars, using as much of her weight as possible, and nearly cried out at the hopelessness.

She couldn't be caged. She just couldn't.
Selina

The air had been crisp but not cold, enough chill to make people happy for such nice weather and oblivious to the danger they brought on themselves. It had to be something pretty special for her to venture onto this side of the City, police presence was pretty heavy here, but she'd heard there was supposed to be some kinda gala thing and anytime the celebrity of Gotham got together, there were gonna be crowds, and where there was crowds there was opportunity.

She'd perched herself on the sloping roof of a shop across the street, sizing up the crowd that had begun to accumulate and noting the bright yellow-jackets of the security guards that roamed around. Whatever this shindig was it had to have been pretty important to have brought about all this.

She'd patiently waited for the sun to disappear below the skyline and the overworked staff had put on the unnecessary spotlights and the cars had begun to deposit some of the City's more prominent citizens before she climbed down.

The crowds were uneven, spectators bottlenecking, choosing to crowd only one side of the barricades. She slid passed a group of girls that looked close to her age, but the sound of their gossiping and giggling put her teeth on edge.

Why anyone would be obsessed with people who did absolutely nothing but waste air and money was completely beyond her, but for today they kept eyes cast in a direction that wasn't hers so they served her purposes just fine.

She'd snaked her way through the crowd looking for a good place, a good target. The people in the back would be too vigilant their disadvantaged point-of-view would make them cranky and they'd be more likely to start complaining to one another. The people in the middle were a little less committed and would be more likely to get bored and have a good look around.

No, she needed the people at the front. Those were the ones that had been waiting for hours, those were the one who would be too absorbed in what was happening in front of them to notice what was happening to them.

She'd just been sidling up to her mark, a large man whose wallet was just peeking out of his windbreaker pocket, when the hair on the back of her neck had stood up.

She'd chanced a glance at her prey, but he was still focused on the people arriving. Biting her lip, she looked up and down the barricaded carpet only to feel her eyes widen at the sight. She saw his butler first, his graying head visible over someone else's entourage, but suddenly the small crowd moved and even at this distance she recognized those dark eyes and that stilted gait.
She’d been too entrenched in the crowd too committed to her work to run so she turned her head away pulling the top of her hood further down over her forehead. The noise of the crowd seemed to have dimmed as she focused on her breathing and waited for him to pass.

She watched as his shoes moved past her post and disregarding all her instincts she sneaked a peek at him. She was surprised to see he looked taller, whether that was because he was thinner or he’d grown she couldn't tell but his dark hair looked freshly cut and the black suit he wore contrasted nicely against his pale skin. She felt herself smirk. It was a good look on the kid.

But despite his dapper appearance her eyes immediately went to the shiny treasure on his arm and she bit her lip. It was gorgeous and expensive and dangled dangerously loose around his thin wrist. It would be nothing just to slide it off...

Somebody should've told him to get the links taken out, she thought, feeling her eyes narrow.

Unexpectedly he paused and she felt a breath catch in her throat. His head tilted in the direction of the crowd a moment before he shook his wrist, his opposite hand absently adjusting the watch face. Quickly she looked away pressing her body dangerously tight to the mark beside her.

She felt herself exhale as he continued on and moved out of sight. Relief and a small dose of disappointment mingled settling in her belly.

She didn’t have the luxury of time and ignoring the latter emotion, she continued pressing her luck, her fingers moving into the marks loose pocket, when she sensed something change. She didn't want to look up. She really didn't. She'd already wasted too much time watching Bruce Wayne, but there was no more hiding from him.

She quickly rearranged her features, pulling her lips into a smirk as she met his dark eyes. She didn't know what she’d been expecting but she realized why she'd worked so hard not to be seen as his eyes narrowed on her.

Bruce Wayne had never looked at her like that before.

She didn't know if he’d ever looked at anyone like that before.

She didn’t have time to acknowledge her thoughts as the guy beside her reacted to her sudden appearance and they both looked down at the hand she still had in his jacket pocket. He was too slow to grab her wrist as she abandoned his wallet, but he somehow got a grip on her upper sleeve tugging her close to him as he shouted. Without thinking she brought her heel down on the top of his foot, his worn sneakers no protection against her boots.

She recognized a woman’s shout before she felt a pair of hands pull at her hood exposing her head and the collar momentarily chocking her, but she jerked away from the Good Samaritan, the wooden barricade digging into her stomach. The angry shouts were becoming indistinguishable as hands grabbed at her clothes and she caught sight of a pair of yellow jackets moving toward her.

Out of options, she took a deep breath and quickly vaulted the barricade, not caring about the swag she felt fall as she ran across the carpet and hurdled the other side.

"Oi," cried a very gruff but very familiar voice.

The sound compelled her to turn her head as she reached the shop front and she barely caught a glance of Bruce Wayne in all his finery and a pair of security guards in a tangle on the ground before she grabbed the first hand hold she could find and hoisted herself onto the roof with every intent to disappear.
Selina strummed her fingers against her drawn up knee at the memory. It was hard to believe it had only been two years, only two years since the two of them had been braided into each other's lives thanks to a twist of fate that had left the boy an orphan and herself on the radar of one of the most relentless men in Gotham.

She sighed at the thought. She wasn't a girl who put a lot of stock in memories. Her own were suspect, the truth and her own reality twisted up until she had trouble telling the stories from the facts. Besides, normally she didn't have the time to sit around and reminisce, but between the constant sound of dripping water and the muffled whimpering from down the hall, all she had was time and memories.

She unbuttoned and buttoned her gloves ignoring the tiny silver scars on the back of her hand. It was strange the things they'd left her, her gloves, her jacket, her boots and the things they'd taken off her, her stiletto, her jewelry, the little bit of swag she'd amassed that night.

Dropping her hands, she looked around her tiny cell again. She'd gathered that wherever she was it was old and at first glance she'd wondered if they had brought her down in the sewer, under the city, but it didn't smell like sewage, just mud and mold. She'd already picked up her mattress tested its weight in her hand, checked under it for anything that might have helped her, but there had been just dirt and stone. Everything was stone, the floor, the walls, the ceiling…

She stared at the door, her only source of light and her only indication that she wasn't already dead.

Another one of the kids, a girl, had cried for what had to have been their first twenty-four-hours. She'd screamed and she'd shouted her cries had been borderline hysterical until Selina had finally just covered her ears to block the sound.

When their first meal (a paper cup of water and a weird looking cookie) had been served, the shouting girl had started trying to make deals. She swore her parents had money, that they had connections. Selina could've told the girl to save her breath. These people never spoke, they never showed their faces, and they never opened the cell doors. Begging, pleading, bribing had no affect on these people. But Selina kept quiet, as long as they were focused on the girl that called herself Rana Van Something or other than they weren't focused on her.

The hours in between their meals had been filled with an unnerving quiet until the other two kids had started in with their questions. If she pressed herself against the bars she could see the edge of their cells the well connected, Rana Van Something or other, was just barely out of her sight.

Ty, at least she assumed that was his name, was so far she could barely hear him, much less see where his cell had been but even from eavesdropping on their conversation she could tell he didn't seem as useless as the girl.

When their questions had turned in her direction she'd momentarily considered staying quite but couldn't see the point. After she'd answered they'd grown quiet. She'd smiled mirthlessly. She wasn't stupid. She understood that these were the kind of kids that crossed the street when faced with her kind of kid and that was if they ever even found themselves on the same side of the city.

But their kid-snatchers were a lot dumber than the last assholes that had tried to run this game. These two kids were quality. Somewhere, somebody was missing them.

It wasn't a thought that usually crossed her mind, but she couldn't help but wonder, just a little, if anybody was missing her. She'd thought for a longtime about the people in her life and could only come up with three possible candidates.
Would Jim Gordon? Probably not. She frowned at the thought. She barely knew the guy. Besides, she was nothing more than a means to an end and a false one at that, her disappearing had to be one of the better aspects of his seemingly miserable existence.

Ivy? Maybe, just a little, if the girl even noticed she was gone at all. But she couldn't blame the redhead too much, Ivy Pepper had her own set of problems; there was just no hiding that kinda crazy.

The Boy? Immediately her mind filled with images of black hair and hooded eyes. She didn't want to think about him. Not here. Not now. But she didn't think he would miss her much, that over stuffed mind of his had way too much to worry about than to spare a thought for her.

Besides it wasn't like she missed him.

For what felt like the hundredth time she absently rubbed her wrist feeling a strange sense of longing at the loss of her bracelet. The boy had presented it to her not long after they'd come back into each other's lives, she suspected he'd given it to her for the same reason that people put bells on cats, but he had been sincere and it was beautiful so she hadn't minded.

She never wore it when she went hunting, the soft jingle would have been a dead-giveaway and the heavy charms snagged on almost everything. She'd always tried to keep it secure in one of the many pockets on her jacket, but when she'd woken up inside her cell, she'd felt the absence of its weight almost instantly.

She jumped her head turning at the squeal of iron hinges. It wasn't time for dinner. She narrowed her eyes, her heart beginning to pound at the echoed footsteps approaching.

This is it, she thought, climbing to her feet and edging toward the door.

She wondered if it was going to be Rana first, or perhaps the boy at the end, but as the footsteps slowed, she felt her jaw begin to clench as she slowly took a step back her feet uneven on the dirty mattress.

Two thin silhouettes appeared in the archway their faces hidden by the back light.

They probably assumed their identities were safe, that she couldn't see in the dark and she was in no rush to correct them. The moment her eyes adjusted on her new targets she felt a foreign and momentary sense of confusion. Both figures were dressed well, but the shorter of the two couldn't have been any older than Bruce, he was still in what she could only assume was some kind of school uniform, a large crest on the his lapel, his white-blonde hair neatly combed away from his thin face.

A sudden burst of light made her squint shielding her eyes from the glare of the flashlight beam.

"This is the one, Barty," drawled the older man, running the beam of light up and down her. "Tell me son, have you ever seen eyes that green before and rumor has it that she can see in the dark. Is that true, pretty girl?"

She stared back at him, but he stood patiently waiting for her to answer.

"Can't trust everything you hear," she shrugged, her voice cracking from such little use.

"She's clever too," he continued. "Took days for those idiots to catch her, and best of all, look there," he explained, his voice rising with excitement as the light landed on her chest. "That right there is a lion's heart."
Selina fought to stand still as the boy's cold eyes ran the length of her.

"How can you tell?" he asked his voice unimpressed.

The older man laughed, a deceptively warm sound, as he reached into the pocket of his jacket. Selina tried to swallow as he leveled the handheld firearm at her. She kept her gaze steady, her eyes narrowing on the barrel before she exhaled looking at him. If they hadn't killed her yet for all the trouble she'd given them, she doubted they'd start now.

Her action must've delighted him more than if she would've started screaming, because he laughed again as he put his firearm back into his jacket.

"Like I said," he repeated his voice full of mirth. "A lion's heart."

The boy exhaled crossing thin arms over his thin chest. "Just looks like street-trash to me," he scoffed.

The older man's face fell at his son's words, "That's because you're naïve my sweet boy. You only see with your eyes, not with your heart," he explained, touching his son gently on the chest. "This street-trash right here has shown more bravery in the last five minutes than I've ever seen from you. That's why-"

He paused, his eyes landing back on Selina for just the briefest moment. "This girl," he said, pointing back in her cage. "She's the one. She's perfect."

Bruce

The fire inside his fireplace crackled and popped, but Bruce Wayne barely heard it as he stared at the phone in his hand, his thumb running over the buttons that he needed to push to reach Detective Gordon. Clenching his jaw, he set the receiver down next to his untouched dinner and the newspaper he'd been reading.

It had not even been two weeks.

Two weeks. Fourteen days.

Four less than her record, he reminded himself dropping his hands into his lap as he sat back against the leather upholstery of his couch.

Ten days did not mean she was missing, it just meant that she was absent and for as long as he'd known her she had been absent quite a bit. She was a lot like her namesake in that respect, she came and went as she pleased and nothing and no one was going to tether her.

Running a hand across the back of his neck, feeling the overly tight muscles that had begun to bunch there, he stared back at the phone. He couldn't call Gordon. She would most likely despise him if he sent a cop out to find her not that the detective could anyway. Gordon was a 'good sort' as Alfred put it, but he was much too busy to try and chase down a streetwise sixteen-year-old girl who most likely didn't want to be found.

His eyes slid over to the newspaper two smiling faces stared back at him. His time at The Academy had been short and most of his memories from that period didn't involve his female classmates, but he still felt a strange sort of guilt that he only had a vague recognition of Rana Vandergood.

According to the article, she had just returned from placing second in a robotics competition at the national level. She currently sat on the school's student council and had been preparing to run for
She shared the page with a Tyrese James, a good student, but a better athlete. Tyrese currently held two state records in the 100 and 500 freestyle and was being recruited from some of the top schools in the country. He'd been reported missing after he failed to show up for practice. The coach was quoted as saying he didn't know what the team was going to do without him.

The reporter had seemed to agree; the article had focused more on the two teens achievements than the pain their parents must have been feeling at the loss of their children. It had finished by mentioning three other high-profile missing persons cases, two college kids and a woman, a well known marathon runner, who had all three disappeared last month, all three cases foul play was suspected, but in all three cases there had been no trace of them.

Three.

He swallowed the lump in his throat at the number and his eyes traveled back to the phone.

Standing he walked to the closed doors pushing back the thin curtains and putting some much needed distance between him and both the phone and the newspaper. He was being irrational. Most likely, Selina was just too busy to come and visit. She had her own life one that he only ever got to see the edges of a blurry outline that she kept vague.

He watched flurries swirl in the little light left from the setting sun. Maybe his anxiety was caused by the incoming weather. The line that had already moved through this week had left inches of snow on the ground, but according to the meteorologist those three inches would be considered a dusting compared to what was to come.

Chapter End Notes

Constructive Criticism always welcome. :)
Selina

She'd stayed awake, covers pulled to her chest, listening to the small groans and aches of the old house. By all accounts she should've fallen right to sleep, for the first time in a long time, she was warm, she was dry and her belly was full. But something was under her skin, a restlessness she couldn't shake.

She didn't like this place. It was too… Big. Too open. For a moment she'd thought of simply taking the blanket and climbing under the bed, but that seemed a bit weird even for her. Exhaling, she threw the heavy covers off.

She already knew that their security was a bit lax, but she tried not to make too much noise as she walked down the first hall she came across. She was surprised to find most of the doors were locked.

The Old Man's not an idiot.

She huffed at the thought. That presented a bit of problem for her, but overall it was probably a good thing, for the boy that is. He needed someone around him that had a lick of sense. For everything he'd been through he didn't seem overly concerned with securing his possessions, but she noticed that he didn't really seem all that concerned with his own well being. Who in the hell left their doors unlocked with a rich-kid stealing psycho on the loose?

She shook her head absently wiping at her brow as she tried another door handle. She was beginning to think the night was just a bust, when the last door's handle finally gave.

Her only sources of light were the dying embers from the fireplace and the thin slivers of moonlight from the half-curtained windows and it took her eyes a moment to adjust. She paused just inside the door, making sure to leave it ajar, as she tried to get a good feel of the room. Her eyes scanned left to right quickly taking in the sparse furnishings, the ornate fireplace with its winged back chair, the large bed with its posts like tree trunks and its small nightstand and the simple wardrobe that stood on the opposite wall. Unlike the rest of the house, the walls were bare, no ridiculous portraits or suits of armor cluttering it up.

She was debating, wardrobe or nightstand first, when something in the bed moved. Her entire body froze mid-stride as she focused on the small mound of covers. How in the hell had she missed that? Missed him?

Despite her mouth going dry, he slept on, completely oblivious to the girl standing nearly at the end of his bed. She glanced at the wardrobe. It was within arms reach now, but she ignored it, her teeth digging into her bottom lip.

The nightstand beside his bed was empty save for a thick book and a plain black box. She ran her
hand over the leather binding, the book looked old and expensive, but it was heavy and she doubted there was any market for it.

Resting her hip against the windowsill behind her, she used both hands to test the box's weight. It was heavier than it looked and she felt herself frowning as she put it down and lifted the lid.

Immediately moonlight reflected off the band of a watch. The side of her mouth turned up as she lifted it out examining the watch face before she quickly slid it onto her bare wrist. She could fetch quite a bit for this, more than a bit.

After the watch, there were only a couple of more items left, a black velvet bag and a necklace of some kind. Ignoring the bag, she grabbed the chain pulling up a pair of what she could only assume were dog tags, though she'd never seen any dog tags like that before, they were small and circular. She flipped them over reading the information engraved on one side and felt her eyebrows lift up.

Weird.

Shaking her head, she set them aside. Her attention moved back to the small velvet bag. It looked like something you would keep jewelry in, but she felt her eyes narrow as only a few loose pearls landed in the palm of her hand.

Disappointed and the slightest bit confused, she stared at the white beads contrasting against the black of her gloves until a certain memory flashed across her mind.

How in the hell had he gotten his hands on those? she asked herself, letting them fall back into the bag and quickly cinching it.

She didn't need those. She didn't need any of this.

A low sound broke the silence of his room and her hand went immediately to the latch on his window. She could make the leap, it wouldn't be easy but she could do it.

Wait!

Grimacing, she turned back to the room. It was still dark, still silent. She hadn't been caught. A low mumble sent her eyes in the direction of his bed and she had to bite her lip to stop from laughing.

How had she forgotten what a noisy sleeper the boy was?

He sighed, the sound magnified by her fear and the nearly empty room, but he just snuggled deeper into his covers.

What did she have to worry about really? He was a traumatized twig of a boy. She felt her head tilt as she watched him. His lashes were too dark and too long, his skin too pale and his cheeks too sharp for him to be handsome, but on the other hand his mouth was just a little too thin and his ears a little too big to be considered pretty. He was stuck somewhere in the between, but she found it oddly interesting to watch him none-the-less.

She'd never given too much thought to her own looks, good looks weren't always a good thing, not where she was from, but neither was being hideous. When you were in the homes, it sometimes got you a second look; it's why Ivy Pepper hadn't stayed on the shelf long. People saw that sheet of red hair and those clear blue eyes and thought they saw potential. Those same people had looked right through her.

Maybe that's why when the boy had looked at her, she'd felt so... Well, she couldn't put her finger on
it, but no one had ever looked at her like that, like she was something he'd never seen before.

Her eyes dropped to the watch in her hand. It would be so easy to leave. She could do it from here grab the box and whatever these things were whatever they meant to him she reckoned he'd probably pay a good bit of money to get it all back and she could just slip out of his window. She'd be back in Gotham before daybreak.

Her fist clenched as he mumbled something that sounded too much like, 'dad'.

She felt herself exhale a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding and quietly started to put his things back in the box. She slid the watch from her wrist, laying it on top, she couldn't recall the exact place he'd had it, she wasn't in the business of putting things back, but she hoped he wasn't overly paranoid. She wasn't sure how long she planned to stay here and there was no sense in drawing attention to herself so early.

Stupid girl.

The sharp scrape of wood on the stone floor compelled Selina to jolt sideways on her mattress. They'd snuck up on her again. They were getting very good at that.

She tried to even her breathing as she stared down at her breakfast. She shook her head as she tried to focus back on the moment. She had to stop doing that. She had to stop losing herself in her head. Memories were doing nothing for her in here.

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The Windego

Wesley Barton flexed his fingers inside his leather gloves, his hunting gloves. He followed the last bits of twilight, the sky a dull grey against the tree line promising nothing but misery and heartache. He should be at home with his wife and son, and he always hated hunting on a Sunday but there was nothing for it. It was the last day of the lunar cycle, the moon would be waning, and he didn't want the other two host's sacrifices to be in vain. They had given too much.

As tempting and scary as it could be, he tried never to cheat when it came to his practices. He didn't believe in baiting or snaring. This world was unfair enough as it was, and besides where was the victory in shooting fish in a barrel? These were the kind of important lessons that he was trying to teach his son, that if you wanted something in this world, hard work was the way to get it not shortcuts, not cheating. You kept your head down and nothing stop you.

Not even addiction.

He tightened his grip on the steering wheel, flicking on his high-beams, as he continued to put distance between him and the city. He hadn't seen it coming. For all of his training, for the days he spent crouching in tall grasses or sleeping in makeshift stands It had been the one to sneak up on him.

It, or 'The Need' as he liked to call it, had hunted him through his thoughts and there had been nowhere to hide. Sometimes it whispered to him, whispered things much worse than what he did every month. He'd moved his family back here, back to Gotham, hoping a new practice, a new school, and all in a fresh town would have silenced it, but after a few months it was abundantly clear that there was no cure for it.

Desperation could make a man do crazy things, but there was nothing crazy about what he was doing. It was savage and heartless but it wasn't crazy. It filled that empty pit if only for a few days, a few hours. He would do anything to get a reprieve.

He'd hunted his whole life, a Barton family tradition, it was rumored that his great-great-uncle had
helped hunt the man-eaters of Tsavo. His own father had brought him hunting for big game all over the world, he froze hunting brown bears in the North-west, tracked elephants for days on the plains of Africa, and they had even hunted alligators along the southern coast.

He'd always loved the tracking, the stalking, if it lasted for days that were even better, elusive trophies were the only ones worth the effort. But then there was the kill. His least favorite part was taking the shot, watching something previously so full of life drop to the ground, its life extinguished in a blink, its existence no longer relevant.

He glanced over at his son, sleeping so soundly in the passenger seat. He was a sensitive boy more interested in his projects, his taxidermy, than he had even been in his family's traditions. Once again, he'd seemed disinclined to come, something about a 'Snow Party,' school being cancelled for the week on account of the storm.

But this was too important. Four months he'd been at this, dragging his boy with him, and though Barty still hadn't caught the hunting fever yet, there was nothing for it. It had to be done.

Jim

Jim Gordon rubbed the back of his neck as he stared at the pile of folders on his desk, papers and pictures peeking out from behind the buff edges.

Two months.

Five people.

Zero leads.

One commonality.

Type-A personalities. Overachievers every single one of them.

"Hey Jimbo," Harvey Bullock's gruff voice pulled Jim from the case file sitting open on his desk.

"The kid's here," his partner finished, inclining his graying head toward the arched entryway.

The use of the word kid, Jim's mind immediately jumped to a certain teenage delinquent, which confused him. He didn't think that Selina Kyle had or ever would voluntarily step foot in any precinct. Seeking out dirty curls and a surly expression, it took him a moment to recognize the young man.

Bruce Wayne looked suspiciously out of place inside the walls of the GCPD. His narrow shoulders were squared under his black coat, his chin tilted up as his dark eyes scanned the gothic archway. He didn't pause to ask for assistance, as he passed under it, his eyes slowly drifting to the men and women meandering through the noisy hive that was the GCPD bullpen. His hooded eyes barely widened at the three prostitutes that sat crossed-leg staring at him as he passed them, before his gaze immediately went to the floor.

There weren't many teenagers in Jim's life, but the two that came in and out like two strands of a braid were as different as night and day.

Even after two years, Bruce's natural insight still surprised him. His eyes tended to linger on things, like a pair of scales, they weighed and measured. His mind dismantling it, building it back, seeking out every bit of knowledge he could squeeze from it. He hadn't known Bruce before that night and wondered if it had been a trait instilled by having such pro-active parents or if it had been a result
caused by losing them.

Selina tended to lean toward indifference, but she was no less observant. Her eyes were quick and sharp, like a camera, point and shoot. Her evaluation never seemed to look past that initial impression, her mind having already sought out the danger or the advantage. He imagined that was one of the many skills that had managed to keep her alive on the streets for so long.

Jim sighed, sitting back in his chair. With the worst storm in half a century coming and a serial killer on the loose the last thing he needed right now was to be worried about two kids who hardly wanted it.

"I'm gettin' a coffee," Bullock said, pulling away from his desk. "Gonna be a long night."

"Yes, it is," Jim agreed giving his partner a non-committal nod as Bruce Wayne climbed the stairs.

"Good to see you, Bruce," he greeted, standing to meet the boy.

Bruce shifted the notebook he was carrying to one side before shaking Jim's offered hand.

"Does Alfred know you're here?" he asked, gesturing to the seat beside his desk.

"I'm nearly sixteen, Detective Gordon," he replied curtly, slowly lowering himself into the chair. "I'm perfectly capable of navigating the streets of Gotham by myself."

So that was a no.

Jim let his eyes linger on the boy. Sometimes the best push was none at all.

"I called a taxi," he admitted, his Adam's apple bobbing.

"And is it still waiting for you?" he asked, hoping it was. In a few hours it was going to be hard enough to find one, much less trying to find one to bring someone all the way out of the city. Billionaire or not.

"I'm not here to discuss how I travel around the city, Detective Gordon," Bruce said, his tone clipped.

Jim felt his eyebrows lift at the boy's reply. If there was one thing that the two kids in his life did have in common it was the well of patience one required to deal with them.

Jim sighed, consciously changing his body language.

"Of course you're not," he started, softening his voice. "I'm sorry I haven't been out there lately. It's been pretty busy here."

"I understand," Bruce replied, his shoulders beginning to round.

"Now, what can I help you with?"

Jim watched as his dark brows furrowed and he looked down at the notebook in his pale hands. It only lasted a moment before the boy swallowed and brought his chin up defiantly, his dark eyes meeting Jim's with a familiar intensity that Jim had never quite grown accustomed to.

"I'd like to file a missing person's report," he declared, his voice thick.

Jim felt himself blink.
"What?" he asked, his eyebrows rising again. "For whom?" he asked, his voice sounding unprofessionally disbeliefing.

"Selina Kyle," he answered, firmly.

He sighed, before he could stop himself and regretted it as he saw Bruce purse his lips. He wasn't trying to belittle the young man's concern, but Selina was hardly a creature of habit.

"Okay," he said, dragging out the word as he opened his notepad. "And how long has she been missing?"

"Three weeks," Bruce answered, his voice betraying his agitation.

Jim's pen froze at the young man's reply, his eyes involuntarily glancing at the folders on his desk. He didn't believe in psychics or clairvoyance, but intuition was a different thing all together.

"Three weeks?" he asked, consciously keeping his voice even. "You're sure?"

"I'm positive," he answered, his eyes returning to the notebook on his lap.

Jim watched the knuckles of his clasped hands pale. He wasn't sure how he'd missed it when they boy had first entered the precinct, but now that he'd had a good look at him, he actually looked a little paler and thinner than usual. This was clearly something of great concern to the young man.

"Twenty-one days really isn't that long," he lied, closing his notepad. "Selina's taken off for longer than that before. I'm sure she's fine. I'll call Bar-"

"I've already spoken with some of her acquaintances," he interrupted, his rigid manners abandoned. "And they haven't seen her either."

"You have?" Jim asked, trying to envision the boy in front of him talking with some of Selina's 'acquaintances.' The thought was unnerving. "Does Alfred know that?"

"He's aware," he answered, dark eyes moving to the top of Jim's desk.

"Bruce," Jim sighed, carefully positioning his arms to hide the folders spread across his desktop and to get the boy's full attention. It was important that he listen. "Kids like that can be dangerous."

"Precisely," he answered. "That's why I came here."

Jim resisted the urge to rub his face in frustration. He wasn't exactly sure what the young man wanted to accomplish but whatever it was he was going about it the wrong way. Street kids, traveling before a snowstorm, even the GCPD, all were dangerous, but he figured all the warnings in the world weren't going to stop the young man. Bruce Wayne was a surprisingly stubborn kid, just another trait he and Selina Kyle seemed to share.

"Look, I'm sure Selina's fine," he repeated, raising a hand to stop the boy's mental protest. "But I promise you," he continued quickly. "I'll look into it."

The boy's shoulders slowly rounded like he'd been holding a breath.

"But Bruce," he continued. "I know it's frustrating, but you have to let me do my job, so no more questioning kids at 'The Flea' okay. That's why we have CIs."

If he hadn't been trained to see it, he would never have noticed the slight flicker in Bruce's eyes at his knowledge of the abandoned building.
"I would imagine that they would be more inclined to speak with someone their own age than someone in law enforcement," Bruce replied, his tone, unusually haughty.

And more inclined to leave you dead in a ditch, Jim thought nervously, refusing to acknowledge the image.

"Yes, but that's not the point, Bruce," he said, hoping his clipped tone would give weight to his words. "So do we have an understanding?"

"Yes," Bruce answered, his teeth digging into his lip. He stared at the ground for a moment, before he cleared his throat. "Thank you, Detective Gordon."

"Not necessary," Jim answered, giving the boy a grim smile. "Now," he began. "They're about to start closing the main roads soon. So," he continued, grabbing the telephone from atop his desk and placing it in front of the boy. "Call Alfred."

Bruce narrowed his eyes, but grudgingly took the phone he offered.

Selina

Whatever reason they had for keeping you alive is over.

The thought sent a strange stirring in Selina's already aching belly. They were gone. The kids were gone. She'd noticed Rana missing first. How they had moved the girl so quietly she still hadn't figured out. There had been no screaming, no pleading, just a heavy silence when she'd woken up two days ago.

She'd stayed awake as long as she could the night they took Ty. She'd listened to the whine of the iron doors, the echo of footsteps, but she couldn't fight the drooping of her eyelids, the weight of her arms and legs as she screamed at herself to wake-up.

How could they have just taken them so quietly? She was a light sleeper, years of sleeping in alleys and abandoned buildings had trained her body to wake her at the slightest sound. Her eyes roamed over to her untouched dinner. Was it something in the cookies? Some kind of drug maybe?

Sneering, she stared at her uneaten meal. Her stomach had begun aching hours ago, the pain in her head following closely behind. But she could ignore it; hunger wasn't a foreign concept to her. She'd gone a lot longer than this between meals. She could do it again.

She didn't know what they wanted, but if those assholes thought that she was gonna go out peacefully like those other two… Well, they were mistaken.

That right there is a lion's heart, her captor's voice, his words, rung in her mind.

Unexpectedly, anger flared inside her. Quickly, she crawled across her mattress and grabbed the Styrofoam bowl left by the door. She was reaching back to throw it across the small room, when it's unusual weight made her pause.

Her breathing slowed as her temper ebbed and she brought the bowl closer to her face. All thoughts of her dinner disappeared as she absently carried it to her bed.

"Why give this back to me?" she asked herself, sliding down the wall onto her dirty mattress.

Slowly she lifted her bracelet into the air, making the charms catch the little available light. There weren't that many. She didn't see the point in useless little trinkets but she felt herself smile as she
caught the biggest charm between her fingers. She bit into her lip as she opened her mother's heart-shaped locket. That was how all this bracelet business had started wasn't it, her stupidity and her mother's locket.

It had been her fault really, she could accept that, expecting it to uphold after all the abuse she'd put it through over the years was foolish. Granted at the time that it had finally broke, she'd been trying to stop a stupid billionaire from falling out of a stupid tree that he'd had no business trying to climb in the first place.

She hadn't noticed when it had snagged and fell, but figured it would be fine, it always was, and she'd eventually find something to hang it on. But the moment she'd found it on the ground, her face must've betrayed her disappointment at its state, cause the boy had immediately offered to fix it.

She'd already known that he'd started learning blacksmithing earlier that month, but she'd still had to bite her lip to stop from laughing. She would never understand why the boy had to learn everything about everything, but he'd looked at her so sincerely that she felt herself handing it to him before she could stop herself.

Weeks later, when he'd presented it to her, his teeth digging into his bottom lip, for one moment she'd almost thrown it back at him. It wasn't her necklace. He was supposed to fix the clasp not change the thing entirely.

She'd thought she'd schooled her expressions well enough, but they way he'd rushed into explaining what he'd done to it, she knew she hadn't. His voice was unusually soft as he told her how he'd melted down the chain, combining it with a stronger metal to make her bracelet, how he'd used a split ring to connect her mother's locket, and how he had added a lobster clasp so she could put it on by herself.

She'd felt her eyes widen at his words, she had never told him, but that had been one of the reasons she'd never worn her necklace. Dependency on others wasn't something she had ever been comfortable with. The gesture had been too insightful and knowing about his awareness of her was becoming unnerving.

She wasn't sure how long they'd stood alone in the study, her silently staring at her new bracelet and him staring at her. A small part of her had known or had hoped he wasn't expecting anything in return, but too many years of living in Gotham were ingrained in her and she'd waited patiently for the other shoe to fall. At her 'thanks' he'd simply smiled and moved onto the dinner she had interrupted.

Selina's eyes went to the present dinner on her mattress. Eyes narrowing, she closed her locket before she draped the chain across her wrist. Using her thumbnail she closed the lobster clasp, before twisting her wrist and listening to the soft jingle of the remaining charms. She didn't know if it was her lack of food, lack of sleep, or both, but she smiled at the sound.

"Cat?"

Selina froze at the unexpected whisper. Had she really heard her name?

"Cat?" the disembodied voice asked again. "That's what the others called you wasn't it?"

Selina squinted against the sudden light, quickly bringing her hands up to shield her eyes. Blinded, she heard the tell-tale squeak of iron hinges moving. Quickly, she climbed to her feet making sure to keep the wall at her back.
This is it.

"What do you want?" she asked, trying to relax her posture as somebody moved into her cell. She wouldn't be able to take a swing at him, not until he was within striking distance, and the bastard must've known it as he stilled just inside her cell door.

"Come with me," he whispered, thankfully lowering the light enough to give her a peek at his features.

Her eyes adjusted quicker to the sight of the boy in her cell than her mind did at processing his appearance. What the hell?

"Look, I don't have time to explain," he whispered quickly, still lingering out of her reach. "You have to get out of here."

Huffing, he took a step closer to her and instinctively Selina pulled back.

"I'm trying to help you," he explained, exasperatedly taking another step in her direction "If you stay here my dad's going to kill you!"

Chapter End Notes

Constructive criticism always welcome. :)

Disclaimer: I don't own anything.
Selina

"I'm trying to help you," he explained, exasperatedly taking another step in her direction. "If you stay here my dad's going to kill you!"

The warning should've prompted her. She could follow him, let him lead her out, and ditch him as soon as they cleared this hell hole, but she knew it couldn't be that simple.

The flashlight he kept pointed toward the ground gave her more than enough illumination to see the kid. He was dressed in dark colors, his face painted to match, and his unusual white hair was shoved under a black knit-cap. But she still recognized his long face and that reedy voice.

The cell was too narrow to run past him, and between the handgun he carried and her lack of specs on the building she doubted she'd get very far.

She lowered her hips, trying to keep her weight on her back foot, but the mattress was proving to be difficult.

His pale eyes flicked down to her feet and he shrugged one slight shoulder, any impression of haste gone.

"I have to admit," he said, his eyes turning up at the edges as he smiled. "My dad was right, he said you'd be too clever to fall for that…"

She kept her back to the stone wall as she inched closer to him.

"Poseidon down there," he boasted, gesturing nonchalantly in the direction of the other cells. "He followed me out like I was the fucking Pied-piper."

His snort was like ice in her belly.

"My father noticed you've stopped eating," he said, using his gun to point at her bowl before he snorted again. "I bet you thought you figured it all out. I bet," he said, crossing his arms. "You thought you were real clever."

"Your words," she answered, her voice hoarse.

His eyes narrowed on her, as he brought the light beam back to her face.
"It was just painkillers," he laughed. "My dad thinks suffering spoils the meat."

"The meat?" she asked, trying to swallow against the sudden lump in her throat.

"Yes, you know," he said, lowering the flashlight again. "All my dad really wants is your heart, but
after that," he said, taking another step toward her, seemingly examining her face. "I think you and I
could have a lot of fun."

"Why wait," she smiled, her chapped lips cracking. "We could have a lot of fun right now."

She'd already judged that she was too close to knee him properly, but her fist landed at the exact
angle she needed against his jaw. Pain shot through her knuckles as she watched him crumble to the
ground.

*Run!*

She jumped his prone body, slamming the cell door behind her. Her mind suddenly narrowed, the
need for self-preservation overwhelming any sense of caution.

The left, they'd always come from the left. Ignoring the right all together, she moved toward a set of
double doors. They looked so common, wood and heavy like something in a barn.

"You low-brow bitch!" echoed down the hall as she stumbled through one half of the doors. It
opened to a set of ascending concrete steps and black sky. The sudden fresh cold air was sweet and
shocking but she didn't pause as she climbed the steps. She couldn't slip now. She scrambled, the
treads on her boots slipping on the ice and snow, every breath dragging the beautiful cold into her
lungs.

She'd barely reached the precipice when she saw the small fire, she should've smelled it, should've
known. It looked innocent enough, a camp fire keeping a father warm. Disorientation caused her to
pause, her eyes locking with the crouching figure warming his gloved hands.

He stood slowly, his body looking massive as the fire sent his shadow against the bare trees behind
him. The fire and its smoke, the only thing dividing them, reflected against his narrowed eyes. She
felt her jaw clench at the crossbow by his side and there was something along his back, a kind of
firearm, it was long, a rifle or a shotgun maybe. She didn't really know the difference. He visibly
swallowed as his head and his eyes turned slowly to the dug out behind her. Selina felt her body
exhale as it finally reacted and she ran for the opposite tree line.

If she thought her cell had been cold, it certainly hadn't prepared her for the frozen hell that stretched
out before her. She ignored the banks of snow that had piled high against the tree trunks and the
sharp slap of their skinny branches as they snatched at her. Her lungs were burning and her head
ached, but she kept running.

Distance.

Distance was her ally.

Distance was the only thing that could save her.

*Stop!*

Her feet came up short, her arms wind milling as she stopped herself from falling over the sudden
edge. The miniature valley below her wasn't deep, twelve or fifteen feet at the most, not high enough
to break your neck but most likely an arm or a leg if you weren't careful. A half-frozen and wilted
creek split it down the middle, rocks and logs exposed along its harsh bank. If it hadn't been for her keen sight she would've ran head long into it.

She turned looking behind her. There was nothing, no moon, no stars, not even the tell-tell glow of city lights. Just ice and darkness and naked trees.

*I'm okay.*

Her breath wheezed from her, catching in her dry throat and making her gag.

She couldn't get sick. Not now. She felt herself doubling over and gave in to the need, reaching for the nearest tree.

Her back to the trunk, her eyes scanned the trail behind her, the dark woods beside her and finally the creek below her. They were beginning to burn at her sudden realization. She was lost. She was cold. And she was being hunted.

She slumped against the tree, fighting the sudden fear in her belly.

*No.*

It was a simple enough command. Her little voice reminding her that she didn't have time for introspective bull shit. She was going to make it out of this. She always did.

Clenching her jaw and steadying her breath, she pushed herself up. She was Selina Kyle. She had to be smarter about this.

"Cats are hard to track. They're both predator and prey animals, they know how to stalk so they know how to hide."

The boy's voice rang in her ear. She wasn't sure if he'd actually told her that or if she'd just assumed but he was right. She'd been snapping branches her entire run, any experienced hunter would be able to find her no problem.

*Shit. Shit. Shit.*

If she wasn't smarter they were going to find her and when they found her… She refused to think on that.

The frozen ground was beginning to crunch beneath her feet, leaving imprints of her boots in the ground. She hand no choice, she was going to have to change her strategy.

Maybe, she could climb a tree and wait until morning? But that was absurd. He would have the advantage of sunlight. She had the advantage now and she couldn't afford to waste it.

Her eyes went to the valley and the stream below.

It would be slow, and it would be painful, but there would be no trees to hold her up, no boot prints to worry about. And streams came from somewhere, and they led to somewhere too, didn't they? Maybe a lake or a river or something. It didn't matter at this point. She just needed to keep moving and moving fast.

At the sound of a gun shot, she pressed herself against the nearest tree. It was close, too close. She heard the soft break of a branch, smelled the familiar and acrid scent of gun powder as he moved closer. She tried to hold her breath as she slinked around the trunk, the bark burrowing into her
fingertips as she lowered her feet onto the snow that had accumulated there.

How? How had he already caught up with her?

It felt like ice in her belly as the answer washed over her and she pushed her back into the tree behind her. He knew. He'd known all along what she was going to do, where she was going to go.

How many? How many times had he done this? She didn't have time to think about that. That would be left to the cops, to Jim Gordon, when she got out of this and got back home. But right now…

Right now, she needed to act.

She breathed slowly, listening to the ice softly crunch under his footfall. She didn't need to see him to know he was on the opposite side of her hiding place. But did he see her? Did he sense her? Smell her? Did he know what she was prepared to do?

Head still, her eyes moved to the side as she waited for any sign of him. The barrel was the first thing she saw come around the corner, and before she could think, she grabbed it. Shock must've loosened his grip and she swung it like a bat, but he jumped away sending the wooden butt cracking against the tree. An involuntary cry escaped her sore throat as the vibration stung her muscles and forced her to drop the useless weapon.

It clattered to the ground between them, but she didn't waste any precious time as she leaned her weight back and connected her boot to his solar plexus. He doubled over, and she took the opportunity to bring her knee up to his face. The satisfying crunch of a broken bone in-between their grunts.

He cried out as she pushed him away, her ankle nearly giving as she stumbled on an exposed root, but she kept her feet. She couldn't fight them both, but she could outrun them. If she could just get to a road, or a house, or something. Anything.

She was nearing the edge of the shallow valley again, her mind already moving to which direction she was going to take when something hit her from behind. They fell several feet onto the creeks shore, her body instinctually rolling against the impact.

Dazed, she was nearly back to her feet, her shoes sliding against the rocky bank, when she felt arms around her waist dragging her back. The heel of her boot collided with a shin, but the man barely gave out a grunt.

For one moment, she felt weightless as the world blurred past, and as she connected with the icy grip of the creek bed, she realized he'd thrown her. Before she could breathe through the pain, he was straddling her, a bowie knife in one hand.

Her forearm blocked his first attempt at her throat, but the knife deflected, tearing through her jacket and right into her shoulder. But she felt nothing, just a vague idea that this was happening.

As he tried to pull his knife free, she quickly poked at his eye, the fragile organ giving way under her dirty nails. He pulled away from her and somewhere between his raw scream and the white hot pain in her shoulder the knife was flung.

She'd expected him to yield, to put his pain above his conquest, but suddenly it was like a thousand needles were stabbing her at once. She clawed at his arms as he held her beneath the water, her pain so consuming she didn't feel the rocks cutting into her back.

He dragged her back to the surface, and she coughed up the small amount of water that managed its
way into her mouth, terror went through her as she looked into his one good eye. He wasn't just going to kill her. He was going to make her pay.

She abandoned her futile effort, his jacket was too thick, his anger too overriding to feel any pain. She couldn't play dead. He would know. His fingers were at her throat now, squeezing, and she resisted the urge to grab at his hands. Her arms went to the sides, her fingers hoping to land on something. Anything. Sticks and rocks littered the creek bed. She just needed one.

The world was beginning to grow dim, the pain in her shoulder all but forgotten as she felt something give beneath her hand. He loosened his grip and she sucked in a beautiful lung full of air.

"I've never," he gasped, his knuckles popping as he flexed his fingers. "Strangled anyone before."

She stared up at his one good eye, her own fingers nearly stiff as she rocked her find back and forth under the icy water. She couldn't swing it with both hands and she was only going to get one shot at it.

*Make it count.*

Her strength was already beginning to ebb, but she waited until she felt his grip on her throat again. Using every ounce of strength she had conserved, she brought the log up. It smashed apart against his temple, splintering and snowing down pieces as she pushed him off her. On her hands and knees, she slid and slipped to the bank.

*The knife.*

Her eyes searched the bank for anything shiny. It was gone, carried away in the stream or thrown too far for her to see. Groping around in the dark, she only felt small twigs. She needed something heavy. Something lethal.

Above the rushing water, she could hear him groaning but getting up.

Her hands were already shaking. She needed a weapon and she needed it now.

Her eyes landed on something, pale and hard, jetting out of the water, and she only hoped that she could get it in time. Her fingernails cracked as she dug it out of the creek bed and she could sense him splashing his way across the stream.

She wasn't aware of the scream that ripped at her throat or the sound the rock made against his skull. She saw nothing. She felt nothing. His blood sprayed against her face, the rock cut into her fingers and still she felt numb. She didn't stop when he stopped moving, or when her breath had become sobs, it was only when her arms couldn't lift it above her head anymore.

It was like waking up from a fog, the cold like being slapped into consciousness. The stream roared in her ears, drowning out even her own heartbeat, her skin alternating between hot and cold. She scrambled off his chest, and she made it ten steps before the smell of copper and the feel of his warm blood…

Her stomach was empty and her eyes burned as she vomited only bile onto the bank.

She could feel a giggle, somewhere inside her, a hysterical laugh that begged to be set free. But she didn't have the time.

"Dad?" she heard the distinct voice of 'Barty' and something crashing through the undergrowth above her.
"Dad where are you?"

"Did you get her?"

"Dad!" he was much louder than his father, whether from inexperience or that he thought his father had already felled her she didn't know.

Cradling her arm, Selina started off in the opposite direction, her splashing covered by the rushing of the stream. She needed to put distance between her and the hunters.

Chapter End Notes

Constructive criticism always welcome. :)
Selina

The dog days of summer had blanketed the normally gloomy city in a cloud of humidity and heat. The temperature had had the normally putrid smells and foul tempers of Gotham set on high and Selina had felt the need to escape the concrete jungle. She could've gone on foot, trudged her way through the streets and across the bridge, but where would have been the fun in that?

"Whose car is this?" the boy whispered, his dark eyes scanning the hood of the small silver sports car.

"Does it matter," she answered, pulling her door open and gesturing for him to do the same. Putting the key into the ignition, she sighed as her eyes met an empty seat.

Lowering the passenger side window she looked at him. When she'd chosen to park outside the brick fence that bordered his front lawn, she'd only been thinking of not alerting the Old Man, but watching his dark eyes drifting to the trees above them and his shoulders hunch almost beneath his ears at a series of tiny squeaks. She realized that this entire thing might not have been one of her better ideas.

It had taken her nearly two hours to convince him to sneak away with her and still she could feel his trepidation.

"Look kid," she hissed. "If you're really that scared…" She paused, watching his shoulders square under his navy jacket. "Then just go back in your castle and do whatever it is that little princes do on a Saturday night.Honestly, I'm not even sure I-"

She didn't finish her thought, her lips too busy smirking as she watched the car door open and the young billionaire slide into the empty seat. He looked uncomfortable, his dark grey knees butting against the low dashboard as he reached behind him to grab the seatbelt.

"It's not a castle," he said, clicking the buckle into place. "It's Tuesday and I would appreciate if you stopped calling me kid."

"Whatever," she teased. Casually she reached over, trying to ignore the pleasant smell that always seemed to cling to him, and fingered the small lever beneath the seat, satisfied at his tiny gasp of surprise when it quickly slid back.

"Better?" she asked, turning the key.

He nodded his head, his lips curling in a way that always caused a little fluttering in her belly.
Ignoring the sensation, she clicked on the radio.

She looked over as she accelerated, both hands clutching the wheel as she took another turn. She could see his hands against the dashboard, bracing for anything. She wanted to tell him not to do that. She wanted to say that if they wrecked, he’d likely break both those dainty little wrists of his. But one look at the lopsided grin on his face and she felt numb. His eyes betrayed his excitement. His breathing was matching her own as she took another curve, her foot nowhere near the brake. She didn’t know how, but she knew this would be something he’d like.

"Wanna try?" she asked.

"No, thank you," he answered, he shivered for only a moment as if he was getting his clothes in order. "Who-who taught you to drive?"

She shrugged. "This guy I know."

"Was it Detective Gordon?"

She glanced in the rearview mirror more out of habit than concern. She didn’t particularly like talking about Gordon or Barbara and he knew that. She’d tried to stay out of their business but she couldn’t seem to keep them out of hers. She’d thought she’d made herself pretty clear about that.

"Maybe," she answered, lowering her hands along the wheel.

"You drive like him," he replied, as if he didn’t hear the finality in her voice.

"I do," she smirked, trying to keep the snicker from her voice. "How can you tell?"

"I’ve had to travel with him a few times," he said, one hand lowering to his thigh. "You both take advantage of your superior reflexes and situational awareness."

She eased off the gas as her eyes left the road to glance at him. Sometimes, she really hated how well he saw her.

"Whatever weirdo," she said, shaking her head as her eyes stared ahead. "If you didn’t want a turn you just had to say so."

They’d nearly made it to the end of the nameless road that led to Wayne Manor or ‘billionaire boulevard’ as she preferred to call the creepy snake like drive when she felt the boy stirring in the seat beside her.

Reaching over and adjusting the volume, she glanced beside her and felt her temper rise as the music lowered. His teeth were nibbling his bottom lip, a habit he usual only showed when he was extremely nervous.

"What is it?" she asked, dryly. Her eyes scanning the road ahead of them.

"Where are we going?" he asked, wiping his hands on his knees before clasping them in his lap.

"Nowhere, in particular," she answered, her eyes scanning the road ahead. "I don’t know why you’re so scared," she continued, resting her elbow against the door. "I’m a phenomenal driver."

"I’m not arguing that," he explained.

"So, what’s the problem," she asked, gripping the steering wheel a little tighter.
"Whose car is this?" he asked, his head turned in her direction.

"Why do you care?" she asked, countering his confidence with agitation.

"Did you steal it?" he accused, his far hand on the dashboard.

She sighed, glancing in the rearview mirror. The road was empty behind them, no street lights, just trees and darkness. She should've known the boy wasn't going to drop it. He never dropped anything.

"Define steal," she said, slowly pressing the gas pedal.

He didn't react to her facetious reply and she felt a sense of disappointment.

"I borrowed it, okay?" she admitted, both her hands on the wheel as she barely slowed and turned off the major road onto something more exciting. The roads outside the city tended to be all darkness, curves, and completely empty.

"From who," he continued.

"A friend," she said, vaguely.

A strange ring suddenly interrupted whatever he was about to say and Selina would've been grateful had it not been the phone that sat between the two bucket seats. Biting her lip, she looked back at the road ahead of them. She knew who was calling; she just didn't want to deal with them at the moment.

"Ugh," she said, quickly double pushing the button that she hoped turned it off.

"Who was that?" he demanded, looking down at the car phone between them.

"No one to you," she answered, her eyes moving back to the road.

"Your 'friend' finally notice that his car is missing?" he asked, that self-righteous note to his voice that tended to put her teeth on edge.

"Pretty sexist to assume it's a dude, B," she said, feeling herself smirk as she took a curve without braking.

It rang again, and she swore beneath her breath, but by the way the boy stiffened she assumed he heard her. Resigning herself, she let out a deep sigh as she turned the music off and pushed the small button.

"Hey, Babs," she cooed, hoping that her voice sounded soothing and playful.

"Selina?" a female voice asked, concern lacing her words. "Are you okay?"

"Just peachy," she answered, feeling a small sense of relief and a touch of something else at her tone.

"Where are you?"

She eased her foot onto the brake and could feel her cheeks warming as dark eyes watched her from the passenger seat.

"Around," she answered.
"Okay, let me rephrase that," said the gentle voice. "Where in the hell is my car?"

Her eyes widened at the sudden anger in Barbra's voice.

"It's fine. I-I left you a note," she answered, trying to sound nonchalant but she could feel her face beginning to burn. This was not a conversation she wanted to have with Bruce Wayne around.

"Yes," the voice sighed. "I read the note… And so did Jim."

Selina swore a blue-streak and ignored the angry boy beside her as her eyes scanned the road ahead of her to find a decent place to pull a U-turn.

She was jostled from her memory as her body slammed her against the metal corner of the truck. She clenched her teeth as pain streaked through her and the truck bounced again as the driver hit another pot hole. Her left eye burned, the flesh around it having swollen so bad she could barely see from it anymore.

That was why she had closed her eyes.

That was how she'd closed off into another memory.

Shivering, she decided she'd be mad at herself later. Later, when she was clean and dry and full and could process more than the cold burning through her clothes. She pushed herself against the cab of the truck, the metal was frozen, but if she sat against it at the right angle she could cut the wind. It was taking her more than a moment to get her bearings.

Thankfully the snow flew past her, over her, swirling and falling outside of the tiny niche she'd created. The sky was still black above her, the moon, if it was even shining, was still covered by the low hanging clouds. She had no real concept of time, but there wasn't the tiniest glance of the dawn trying to break so she supposed it was hours until morning.

Between the large cardboard boxes, stacked so neatly in the open bed of the truck, she could see glimpses of the road behind her. Snow was falling in sheets, the road a mixture of black and red as the white ice reflected the glow from the tail lights.

Clenching her teeth to stop them from chattering, she wrapped her right arm, her good arm, around her sore knees trying to make herself as small as possible. She'd managed to wedge herself between two large boxes their contents unknown and she was more than happy to keep it that way. She needed to remember where she was. How she'd gotten there.

When she'd broken through the tree line, her eyes had barely adjusted in time to see the red glow of taillights turning off the road. Hoping it had not been a hallucination, with legs aching and lungs burning, she had run after the sight.

It had been a small gas station, something that she wouldn't have expected to be open twenty four hours like its small neon sign advertised. A single flood light barely lit the gravel parking lot, but it was enough to illuminate the out of date gas pumps and the single truck that was parked beside them.

People. Phones.

Relief had flirted at the edges of her mind. A part of her had wanted to run up to the driver, to beg whoever was behind the wheel to bring her to Gotham. Hell, they could call the cops if they wanted, if they'd just give her some food and bring her home. But that nagging little voice had stopped her.

Skirting the edge of the parking lot and staying close to the tree line, she'd watched the manager of
the place come out. He had been an older man, white hair and flannel coat, but from the long firearm he'd held loosely by his side she'd guess that he could take care of himself just fine. He'd approached the truck with as much congeniality as any octogenarian welcoming his grandkids.

"Where ya headed?" he asked, grabbing the nozzle and lifting a lever.

"The City," replied a gruff voice that made the hair on her neck stand up. "Got a load for the boss and then headed back before the roads ice."

"In this?" the old man asked, incredulously. "Why didn't they give you one of those big-?"

A gust of wind carried away their words, but she didn't strain her ears to hear. She'd heard all she need to. Looking at the side of the truck, she recognized the logo and berated herself for not recognizing it earlier.

Maroni.

These are Maroni's men.

Silently swearing, she felt her eyes begin to burn, but she ignored it. How? How had her luck failed her so miserably for so long? Breathing, deeply she pushed down the hysteria threatening her.

She couldn't trust these men. She couldn't con them. She couldn't ask them for help.

Maroni. Falcon. It didn't matter. They weren't in the business of helping others. They weren't in the business of doing the right thing. But she didn't need their help. She just needed a ride and she knew where they were going and that was good enough for her.

Breathing deep, ignoring the throb in her shoulder and the burn in her throat, she slid out from the tree line crossing the small parking lot as quite as a stray. The old man was busy, his hands cupped around his mouth in an attempt to warm them. Her eyes shot to the driver as she reached the tail end of his truck, but his dark head never turned.

"You take care now," the old man said, and she listened to the mechanical jingle as he replaced the nozzle before he slapped the side of the truck.

Still she waited. She waited until the driver paid for his gas, his back turned as the manager went back inside, it was hard to keep her eye on both men, but she managed it best she could, as she hopped over the side of the truck, her feet barely making a sound as she slid in-between two large cardboard boxes.

She'd started shivering as soon as they'd taken to the road and she wasn't sure if she would ever stop. The blood in her hair and the water in her clothes had just begun to freeze when she'd stupidly drifted off.

Little black shapes still danced at the edges of her vision, but she would worry about that later. For now, she had to keep moving forward. She had to get back to Gotham.

She heard the whine of the brakes, her head snapping up at the familiar sound as the truck came to a stop. Her head swiveled to the side, her ears straining to hear over the rumble of the truck engine and the wind whipping through the trees.

Maybe he was stopping for a cigarette break?

Please, be stopping for a cigarette break, she silently pleaded.
"I don't know who you are, or what you want, but you got three seconds to get the hell out of my truck.

"One.

"Two…"

Fatigue had her underestimate the height of the truck and she under-rotated as she hurdled herself over the side. An ominous pop reverberated as her ankle collapsed on her, but she kept moving toward the woods that crept up on both sides. A sound like thunder ripped through the quiet and she knew he'd shot off a warning as she entered the woods.

The truck’s engine roared as it drove away. The pain in her ankle beginning to throb as she pecked around the tree she'd been hiding behind. Her eyes followed the taillights as they grew smaller and smaller. Her last chance of hope literally diminishing.

Hobbling back to the road, her eyes continued their upward trail and her head began to tilt back as she felt her self smile. Over the skinny silhouettes of the forest, she could see the glow of the city. She was close to Gotham. She was close to home.

Ignoring the pain that seemed her constant companion, she looked around, taking in the fork in the road ahead of her being quickly consumed by the snow falling in sheets. Despite the darkness, despite the cold, despite her swollen eye, everything seemed vaguely familiar, like a dream she couldn't quite remember.

The wind suddenly cut through her reverie and she pulled her hood up again. As she looked at the fork in the road ahead of her she couldn't help but feel that maybe her luck hadn't completely abandoned her.

'Billionaire's Boulevard' she breathed, she knew the snake like road, the trees bent over it like a canopy in the summer, but right now on a cold moonless night they looked like the legs of a giant pale spider.

She stood looking at the fork, one way went straight to Gotham, but self-preservation pulled her toward the road.

She hopped her way into the bushes. She was never going to make it back to Gotham before light. Even in the dark, this place looked familiar.

If she kept on this path, past the grove and the maze…

She wasn't sure how long she'd been walking, but she was starting to believe she might already be dead. Was this hell? Was she in hell? It was the only thing that could explain how she'd been walking for so long without the slightest hint that she was getting closer to civilization. She’d walked this route a hundred times, and it had never taken her this long. But she’d never been in this much pain. Never in her life.

She knew she had to keep moving. If she fell now, she was dead. One foot in front of the other that was all she had to do. She just had to try and block out everything else, the burning in her shoulder, the pounding in her head, the pain shooting up from her ankle. She didn't know the difference between a sprain and a break, but as the soft flakes of snow turned into ice she didn't think it really mattered.
Her body wanted to give up, to lay down right in the middle of the road. Would her death make the papers? Would she be a tiny blurb on the back page, not even a picture, just another dead street kid? Would the boy read about it? Would he care?

Of course he would, she chided herself, grimacing as her foot began to trail behind. He cared about everything. All the time. He was like a giant open wound, everything infected and festered inside him. He felt too much.

She wasn’t exactly sure how he even existed in the world. He needed to be coddled, kept in a gilded cage and handled with kid gloves. The world was too brutal for a soul like that.

Crack!

The sound of a heavy limb breaking under the weight of snow had her jump and the pain in her ankle and shoulder shot through her like a popper.

What in the hell was she thinking about souls for? Was she losing her mind?

She had no business feeling sorry for an orphaned billionaire, but here she was walking down a familiar path, enduring more physical pain than she thought possible, dying ever so slowly as she crept up on the manor house.

If she didn't make it and that was a big if, she wondered who would find her, one of the yard guys or maybe the chick who delivered the paper every morning. She just hoped it wasn't him. She didn't want this to be his last memory of her, clothes shredded, face swollen and bloody. She was probably unrecognizable, bits of blood and mud caked in her hair.

Just a little longer, she promised her exhausted limbs, as the sleet stung her cheeks and eyes settling in her hair, just a little longer and we'll stop.

Every tree, every topiary, became a milestone as she trekked her way across the yard.

She and the boy had had fun out here. He'd finally caught her in the never ending game of tag and this one had seemed to last for months. She still wasn't sure how he'd got the jump on her but he had.

She'd been hiding behind one of the tall hedges, so confident in her choice of hiding places. Bruce was quiet, but he still hadn't learned to play dirty and she always exploited that. When he'd ambushed her, she had been genuinely shocked. In his zeal, he had forgotten to factor in the couple of extra inches he'd gained in height, and when he'd tackled her, he tackled her with more force than necessary. When they'd hit the ground, she'd almost felt the air knocked from her lungs.

His dumb smile had faded quickly as he realized his mistake.

"Selina-" he'd started, his voice soft and so full of concern she almost hit him.

"Alright kid," She'd interrupted tilting her head, "you caught me, now whatcha gonna do?"

He'd looked down at her, his pale face completely bewildered, as he'd certainly not thought this far ahead.

"That's what I thought," she'd mumbled, swiftly lifting her leg and in one movement flipping and pinning the slight boy to the ground. He'd looked up at her, his usually somber features a mixture of confusion and amusement.

"See," she'd said, trying hard to keep her weight on her knees and off his chest. She'd wanted to
teach the kid a lesson, not crush him. "I'd know exactly what to do with you." She'd smirked, lightly thumping the end of his nose.

That day had felt years away now, but it had just been last fall. Red and gold leaves had been scattered all over the grounds and the bushes had already lost their fullness, it wasn't that Selina was a romantic; it was that their loss had greatly limited her hiding places and escape routes. She wondered if he'd planned for such a day, for such a trap…

Crack!

Another limb crashed to the ground with a thud, the sound bringing her head up. At the sight that loomed ahead of her, she smiled despite the multiple bloody splits in her chapped lips and quickened her step.

She had not survived all this to die on Bruce Wayne's doorstep.

Chapter End Notes

Constructive criticism always welcome. :)

Homecoming Part 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part 2

Chapter 6: Homecoming: Part 1

Fandom: Gotham

Pairing: Bruce/Selina

Disclaimer: I own nothing.

Rating: M

Alfred

The cold did strange things to the city.

Earlier that evening when he had left to fetch the young master from the police station, if he hadn't been such a confident man he may have worried that he'd driven in the wrong direction. For a City that boasted a populace well into the multi-millions, Gotham appeared utterly desolate.

Snow plows and street sweepers were parked idly on every street, but there were no cars, no people. Silence had settled over the city.

If Gotham had been quiet, Bruce had been quieter. He didn't talk the long drive back to Wayne Manor, or the dinner Alfred had made him.

"Starving yourself won't bring her back," he'd reminded the boy, but Alfred had only received a glare in return.

He wasn't exactly sure what kind of pull the young Miss Kyle had over Master Bruce but he knew it went deep, deeper than mere hormones and a pretty face called for. And he was a betting man, he'd bet that pull wasn't one sided.

He spotted her not a month after their first fight, the one that had ended in confessions, tears and a shattered snow globe. He'd been talking to the new gardener, asking about a certain tree that the master wanted planted when he'd caught movement in his peripheral. The unnatural disturbance had caused the hairs on the back of his neck to stand up as he'd watched a shadow glide away. There had been an unnerving intelligence to that silhouette, but when he'd went to investigate all that had been left among the hedges was a trail of small boot prints leading away from the manor.

Soon after, he'd hired a man he trusted, the top security specialist from Wayne Enterprises, to install the most state-of-the-art security system. But even with technology that would impress the most hardened Las Vegas pit boss, he barely caught sight of the little troublemaker.

Maybe it was something preternatural, but he knew it was her. Even analyzing the security footage he barely caught glimpses of her, and certainly nothing that would ever hold up in a criminal case. Unnatural agility let her work the angles and she was able to cling to the most minuscule shadows. It was like trying to catch smoke.
Smoke or not, it didn't take Alfred long to begin piecing together what she had been doing all those times, what her intentions really were. She was just like any good predator, she was watching and waiting.

One evening, not long after 'the Gala Incident,' he had sat alone in the monitor room watching the security tapes from the day as he always did. And sure enough, he watched as that familiar shadow climb into one of the many trees that lined the property.

Noting the time stamp, he kept his eyes trained on the small black mass as he fast forwarded. Watching the numbers tick by he couldn't help the furrowing of his brow.

"What in the world could entertain you for so long?" he asked no one in particular.

Switching monitors, he immediately saw what had caught her attention. Two fencers, their white uniforms contrasting brightly against the dark grey of the grass, danced backward and forward, neither able to really get a hit or retain the right of way.

He couldn't help but chuckle at the sight. Poor Master B, he had no clue what was waiting for him in that tree.

Slightly disappointed, he watched as his young master feinted and lost the right of way before he took a hit to the chest that left him on the ground.

Visibly frustrated, he quickly climbed to his feet, flinging his mask to the ground. Even through the monitor he could tell Bruce was breathing hard, his face most likely ten shades of red. Despite his temper, he politely took his instructors hand and Alfred couldn't help but feel a sense of pride at his well kept manners.

Ignoring his equipment, the boy was turning back toward the Manor when he paused mid-step. From this angle, Alfred could only see the back of his dark head, but imagined equally dark eyes were surveying the tree line.

When Bruce turned back, he had expected the young man to be worried or at the very least concerned, but his curled lip and smiling eyes seemed to be only mildly curious. Eyes back on the tree line, he watched as she slithered down.

He could see it for what it was now, a cat watching a caged canary.

It would be two more weeks before she turned up again. He was careful this time his tread whisper soft as he walked the perimeter of the property. If the girl was anything, she was clever, but her youth gave her arrogance and he knew her eyes would be trained forward, completely unaware of the man following behind her.

Her dark grey hood was pulled over her unruly hair as she kept her head bent down as she approached the tall brick wall that fenced the property. He watched silently as she cracked her knuckles before her slim fingers reached out and caught unseen grooves in between the bricks. It was impressive, the speed and grace in which she pulled herself to the top of the wall. Her hips and legs were still resting on his side, when he made his presence known.

"What do you want?" he barked, halting her progress.

Ignoring his abrupt voice, she quickly swung a single leg over, straddling the brick wall and letting a foot dangle on either side of the fence.

"Was just in the neighborhood?" she answered her body language as arrogant as ever.
"Was just in the neighborhood," he mumbled, doubtfully. "Right? And what bout last week," he asked, bluntly. "Or the week before that,"

"Strollin'," she said, shrugging one of her delicate shoulders.

"Strolling," he repeated, his eyes conveying his doubt.

"Yeah, it's good exercise," she said, pulling up her opposite foot and propping an elbow on her knee. "Maybe you should try it sometime."

"That's enough cheek for now Miss Kyle," he said, already tired of this conversation. "What are you really doing here?"

She merely smirked, her head tilting away from him as she gazed at the trees and the road behind him.

"Are you working for someone? 'Casing the joint' as they say," he asked, his tone thick with accusation.

At his question, her head fell back against her shoulders, her even white teeth exposed as she chuckled. "Nobody says that," she said, mockingly. "And no, I'm not working for anyone."

"Then what're you doing here?"

"Like I told you," she drawled, quickly swinging her leg over so both of her feet rested on his side. "I was just strolling through the neighborhood."

"Then you can stroll yourself along, Missy," he ordered, stepping back to offer her room to climb down.

Snorting, she looked away before she planted her hands by her hips. Effortlessly she pushed herself off the garden wall landing gracefully on the dry road in front of him. She shook her head, her hood falling back as she stared up at him, her green eyes tilted up curiously.

Wordlessly, she turned on her heel giving him her back as she started down the long road from Wayne Manor.

"See ya round ole' man," she called, dismissively throwing up a hand.

"Not if I can help it," he called after her.

Exhaling, he focused back on the monitors ahead of him. Their pale grey screens bathing himself and the dark room in a sickly light. Unfortunately the electricity, a main grid he assumed, had failed hours ago, plunging the manor and he could only assume the city, into blackness, but unlike the city the manor switched over to its alternative energy sources.

The gentle hum of the generators was easily drowned out by the howl of the Northeaster. The wind cut through the trees, the eerie call carrying all the way inside the manor. Cut off from society, alone in this big house with nothing but his surly young ward, a whimsical man could easily see himself as the character of a Gothic horror novel, but Alfred Pennyworth was far from fanciful.

Stifling a yawn, he gazed at the screens, his eyes widening on the small red dot glowing in the corner of one of the monitors the motion sensors having detected movement coming up the lawn. Sitting up, he set his cup of tea on the nearest surface.
The cold had a way of disorienting all the senses, ice masked scents and snow covered well worn paths. All night deer had been wandering aimlessly onto the grounds before the floodlights and their internal compasses had them scurrying back onto their original paths.

But this this was no deer. The way it moved so slowly, its small body hunched and dragging, like every step through the steadily growing snow was a monumental accomplishment.

Despite the storm and the crippled gait, there was something vaguely familiar about the faceless shadow. But he didn't have time to reflect as he watched it stumble and change directions, the dark trail it left behind disappearing in the white down pour.

Standing, he grabbed his gun off the desk, quickly checking the clip. He might not recognize this faceless person, but he had a fair idea of where they were headed.

The fireplace hadn't been extinguished giving the room a warm glow and lengthening the already dark places around the master's study. Carefully sticking to the shadows, he kept his back to the wall as he stepped toward the double doors. It still stood on the opposite side, a silhouette against a moving backdrop.

He shifted his feet, instinctively planting them in the weaver stance. Despite his nerves, he kept his gun lowered, as he heard the jingle of the door knob as the intruder tried it.

Discovering it was locked he expected the stranger to walk away, to try another door another point of intrusion. It drifted away and he was beginning to exhale when it suddenly came charging back. A dark blur broke through the double doors in a whirlwind of black clothes and dirty snow.

Unconsciously he lifted his weapon.

"Stay where you are!" he barked, his voice hoarse from the early hour.

The figure froze, the smell of cold and blood wafting from it.

"Hands up!" he ordered, his fingers relaxing against the trigger at the individual's obedience.

Surprisingly it continued to comply, but he could see its arms shaking from the effort. It was much smaller than had appeared on the monitors, but there was something in the way it held itself, something that kept him from completely lowering his weapon.

"Now step forward," he ordered, eager to put a face to this fairy creature. "Into the light."

He thought he heard it snort, but it stepped forward, or as close to step as the half-frozen creature could manage. The golden light from the fireplace did nothing to soften the image it illuminated. There was nothing recognizable about the creature in front of him, just that whatever it was, it had walked through Hell's gauntlet.

"Nice tasee you too, Ole' Man," a reedy voice croaked out.

For once in his life Alfred Pennyworth was stunned, and could only stare as Miss Kyle crumbled to the floor.

Thanks for reading and let me know what I can improve on. Constructive Criticism is always welcome.
Author's Notes:

I feel the need to apologize for this update taking so long and being so short. I never intended to put this story on hiatus, but shortly after I posted chapter five, I unexpectedly lost my mother. The loss was hard enough but the show was something we shared and to return to watching, reading, and writing about it has been harder than I thought. But ultimately I know she wouldn't want me to stop doing something I enjoy and honestly, I might be the only one, but I really care about this story.

On that note, full disclosure this was not my favorite chapter. It was difficult to write Alfred and he and the chapter kind of got away from me. It was originally much-much longer but after having proofread it, I decided to post and see if anyone would still be interested in reading about Selina and Bruce's little adventure.
Bruce

Even before his parents death Bruce had never slept much. His mother had teased him about how as young as three she would often find him wandering the halls in the predawn hours. The first time, convinced he had been abducted, she'd nearly screamed the house down searching for him, only to find him sleeping under the desk in his father's study. It wasn't unusual to find him in the green house or the wine cellar, or wherever he could wander off to.

And he liked to wander. A lot.

His house was old, one of the oldest buildings in the incorporated city limits. It hadn't always been, but cities needed to grow and change and saving a few old buildings wasn't high on the city councils priority list, so they were demolished and their property redistributed to dummy corporations for "warehouses" and "factories."

Researching his family home hadn't brought up much. The blueprints to the main house had been destroyed long ago, probably in one of Gotham's many natural or unnatural disasters, and the few historians he'd contacted couldn't give him any more information than what he had already known. Anything he wanted to find out, he was going to have to dig it up himself. Which wasn't really a problem, curiosity came naturally to him.

It was that tendency toward inquisitiveness that impelled him to explore his cavernous house, finding nooks and crannies and servants passages forgotten by people and time. Behind the walls of his family home was a labyrinth of channels and secrets and he was perfectly content with discovering them on his own. One of the many sentiments, Alfred did not share with him.

It wasn't that Alfred didn't support him per say, it's just that their ideas on testing one's limits differed… Greatly.

Sighing, Bruce paused in the stairwell, his gaze landing on the snow covered pool below. Between the predawn light and the heavy snow, his gardens were a mix of lavender and grey an ethereal world that was unfamiliar to him. Perfectly pruned hedges, massive sculptures, even the brick wall that encompassed the property was unrecognizable, just a solid blanket of white.

He knew he should tell Alfred what he had planned, but he knew it would only lead to a fight.
Alfred tolerated his training to a point. Only a point.

How was he supposed to conquer his fears when in the back of his mind he knew Alfred would always find him, always find a way to save him.

His exploits into self-discipline had only grown in intensity over the last two years boxing, fencing, linguistics. No, two skills were alike and if Alfred couldn't teach him it didn't take long to find some instructor willing to take Wayne money. Diverse stimulation was important, and he didn't want any part of his training found wanting.

He was still hesitant when it came to firearms. Researching the different types, how they worked, how they didn't, still made his throat tight so he wasn't sure if he would ever be able to hold one, much less fire it.

He went elsewhere when it came to more unconventional skills though that conduit took a little more than cash. Selina Kyle had her own unique skill set and unfortunately she had never been impressed by his name or his wealth, but she liked to wager and she liked to play games. All kinds of games.

He clamped his jaw at the thought of her, his eyes roving over to the banister, before they moved back to the window. He didn't have time for any stray thoughts, the wind was beginning to pick up, the ice and snow making harsh sounds against the glass. If he waited any longer he might talk himself out of it, or more than likely he would let Alfred talk him out of it.

The idea had come to him in the middle of the night; there in that in-between his mind had been drifting, hazy images and half-remembered conversations floating past his inner-eye. At some point his mind had conjured the idea of cold and ice and the places it could push the human body.

Winter always settled in Gotham like an unwelcome house guest, but unlike the previous year he refused to give up his runs. At first his body had rebelled against the treatment, his head aching, his muscles itching from the different training. But he knew his body was acclimating, he could feel it growing accustomed to the freezing temperatures, to the weight of the snow at his feet.

So it was inevitable that he would need to take the next step.

Bruce stared down at the pool below him. Cold shock could kill within two minutes, cold incapacitation around fifteen. If he broke the ice and slid in how long could he handle it? Would he need oxygen or comfort first? Could his body uphold such torment?

He didn't want to do this. It was going to hurt, probably worse than the times he had cut himself, worse than the times he had burnt himself, but it had to be done. There was nothing for it. He could train his way around this problem.

Or you could freeze to death mocked a drawling female voice. Like a little billionaire Popsicle.

If she was here he was confident she'd have something derogatory to say about his training methods. And maybe she would be right. Maybe this was all for naught, but he couldn't think about that now. He couldn't think about her either. Not today. He needed to keep his head clear.

Maybe Detective Gordon and Alfred were right. Maybe, she really was fine. Maybe she really did just want her space.

Maybe she really was 'just shacked up with some bloke' as Alfred had offered during his boxing lesson, an opinion that had left Bruce on the ground after he'd thrown an overzealous but easily blocked right hook. Alfred had only chuckled at him as he'd fumed on the ground and reminded him 'to keep his wits!'
Turning from the window he descended the staircase. Getting through his run was going to be hard enough this morning without the anticipation of coming home to pain. Sighing, he took the last two stairs, his trainers whispering across the wood floor.

A growl from his study caused him to pause, his eyes reflexively squinting at the unfamiliar sound. Curiosity pulled him and he turned in that direction, his feet stopping short at the threshold to his study.

The overwhelming smell of blood and cold wet earth assaulted him, the sudden temperature drop like a slap in the face. Wind whipped in from the open doors carrying ice and snow into the study like a white hurricane, growling like an injured beast.

Vaguely aware of the two people hunched together near the fire, he rushed to the double doors, pressing his weight against a single panel, his sneakers slipping against the icy floor. The door barely wavered under the roughly one-hundred and thirty-five pounds he pushed against it and he heard an all too familiar voice yelling behind him.

Changing tactics, he turned his back to the door, hoping to gain better leverage and acknowledge the two beings on the floor. A part of him instinctively registered Alfred, but something warned him against looking at the thing in his arms.

Breath caught in his throat as he stared down at the person. Dark ice clung to her hair her clothes even her eyelashes. Her ears and her eyelids were tinted blue, the small expanses of skin peeking out from beneath the frozen mud and dried blood was impossibly white.

One eye was swollen shut, snow having caught on her eyebrows and eyelashes. Small crystals clung to her sharp cheek bones. Her lips were black and blue, dried blood seeping through the cracks. They didn't tremble, and some lingering thought told him that wasn't a good sign.

Selina. The name made his vision blur, the edges darkening dangerously.

Her eyelashes fluttered, head swiveling from side to side, as she made a disgruntled noise.

"Come take her," Alfred growled, his voice rising above the howling wind.

He felt like a robot as he abandoned the door and crossed the room. Alfred was still holding her upright, providing him a place to sit between her and the couch. Carefully, he lowered himself letting his legs stretch out the outside of her thighs brushing the inside of his own.

"Take her," Alfred repeated.

With trembling hands Bruce grabbed her by the arms, the cold from her jacket seeping through his gloves. It felt like time was beginning to slow as Alfred stood and ran behind him. He could hear him struggling to close the door, but the sound was beginning to fade like someone slowly turning the volume down on a radio.

Trying hard to even his breath he stared at the back of Selina's head. Her usually blonde curls were stiff and dark. The grey hood of her jacket, splattered with something the color rust that smelled suspiciously like decay.

"Bloody freaking white-out!" Alfred's hoarse voice boomed through the study causing him to jump. He kneeled in front of them his hands immediately going to Selina's cheeks. "Five more minutes and she would've been a goner."

"What's wrong with her?" he asked, surprised to find his own voice sounding so far away.
"Loads," the older man murmured, and before he could object, Alfred snatched the knit cap off his head placing it over Selina's slowly thawing curls.

Suddenly, Alfred raised moving over to Bruce's desk, shuffling around his papers and books, and opening the drawers.

"What are you doing? Why are we on the floor?" he asked, trying to keep the panic and confusion from his voice.

"You're on the floor, Master Bruce," he explained pausing to open another drawer. "Because a hard surface makes it easier to resuscitate," he answered, sliding the drawer shut with a snap. "And I was looking for something sharp," he finished, holding up a pair of scissors.

Bruce felt his eyes widen as he looked at the older man, but Alfred ignored him as he squatted next to them. He reached for Selina grabbing the lapels of her jacket, when suddenly Bruce felt her squirming under his grip. Her left leg was trying unsuccessfully to kick at Alfred, her arms trying to break free. She briefly reminded him of an animal, something wild and cornered and unaware that they were just trying to help.

"Selina," Alfred said gruffly, and between the tone of his voice and the use of her given name she froze as if it was the first time she was really seeing him. "I'm gonna take your jacket off, if I don't, you'll likely get worse."

She didn't blink or nod her head, but Alfred took it as an invitation none-the-less.

"Master Bruce," he said, very slowly pulling her arm from the sleeve of her jacket. The material made a sickening cracking sound as it peeled away from her dark hoodie.

"How long have you been wearing that?" he asked, gesturing to the black sweatshirt he was wearing.

"I just put it on," he answered numbly, watching as Alfred unsuccessfully tried pulling the frozen zipper down.

"Take it off.," he ordered, grabbing the scissors he brought. "All of it. Shoes too."

Modesty and hubris had no place in an emergency, so trying not to disturb the girl between his legs; Bruce grabbed the collar of his sweatshirt pulling it over his head. He handed it to Alfred, but the older man just threw it onto the pile with the remains of Selina's jacket. .

Alfred removed her boot, seemingly deaf to the grunt Selina made from between her teeth. He pressed the nail beds on her toes and was seemingly satisfied at her reaction as she tried to pull away from him. His fingers grazed her heel, avoiding her ankle which was red and black and swollen to the size of a grapefruit.

At once, Bruce recognized the injury.

"Broken," he mumbled to himself, all too familiar with that kind of pain.


Bruce felt himself nod as he bent each leg pulling off his shoe. Selina was sitting obediently as he began cutting away at her black pants. Despite the freeze firming it the usually fitted material didn't cling to her skin and slid off her legs easily. But the more Alfred removed the worse it looked, blood fresh and dried covered most of her legs, her knees a mixture of cuts and bruises. Bruce watched as
he began peeling at her dark sweatshirt, but the material suddenly caught on something.

"Forget your socks and hold her still," Alfred ordered.

Bruce quickly wrapped an arm around her middle; her camisole was wet and cold causing his arms to break out in goose bumps. His eyes moved back to the man in front of them. There was a crease between Alfred's eyes, his concentration on the bit of sweatshirt at her shoulder.

Exhaling, Alfred grabbed the dark sweatshirt and without warning swiftly pulled it away. She cried out, her voice hoarse and anguish and like nothing he'd ever heard before. She jerked against his hold her blunted nails digging into his arm, her legs flailing, like she was treading water but Bruce held her tight. Exhausted, she fell back, the back of her head landing painfully against his shoulder and collarbone.

Her helplessness made his stomach clench and he couldn't help himself as he looked away. His attention drifted from the floor splattered with tiny puddles of melted snow, to the fireplace with its dying flames, to even the stupid shiny suit of armor he had insisted on keeping, it drifted everywhere and anywhere but at the nearly unconscious girl on his study floor.

He'd never seen her like this.

Bruised? Yes.

Bloody? A couple of times.

But this… This was…

His heartbeat had grown uncommonly fast, the drumming beginning to drown out the sound of his quick breath. He pulled at the collar of his thermal undershirt, the thin material feeling like a noose against his throat.

Darkness was beginning to creep around the edges of his vision again. Panic tinting everything…

He felt something bracing his arms.

"Take a breath," a calm voice ordered.

Unaware that he'd closed them, Bruce opened his eyes. Alfred was merely inches from him now, his grip holding Bruce by his shoulders.

He could feel his cheeks beginning to burn as Alfred stared down at him but he could ready only concern in the older man's expression. Blue eyes watched his face, waiting for some signal that Bruce couldn't contemplate, before Alfred nodded and let him go.

"Just sit there and keep her up," Alfred ordered, his voice restored to its typical rough and thick tone as his attention returned to the nearly unconscious girl. Looking down, Bruce could see he'd cut away her dirty camisole revealing a yellowing sports bra and pale skin covered in old filth and fresh bruises. Littering her back were fresh cuts mixed with small jagged stones that had not been knocked loose by Alfred's less-than-gentle bedside manner.

From under his black cap, pink rivulets streamed across her wounded cheeks and down her pale throat. Selina had never carried much weight, what little she did was constituted of lean muscle, but that seemed to have been shaved from her bones. He could feel the outline of her ribcage against his forearm, the dotted bones of her spine brushing his chest.
She's only been gone a month, he thought, biting into his bottom lip.

Alfred climbed to his feet again, growing quiet as his movements became very efficient. He walked through the room gathering all the throws Bruce kept on the back of his couches and began trying to cocoon the two of them. He started layering the blankets, leaving the room only to return with more some he left rolled by the fire, but most he added to the mounting pile he'd started on them.

Bruce watched him with an unnerving sense of detachment. He hadn't been born a leader, but one cold night in a dark alley had irrevocably changed that. Training and study was slowly helping to mold him into someone else, so he would never let himself feel that powerless again. But it was a slow process, it needed time, a lot more time than the two years he'd been working toward it allotted.

Naturally he was a problem solver, his first instinct to contain and resolve. It was that intuition that compelled him to follow Alfred on this. There was nothing he could do for her on his own. He couldn't fix this.

"What can I do?" Bruce asked, adjusting his hold on her middle.

"Just sit with her. Talk to her. Keep her conscience," Alfred said, tucking the ends of the blankets around their feet. "But don't try and rub her arms or her legs. Don't try and move her."

Bruce looked up at him as he stood and moved toward the study's door. "Why not?"

Alfred sighed as he looked over his shoulder, "It could stop her heart."

The only sounds were the crackle and pop of the fire beside them and the wheezing girl in his arms. She slumped against him, and he was thankful for the couch behind them or they would've sprawled onto the floor. He knew it was an involuntary reaction, her body instinctively seeking out his warmth, needing his body heat.

He should talk to her. Bruce knew that, but his throat felt tight his tongue too heavy to move. He could barely swallow much less speak. He inhaled deeply, the smell of cold and blood causing bile to creep into his throat. He fought the memories that tried to creep up on him, images of white pearls against asphalt and the shiny barrel of a gun.

Lifelessly her head tilted away from him, the tips of her dark curls cold and wet against his throat. One of her arms fell to the floor; somehow escaping from the nest of covers Alfred had wrapped them in.

He gently gripped her wrist, his intention to place it back against her stomach. But something caught his eyes. Past the dried mud he could see a thin bruises forming along her skin as if something had been torn around them. Had her wrists been bound?

Immediately, he gripped her opposite hand bringing it to eye level for inspection. She moved against him, her back pressing into his stomach as she roused. Her skin felt like ice, he could feel it through the jogging pants he still wore.

Lowering her arms, he clenched his jaw, his eyes closing out of frustration. This was the closest he'd ever been to Selina Kyle and he could barely keep himself from being sick.

She titled her head in his direction. One of her eyes was nearly swollen shut. Her usually generous lips, tinted blue and striped black, were parted just enough for him to see the edges of her teeth. Her
good eye was impossibly green as she stared back at him, small flecks of dried blood caught on her eyelid and brow.

His stomach felt like it was flipping over as he watched her eye dilate. He couldn't say why, but he knew there was no recognition there.

"You're going to be okay," he explained, his voice low and rough. He tried to swallow and failed, nerves having robbed him of saliva.

"B?" she breathed through chapped lips.

"Yes, Selina," he said, feeling the side of his mouth turn up at her voice, at her recognition. "It's me."

She nodded her head quickly as she stared ahead. Her fingertips lightly gripped his forearms where they rested against her stomach, the weak touch barely a graze before her eyelids fluttered and lowered over her unfocused gaze.

"I don't wanna die," she mumbled, her lips trembling around the words. He inhaled sharply at the sound of her voice so thin and weak.

"You're not going to die, Cat," he answered, trying to speak over the lump in his throat. "You're too stubborn for that."

"Promise," she asked her voice barely above a whisper.

"I promise."

He pressed his cheek against the top of her head, an image of her frightened eyes making him want to punch something.

She tried to draw her knees up, but remembering Alfred's warning he quickly wrapped a single leg over hers forcing them back to the floor. She started to tremble, her body shaking violently against him. Instinctively he pulled her tighter, one hand cuffing the other wrist as he locked his arms around her middle.

He could hear her teeth chatter, the noise magnified by the silence. He could feel the underside of her breast the fabric of her sports bra stiff and cold against his forearm. Unconsciously, he pushed his chest into her back.

"Selina, you have to stay still," he explained, his lips against her ear.

She didn't respond, her body sagging against him. Immediately, he lessened his grip placing the palm of his hand over her chest, the other against her belly. He held his breath as he waited for his hands to move, to feel something living beneath them. He felt himself smile, as he felt her lungs expand and the faint but steady beating rhythm of her heart.

Sweat was beginning to pool at his temples and the top of his lip. He felt his eyes beginning to unfocused as he stared over her shoulder. He thought he'd stopped asking the universe how and why a long time ago, but as he struggled to stay grounded, to stay in the moment, he couldn't stop the questions racing through his mind.

Where had she come from?

How had this happened?
His eyes drifted to her forgotten clothes. Alfred had cut through most of them and the ice had melted leaving a brown and black puddle of leather and dirty water on the floor.

That was her favorite jacket, he thought absently. She is going to be so angry.

Bruce shook his head. He needed to stay connected to the moment. He needed to know where she had been, who she had been with. Could this have been one of her schemes gone wrong? Had she been double-crossed and left for dead? If so we're they still looking for her.

His forearm against her belly was beginning to warm, and as he turned his head to look around her. He breathed a sigh at the pink tint to her lips. The covers slipped down, baring her shoulder. Automatically he went to readjust it when his fingers brushed something warm and sticky. The mere feel of it causing his stomach to roll.

He didn't need to see it, didn't need to smell it to know what was coating his fingers. Gritting his teeth he slowly pulled the blanket from their bodies. A rivulet of red ran down her arm, her chest, her side, coating her bra and his undershirt.

"Alfred!"

Despite his haste the sun had risen by the time Alfred had made it back a silver tray in his hands and an old leather bag tucked under his arm. Sunlight filtered through the French doors, spilling grey light over the floor, briefly reminding him of the snow storm that continued to blanket the city.

"She's bleeding," he blurted, ashamed by the shake in his voice. "Her blood isn't coagulating."

"Yes, I've noticed," Alfred said calmly. Slowly, he set the tray down on the sideboard and Bruce could see the steam rising from one of his mother's teapots, only two of the matching cups beside it.

Confused, Bruce felt his eyes narrow at the response. "She needs stitches," he continued, the tone of his voice beginning to rise.

"I've noticed that as well," Alfred replied, nearing them.

Kneeling, he peeled back the blankets and lifted Bruce's hand from her wound. He stared at her injury, at the blood coating Bruce's fingers, a single grey brow lifting at the damage.

Bruce blinked rapidly as Alfred walked away. Reaching the sideboard, he began methodically pouring liquid into one of the matching cups. Finished, Alfred opened the bag he'd been carrying leisurely rummaging through it.

Bruce wasn't sure what he'd been expecting from his butler, but it hadn't been nonchalance.

"Well, what're you going to do?!" he asked, not hiding the crack in his voice. "We can't just let her bleed to death!"

"Steady Master Bruce," Alfred said, combating Bruce's frustration with composure. "If she was going to bleed out, she would've done it already."

Bruce exhaled, trying hard not to let his temper get the better of him. He watched Alfred walked toward them, a tea cup in one hand and a small vile of something in his other.

"Her body temperature has to come up, before I can do anything for her," he explained, showing
Bruce the things in his hands. He knelt down, placing the teacup beside them before he broke the vile beneath her nose.

The next moment happened so quickly Bruce wasn't sure how he didn't walk away with a black eye. Her head shot back so quickly he felt her curls brush his cheek as he moved out of her path, his chest and shoulder taking the brunt of her assault.

"Whatha?" her breath wheezed out.

Suddenly, Alfred raised the cup to her lips. "Drink," he ordered, tipping the delicate cup forward.

Bruce watched her mouth part around the lip of the cup, taking the smallest of sips.

She doesn't like tea, he thought absently. His mind trying to pull away again, but somehow he managed to watch Alfred and Selina to stay present in the moment.

"More," Alfred demanded as his blue eyes met Bruce's. "Take this."

Without question, Bruce reached around grabbing the cup Alfred offered. His hands shaking as he tried to bring the cup to her lips.

"Get her to drink as much as she can before she faints again."

The girl in his arms inhaled deeply, the sound a cross between a wheeze and a snort, at the accusation.

Alfred turned from his grandfather's bag at the sound.

"You can understand enough to get offended," he said good naturedly, checking Selina's eyes with a penlight as he held her chin. "That's good," he said encouragingly. "Very good."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, for the short and somewhat uneventful chapter and that Selina was unconscious for most of it. I had to rewrite this chapter from snip-its and it kind of came out a complete mess, but hopefully I'll be able to get the next chapters out quicker. Also if anyone is interested in proofreading, betaing for me please let me know.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

A huge thanks to a2zmom, your words of kindness were greatly appreciated. Thank you so much.

Alfred

Alfred would never tell the boy, but in that first twenty-four hours he had believed she wouldn't make it. He'd kept an eye on her temperature waiting for it to rise to acceptable levels before he'd stitched her up.

Fortunately, he'd found most of her wounds had been superficial all but the one in her shoulder. Whatever or whoever had done that had intended to do some real damage to the girl. The weapon most likely a knife judging by the size had torn through skin and muscle. Whatever she'd been given or more likely taken had done quite a number as well, her skin had refused to mend, her blood to coagulate.

Her heartbeat was strong, but still there was something ominous every time her eyes would close. There was something terrifying about those unfocused pale eyes shutting. Like she was giving up, letting go. Malnutrition had weakened her immune system making her an easy target for infection and her skin had grown impossibly pale.

It had been around lunch time, when he should've been fixing his boy's lunch, when he'd felt the most anxiety. In his first sixteen years of life Bruce Wayne had already seen too much death, had watched life leave too many people he loved. Alfred wasn't about to add the girls death to that bank of horrible memories. It was why he'd kept sending him away, until the boy had grown impatient and refused to leave.

Surprisingly, the moment Bruce had taken up a chair by her side, she'd stopped fighting that invisible monster. Trembling from the stress and fever she'd rolled onto her side and her body had started doing what it should've been doing all along.

Selina

Fear.

*It was the first thing she recognized as she was deposited onto the tiny deck.*

*An all encompassing fear.*

*Wind cut through the hood they'd forced over face, it burned her round cheeks and hit her ears,*
muffling a woman’s screams and the motor of the boat as it crashed through waves.

She couldn’t quite see past the brown haze, images darkening behind it as they shuffled around her. Sea spray sprinkled against her bare legs causing goose bumps to breakout on her skin. She was in her night gown, a plain cotton dress with a popular cartoon kitty on the front.

There was a grip on her arm now, and the woman’s shrill scream turned into her name.

Selina

The single word reverberated in her mind as she slid into a squat. The world around her dissolving both time and space. Her leather jacket squeaked and her breath caught in her throat as she recognized the alley around her. Someone was still screaming, a piercing sound that crept along her nerves, but nothing blocked the view of the small terrified boy below her.

Her eyes widened at the sight, a happy family of three reduced to a single orphan in seconds. She tried to move, tried to run away from the image but she stood frozen, like she always was.

She closed her eyes hoping to block the boy, the alley, the memory.

Silence.

The abrupt silence was more unnerving than the either the sounds of the broken little boy or the cries of the desperate woman. Forcing herself, she opened her eyes.

Darkness welcomed her. Darkness and stone and that fucking little bucket!

No! No! NO! She screamed, her voice bouncing back to her off the cold stone walls.

No!

She had to be dreaming. She'd gotten out of here. She'd gotten away from this place. Hadn't she? Or had that been the dream?

On the verge of hysterics she curled her knees to her chest, lowering her forehead to rest against her knees.

"C'mon kitten," purred a warm voice. "You need to get up now."

"Ma," she tried to cry out, but her lips didn't move, her tongue stuck stubbornly to the roof of her mouth.

A weak awareness came to her, pulling her from her nightmares but abandoning her to a half-twilight existence where light and sound and time meant nothing to her.

The bed beneath her was soft, softer than the mattress in her cell, softer than the concrete of a warehouse. It was even softer than the over priced couch in Barbra's apartment. Now that she thought about it, it was too soft, magnifying specific pains that throbbed across her body.

Her head pounded inside and her throat felt sore like she was trying to breathe through a straw. But nothing could compete with the pain in her foot and the burning in her shoulder.

Some part of her knew she'd taken a beating before but that this was different that this had nearly... Someone tried to kill me.
Panic shot through her at the realization. Someone had tried to kill her. She tried but she couldn't summon the strength to lift her lids much less drag her body up. She could see light behind her lids, could hear shuffling, and feel the shifting of weight coming off and on her bed.

The smell of fresh tended fireplace and warm cotton sheets suddenly broke through her congested nostrils. It didn't make any sense but she felt the tension beginning to leave her body in degrees. There was something familiar about this. There was nothing to support such a feeling, but she felt safe here.

But still…

How did she get here?

Memories danced at the corner of her mind, but she refused to acknowledge them. No, those weren't memories. Those were nightmares. Trying to brush them aside, she couldn't stop the sudden colors that danced through her thoughts.

Red.
White.
Blood.
Snow.
So much snow…

"I think she's trying to say something," said a concerned voice.

The sound chipped at her memories. She knew that voice, that beautifully familiar voice. She just needed a face, a face to put to that warm tone. Images flashed through her memories. Thick black hair. Dark grey eyes. Long fingers. A nervous smile that made her stomach flip.

Eyelids trembling she was only able to crack them open to stare uselessly at the two shapes in front of her.

"What'd she say?" asked a gruffer voice.

Was that an accent?

Wait! Where in the hell was she?

"I couldn't understand it," replied the warm voice and despite the pain that was creeping along her body and nightmares creeping along her thoughts she felt herself relax.

"Well, after this," the Englishman said, holding something up. "She won't be saying much for a while."

Through her lashes she watched the two shapes draw closer, saw the outline of the needle and could do nothing as she was gently leaned onto her side, a tiny pin-prick as she felt it pierce her hip.

Instinct called her to kick out, but she lacked the energy. The burning in her shoulder was now a low simmer, but her ankle still throbbed. The end of the blanket flipped up and she felt rough warm fingers against her ankle, her leg jerked away, but was held steady with a gentle grip.

"Nasty that," said a gruff voice, but the sound was dimorphic like she was hearing it under water.
Her cover was pulled back down gently covering her cold feet. "No worries, Miss Kyle, you'll be back to causing trouble soon."

At that comment, she felt the side of her mouth tug up, as the pain began to ebb and the darkness came seeping back.

Wendigo

Sliding down the far wall of his parent's basement, Barty ripped the black knit cap from his head. He could still hear his mother's screams, the sobs that racked her body. Anger didn't slide across his nerves; it engulfed every cell of his body.

What in the hell had his father been thinking?

Tears of rage pricked at the back of his eyes and an unbearable heat ran along his skin. He pulled the blood stained sweatshirt over his head.

It was his fault. It was all his fault. He should've been there with his dad. And he would've been if it hadn't been for that little gutter slut. From the moment that nasty bitch had gotten the jump on him everything had gone to hell.

But he was going to fix it. He would make it up to his mom. He would make his dad proud. He'd find that little street rat. He'd find her alright. He'd find her and peel all that beautiful white gold skin right from her bones.
Constructive criticism always welcome.

a2zmom - thank you so much. Hopefully this chapter doesn't disappoint.

Alfred

The décor of her room had not changed much, not even with the knowledge that she was not the sugar and spice type.

Soft pastels, blonde wood, white mosquito netting and a dainty four-poster bed made up most of the room. There was even a dusty vanity and an empty wardrobe. It looked like something made for a princess.

When he had given Alfred instructions on what to buy Bruce had been very particular under some misguided notion of what a girl's room should look like.

'Everything nice and all that.'

It had taken him little more than an afternoon to order and organize the room to the boy's specifications and it still amazed him what the name Wayne could accomplish.

The young man had been very pleased with himself, as he had stood in the middle of that room hands clasped behind his back as he gave the décor an appraising look.

"Do you think she'll like it, Alfred?" he had asked in the same voice he had used when he had wanted his parents approval and already knew he was going to get it. It was a mix of confidence and concern.

"I couldn't say sir," he replied, giving the boy a sidelong glance.

"I hope she does," he answered.
Something in Alfred had suddenly become very alert at the boys tone.

Bruce had met the girl all of five minutes and already seemed much too eager to spoil her. A pretty face like that was probably used to dragging boys around. Like a cat with a mouse, she would bat and strike fore she put him out of his misery and moved onto her next victim.

Alfred shook his head. Two years and his opinion of Miss Kyle hadn't changed much if anything it had only grown worse. He just was not quite sure what the appeal was. She lacked all the things Bruce should have been looking for in a companion much less a female.

Balancing the serving tray on one hand, he opened the door to her room.

It was dark. The fire in her grate needed rousing, but he easily made out her form in the bed. Her back was to most of the full bed, her bandaged hand out by her side reaching for nothing in particular.

Following her arm, past a few large books, he noticed a dark lump at the end of her bed. Like a napping kid in class, Bruce's black head was cradled against his folded forearms. Out of habit, his dark grey sweater had been pushed to his elbows contrasting against the pale skin of his arms. The books around him had been left open, the majority textbooks human anatomy, geology, and possible psychology all taken from his father's study.

However, closest to him, too small and too old to be read for anything but enjoyment, was a leather bound book. Alfred could not make out the title but from his position, he could guess that Bruce had most likely spent most of the night reading to her.

He resisted a sigh. If anything did happen to the girl, he wasn't sure what Bruce thought he was going to be able to do about it. Alfred kept a keen eye on his patient. Physically she was doing well. She just needed time to rest. Nevertheless, there Bruce sat keeping vigil.

He chuckled to himself at the thought.

He had seen them like that before, the roles reversed when the young master had somehow come down with the flu last Christmas.

*It had been right after the 'Children’s Ward Incident' at Gotham General.*

*Bruce had been there because ‘making health care available for the less-fortunate’ had been one of his mother's more passionate causes. It did not hurt that Wayne Enterprises had thought the publicity would help after the whole Viper debacle.*

*Free flu vaccinations were going to be available to anyone, but like all publicity stunts Wayne Enterprises had wanted to start with the young. Bruce was only there to smile and demonstrate the new shot. That it was nothing to be afraid of, that it was even good enough for the ‘Prince of Gotham.’*

*It was supposed to be good press that turned into a personal relations nightmare and a nightmare for thousands of Gotham's youth rich and poor alike.*

*Tampered flu vaccines had caused an epidemic, mutating an already contagious disease. Antibiotics were scarce and expensive, becoming more expensive as both mob and legitimately run pharmacies had begun to price gouge medications. Supply and demand they claimed as hundreds of children had begun to sicken beyond help.*

*Bruce had been lucky, at the time Detective Gordon had been close to someone with antibiotics and*
a PhD. Despite his dangerously high fever the boy had refused to stay in the hospital arguing that he
didn’t want to be a drain on the hospital’s limited resources, but that above all he wanted his own
bed, in his own room, at his own house. Reluctantly, Alfred had conceded.

He had not noticed her when he’d first come into the room, his eyes immediately seeking out his
young master. Then he had noticed a black heap on the floor made up of overused leather jacket.
His gaze had quickly trailed up to find Selina curled in the boy’s captain’s chair by the fireplace.

Her knees had been curled to her chest; her blonde curls a stark contrasted to the dark navy
upholstery. She had not moved an eyelash at his heavy footfall or when he laid his tray down, but the
moment his master stirred her green eyes were open watching them both.

She yawned and unfurled, stretching her lithe limbs with a lazy grace before grabbing her jacket off
the floor.

"He okay?" she asked, against another yawn.

Ignoring her inquiry, he gave her a questioning glance. "Haven’t seen you in a while."

She merely shrugged, leaning against one of the bedposts, looking down at his young master with a
look of lazy apathy.

"Not proper for a young lady to be in here this time of night," he noted, rearranging the items he
had brought from the kitchen.

"Good thing I aint a lady," she replied, smirking at him in a way that made him want to both grin
and thump her.

Suddenly Bruce murmured something unintelligible, grabbing both of their attention.

"He still hot?" she asked, her voice betraying her concern as she uncrossed her arms.

"Fever must’ve broken last night," he answered, turning his back to her as he went back to his tray
full of medicine and tools.

He could feel those pale green eyes watching him, and he pretended to be absorbed by the task of
cleaning the glass thermometer and rearranging the master’s antibiotics. He glanced up in the
mirror to see she had slinked onto the bed, her weight barely registering against the mattress.

Anticipating her glance, he quickly averted his eyes, his hands busy with nothing at all. She was
good, he had always known that about her, but he was better trained at surveillance.

When he felt it was safe again, he glanced up to see her pale fingers pushing at the shorter black
locks that had plastered to his forehead from fever. Her pale brows were drawn together, her lips in
a thin line, as her nimble tips gently traced down the side of his cheek. Unexpectedly his pale face
turned into her palm and she jerked back as if he had been on fire.

His brow furrowed at the loss of contact.

"Cat," he mumbled his voice barely a whisper.

Her pale eyes widened as she backtracked her way off the bed.

"It’s just the flu," he said.

Her shoulders shifted her eyes wide as she looked at him as if she had completely forgotten his
"He's seen a doctor," he continued, careful not to embarrass the girl. "He has antibiotics and-"

"I know-" she snapped, bringing the cotton hood of her jacket up to cover her pale curls. "I just-"

He watched her exhale quickly. Her cheeks beginning to blush. He knew. He understood. In her world, kids who got the sick probably did not survive very long. Not for the first time did he wonder at exactly how much pain this girl must have seen in such a short life.

"Look," she interrupted his thoughts, moving the two short steps it took to get from Bruce's bed to the wall of windows. "I gotta go,"

"Don't-" she began, but he held up a hand to stop her.

"Don't tell him you were here?" he asked. "Yes, I know the routine, Miss Kyle."

Lifting a single brow at him, she opened one-half of a window.

"Wouldn't you rather take the front door?" he asked, walking toward the bed, Bruce's medication in his hand.

"Nah," she shrugged, straddling the boy's windowsill, "Where's the fun in that?"

He watched her casually lean out, before halting as if something had just occurred to her.

"Gordon catch the douche bag that did this," she asked, nodding to the boy in the bed.

"I believe he did, yes," he answered. "Apparently, it was a couple of doctors."

"Doctors?" she asked incredulously, her lip curling unattractively.

"Yes, it's a bit confusing but basically a few well placed people planned to make a lot of money off loads of sick people."

"Course they were," she mumbled looking down. "And I bet not a single ones gonna sit more than a minute for killing all those kids."

"I couldn't say," he said, watching her.

Something crossed over her soft features, a ruthlessness in the set of her jaw that made him pause.

"Miss Kyle, at this point I should tell you to not go looking for trouble but I'm guessing that's a futile request," he said, halting her exit once again.

"You know me well," she said.

"But it wouldn't do you, or him," he said, nodding to the unconscious boy, "or any of those kids any good for you to go and get yourself killed."

"Ah," she said, giving him a smile that did not reach her eyes. "You know what they say about us cats don't ya'. We got nine lives.

"Heck, I figure I still got a couple left," she said, dropping form the window as if it was only three feet to the ground and not three stories.
Alfred moved more fully into the room. Placing the tray on the nearest available surface careful not to disturb Selina's breakfast. She had still failed to fully rouse. Never awake for more than a few minutes before the morphine had rendered her unconscious again.

He'd already started to wean her off the medication. He had no way of gauging her pain, but from her injuries he guessed that she was probably somewhere in the five to six range on the ten pain scale. And a little discomfort had never really hurt anyone.

He understood the weird twilight she was in and thankfully she wouldn't remember a thing.

He moved to tend the dying fire in her grate. The great house had central air and heat, but there was something calming in the familiar orange glow, the sudden pop and crackle of a genuine fire.

Finished with the fireplace, he moved back to the patient. Pulling the covers down to her waist he checked the sutures he had laced in her shoulder. They weren't pretty, they weren't the work of a surgeon, not even a medic. They were ugly and would definitely scar. But she hadn't caught a fever and the wound looked good, no swelling, no signs of infection. He flipped the bottom of her blanket up to examine her ankle. The injury was still tender, but it appeared to be healing well. Hopefully, he and Master B had been wrong and it was not broken.

Pulling the cover back over her feet he felt Bruce beginning to stir. The master had a graceful way of rousing, his dark lashes fluttering lazily over equally dark eyes. His hair was even charmingly messy as if someone had come in and finger combed it perfectly.

"Good morning Alfred," Bruce slurred lazily, his voice gravely from sleep as he sat back in the chair he had pulled up beside her bed.

"Morning Master B," he sighed, standing fully.

Covering a yawn with the back of his hand, he asked, "How is Selina?"

"You'd know better than me sir," he answered, not keeping the censure from his voice.

Bruce looked back at him, his thick brows furrowing in confusion.

"I'd ask if you've been here all night, but-" he gestured to the half-read books and Bruce's rumpled appearance.

"I must've fallen asleep," he apologized, blinking still half asleep.

"Obviously," he answered. He sighed, watching the boy widen his eyes. Bruce was still too sleepy to understand his disapproving tone.

"To answer your original question, Miss Kyle's in good shape."

He nodded his dark head in understanding his half-lidded eyes landing on the breakfast tray.

"I don't take sugar in my tea any more," he said, even his sleep-hoarse voice sounding imperial.

"Good thing your tea is downstairs with your breakfast then, sir,"

Suddenly his chin jutted up as he clasped his hands on top of his books. Dark grey eyes narrowed over a pursed mouth as he physically acknowledged Alfred's mood.

'Out with it then.' It was an unspoken order.
'You shouldn't be in here,' he wanted to say.

It was not proper and it was not healthy but Bruce would only want to have a very analytical debate with him and he had too much to do so instead he said, "The phones are working."

Bruce's eyes widened but his face remained impassive.

"We should notify the authorities, sir," he said, one hand drifting behind him to cuff the wrist of the other.

Bruce's gaze drifted to the unconscious girl propped against her pillows.

"She'll run if we do that," he said firmly.

He snorted with disbelief. "A dozen stitches, concussion, busted up ankle. She won't get far."

"Doesn't mean she wouldn't try," Bruce snapped, his dark eyes flashing. "She could hurt herself worse before we found her."

He exhaled, his eyes moving back to Miss Kyle. "Besides, it could've been anything," he said, his voice growing soft with doubt. "Car accident-

"Car accidents don't leave knife wounds or fingerprints on your throat," he said, his hands falling back to his sides.

He watched a muscle in the young man's jaw tick, his chest rise and fall with an uneven breath.

"We'll ask her first," he said calmly.

"But-" Alfred began.

"I've made my decision, Alfred," he snapped, his voice steady with finality.

"Well, Master Bruce," he said, his tone betraying his sense of fatalism. "Like I said your breakfast is downstairs."

"I'm not hungry," Bruce answered, his head bowing to the book in front of him.

"Shocker," he replied, turning to leave the room. Selina's breakfast forgotten.

Selina

Biting her lip to stop the sudden whimper, Selina pulled her hand free from the deep coat pocket. Shards and slivers of glass stuck out of her right hand, quickly staining red from her blood.

"Try again Cat," drawled the voice of her foster mom. "With the other hand this time."

The other hand. Her left hand. Her weak hand. If she couldn't pull the dummy swag free with her right hand it would be damn near impossible to do it with her left and her foster mom knew that.

Selina suppressed the glare and the biting retort on her tongue as she flexed the fingers of her bad hand. She could not show anger. She could not fear. There was something scary about her foster mom's eyes, the way they glittered every time Selina failed.

The woman had taught her everything she knew: how to mark, how to lie, how to lift, how to snip, how pick a lock. Locks had been Selina's favorite. All a person needed was a couple of tools and a
good ear and she had mastered that skill easily.

Like all the younger kids, Selina had started as a diversion. On the nice side of Gotham, people were eager to help a well-dressed girl with golden curls. But Selina had hated the crying. Hated the way her foster would pinch her until her bottom lip would pout, her chin would tremble, and Selina had proven to be a terrible diversion. Her pride had proven to be too much of a hurdle. It had proven harder and harder to get her to cry and until even a slap couldn't draw a tear. But thieving. Thieving she was good at. She was quick and quiet, nimble and dexterous. She was able to move through crowds, snipping and stroking with little to no notice. Those had been the first traits her foster mom had praised her for.

It had taken her nearly a year to pass the bells test and even though she was the youngest to pass it, still she wasn't sent out like the older kids. Her foster had wanted more, wanted perfection. So she had handed Cat's training to a person with a thick accent and no patience and even less kindness. Razor and glass laced pockets sliced her questing fingers scarring up her hands but she had quickly learned not to jerk her hand out too quickly.

Pain was an amazing training technique, she was learning quickly, and soon it would be her turn to earn her own slice. They would shadow her the first few months but when she had proven herself bringing home nearly twice as much swag as most of the other pickpockets, she would be set free to work on her own. And once that figurative collar was gone so was she.

Looking back at the half-dressed mannequin Selina rolled her wrist. She could do this. She could do anything.

A soft voice drifted to her sleep-addled mind, warm and soft and inviting.

"Qui es-tu?" dir le petit prince. "Tues bien joli…"

She had no idea what those sounds were but they were so nice, so familiar. Her pain was still there, the aches seething below the surface, but it didn't throb didn't make her want to jump out her body. She struggled to lift her eyes, taking in the room around her through her thick lashes.

Light streamed in through a single window illuminating a dark head. Fighting her exhaustion and her endless state of confusion, she tried to focus on the dark and light person sitting so close to her bed. It was a boy. There was a boy in her room.

"Viens joer ace moi," lui proposale le petit prince. "Je suis tellement triste."

His warm foreign voice washed over her. It was a boy… And he was reading to her. Where in the hell was this place? She thought feeling her lips curving at the impossibility. Struggling against her heavy lids, she momentarily widened her eyes as someone else entered the room. It was an older man, dressed ridiculously formal.

The boy didn't look up at the sudden intrusion, his dark head still bent to the book in his hands.

'They must know each other,' she thought, letting the drowsiness pull her under.

"Je ne puis pa jouer avec toi," dit le renard. "Je ne suis pas apprivoise."

"Your dinners getting cold," fussed the familiarly gruff voice.

"I will be down in a moment," replied the formal but warm boy.

She felt her bangs being gently pushed aside as something warm and soft brushed her forehead. All
she could smell through her stuffed up nose was the mild scent of someone she knew. Someone she…

She didn't get to finish her thought as she tumbled back into dreams.

Bruce

As hours turn into days, the snow began to slowly disappear. The pure white landscape that had stretched for miles was now tainted by muddy tracks and peeks of dark green as coniferous trees poked their way through. Like always the sky was overcast, but it was a brighter shade of grey.

His chest hurt from the cold air, it slithered into his nose dully aching and giving him a throbbing headache. He took another turn, each step bringing him closer to the manor. He did not notice the bare limbed trees or the footprints he had left earlier.

Pain sliced through him, the wind chaffing his cheeks, the muscles in his legs burning. Is this what it had felt like for her, pain, cold, and nothing but woods between her and home.

Had she been scared?

He could not bring himself to really wrap his mind around that one. Despite the bruises and blood, fear seemed so foreign to him. No, he imagined that she had felt more annoyed than scared.

She also would not like him sitting by her bedside watching her sleep. When she woke up, she would probably call him a creep and maybe she would be right. He was wasting his time trying to wake her up. Selina always did things in her own time and this would be no different. He had to constantly remind himself not to do 'weird' things, to remind himself how important it was to push down his basic reaction and to seem 'normal,' but Selina made that hard. He felt natural around her, felt as if he could be a closer version of himself, weird habits and all.

He fought the urge to sigh, it was nothing more than a sign of agitation and would accomplish nothing but throwing off his rhythm.

Alfred was right. The phones were working and soon the roads would be clear they were going to need some answers. He just had not figured out exactly how he was going to do that.

He could go back to Detective Gordon, back to the GCPD. Bring the evidence he had collected, but say it was for a science project. School projects were the greatest excuse to use. People always had a kind of fear that you would suddenly ask for their help. They made themselves scarce and it had been his greatest excuse to get inside the GCPD.

Even hardened cops often pitied 'the little orphan boy' as he had heard himself called and Bruce was not going to start correcting them. Even the forensic scientist with his sad eyes behind his coke bottle frames had looked at Bruce with a sad sort of expression. Bruce assumed that pity was why he had given Bruce some kind of brain tease to solve. The patronizing stumper had been easy to crack oddly enough to the delight of the man.

He could send it to Wayne Enterprises but that would only get back to Alfred.

He would have to do the tests himself. But for what? He was not even sure what he was looking for. Where had she been? What kind of rocks were those? Where did they come from? It was not gravel that he was sure of. They were small and jagged like they had been eroded over time, like the rocks at the bottom of a rough streambed.

Moreover, what kind of knife had done that to her shoulder? Alfred had not told him, but he had
watched the older man sew her up, watched him knot the crude sutures. That was not a bullet hole. While he had seen evidence of an exit wound on her back, the wounds just did not match up. The incision had been relatively small, whatever kind of knife they had used, had been sharp and exact. Something sharp enough to cut through skin and muscle and had it hit it, probably through bone as well.

Whatever had happened to her, he was not sure how she had survived it. Or why she had come here. She could have gone to the city. Went to the Detective Gordon or even Barbara Keane they would have taken care of her. They would have gotten her to a real hospital with trained nurses and doctors and a limitless supply of antibiotics and painkillers. Nevertheless, she had ended up here on his doorstep bleeding and half frozen to death. She had chosen to come to him.

Bruce was not arrogant enough to believe it had anything to do with him. So why; why come all this way? And where had she been? A month she had been gone. A whole month doing whatever it was that kids like her did, stealing and cheating and surviving.

He had offered her a place to live. He had offered her all the comforts his life could provide and she had refused him so why now? Why when she was clearly in a great deal of trouble would she choose to come here to involve him?

*She wouldn’t*, he answered.

Besides that one night, she had brought him traipsing around the city; Selina had made a too conscious effort to keep him out of her 'business.' If he demanded an answer, she would simply shrug and leave the room, the alley, the restaurant wherever they happened to be at the moment. That is what it was to her, the people she dealt with, 'just business.' She executed most of her schemes like most people did their laundry or washed their dishes.

Sometimes it was like seeing someone after a long day of work; wordlessly she would throw her jacket on the nearest surface and slip to the floor beside his legs. Her back to the couch, her eyes on whatever television program he had been watching, she would steal his dinner, her nimble fingers grabbing whatever Alfred had served him. Broccoli, chicken, potatoes it did not matter, she almost always ate with her fingers. The unhygienic habit should have revolted him, but somehow it did not. It made him feel… aware.

Aware at just how different she was, how elemental and primal… Female.

He could not be thinking about that right now. He was supposed to running to clear his mind not muddle it up with inappropriate thoughts. The girl was upstairs recovering from what he could only imagine was a harrowing experience. In addition, his mind, albeit unintentionally was down here objectifying her. What kind of man did that make him?

His legs felt like jelly, his lungs burned and the skin of his face was itching from the cold. He'd run too hard. Recognizing the signs, he slowed his pace to a jog and then reluctantly to a walk. He breathed deeply through his nostrils as he lifted his hands to clasp against the top of his head. Rounding a bend in the trees, his house came into view, its brick façade rising out of a sea of white. It was a beautiful home, he admitted to himself something that generations before him had worked hard to preserve. He felt his eyes narrow as he saw a figure waiting for him on the veranda outside the French doors of his study. Dread filled him as his legs started to move of their own accord. The pain that had engulfed him moments before was vanishing as he approached.

Alfred was standing there a peculiar look on his face. Something between annoyance and resignation.
"Selina?" he panted between breaths.

"Yes, Master Bruce," Alfred began. "Settle yourself, I've just come down to tell you, she's awake."

Constructive criticism always welcome.
Selina

From the safety of an old shade tree's limbs, Selina watched the boy as he moved around his study. She had developed the nasty habit of spying on him long before his butler had caught her or even knew she existed, and just because he was on to her now didn't mean she was going to stop.

His image passed by the half-curtained windows, flickering in and out as he passed by each one oblivious to her gaze. She hadn't been wrong about that growth spurt of his, it looked like his limbs were growing too fast to let the rest of him catch up, but she had to admit it loaned him a sharp sort of elegance.

His brow creased as he opened another file, his face between the folds as he navigated his way around a stack of unopened banker's boxes. He bent over his desk, jotting something down, probably in that tiny handwriting of his.

She frowned at the action. She knew what was in those files, what he had tacked up to that useless board of his.

She hadn't been bull-shitting him, when she'd told him that he should try to move on with his life. This was Gotham and in this city anything was possible. His parents' murders really could be a conspiracy that went right to the top. Now, to the top of what? She didn't know. Or it could be as simple as a random 'wrong time, wrong alley' coincidence. But seeing as the average mugger rarely sent trained assassins after a kid who might have seen something… In the dark… Fifty feet away… Given the chance she would be betting on the former.

His head raised up from the folder he was reading and she watched as he rose from his chair and walked the length of the room disappearing into the windowless hall.

She didn't know what compelled her next, curiosity or invasiveness, but before she could consider her actions she'd already swung down from the tree, landing so softly she didn't even leave a boot print in the soft earth.

Keeping to the slim shadows and out of the many cameras' sights, she moved across the bricked porch and soundlessly squeezed past the slightly ajar French door. The last time she'd been in here she had caught the lonely little genius playing chess by himself and she'd had to stop herself from smiling as his innocent face had instantly brightened when he'd seen her. She highly doubted that he'd be so happy to see her now, but she also didn't have any plans on getting caught.

Slipping past the heavy curtains, she immediately noticed the heavy feel of the room, the unwelcoming atmosphere as if the actual house didn't want her here. Sniffing the air, she caught only the faint traces of the familiar house. The fireplace had gone cold and a single tray of warm but forgotten food sat on the coffee table. Ignoring the depressing image, she moved further into the room, deftly snatching a potato wedge off his plate and popping it into her mouth.

She had to resist the urge to close her eyes at the taste.

Alfred Pennyworth might have a lot of faults but being a bad cook is not one of them, she thought, quietly hopping the oversized bench.
She eased over to his desk, her eyes narrowing at the state it was in. His desk was usually neat and organized, but now his files and notes were scattered, weighted down with different makeshift paperweights. Taking a quick glance toward the open doors, she carefully picked up a magnifying glass that had been weighing down the file closest to her.

'Just wanna check on him,' she told herself. 'Make sure he's not getting his baby billionaire ass into any more trouble.'

She had just eased the corner of the file open when the hair on the back of her neck stood up, goose bumps breaking out on her arms.

"What are you doing here, Selina?"

She looked up as Bruce stepped out from the shadow of the hall. His dark eyes were fixed on her without even the faintest trace of surprise and she couldn't help but wonder how long he'd been watching her. She gave him a rueful smile as she straightened and let the cover fall closed.

"You're the little junior detective," she accused, lifting his magnifying glass and looking at him through it. "You figure it out."

He stared back at her his too serious face not amused by her answer.

Slowly, she lowered the antique back to the desk, shrugging one slim shoulder, "Was just wondering what bored little billionaires did with their free time," she answered.

He exhaled sharply, narrowing his eyes as he advanced toward her. If he were any other boy, she would have expected him to try and go toe-to-toe with her, crowd her space and try and intimidate her but Bruce wasn't any other boy. He stopped just shy of the open French door and right in the middle of her escape route, trapping her without trapping her.

"What do you want?" he asked, pushing the cuffs of his dark sweater to his elbows.

"Just wanted to say thanks," she said, lazily moving around his desk.

"For what?" he asked, his normally soft voice hard with suspicion.

"With the whole rent-a-cop thing," she answered, strolling to meet him half way.

"Why would you feel obligated to thank me?" he asked, not a thread of humor in his voice. "The security guard ran into me, it was coincidental that at the same moment you were trying to escape from a man I can only assume you were stealing from."

She scoffed as she watched his fingers curl by his sides. "You're a terrible liar," she accused, giving him an insolent smile.

"Then I suppose that's simply one other thing that we don't have in common," he replied, his princely tone tinged with finality.

A rare sense of guilt settled into the pit of her stomach and she let the words sit between them for a minute as she openly glanced around the room. It had only been a few months since the last time she'd been this close to him but he seemed older, wearier like it had been a century since he had smiled.

"Why are you really here?" he asked, his voice surprisingly devoid of emotion. "What do you want?"
She couldn't help but stare back at him.

'That was the question wasn't it,' she thought.

She shrugged, noncommittally.

He nodded his head in defeat.

"I'm busy," he began. "And you know you're way out," he said, taking a step away from her as if her very presence offended him.

'And why wouldn't it,' asked a little voice. 'You just lied about the most horrific moment of his life.'

She'd half expected him to run straight to Gordon after that, to let the man know his star witness was nothing more than an opportunistic liar so she'd been very surprised that day in Barbra's apartment when Gordon had looked at her with confusion at her confession. Bruce could be funny like that, even with someone who had just ripped at his heart.

Swallowing against the sudden lump in her throat, she moved to walk past him. From the corner of her eye, she watched his lips thin as he took a step in her direction.

"See ya round, B," she said, stepping through the threshold.

"I'm glad to see you're not dead," he almost shouted at her retreating back, causing her to pause outside the door.

"What?" she asked, turning back to him.

"I said," he continued, taking another step in her direction and for just a fraction of a second, she saw his eyes narrow on her face with curiosity. "I'm glad to see you're not dead."

"Right backatcha, kid," she replied, turning to leave.

"Was it worth it?" he asked, his confusing question halting her exit once again.

Staring at the well manicured lawn ahead of her, she knew she should just keep going. It was the smart thing to do, get back to the city and maybe do some hunting before dinner, but when it came to Bruce, she rarely ever did the smart thing. Sighing, she stepped back into the room.

"Was 'what' worth it?" she asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Whatever you did to earn that," he asked, gesturing to the bruise along her cheekbone. She'd almost forgotten about it.

"Oh that," she asked, judging his degree of curiosity. "You aint got time to hear about that, you're busy remember."

"Say that I do…" he answered coyly. "Have the time," he said, taking another step toward her. "Would you tell me?"

"Depends," she answered, feeling him taking the bait that she hadn't intended to hook.

"Of course it does," he breathed deeply, clearly disappointed. "On what?"

"You finished with that?" she asked, gesturing to the untouched dinner Alfred had left him.
She watched his lips curl up at her answer. "It's yours," he said, offering it to her as he moved to sit on the couch.

"So are you going to tell me... The truth," he asked, gesturing to the empty place beside him but she ignored it taking the couch on the opposite wall.

"Well," she began, moving his plate in front of her as she grabbed a leg of chicken. "It was a good idea at the time."

Selina shook off the memory as she hopped down the hall miserable and breathless. Using the crutches left by her bedside, she managed to limp her way into the bathroom. Like everything else in this oversized house, the bathroom was huge, larger than some of the apartments she'd lived in as a kid and her eyes quickly and instinctively ran across every item in the steam filled room. In one corner a towel warmer had been filled with fluffy white towels, the vanity with toiletries and clothes, and against the far wall beside a frosted bay window sat a delightfully full claw footed tub steam subtly rising from its depths.

Looking down at the robe she'd been given, she sighed. Admittedly, it was a nice robe dark blue with the Wayne family crest over the left breast, but underneath all that soft cotton she could feel the grim clinging to her body and she wasn't even sure where to begin scrubbing it off.

Taking a deep breath and letting the warm air feel her lungs she decided to start with the body part that had been neglected the most. Actively avoiding the fog proof mirrors, she moved slowly to the sink and grabbed the unopened toothbrush. She made quick work of the box and paste her body naturally responding to such a natural routine. She rested her bruised hip against the waist high vanity as she brushed the nasty film from her teeth and continued to ignore the mirror as she spat mouth wash into the sink.

Ignoring her cracked lips and the pain in her cheeks, she couldn't but smile as she ran her tongue against her clean teeth.

*Just one more step to being civilized.*

She stripped off the old monogrammed robe, letting it fall uselessly to the ground as she glanced at the vanity tray. A couple of high end products littered the top, as if someone had haphazardly left them there. With her good hand she lifted an unwrapped bar of soap, a light green bar, to her nose. It smelled faintly of black hair and grey eyes, and she made a note to pocket it later. The other was pink but it smelled clean, no underlying scents or girly perfumes, and she placed it next to the tub. Shampoo and conditioner came next and after feeling the impossibly coarse matted clumps that used to be her curls she took all the bottles.

There were a few items that she didn't quite understand, bottles with oils and tiny crystals, so she left them unopened and where they were. Her eyes narrowed in confusion as she noticed a pair of scissors set among the shampoo and soap. Glancing down at her crusted sports bra and the crude stitches in her shoulder, realization dawned on her.

She breathed deeply, again letting more warmth flood her lungs as she stared down at her body. In that place it had never been warm enough to strip down to her underwear so she'd had to satisfy herself with just a whore's bath and now she was paying for it with the sores on her sides and back.

Selina shrugged in resignation and grabbed the scissors. Outside of her jacket, she wasn't attached to rest of her clothing and only felt a light satisfaction as she snipped the straps of her sports bra before she did the same with her panties. She gritted her teeth as she tried to peel away the fabric and after finally prying apart a stubborn bit of material that felt like it had melted to her skin she had to sit
down on the curb of the tub as a wave of dizziness washed over her.

Inhaling deeply, she opened her eyes and once again met the stitches in her shoulder. He had been aiming for her throat. She knew that instinctively, knew that he had had every intention to kill her. Holding up her hands, she saw her fingernails were cracked and still bloody around the beds. The nails on her right ring and middle were almost completely gone. Traveling down she barely acknowledged the shallow cuts in her arms as her eyes landed on the circular bruise against her wrist. There was something vaguely important about that bruise, but she couldn't quite remember…

Realization hit her like a punch to the gut.

Her bracelet.

Blinking her eyes against the sudden burning, she traced the thin purple and green line with her calloused fingers.

She'd lost her bracelet.

The only thing she had left of her mother and she had lost it.

She gritted her teeth as something akin to rage suddenly swept through her. No, she hadn't lost her mother's locket. It had been ripped from her. It had been ripped from her when that bastard had tackled her. Or maybe it had been when he had been choking her. Or maybe when she had…

She felt an inappropriate giggle at the back of her throat and quickly stopped it. If she started to laugh, if she choked on a cry, she was done for. They would just have to lock her up. Lock her up and throw away the key.

And she couldn't afford to lose it now.

Climbing into the bath, she nearly blacked out the moment her body hit the scalding water, all her cuts suddenly burning at on time. Immediately the water started to change shade, pink and brown swirling against each other.

The pain and smell of old blood were nearly overwhelming and she closed her eyes, but it didn't help. Despite herself, once again she was in that creek, once again that face loomed above her. Her eyes flew open in frustration.

She had never wanted to kill, had never wanted to take someone's life.

Sure, she had known that she could, survival was her constant companion, but…

Bile rose in her throat at the memory. She'd killed a man. Beat him with a rock. Beat him well after he was already dead. What she had done had gone well beyond self-defense. That had gone well into rage… That had gone into revenge.

She didn't regret what she'd done. Some small part of her, a tiny voice at the back of her mind, knew that she should but she couldn't drag up even the tiniest bit of remorse.

That bastard had gotten what he'd deserved and put in the same situation she would do it again. She'd only been defending herself, giving into her primal urge to survive.

But would the police see it that way? Would they even care? Would anyone?

Selina swallowed the movement painful in her bruised throat.
Her memories of the last few days were hazy, but there were fleeting images of a young man by her bed. At the time her mind had been too confused and exhausted to assign any significance to him, but now that she was rested she felt heat flood her cheeks.

She had only been truly conscious for a few hours, but already she needed to make a decision about Bruce Wayne. Undoubtedly the boy would be filled with a million questions. His mind would start running a dozen different theories from the bizarre to the boring and then he'd start trying to coax her for information right before he'd start to try and demand the answers. He was curious and stubborn, two traits that she normally enjoyed about his personality, but that was usually when they were being directed at someone else.

This was different.

A part of her wanted to tell him, wanted to unburden herself, but she knew she couldn't tell the boy, couldn't let him find out what she'd done. It would be too risky, his reaction too unpredictable. She couldn't even begin to guess how he would take the news that she had killed someone. Regrettably, he wasn't as naïve as he had been when they had first met. He was well aware that she was no angel, but taking a life was a far cry from thieving and instinctively she knew that that would be something he wouldn't take well.

He would insist that she go to the authorities; that she at least try to play by society's rules. After all this time, after everything that they had been through in the last two years, Bruce still believed in the system but more than that he still believed whole-heartedly in Jim Gordon.

At that thought, Selina drew her dirty knees up to her chest, wincing at the bruises and stiff muscles. It wasn't that she didn't trust Gordon for any particular reason. She didn't think he was inherently a bad guy, but she'd lived too long in Gotham to really trust anyone.

The GCPD had never really caught the people responsible for snatching up street kids. They were quick to clap themselves on the back for catching a couple of traffickers and shipping the remaining kids upstate to people who didn't want them. But they didn't really stop it. Bums had continued disappearing for at least a year after that. Why would this be any different?

All she would be doing is putting herself in the cross-hairs and for what? The bastard was dead. He wouldn't be hurting anyone else. He couldn't.

No, she couldn't tell Bruce. He would never understand.

She just had to play this close to the chest. She had to heal up. Get back home. Get back to Gotham.

Selina stared at the bed in front of her resisting the urge, the pull, to climb back in. Strangely, instead of invigorating her the warm bath had worn her out. She had wasted a lot of energy as she had scrubbed at her exposed skin, careful to avoid her open sores and the rough stitches in her shoulder, until her skin had turned pink.

By the time the water had grown cold around her, her head had begun to throb and her shoulder and ankle didn't feel much better. Painfully, she'd toweled off and quickly donned the clothes she'd seen earlier. They had looked like a set of the boy's old training clothes and as she had gingerly pulled the racer-back tank over her head she had been instantly enveloped in his scent.

Pulling the neck of the white top to her nose she inhaled the complex smell of leather couches and old books sprinkled with tea. Yes, that was definitely him.
Letting the collar fall back into place, she stared back at the bed. While she’d been bathing someone, presumably Alfred, had changed her sheets. Fresh linens were pulled tight across the mattress, just begging for someone to climb in and disturb their military neatness. For now she would have to be content with dumping her bathroom finds, unused soap, a pair of scissors and couple of rolls of fresh bandages, onto the duvet. The fire that had been dying in the fireplace when she’d left had been extinguished, and the lingering smell of burnt pine and clean cotton filled her senses. The thick curtains had been pulled back bathing the room in a muted grey light and by the degree of brightness she guessed it had to be sometime around midday.

Denying her urge to nap she turned to eye the only mirror in the room. Standing beside the unused wardrobe it was an expensive looking thing, a full length oval with too many ornate swirls framing it. Sighing, she limped to stand in front of it.

She gritted her teeth at the reflection that greeted her. From her aching muscles and the constant pain when she moved Selina had assumed that she probably didn't look great but the girl that stared back at her felt like a stranger.

The thick white straps didn't conceal much from the naked eye and Selina found herself absently roaming the exposed skin with her fingertips.

How had she not felt all of these?

The bruise that had kept her eye swollen for so long had now darkened half her face and purple and green fingerprints ringed her throat like a macabre collar. Her cheeks were too sharp and her lips were still pale and chapped, giving her an almost ghost like appearance.

She looked down at the stitches in her shoulder, the darkened skin around them flared out like a purple starburst against an impossibly pale canvas. The low neckline of her top exposed the severity of her collarbone and the bruises that resulted in being tackled onto a creek bed from twenty feet high.

Her eyes moved back to the top of her head. She had been careful not to wet her stitches when she had washed away all the blood and mud from her hair. She had painstakingly rinsed and rinsed until the water had run clear, but despite her ministrations and using both bottles of conditioner, her seemingly thinning hair was still a mess. The tangled locks were mixed with the matted curls that stuck out from her head. It would take forever to comb out.

Fuck that.

The pain in her ankle forgotten she moved toward the bed mindlessly snatching the scissors out of the pile. Dazedly, she grabbed a loose piece from her nape wrapping the curl around two fingers before she cut it away. It came loose with relative ease, and the released tension sent the side of her head banging into her bad shoulder. Pain shot through her like a slap and she stared down at the curl just lying in her freshly bandaged palm.

What in the hell was she doing?

Angry and confused she dropped the scissors and the useless lock of hair onto her bed, before she reached for the zippered grey hoodie she'd left there. She couldn't continue reacting so irrationally.

And chopping your hair off because of a few knots definitely counted as irrational.

The heavy pound of footfalls pulled her from her thoughts and she quickly pulled on her jacket. She narrowed her eyes at the squeaky screech of a rubber sole coming up short.
She had barely flicked the hood up on her jacket when the door was flung open. Dark eyes shot to the doorknob in his hand as if he had just remembered that he had forgotten to knock. Blinking, he stepped into the room.

He was in his training clothes, his black jacket zipped all the way to the collar and bits of snow and mud clung to the matching bottoms. His normally perfect hair was mussed the black locks sticking up at angles as if he had just pulled a hat off. His cheeks were flushed, beads of sweat slowly dripping from his temples and jaw line and his chest rose and fell too rapidly, as if he had run too far too fast.

Her stomach clenched as she stared at him. Despite his wealth and his intelligence, Bruce Wayne wasn't an overwhelming human being and she had thought that she'd prepared herself to see him. But standing here with him, seeing him in the flesh, something suddenly clawed at her.

She felt older, a thousand years older. So many things had happened, so many terrible things that it felt like she hadn't seen him in years. It was crazy but a part of her wanted to touch him, be near him, wanted to breathe him in, but her little voice warned her away. She'd already told herself that she was going not going to do anymore irrational things.

"Sel-ina," he breathed. "Alfred said-" he gulped in air. "You're awake."

She felt her chapped lips curl and her eyebrow quirked up at his voice and the look of relief on his normally sullen face.

"Take a breath kid."

His dark eyebrows drew together at the unusual sound of her voice. The tone was even foreign to her own ears, deep and scratchy, like she'd eaten a handful of gravel.

At the sudden reminder of why she was here, an unfamiliar pang of uncertainty ran through her and she almost turned from him. She could feel his gaze on her, taking in her appearance with his critical eye, and she felt the need to zip up her hoodie. Some part of her knew that it shouldn't feel this uncomfortable with Bruce. She had never minded his attention before, but she remembered that there was nothing appreciative in his eyes. And she suddenly realized that she felt something that she rarely ever felt around Bruce. Awkward.

His breathing under control, he stepped fully into the room, but left the door open behind him. His manners having finally broken through whatever urgency he had felt before. Swallowing, she watched him finger comb his hair down, the dark locks magically falling back into place. Still when he spoke, she could hear hesitancy in his tone. "Um- how're you feeling?"

She felt her lids lower at his question. Silly boy.

"Not great," she admitted, glad to hear her voice beginning to normalize.

He lowered his head a fraction, but she saw his lip twitch to one side at her answer.

"I'm hungry though," she continued.

"Oh, of course you are," he stated, his voice sounding uncharacteristically dazed as if he should have already thought of that. His dark gaze moved to the opened curtains and she could feel his apprehension. "It's past breakfast," he explained, quickly. "But I'm sure Alfred wouldn't mind making an exception-"

She half snorted at his suggestion. "It's cool, B," she said, shrugging a shoulder as she reached to
grab some of the things she'd left on the bed. "Don't bother the old man, I'll get it myself, I know where you keep your food."

"No," he said firmly and she turned on her good foot in time to see him staring at her injured ankle. At her movement his dark eyes shot up to hers. "There's no need for that, I can have something brought up for you."

"I'm not an invalid," she argued, feeling a mixture of annoyance and begrudging gratitude. "I can take care of myself."

"I understand that," he answered, his voice grave. "But there is no point to causing yourself any undue stress," he continued. "Or pain," he added, his eyes drifting to her shoulder.

At his tone and the look in his eyes she felt the air in the room starting to grow heavy. Serious Bruce was a very hard animal to control. If she could keep him on his toes, annoyed but playful, she might be able to avoid having to answer any of the questions she was sure were floating around in that overstuffed mind of his.

Lightly tossing the bar of soap that she had in her hand onto the bed. She tilted her head at him a motion that always seemed to grab his attention.

"What if I just want out of this powder-puff of a room?" she asked, playfully sneering and using her good hand to display the room around her in a mocking gesture. "It's like being trapped in some cartoon princess's dream."

At her casual observation he took a step closer to her, his brows drawing together and for once she almost stepped away from him. His dark gaze openly studied her face, like when he was looking at a nearly impossible puzzle and she brought her chin up in answer. Recognition and some unreadable emotion flickered over his face, and suddenly the anxious look in his eyes disappeared replaced by a calm resignation.

"Very well," he said, a shade of determination in his clenched jaw. "I'll make us an early lunch."

She felt a moment of confusion at the change in his temperament followed by surrealism at his sudden suggestion. "You?" she asked, unable to keep the disbelief and cynicism from her voice.

If it was possible his cheeks flushed more as he brought his chin up. "I am more than capable of making a simple sandwich, Selina."

Her lip lightly curled at his answer. "Alright, kid."

Chapter End Notes

Constructive Criticism always welcome.
Duplicity Part 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bruce

Comparative to the scale of his house, the kitchen was and had always been surprisingly small. He could only assume this was because it was built at a time that kitchens were meant for cooks and servants and not much else. Years of remodeling by both his parents and his grandparents had left it with a rustic charm, like something a far-fetched movie producer would imagine a French farmhouse to look like. However, even on the brightest of days, little light penetrated past the large Wayne crest that emblazoned each white paneled window that lined the wall over the farmhouse sink and more for looks than practicality, the wood burning stove.

Today was no different. It was almost past midday, and the daily snow shower that was so frequent this time of year was swirling around, casting shadows against the stained-glass windows. Bruce glanced at the rhythm-less darkness, then to the clock hanging by the door, then to the man standing by the high-lipped sink.

Despite boasting of his sandwich making skills, though if he was being honest he tended to cut the bread too thick, Bruce had nearly been overwhelmed when he had finally gotten into the kitchen. It was not that he did not know how to cook, he understood the mechanics and science of it, but some things just baffled him. There was too little structure and too much instinct involved in making anything. He had been in the midst of analyzing the instructions on the back of a soup can when Alfred had found him.

At first, he had been reluctant to accept his butler's help- he was at least trying to be more independent- but then Alfred had pointed out that the tremor in his hands meant he would probably end up with one less finger than he had started out with this morning so he had conceded.

Bruce did not see himself as having a particularly nervous disposition, but after his encounter with Selina that morning he could not quite still the energy that seemed to be shooting through his body. He felt shaky and bruised and something else that he could not quite work out yet.

Half aware, he had watched as Alfred had moved around the kitchen, chopping up winter vegetables, tossing things together, adding spices that didn't quite make sense to him. Completely confident in his tasks, his guardian had been talking the whole time, giving him advice on how to care for Selina. He knew he should have been listening, should have been taking the words to heart, but he could not get the sight of her out of his mind.

It was not just her appearance that had left his usual self-control fissured; it was the edge of anxiety he had felt the last few weeks, the concern over the blizzard that had nearly wrecked the city, and even the fact that his daily run had somehow exhausted him without putting him at ease. It was everything.

The dry heat from the stove was making the kitchen grow uncomfortably warm bordering on oppressive. Pushing up the thin sleeves of his sweater to his elbows and wiping the sweat from his brow he tried to focus on Alfred's usually pleasant voice, but it seemed to be lost among the sharp clang of the pans, and the gentle sizzle of meat in the iron skillet.
Frowning down at the wooden table in front of him, Bruce tried to take stock of the symptoms he had grown so well acquainted with over the last two years: shallow breaths, lump in his throat, the over stimulation...

Taking a deep breath from his stomach, he ordered his body to center itself.

_Inhale._

_One, two, three._

_Exhale._

_One. Two. Three. Four._

_Inhale._

_Exhale._

He was pulled from his thoughts as Alfred set down the last tray of food, a pie of some kind filled with chicken and vegetables. He had not known what Selina might be hungry for, but if memory served him well, she would eat just about anything.

"You're sure you don't need me to stay," the older man asked, casually cuffing one wrist behind his back, in a strictly military gesture.

Bruce gave him a grim smile. "I think we both can safely assume that Selina wouldn't care very much for the company," he answered, looking back down at the food spread out. It was beginning to look more like a feast than a light lunch. "I'll be okay, Alfred. I can handle the situation," he said not feeling as confident as his tone lead on.

"Well, it's not really the _situation_ I'm worried about, sir."

Bruce narrowed his eyes as he looked back up at his butler. Alfred was staring back at him his lined face and calm blue eyes leaving no doubt to his thoughts.

"I can handle Selina," he said, his voice flat.

Alfred's normally stoic expression broke on a scoff, and Bruce felt his eyes narrow further, but the older man quickly made a valiant effort to cover his laugh behind a cough.

His cheeks began to burn and he involuntarily clenched his jaw. It was not that he did not understand Alfred's concern, he did, but that did not mean he had to appreciate it.

It seemed that in every other aspect of his life that Alfred rarely tried to shield him from the harshness of the 'real' world. In training, the man had nearly broken his nose and knocked him down more times then Bruce could count. There were the times he had made Bruce confront bullies, attend parties he didn't want to and talk to people that had made his skin crawl. All in the name of toughening him up.

However when it came to a certain green-eyed girl, Alfred took up his sword and shield as if Selina Kyle was some kind of mythical dragon and not a ninety pound teenage girl. Alfred acted as if given the opportunity she would eat him alive, that her very presence would irrevocably break something inside him. As if when it came to her, Bruce had neither the walls nor the skills to deal with such a complicated matter.
Even now, Alfred had found the idea that Bruce thinking he could "handle her" was... comical.

He could not help but feel the insult burning through him.

Alfred must have recognized the look on his face because he quickly sobered, visibly clearing his throat as if for good measure.

"Do you really think you can get her to tell you what happened?"

"No," he admitted. "But I have to try."

"And if you fail?"

He sighed. "I don't know."

He felt Alfred's gaze on him, but he did not need to look up to know it was a look of concern. 'I don't know' was not a phrase he applied to a situation lightly.

"Very well then, will that be all, sir?"

He glanced over the food that Alfred had set for them. "Yes, thank you, Alfred."

Alfred moved toward the door, but paused before he opened it. "Remember what I told you," he said.

"I will."

Listening to his butler's fading footsteps, his eyes unwittingly moved to the slow moving clock in the corner. He sighed at the time. It had been nearly three hours since he had left Selina. In that same stretch of time he had showered, found a change of clothes, and watched a man cook an entire meal and she had not even made it down the stairs.

He understood he had to be patient with her and to remind himself that she did things in her own time, but where was she? Hadn't it been her idea to eat an early lunch or had that just been an excuse to get rid of him? Maybe it wasn't her fault, she could have overestimated herself. He knew from experience that her ankle had to be aching and that bruise on the side of her face looked like the promise of a potential migraine. Or maybe she'd simply changed her mind about eating in her room?

He bit into his bottom lip. He felt twelve years old again, just like he had that first day when had sat all morning in his study, waiting in vain for her to come down to breakfast. He had been so filled with nervous energy, his hands had shaken as he had tried to drink his orange juice and come up with something to talk to her about. But she had never shown up and he had been forced to shove a couple spoonfuls of cereal into his mouth before Alfred had brought him outside for his first boxing lesson.

He looked over the food on the table feeling a sense of disappointment beginning to mix with his anxiety as the little light from outside began to dim.

Maybe Alfred was right.

Maybe when it came to her, he really was in way over his head.

Because when he had opened that door to her room and seen her standing there, pale eyes wide open and finally aware. He had wanted to go to her; he had wanted to wrap his arms around her and to feel her breathe. If for nothing more than to prove to himself that she was real, she was here, and she
was alive. Really alive, not in that half-conscious state she had been struggling through the last few days. However, he had fought that unnecessary urge. There was a chance she may not have balked, may have even welcomed his embrace but the odds were too great and he could not take that risk.

It had been almost three years since Detective Gordon had shown up at their door with a grim smile and a proposition. When the Detective had informed him that he had found a witness to his parent's murder, Bruce had felt a combative mixture of cynicism and optimism. He had been told it was a girl, a thief not much older than himself that had somehow seen the killers face before he had donned his disguise. As he had looked down at the composite sketch in his hands he had felt his insides turning over, his thoughts moving too fast and he knew that he was going to be sick.

He had tried to think of something, anything else to focus all of his useless energy on. He could not remember if had asked or if Detective Gordon had offered, but at just the sound of her name he had felt something, a distinctive twinge like a distant memory had been knocked loose in his mind. Heat had colored his cheeks and shame had flooded him, shame that someone had seen everything, seen his fear and his cowardice as he had stood frozen in that alley.

Anger had always been easier to deal with than shame and Alfred's fierce objections had finally brought him around. The decision to have her live with him had been easy. He could provide for her, food and shelter, buy her new clothes if she needed them. He had more than enough; it would only be fair to share some of it especially with the person who could help him give his parents justice. Surely being brave enough to come forward should be rewarded.

That day he had finally felt something positive beginning to take root in his chest, things that he later recognized as hope and purpose. He had felt so much lighter as he had taken the corner from the dimly lit study into the sunny back hall. He had been feeling more optimistic than he had since before his parents… Well, he refused to think about that.

He remembered he had needed to be on top of his game. He had never been good with children his own age and he didn't think that being from a world so far removed from his own would change that, but he would try to find them common ground.

*Normalcy*. That would be the behavior he strived to emulate.

When he had entered the hall and had seen her manhandling that centuries old vase, he had not been able to believe his luck. Despite his youth new acquaintances had always been presented to him. At such a young age, it had been a strange practice but his father had believed that the reverse in etiquette would help Bruce to grow more comfortable with the power and the responsibility that he would have one day. It was such naked introductions that had worried him, but with her back to him, her fingers on his mother's vase he had found the perfect topic of conversation.

But then she had turned around and thought had fled him.

In hindsight, he knew he must have looked like an idiot, but he had been dumbfounded. Curious green eyes and a curling but generous mouth had stared at him from a Cossack face and something inside him felt like it was clicking into place. She had looked back at him with an all too familiar amusement, as if she knew him, as if she had always known him.

It took him a moment to mentally shake free from his shock. Of course she had seen him before. She had been there that night. She had seen everything.

He had been talking. He knew he had been saying something but he could not quite remember what it was.
*Normal,* he had reminded himself. *Act normal.*

People had told him that wealth could impress and intimidate but he had every intention to dispel that, to make her feel comfortable. Judging by the look she had given his outstretched hand, he doubted Selina Kyle had ever been impressed or intimidated by anything.

A sharp pain and the taste of salt and copper on his tongue made Bruce shove the memories to the back of his mind. Reaching up, his fingers found the evidence that he had bitten too hard into his bottom lip. It had already been too dry from his earlier run and his nervous habit had not done it any favors.

He heard the disturbance of air and dropped his hand as the object of his thoughts hobbled into the kitchen, the majority of her weight leaning against a crutch. He had not remembered seeing the crutch in her room, but he had not really noticed anything beyond the pale figure of his friend. Even now, he felt the need to relegate his breathing.

Despite Alfred's care giving and the bath that she had so desperately needed she still looked wane and miserable. Her usually thick hair had begun to dry, the now fine pale locks curling softly around her too thin face. The clothes he and Alfred had found for her were far from stylish but he knew that they would be soft and comfortable. Two things he assumed she would need right now. The old knit sweaters, the zippered hoodies, and the jogging pants would have been a little roomy for her before but now she seemed to be overwhelmed by the material.

Sighing deeply, she ignored him, her eyes darting to the high windows on her left and the wine cellar door behind him. He couldn't help a tight lipped smile as he recognized her habit of always planning for a break. Her instincts were right, there was a way out down there, a special wine rack that pulled the right way swung into reveal an old oak door, but Selina had no way of knowing that.

The windows were her next target, but he had foreseen that and had put just enough obstacles between her and the window to make it uncomfortable but not impossible for her to escape if she wanted. Physically he had outgrown her, but he was not naïve enough to think he could ever match her ruthlessness. Everything had to be her choice, he could not even risk the illusion that it wasn't. Making her feel trapped would accomplish nothing.

She was still wearing the same grey sweatpants he had seen on her earlier, but had somehow pulled on of his old knit sweaters over the plain racerback. The sleeves were a touch too long but he noted the dark cuffs pulled intentionally to the tips of her fingers. It was a nervous habit of hers, one of the very few he had observed.

"This all for me," she said her voice rough as her head nodded to the food that was spread across the table. It was not really a question and Bruce could not help but grin.

He felt a familiar disappointment as she unceremoniously took the chair on the other end of the table. She swung her injured foot up, plopping it rudely onto one of the empty chairs. Leaning over, she wasted no time filling her plate with some of the different foods Alfred had left out for them.

"It's nothing fancy," he explained, his voice sounding too loud in the unused room. He cleared his throat. "I'm sure dinner will be better."

"I'll do," she said. Her eyes still on her lunch plate as she grabbed a warm croissant.

For several moments the only sound in the room was the harsh metallic scrap of silver on porcelain and porcelain on wood as she noisily served herself and scooped the food from her plate. The familiar sound did nothing to loosen the sudden knot in his stomach.
"How're you feeling?" he asked, watching her take a very un-lady like bite from a triangle-halved sandwich.

"Hungry," she said lightly, through a mouthful of bread and meat.

Watching her chew so unguardedly, he remembered there was something Alfred had told him, but could not quite remember what it was. Leaning back in his chair, he studied her for a moment. The purple and yellow of her cheek, the finger sized bruises around her neck and even though he could not see it now, his mind's eye supplied the damage along her shoulder.

He almost jumped as he heard her fork hit the table with a terrible clatter.

She was staring at him from across the wooden table.

"What?" she asked, her voice was hoarse and unexpectedly patient.

"Nothing," he responded, the word automatic.

Her good eye narrowed as if she hadn't expected that response, but she gave him a half-grin. "Then why're you looking at me like that?"

Her response was so light so playfully curious he almost forgot why he had been staring at her in the first place.

"I just-" He suddenly felt confused.

She ignored his answer, looked pointedly at his empty plate, and lifted a single winged brow, the same brow that he had wiped blood from not a week ago. "You aint gonna eat?" she asked.

"Not at the moment," he answered.

"Suit yourself," she said, ignoring him again.

He exhaled as he watched her shove another forkful of food into her mouth. He knew she had been on a steady diet of broth and morphine for the last two days and if she did not slow down then she was likely to make herself sick. He swallowed again, Alfred's advice on the tip of tongue.

"Selina."

"Bruce," she countered, her eyes not leaving the food on her plate.

Bruce felt his eyes narrow. There was something odd in the way she was eating, a certain single mindedness as if she had not just gone days without food but weeks. His gaze moved to the shadows beneath her cheeks and down to the sharpness of her collarbone. He remembered all too clearly the sickening feel of her spine against his chest and the sharp cut of her ribs against his arms as she had laid there half-dead.

Breathing deeply, he placed his clasped hands on the table. "How are you…? Really?"

"You've been asking me that a lot lately," she said, tilting her head to the side and for a moment her eyes narrowed and widened on an almost grimace. "I told you I'm fine."

"You've been gone a month," he barked, and quickly checked his tone knowing it sounded like an accusation.

Her fork stopped midway to her mouth before she slowly took a bite and he knew instantly that he
had changed her mood. Chewing slowly she balanced the fork, tines down, on her plate before she let it drop. He resisted the urge to clinch his fists as her lids lowered over her eyes like a lazy viper coiling in on itself. "I didn't know I was supposed to report to you."

"I wasn't saying that. I just-" he asked, feeling exasperated. "Where have you been?"

"Here and there," she said, not taking her eyes from him. He watched as her freshly bandaged fingers slid further into the cuff of his jacket. The tell would've been unreadable if he hadn't been looking for it. "Mostly there."

He saw the subtle flicker of her eyes moving from his mouth and suddenly he tasted the salt from his fresh cut and quickly stopped chewing on his already abused lip.

"What happened to you?" he asked.

"This and that," she answered, leaning back in her chair. Her green eyes coolly assessing him and Bruce could feel heat beginning to climb into his cheeks. "What happened to you?" she accused, sneering at his appearance. "You're startin' to look kinda like a half-starved vampire."

The insult didn't hurt, but he knew it wasn't designed to. If Selina had really wanted to, she could strike him hard, but that's not what this was about. She was verbally dodging him, using her words to intentionally confuse him. It was nothing more than a verbal deflection.

"Do you think this is funny?"

She scoffed, "Not particularly."

He exhaled audibly and watched her eyes move lazily around the room. There was something slightly feverish in her gaze and her cheeks that had been so rosy earlier seemed to be draining of color.

"You are being quiet flippant about all of this," he said, as she absently grabbed another piece of potato. "Alfred advised me to go to the authorities-"

"And d'you?" she snapped, her green eyes suddenly sharp.

"No," he explained, feeling his temper beginning to rise. "Not yet. I told him that I wanted to give you the opportunity to explain this to us."

"Us?" she asked her good brow arching as she reached for her discarded fork.

"Yes, us," he answered. "Alfred saved your life Selina. I believe he deserves the right to know from what."

She exhaled deeply through her nose, her chin lifting, as she looked him in the eye. Her head was lightly bobbing, a deceptively lazy motion, but he had known her long enough to know what it meant. She was stalling, composing herself, struggling to come up with a believable lie.

"Lookit," she began, pulling her foot down as she sat up straighter in the chair. Her posture mirroring his own. "I got in an accident, okay," she explained, shrugging her uninjured shoulder and stabbing a piece of meat with her fork before shoveling it into her mouth. "I jacked a car and…" She swallowed motioning to herself.

"Car accident?" he asked, not trying to disguise the disbelief in his voice.
"Yeah," she deadpanned. "Car accident."

Something very close to rage shot through him at the blatant lie and Bruce exhaled to keep his temper in check. It was unfair to place the blame squarely on her shoulders, when he was not sure who he was angrier with Selina or himself.

He was not sure why he had assumed that she would do this the easy way? In the entirety that he had known her, she had never done anything easy. She always told him that she didn't intentionally go looking for trouble, that trouble just had a way of finding her, but a person didn't strike up alliances with the seedy underbelly of Gotham because it was good for their health. The evidence to that was glaring back at him from the bruise on her face.

He had planned to be patient, to be calm and in control, but he had known since those first few minutes that he had spent with her in that room that he was going to have to be the rational one. He knew he should be, but nothing could stop his temper from rising, from that instinctual need to try and get the truth from her.

It was counterproductive, this thing they did, no matter what noble intentions of control he had planned, he was always compelled to let that control slip. And before he knew what was happening, his nails would be digging into his palms and Selina would be giving him her back as she walked away.

She can't walk away now, he reminded himself.

"I don't believe you."

"And who said, I needed you to believe me," she countered, her chin raised stubbornly. She shook her head, the frustrated movement sending a golden brown curl across her bruised eye. "Look, why are you so upset about this? It was only a month."

"Because, you almost died," he argued.

"I've almost died half-a-dozen times! What makes this time special?"

He was utterly still as he stared back at her, letting the weight of that outrageous declaration settle between them.

"Do you really have so little regard for your own life?"

"Just the opposite," she answered, her lip curling on the undamaged side of her face. "I have nothing but regard for my own life."

He looked away from her, with no intention of pointing out that her statement had made absolutely no sense, because he assumed that had been her objective.

"Then do you really have so little regard for the people who care about you?" he asked, his voice low.

She gave an offended laugh. "That's rich, Bruce," she accused.

Confused, his brows furrowed. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"How many times have people asked you? No, begged you to stop all your digging. All your investigating," she mocked. "Huh? How many times, B?"
He felt something cold sliding into the pit of his stomach. "That's different," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Of course it is." she said, sneering. Her eyes slowly drifting away from his.

"It is," he reassured her, feeling his palms beginning to sweat and his breath quicken. She might not care about what had happened to her on his study floor, but that didn't mean he had to. "You've never thought I was going to die."

She didn't reply and he looked up at her pale face.

"It wasn't just me, Selina. You thought you were going to die," he paused, hoping his words soaked into her. "I could see it in your face and there was nothing I could do to help you. So please don't act like this was nothing."

Despite his manners, he hadn't looked away from her. For one moment, her eyes were shimmering, pale and blood shot and he could see her lips moving ready to form words.

He felt encouraged. "Selina, the person that did this to you-"

Something foreign slipped into her gaze as her good hand clamped over her mouth. Before her could stand, she had shot to her feet so fast her chair fell back with a clatter and she clumsily moved around the tight space. At first he worried she was going for the windows, was going to try to escape him, but as he quickly stood, prepared to physically restrain her if he needed to, the sound of retching reached his ears.

Closing his eyes, he finally remembered what it was that Alfred had warned him about.

Chapter End Notes

Constructive Criticism is always welcome.

Sorry, I had to cut this chapter in to three parts. I am also very sorry for taking so long to update. This was a hard one for me, but I have no excuses, just apologies to anyone still following this story.

A HUGE thank you to anyone who has/had/or is still reading or interested in this story. You guys don't know how much your words mean and that you really give me inspiration to keep writing. Again, thank you so much!

Also: I know I already have a few fics to catch up on, but if anyone has any Bat/Cat fic recommendations I would love to hear of them.
Selina

Spitting into the sink, Selina glanced toward the door. The sight of the empty threshold left her somewhere between relief and dejection.

He was gone.

_Good._

However, she couldn’t deny the small amount of disappointment riding beside her humiliation. Feeling the sudden cramping of her stomach, she heaved unable to keep the taste of sick and bile from burning her mouth. Suddenly, from her peripheral she watched a hand shoot out, turning on the tap. She shivered as she felt calloused fingertips brush the hair at her nape.

She felt something cold and wet against the back of her neck and her fingertips brushed the terrycloth material of a soaked kitchen rag. Looking down, she caught the tips of black shoes and the stiff cuffs of dark grey trousers.

“When I got sick my mom… She used to do this…” Bruce trailed off as if that would explain everything.

Not trusting herself to open her mouth she nodded at him as she rested her head on the lip of the sink.

“Is it helping?”

She nodded again, the movement causing her to suffer another dull pain in her head.

The cold rag against her neck was shocking and yet somehow whatever he had done was working. Her head was still aching, but the nausea was slowly disappearing by degrees.

She could imagine his grey eyes growing dark as he stared at the blunted ends of her missing hair. But for once he didn’t question her, didn’t ask any useless questions. He only stood there, his scent suddenly invading her space. She expected the sudden smell to send her reeling again but it didn’t and that made her even more agitated.

She exhaled slowly but could still feel the ominous cramp in her stomach and coughed to keep the sick down. She could feel him stiffen beside her and she would’ve sworn if she could have.

Emptying her stomach was painful but quick and Selina was proud of herself as she resisted the buckling of her knees. She just wanted to curl up on the floor; feel the cold kitchen tile against her skin. She could feel her eyes burning. Her vision beginning to blur as the tears began to pool, but she refused let them fall. She had humiliated herself in front of the kid enough, than to commit that
She gritted her teeth, letting out a shaky breath. She couldn’t be doing this right now. She couldn’t be hurling up her first good meal in recent memory and having Bruce freaking Wayne standing beside her as she did it.

If he tried to rub her back, she might be compelled to punch him in the gut. Giving in, she rested her head against the cool basin physically寻求ing a moments reprieve from her body’s revolt.

Her body should be done with this!

She should be done with this.

She hadn’t died. She’d survived. She was healing. She had literally made it out of the woods. So why wouldn’t her body just do what she wanted it to do. Why was it treating her like a stranger?

He must’ve thought it was safe cause she heard the squeak of the tap as he turned off the water.

“Just… Stay here.”

“Where tha hell ya’ think I’m gonna go kid,” she snapped, her words losing their edge with her shaking breath.

Teeth chattering she glared up at him. For a moment, his face blurred, but she could see it had gone white and read the concern in his eyes.

“I’m going to get Alfred.”

Pushing her hair back with one hand, she spit into the sink as she listened to the dulled footsteps of his retreat. Her eyelids felt heavy, her thighs shaking from the effort of standing.

She had known from the moment that the boy had stepped into her room that this was not going to end well. She had barely sat down to eat when he had started in with the questions. Questions. Questions. Questions. The boy always had so many freaking questions. His curiosity was freaking insatiable. No matter how polite he tried to be it always came out like an interrogation.

“I had nowhere else to go!” she had wanted to shout. “Is that what you wanna to hear?

“You wanna hear that I spent four weeks in a concrete box, because I was stupid and desperate enough to follow the wrong mark down the wrong alley? Wanna hear about how some crazy asshole was hunting me? Woulda killed me, if I hadn’t bashed his fucking face in!”

She felt her stomach roll again at the thought. No, she couldn’t start thinking about that again. She had to keep her head straight.

Bruce had once told her that to win at chess, you had to remember your end game, you had to think ahead, well ahead. Now, she just had to stay ahead of him.

It wasn’t that she enjoyed lying to the kid, but if lying meant no more questions and more importantly no cops than she had every intention to lie where she could and smile where she couldn’t.

The truth was that there were parts missing. She wasn’t exactly sure how she’d gotten here. She could remember the feel of the rock in her hand and the blood on her face, but try as she might she couldn’t quite pin the rest of that night down. Memories of her escape came to her in only flashes. Images of snow against headlights and black trees against the night sky. She couldn’t remember
when she had gotten here or even how? Had they found her wandering around or had she come here on her own? The worst part was that if he caught her in a lie, he would never drop it and she would be forced to run and she wasn’t ready to run. Not yet.

The lapse in her memory should have bothered her more. She knew that, but her head was pounding so bad, the feeling of dizziness so intense she couldn’t bring herself to care.

She just wanted to curl up, to sleep, to forget about all of this for a little while.

It was a long moment before Selina felt steady enough to reach for a chair. Exhausted, eyes closed, she blindly dragged the chair closer, but when the sound of its feet scrapping across the floor barely reached her ears, she knew she probably wasn’t going to be conscious for much longer.

The first thing she recognized as she made her way back to consciousness was the jarring thud as someone readjusted their grip on her. She clenched her teeth against a groan at the now familiar pain in her shoulder as it bumped into something solid. Her head was still throbbing but fortunately the somersaults her stomach had been doing seemed to have finally stopped.

Against her better judgment, she opened her eyes wide enough to see a silver hairline and the collar of a black vest. Her cheek was pressed against the top of Alfred’s shoulder, his light aftershave tickling her nose. It wasn’t a particularly unpleasant scent, but at the moment it wasn’t doing her head or her stomach in favors.

“You couldn’t have upset the girl upstairs, Master Bruce,” Alfred asked, his voice strained. “She’s a good deal heavier than she looks.”

“I didn’t upset her,” Bruce answered, his tone irritated. “And I highly doubt she is that much of a burden.”

The man carrying her paused, hefting her weight against his chest.

“Then you can carry her up three flights of stairs next time,” Alfred snapped.

She wanted to lift her head. She wanted to order him to put her down. She wanted to tell him and Bruce that she could walk just fine…

But she couldn’t.

She couldn’t even muster the energy to lie to herself.

The sudden feeling of helplessness made her cheeks warm and her jaw clench. She was being carried by a freaking butler and there wasn’t a damn thing she could do about it. Exhaling, she reluctantly let her eyes drift shut but she refused to give into sleep.

“I told you it was too much,” Alfred said, his rough voice almost breathless.

From her position cradled against his chest and shoulder, she couldn’t see Bruce but she could recognize that particular sigh in the dark.

“I know,” he replied, sounding resigned. “I tried to tell her… I thought…”

“I believe your exact words were that you could ‘handle her,’” Alfred said, a cheeky lilt to his non-question.
She felt her lip curl at the corners. Handle her?

Bruce made a small self-depreciating sound and she could imagine him biting into that bruised lip of his. “Yes, well we both knew that was a bluff.”

“Clearly,” the older man replied. “If you would’ve asked me-”

“I didn’t,” Bruce cut him off and she could not help but feel a tinge of disappointment. She would’ve really liked to hear what Alfred had to say about that, but neither spoke again.

“Get the curtains,” Alfred ordered as he stepped into the room. Behind her lids she could hear the sound of fabric against a rod as the room grew darker.

The room smelled clean and she was thankful for the fresh sheets. She would’ve opted to sleep on the floor if she would have been forced back between those old bedclothes. The stench of sweat and blood alone would’ve had her stumbling to the nearest toilet.

“Finally,” she muttered, letting Alfred know she was awake.

“Never do make things easy, do you Miss Kyle?” Alfred asked, carrying her to the bed.

She felt that overwhelming sense of self-disgust at her current state of dependency as he laid her on the bed. Inhaling, she wrestled for control. She could do this. She could play her part.

“Oh for you,” she replied, keeping an appropriate measure of playfulness in her tone.

“Cheeky, girl,” he said, laying her gently down before his attention moved to the nightstand beside her bed.

A pillow beneath her head, she moved to curl on her side, but Alfred stopped her with a gentle pull on her shoulder.

“No, not quite, Miss Kyle,” he said regretfully. “I just have to be sure about a couple of things and then I’ll let you sleep for as long as you want.”

Unable to stop herself, she groaned but reluctantly sat up. Bruce had been right about one thing, if Alfred had saved her life, she supposed she owed him something.

“Now, this is going to hurt,” he flashed the pen light in her eye. The warning did nothing to quell her response or the sharp pain that shot through her head. He made no apology, no sound as he reached for her wrist, his fingers against her pulse point as he read the face of his watch.

She looked over his shoulder at Bruce.

Unexpectedly, she felt his fingers pushing against the collar of her sweater and she pulled away as if he had burned her.

“Your shoulder,” he explained, gesturing to the injury that was beginning to ache.

She nodded her head, gritting her teeth as he moved the collar of her jacket to inspect her wound. She jumped against a sudden wave of nausea as he prodded around.

“What the hell?” she snapped, unable to keep the anger out of her voice.
“Smarts doesn’t it?” Alfred asked, unfazed by neither her tone nor her words. His thick brows suddenly drew together as he pushed the collar of the sweater completely off her shoulder exposing her stitches and the line of sores that had developed along her old bra-strap line. He poked at one, causing her to clench her fist at the itchy pain, and his eyes suddenly snapped up meeting hers as if he had just been given a news report that he hadn’t wanted to hear.

Uncomfortable but refusing to break such an intense gaze, she sat back into her pillow feeling her own eyes beginning to narrow as she purposefully yanked the collar and sleeve back into place.

“Would you rather I leave?” asked a hoarse voice from behind Alfred.

She heard Alfred sigh, his blue eyes dropping away first, but not fast enough that she could deny the pity that she had read in them. “It’s nothing you haven’t seen before, Master Bruce,” he answered, standing and moving away from the bed.

Selina watched him wearily until his words began to sink in. She felt her eyes widen in curiosity and amusement as her gaze quickly moved from Alfred to Bruce. If it was possible his wide eyes looked nearly black in his flushed face.

Bruce

“I-I helped Alfred,” he explained quickly. “When we first found out you. You-you had hypothermia so…”

Selina had that tickle in her laugh that meant she was laughing at him and not with him.

“Chill B,” she said her voice barely above a whisper. “It’s fine.”

She leaned back looking up toward the ceiling as Alfred began prodding at her ankle. She jerked away letting out a shaky breath as he tried to rotate it.

“Be honest, Miss Kyle,” Alfred ordered. “How bad?”

She stared back at him, her pale eyes as defiant as ever.

“Right,” he began, in a tone that Bruce was overly familiar with. “If you don’t tell me, I won’t give you anything to make it go away. Now,” he paused grabbing her bad ankle. “How bad?”

“Like hell,” she admitted.

He expected a half-gloating quip or at least a self-satisfied smirk from Alfred, an acknowledgement that he had forced Selina Kyle to admit to something, but his face was grim as he reached for the medicine bag that he had been keeping by her bedside.

Alfred sighed. “Judging by what the two of you told me, I can only assume that what happened downstairs came from your appetite and that knock you took to the head.

“I’ve already told Master Bruce, and so now I’m telling you. Stay in bed.”

Selina’s lips lightly parted as if to object but Alfred continued unperturbed.

“Stay in bed, Miss Kyle,” he repeated, his voice heavy with finality. “Or the next time I find you unconscious, I might just leave you where I found you.”

Her pale eyes were only half-lidded and she gave him a lopsided grin. The closest thing to acquiescence that Alfred was ever likely to receive from her.
“Now, since you can’t keep anything down,” he said lightly, producing a hypodermic needle and what Bruce assumed was their last vial of painkiller. “On your side, Miss Kyle.”

Bruce quickly looked away as Alfred pulled down the band on her sweatpants and applied the shot to her exposed hip. He hadn’t really given it much thought before, when she’d been covered in blood and dried mud, but there was something deeply unsettling about seeing your friend half-naked. Despite himself he could feel heat and color beginning to crawl up his neck and into his cheeks.

It took only a few minutes for the drugs to take affect and Bruce watched patiently as Selina’s eyelids began to droop. Alfred allowed her to arrange her own covers, the process slow and jerky, as he cleaned up after himself preparing to quit the room. He felt useless standing there, watching as they moved around, neither asking for his help nor wanting it. He could not help himself as his gaze lingered longer than necessary on the girl drowsily trying to pull the duvet to her chin.

Sighing, she slowly blinked at the ceiling and then at the wall as she turned on her side, the movement too slow to be natural. The pinched lines of her face had already begun to soften, the drug beginning to gently rock her into that useless state of oblivion. The dream like euphoria that was settling like shades over her pale eyes, was a disturbing thing to witness. He had expressed his concerns to Alfred, but the older man had assured him in no uncertain terms that he knew exactly what he was about.

The fact that Selina was in no danger and in no pain did little to stop his agitation. He had actually felt like he had been getting somewhere with her as if she had been ready to tell him something, anything.

But now.

Now, he felt like he was back exactly where he had started.

He felt Alfred’s eyes on him, and reluctantly met them though he had already known that his look was going be nothing more than a silent entreaty to abandon the room. Exhaling deeply, he turned to leave when he heard the sound of covers rustling and noticed Selina’s hand in the air between them.

“Hol’ up, B,” she whispered, her voice hoarse from the bile he was sure she had retched up. Her eyes were half-lidded, gazing at him lazily. Before he could make the mistake of reaching for it, she dropped her hand letting it fall to the bed beside her hip.

Alfred looked down at her and then back to Bruce. He could read the wariness in the older man’s face.

“I’ll be down in a minute, Alfred,” he said, trying to politely dismiss him. Narrowed blue eyes gave him a quelling look, but he ignored it.

His gaze stayed on Alfred as he left the room, his guardian making a point of leaving the door open. He cleared his throat as he let his eyes fall back to the girl in the bed. Cocooned in fresh bed linens, she was already sleep warm, her skin where it wasn’t bruised was rosy against the white cotton and there was something unnervingly alluring about that.

He had to clear his throat before he spoke. “I’m sorry if I upset you, earlier.”

“I’m no princess B,” she murmured. “Y’know, it takes a lot more than that to upset me.”
He felt his lip twitch into a grin at both her answer and her suddenly pronounced accent. It was only ever that thick when she was exhausted or enraged, but he enjoyed the sound of it either way. And she was only barely putting on airs, she had never been a damsel-in-distress and he felt something akin to pride at the realization.

“I know,” he replied, taking a step closer to the head of her bed. He had the overwhelming urge to brush her hair back from her forehead, but instead he tested the edge of the duvet the white cloth impossibly soft beneath his fingers. “but Alfred warned me and I- I could have handled the situation better.”

“Yeah?” she said smiling. “Jus’ like you were gonna’handle’ me.”

The statement was sobering. He immediately dropped his hand and stepped away from her, away from that bed. “I thought I was trying to help.”

“O’ course ya did,” she said, sighing.

“Selina,” he asked. She made a non-committal sound. “About your accident-”

She groaned, her eyes opening then falling shut. “You’re like a freaking dog with a bone,” she said, sounding agitated.

“I just want to know what happened.”

“Lookit, we’ll play twenty questions tomarraoh hmh-kay.”

“Okay,” he agreed, knowing that he would mostly not be getting any more information out of her tomorrow either. His disappointment quickly faded into frustration and back into disappointment.

Bruce narrowed his eyes.

Taking in her appearance, he swallowed against the ever present lump in his throat. Beneath her closed eyes and flushed cheeks, she looked exactly like what she was vulnerable. It was a word Bruce had never thought he would use to describe her but it was the simplest and he knew that for Selina that feeling must have been eating her alive.

He sighed as her breathing deepened.

Seeing her like this, he wished he could believe it was a car accident; that he could let her keep her secrets and that they could just go on.

Alfred

After he finished restoring the kitchen, wiping and scrubbing, throwing out the half-eaten food and disinfecting the sink Alfred went in search of his young ward. Despite the enormity of Wayne Manor it was relatively easy to find him as Master Bruce was, at his roots, a creature of habit. He was reclined on the couch, a thin sweatered arm slung over his eyes and a single knee drawn up pointing at the ceiling. For a moment he thought the boy was sleeping, but as he entered the study, Bruce pulled himself up, quick and graceful.

Alfred didn’t take a seat, just stood inside the threshold, one hand cuffing a wrist behind his back, leveling his gaze at the young man. Bruce looked back up at him, his usually pale grey eyes dark in the ill lit room.

“She didn’t tell me anything,” he admitted, sitting back. If he had been any other exasperated
teenager, he might have sworn and let his head fall on the couch, but Bruce Wayne was too well mannered, too restrained to do something so human. “At least nothing that could be of use.”

“What exactly did Miss Kyle tell you?” he asked. “She must’ve have given you some excuse for the state she was in.”

Bruce looked away, his head tilting in the direction of the fireplace. “She said it was a car accident.”

“Car accident?” Alfred asked, amused but not surprised that Miss Kyle had produced the same ridiculous answer as his young ward had just days ago. “Two sides of the same coin, you two.”

At his response, a muscle visibly ticked in Bruce’s jaw. It was an odd look, to see an old man’s eyes glaring back at him from a youth’s soft face.

“I don’t believe it can be that simple,” he said, his usually soft voice laced hoarse with frustration.

“Changed your mind didyou?”

Bruce’s shoulders straightened at his tone, his chin lifting with an aristocratic confidence.

Alfred knew that he was probably being unfair to the young man, but between the useless work he had put into that uneaten meal, the pain in his back from carrying ninety-pounds of dead weight up three flights of stairs and the sores that he’d seen on that little girl’s skin, he wasn’t feeling very fair.

“What about the authorities? Changed your mind about calling them as well?”

“No,” he admitted. “Selina gave me the impression that she would not be very receptive to that idea.”

“It’s not her choice though, is it sir?”

Bruce stared back at him, a moment of indecision written in his nit brow and his bitten lip before he shook his head solidifying his decision. “No, but I’m not going to be responsible for her running away either.”

Alfred swallowed, tightening his grip on his wrist. They had had this conversation before, and even then it had felt frayed and overworked. If he was going to get Bruce to understand the severity of this situation then he needed to be completely honest with him about his speculations.

“I don’t believe she’s well enough to take care of herself,” Bruce admitted, “And if she were to try and live on the street in her condition I don’t think she’d fare very well.”

Alfred snorted his agreement. “I doubt that girl could walk down our driveway much less get back to the city.”

He looked away from Bruce for a moment, trying to figure out the best way to approach the lad. “I think she might be a bit worse off than you think, Master B.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, his head moving just the tiniest bit in curiosity.

He took a deep breath. “When I was checking her sutures earlier, I noticed she has pressure sores.”

“Pressure sores?” he asked, his eyebrows drawing together as he was unfamiliar with the term.

“Bed sores, sir,” he answered. “They’re caused by prolonged pressure on the skin.”

The young man nodded his head as he digested the information.
“Wherever that little girls been doing, or wherever she was for the last month, she’s been confined enough to cause them.”

Master Bruce’s eyes suddenly grew bright as if he remembered something. Wordlessly he moved to his desk, moving books around, before returning to his seat with an ordinary composition notebook.

He quickly opened up the notebook, the same one he used for all of his annotations, “That night,” he paused, reading something before he turned the page. “That night you found her, I noticed Selina had bruise on her wrist I thought that maybe she’d been cuffed or… something. But then she started bleeding and I must have forgotten about it.”

He laid the book open on the coffee table and Alfred could see a series of small lettered bullet pointed notes followed by the random question mark, rough sketches of rocks, and somewhere in the margin, shoved between the edges of the city skyline was the small nonsensical silhouette of a cat.

He quickly uncapped his pen, his usual penmanship forgotten as he wrote down everything Alfred had told him.

“I didn’t tell you that so that you could jot it down in your ‘lil notebook and try and play detective Master Bruce. I told you so that you would see why we need to call the police.”

Bruce sighed, the sound magnified by the tension in the room. He finished writing down whatever had been running through his head and he slowly capped his pen, slowly shutting the notebook.

“I’ve told you before Alfred. She won’t talk to the police, she doesn’t trust them and she thinks they’re incompetent and from our experiences outside of Detective Gordon I can’t entirely disagree with her.”

Alfred held his tongue waiting for the young man to continue.

“I can’t say that I can get the truth from her, but I know I have a much higher probability of success than any person of authority.”

Silently, he looked back at Bruce not trying to hide his doubt.

“Selina came here for a reason,” Bruce continued, his voice filled with conviction. “She could have chosen to stay in Gotham, but she didn’t. She came here. I want the opportunity to find out why.”

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

A HUGE Thank You to a2zmom, gabzilliaz, thedragonatthegates, and apetbrz and anyone who took the time out to leave Kudos. Thank you so much.

It sounds childish, but I honestly have no idea where this last bit of story came from. I was completely done with the chapter and suddenly Alfred decided he needed to put in his two cents and it kind of snowballed away from me which probably means I need to be more disciplined.

I am so very sorry for the delay and the seeming out-of-character and tonal shift of this
chapter. It was surprisingly difficult to write even though it is really just the final third of the previous two chapters. Just a warning though, the next few chapters might see an even bigger tonal shift as Bruce and Selina are forced to be around each other.
6 months ago…

It was one of those rare late summer days in Gotham where temperatures were hovering around the triple digits and threatening to break records. For most of the afternoon thunder had been rumbling in the distance, the occasional sharp crack promising a reprieve from the sultry weather at any moment. Due to the unbearable heat, Bruce had chosen to leave the French doors that lined the East wall of his study open letting the wet breeze and the smell of gardenias and jasmine drift into the study.

Despite the hour, the sky outside was a dark shade of grey and he regretted not having had a fire burning as he stared at the backlit girl sitting on the couch across from him. Selina stared down at the table and the game board between them, her elbows on her thighs, her gloved hands dangling lazily between her parted knees.

When she had arrived around lunch time, she had immediately discarded her jacket and goggles carelessly tossing them and herself onto the nearest couch and nicking the meal Alfred had left him. She had seemed unconcerned with the impact the heavy air was having on her curls, but he had caught glimpses of her trying to tame her unruly curls. She had managed to finger comb half of them back from her face, the dirty roots lending her at least the semblance of control, but the breeze that continued to stir the thin curtains also flirted with the loose curls around her face.

At the moment, she blew an escaped lock out of her eye as she studied the chess pieces ahead of her. They had been playing for nearly an hour- a true testament to Selina's slowly growing patience with him. Early in the match, as was her custom she had went after his pawns ruthlessly destroying that first line despite his intentions to use the French defense. He had let her have her reign despite the fact that he had wanted to tell her what a detrimental set of moves that would prove to be. But something, a completely self-serving thought, had stopped him.

If Selina dominated him at cards, it was only fair that he return the favor.

Without warning, one forearm braced across the table for balance, she quickly reached over the board grabbing one of his secondary pieces. Her upper body was so close to the pieces, they were in danger of knocking over and he had to stop himself from reaching out to steady them. The action had been accomplished so quickly he could only blink as his vision was filled by wide-set green eyes and a halo of wild curls.

"What's this one do again?" she asked, waving his white Rook by her cheek.

She was so close that he could almost smell her which was a usually difficult thing to do as Selina typically smelled of nothing in particular. A convenience he imagined was beneficial in her line of work; one couldn't exactly pick a pocket if one's scent was so easily detectable, whether it was good or bad. The few times he had managed to catch a whiff of her he had been close, dangerously close, and he had quickly made a practice of stepping away before she chose to. Today, she had removed her jacket but the remnants of good leather and girl sweat still clung to her persuading him to stay still and breathe deeply.
She flicked her wrist, letting the bottom of the round chest piece rest playfully against her temple and he heard the metallic jingle of her charms rubbing together beneath the cuff of her glove. He refrained from biting his lip as he understood the sound. She was wearing the bracelet that he had fixed for her which meant that in all likely hood she had no plans to go scheming that night. He felt something in his chest warm at that and not only because it meant she would be spending time with him.

He could see she was growing impatient with his silence and she cocked her head trying to swing an errant curl off of her cheek without losing her balance. The heavy air had coiled it so tightly it was like a honey colored corkscrew. He felt his fingers twitch against his thigh as he had the unnerving impulse to reach up and pull on the lock, a purely experimental gesture, just to see if it would spring back into place, but a crack of thunder close enough to rattle the glass inside the window panes reminded him of who he was and who he was with. Irrational actions like that would do nothing but earn him a literal slap on the wrist and Selina suddenly needing to be elsewhere.

He leaned away from her and swallowed against the sudden lump in his throat.

"I've told you," he explained, reaching up to firmly dislodge the Rook from her grip.

She gracefully shrugged a shoulder as she let him take the piece from her hand. Putting the piece back into its place he tried to ignore the warmth he'd felt from her fingers and the butter-soft leather of her worn gloves.

"Musta forgot," she said, her voice far too innocent to be the truth as she slid gracefully back onto the edge of the couch.

His eyes narrowed as he studied her for a moment and she stared back at him as if she could sit here and do this all day. It hadn't taken him very long into their friendship to discern that Selina Kyle had a very deceptive gaze. He imagined most people assumed it was lazy or apathetic, but he knew, had always known, how much was really working behind those Cossack eyes and that cocky mouth.

"It's still your move," he said, abandoning his posture and mirroring hers, one hand enclosing the other.

Head titling she raised a pale eyebrow at his tone, before she reached for one of her pieces.

"Black Queen takes white Knight," she declared, knocking his Knight over with her pinkie as her piece took its place.

He stopped himself from exhaling as he saw her obvious mistake.

"Are you sure you want to make that move?" he asked, reflexively acknowledging the danger his own Queen posed to her.

"Yeah," she said, picking up the discarded Knight and placing it in the pile of Pawns she had already accumulated.

He watched as she thoughtlessly surveyed the pieces she had captured before looking back to the scarce few each of them still had left on the board.

She was either making a grievous mistake or she was aware of something he was not. He just wasn't sure which and with Selina he probably wouldn't know until it was too late.

He sighed.
"You would sacrifice your only Queen to kill a single Knight," he asked, allowing her to hear his confusion.

"Yup," she said, her full lips curling at the corners in a way that despite the predicament never failed to make his heart beat a little faster.

Brows drawn together he glanced down at the board and then back at her.

"It's just… Do you think that's really the best decision," he said, trying to keep the haughtiness from his tone, but worrying that he had failed.

"You just let me, worry bout me, kiddo," she replied, crossing one leg over the other as she relaxed back into the couch. "Your move."

He clenched his jaw as he kept his opinion to himself. Instead he studied her overly relaxed posture, taking note of her lack of nervous tells. He had done the sporting thing, he had given her the chance to change her mind, but as she was want to do she had refused.

You lose your Queen. You lose the match.

It was that simple.

He had told her that before. He had warned her. There wasn't much more he could do if she was not willing to heed his advice. He was going to win, but there was never much satisfaction in winning anything so easily.

Swallowing, he dragged his Queen across the board, seamlessly trading one Queen for the other.

Silently he placed it with the others he had collected before he folded his hands together again. He didn't feel smug and he had no plans to gloat so he just stared down at the pieces left on the board.

"Black bishop takes White Queen." she said.

Bruce felt his jaw loosen at her statement and his eyes widen as she used the end of her Bishop to knock over his Queen.

She smiled at him mischievously, the tip of her tongue running over her teeth, as if this was all just a private joke but one she only shared with herself.

Frowning, he looked down at his fallen Queen lying so uselessly on the checkered board, lost among his other players.

He had never seen it coming.

"Why?" he asked, not entirely sure what he was asking. "Why sacrifice your Queen just to get to mine?"

She looked up feigning concentration for a moment before her eyes met his across the table. "'cause, I might not have a Queen," she answered, shrugging one shoulder, "but neither do you."

He swallowed looking down at the board. She was right. His Queen was the strongest piece on the board and he used her relentlessly. Tirelessly. She was almost always the center of his attacks, the key to all of his victories. He had relied on her too often, and stripped of her he suddenly felt confused and lost.

The next series of moves would prove how right he had been to be worried. He had tried in vain to
hide his frustration as Pawn Promotion - something he now regretted having taught Selina - had forced him to return Selina's Queen to the board. His anger wasn't born from the fact that Selina was beating him, though the idea that the one thing he had managed to best her at was now gone did smart, and he wasn't surprised that she was either.

Selina may have had no formal education, but she had a quick mind and she exercised it every chance she was given. He had never given much thought to Selina learning as much from him as he had learned from her, but the logic behind the idea was sound. It was symbiotic, the more they interacted, the closer to even-handed they became; it was an inevitable circumstance of adapting.

No, he was angry with himself. Angry that he had missed that Bishop, angry that he had left himself so open for an attack. Angry that without his Queen, Selina quickly backed his King into a figurative corner using nothing more than a pair of Pawns and that bastard Queen slaying Bishop.

"Check," she said grinning.

"Mate," he said through gritted teeth.

"Whatsat?" she asked innocently as she slightly wiggled in her seat. It had occurred to Bruce before and was only reiterated in the latent excitement of her body language that Selina Kyle took a particular delight in his frustration.

"It's check-mate," he answered. "You won."

"Yeah, I guess I did," she answered, her pale green eyes bright and playful.

Present…

Bruce let his mind linger faintly on that memory as he stood in the hall outside Selina's closed door, the book he had been reading gripped too firmly in his hand.

He couldn't recall what he had wagered and lost that day, most likely something that he neither wanted nor needed, but he did remember that as he had been falling asleep that night, his mind drifting to mundane images from his day as it always did, something had caught his attention.

He admitted to himself that it had caught his attention for all the wrong reasons, the same reasons that still made his face flush and his heart beat a tattoo inside his chest. Even now, he had such a clear picture of her bending over the table, her lips parted just enough that he could see her sharp white teeth, her curls shoved to one side, her body so close to the game pieces that they were almost hidden that he could feel his cheeks heat.

As discombobulating as those images were they only served to remind him of the moment that he had realized that as she had been leaning towards him, peeking out between those dexterous fingers of hers had been the head of a Bishop and sitting on the backline between her Knight and her King had been Black Pawn, a Black Pawn where no Pawn had any right to be.

The fact that Selina had cheated had not surprised him. Her moral compass was closer to a weathervane, it typically moved with the wind and rarely if ever pointed north. He was not shocked or confused by her actions, only by his own visceral response to them. He understood that he should have been upset with her. Both his competitive nature and his sense of justice should have left him disgusted and piqued or that very least embarrassed, but he had found himself mildly amused by her trick.

She had somehow gotten the best of him. Again. And the only things that had seemed to be interested were his curiosity on how she had accomplished it and that more primitive part of him that
he still tried to ignore.

Even now, as he brought his hand up to rapt on the door, he was aware that he could not quite seem to disentangle himself from those emotions, but he knew that he must. He had no choice, he had to be smart and he had to be vigilant.

Selina had already made the first move.

Selina

Selina had never considered a week a long period of time. She tended to gauge time less by a clock or calendar and more by her needs and her wants. When you lived by your own schedule time became relatively meaningless, days turned into weeks and weeks into months and months into years pretty seamlessly. People who lived nine-to-five lives typically charted their time by weekends and paydays and she could somewhat see the appeal in that kind of structure, but that life wasn't for her. She didn't think about it much, but she could only assume it never would be.

Trusting Alfred with her care giving hadn't been a very hard decision for Selina to make. According to Bruce, Alfred had saved her life and 'had worked tirelessly to restore her health,' but in spite of Bruce's claims and the fact that he was Bruce's guardian she hadn't expected Alfred to be so good at playing nurse maid. She had thought it was something easy to imagine from Bruce, just like curiosity care giving seemed to be somewhere in his nature, but she had never seen it coming from Alfred. But that didn't make following his rules any easier.

The first day had been the worst. For the entire day, even though she had been perfectly conscious, the man had denied her any form of entertainment.

No reading.

No talking.

Nothing.

The Old Man had suggested that she not even open her eyes until her sensitivity to light and sound had faded. Personally Selina wouldn't have exactly called it 'sensitivity' herself, it was more of a constant throbbing punctuated by the random slice of pain so she really hadn't minded the isolation at first. Her head had hurt too badly for TV and her ankle and shoulder had been punishing her for what she had put them through the day before, but eventually the darkness and the quiet had begun to eat away at her.

She had tried not to dwell on her time in captivity: the inky blue darkness, the unusual food, the hours of her life that had been stolen and wasted. Dredging up the memories seemed to only leave her breathless, shaky, and feeling as if something was clawing its way up her throat. She also tried hard not to think about the other two kids who had been down there with her. The bright young things that had not been as lucky or maybe just not as ruthless as herself.

There was nothing for any of that now and besides brooding over things out of one's control was Bruce's thing, not hers.

On the second day, when her head could handle more noise than the house's bones groaning and sighing and she was nearly brought to tears from boredom Bruce had shown up.

It had been such a mixed bag seeing him standing so casually in the doorway. Half of her had been delighted. Half of her had been uneasy.
"Alfred said you were feeling better," he had explained as he had lingered in the doorway. "Would you like some company?"

She had been prepared, had armed herself for Bruce's inevitable questions, but they hadn't come. He'd walked into her room as if he hadn't been interrogating her days before. Feeling paranoid and contrary, she'd thought of asking him about his sudden change of heart. Bruce Wayne didn't just give up. It wasn't in his nature.

The boy had spent the last two years looking for his parents' killer and had so far hit nothing but roadblocks and dead ends, including her, and somehow after every set back, he simply just started over. It was an admirable trait, kind of stupid, but admirable. If she were a kinder person she might have described him as determined or strong-minded, but the only words she could conjure when he was being particularly frustrating were stubborn and pigheaded.

On the third day he'd shown up when Alfred had brought her breakfast, his black hair still wet from his shower and looking annoyingly refreshed. She hadn't been able to stop the stab of jealousy she felt at his appearance, she'd felt like no matter how hard she scrubbed she would never be able to get the feel of riverbed out of her pores or the smell of city from her hair.

Again she had waited for the questions and again Bruce had disappointed her. He'd simply sat in the captain's chair by her bed, reading the newspaper and sipping his tea until Alfred had cleared him off.

On the fourth day, she'd been laying in bed after her bath when she'd heard muffled but clearly angry voices. In Bruce's house the walls were thick and the doors made of real wood so all the words were distorted and deformed as if they weren't words at all but grunted thoughts. Eyebrows drawn together, she'd considered climbing to her feet and padding to the door to eavesdrop, but quickly thought better of it. She had a good idea of who was outside her door, had less of an idea on what they were arguing about, but knew with certainly that there was no way on her bad ankle that she could hobble back in time before they entered her room.

She wasn't surprised when Bruce knocked on her door or when he was trailed into the room by an angry looking Alfred. They didn't say anything to each other as Bruce tucked something under his arm and Alfred left her lunch tray on the end of her bed before turning on his heel and exiting the room before making a rather obnoxious show of leaving the door open.

When they argued the tension between Bruce and Alfred was nothing new to her, but it also wasn't something Selina particularly enjoyed. She wouldn't deny that she had her issues with Alfred, but watching Bruce and Alfred fight was something completely different. It was never over something stupid.

Selina tried to enjoy the rest of the day, or as much as she could still bed-ridden and slightly sensitivity, she really did. She tried to ignore the argument she'd overheard and the little voice inside her that refused to just accept Bruce's vagueness on the matter of her "car accident," but she just couldn't.

Hours later when Alfred had returned to tend her fireplace and bring her dinner tray he had conveniently forgotten Bruce's tea. While Selina had pursed her lips at the grey-eyed glare Bruce was directing at his mutinous butler's back as he left the room, because honestly, Bruce could scowl better than anyone she knew, she couldn't help the twinge of paranoia she was feeling.

Maybe it was that left over tension, the endless hours of nothingness, the familiar ache in her ankle or the throbbing pain of her shoulder, but she felt like she couldn't take Bruce's silence on the subject anymore.
"Alright, what's up?" she blurted, shoving her half-empty dinner tray to the bottom of her bed as she sat up. She couldn't stop the slight dizziness that was still clinging to her but she took a deep breath and steadied herself.

"Come again," he countered, looking away from to door for the first time.

Selina barely stopped herself from rolling her eyes at his manners so instead she sighed.

"I'd thought you'd be asking me a million questions by now," she accused.

"Questions pertaining to what exactly?" he asked, his eyes moving across her face.

"My accident," she said, waving a hand in the direction of her shoulder.

"Oh, that," he said, lowering the file he had been reading most of the afternoon and nodding his head as he sat back in the chair. There was something very off about the movement, but Selina overlooked it. After all the advice she had given him, Bruce was still a terrible liar and she knew what his tells were.

"Alfred advised me against upsetting you," he explained, his eyes landing on hers.

She stared back at him, applying a little trick she'd picked up from Gordon and using her silence to encourage him to continue.

"And I'm sure that whatever happened, you have your reasons for not divesting yourself of it to me," he continued, raising his chin in that slightly arrogant way of his that always reminded her of where exactly he sat in the world.

"And I assume that you know what you're doing."

Selina had felt as if something very thick was stuck in her throat at his words and she had to clear her throat twice before she could reply, "I always do."

He didn't stay for very long after that, whether it was due to her questions or that Alfred had called him down to dinner she wasn't sure. He'd left like he always did, pausing at her open door and gazing at her for just a moment before he said, "Goodnight, Selina." The sound of his voice and the earnestness of the gesture never failed to make her stomach flutter and all she could ever do was nod in return.

She had to admit to herself that she wasn't too happy with his answer, but for whatever reason Bruce was giving her room to breathe and she knew only idiots looked a gift horse in the mouth.

On the fifth day, he'd been gone for so long that she'd found herself becoming agitated for no apparent reason. She had never really enjoyed another person's presence before, typically she found most people barely tolerable, but being around Bruce was different. It always had been. He never seemed to ask too much of her, or at least nothing more than he would ask of himself. The downside to his 'personal code' was that he also didn't expect any less of her either. It was why Selina continued to stay guarded despite all of Bruce's pleasantries and seeming nonchalance.

Even though she was shedding her ordeal, her bruises showing the first signs of fading and her aches becoming more bearable as each day passed, she'd found herself in a rather sour mood and had just about given up on seeing Bruce at all, when she'd come back from bathing to find the boy setting up a jigsaw puzzle on her empty lunch tray.

Bruce had never been what Selina would have considered 'normal' but if she was honest she wasn't
actually sure what the definition of normal was herself, so she had thought it was kinda weird, kinda childish and her single raised eyebrow must have conveyed her feelings because he quickly explained that it would be less taxing on her 'recovering mind' than one of their other usual time killers like cards.

Selina couldn't help but sigh and indulge him when he looked at her like that. "Cards wouldn't be much fun anyway," she said, climbing onto the opposite side of her bed and looking down at the pieces he'd already flipped face up. "For somebody with as big a' brain as yours, you're pretty terrible at poker."

"Yes," he agreed, grinning at the board as he collected the corner pieces. "If I remember correctly, I already owe you the deed to a 'castle of your choosing'."

"And your first born," she reminded him, watching his dark eyebrows arch as he collected another piece from her side of the board.

"Of course, how could I forget," he said, snapping two puzzle pieces together.

"And don't think I won't collect," she warned, smirking at his bent head.

"I would expect nothing less of you," he said, sliding her a piece with two of his long fingers.

On the sixth day, Alfred had finally pulled back the curtains flooding the room in grey light although the howling wind had been throwing snow against the window panes. She had been sitting on top of her covers, her now slightly swollen ankle had been elevated on a pillow all morning and out of sheer boredom she'd found herself flipping through one of the books Bruce had forgotten on her nightstand. He was sitting beside her bed, the winter light bathing him in those muted tones that unfairly complimented him so well. For once he wasn't reading a newspaper or a police report or writing in that notebook he'd taken to carrying around. No, he was reading something as normal and boring as a magazine, but as she saw the cover she couldn't help but smile. If he could, Bruce Wayne really was going to teach himself everything that there was to learn in the world.

She closed the book she was reading, letting it fall to her lap. "What in there could possibly be that interesting?"

His eyes looked almost silver as he glanced up over the edge of the cover and she could tell by his gaze that he was weighing the sincerity of her interest.

"It's for educational purposes, not entertainment," he answered, his eyes going back to the pages.

"Okay," she said encouraging him.

"It's an article on the Global Positioning System," he said. "Did you know that we can produce trackers that are as small as your thumbnail now?"

Selina nodded her head, but with no real conviction and because she was feeling bored she asked, "And what's that got to do with you?"

"Not me specifically, but..." he said, his eyes flicking from her face back to the page. "I think it might be of interest to a... Friend of mine."

"A friend?" she asked suddenly intrigued.

"I know I should be insulted by your tone of surprise, but..." he sighed. "Technically he is an employee of Wayne Enterprises," he explained, his eyes moving left to right as he scanned the page.
"Regardless, I think he would find it interesting."

Selina stared at him for a moment, and felt the same twinge of sadness that always seemed to bubble up around him. It always hit her so unexpectedly, the sudden reminder of his… Loneliness. She had recognized it the first moment she had met him, all soft voice and kind eyes, and the time he had caught her running away, and in an openly wounded tone had offered to call her a taxi, the sunny afternoon that she had caught him playing chess by himself and he had been so excited to have brought her back a present because it was probably something that he'd seen in a movie or read in a book and then there had been the night when he'd been delirious with fever and she'd cupped his cheek he had called out for her.

"Cool," she answered, her eyes going back to the book in her lap but she wasn't quite able to make out the words.

It was exactly one week to the day after her disastrous afternoon in the kitchen with Bruce that Alfred decided it was time to take out her stitches. She had been dead to the world when the old man had sewed her up and from the looks of it she had counted herself lucky cause if she was going on what she had seen in the mirror she could tell Alfred wasn't going to be winning any cross-stitching awards anytime soon.

She had been sewn up before when she was younger, a suture here, a stitch there, but none really deserved recalling. But as Alfred began to carefully cut and pull the thick medical thread free, she knew she would never forget this and not just because of how she had earned it. She was glad that Alfred had chosen to do it while Bruce was with one of his tutors, because the deep dull ache made her jaw clench and her eyes water until what was left of her fingernails was digging half-moons into her palms.

"You can breathe now, Miss Kyle," Alfred said, dropping the medical scissors onto the towel at the end of her bed.

Selina released a breath she had no idea she had been holding, "Well, that hurt like a son of a-"

"Language Miss Kyle," Alfred admonished, but she could see the slight tilt to his set mouth.

"Sooka, then," she replied, smugly. When he shot her a look she put up both her hands in mock innocence. "Hey, you didn't specify what language."

"Cheeky chit," he said, wiping a very cold antiseptic wipe against her shoulder. Even if he never admitted it, and Selina would put money down that he never would, she suspected that he found her at the very least amusing. "It's gonna scar," he'd told her pulling up the collar of her sweater.

"Won't be the first," she answered, rubbing at the muscle in her opposite arm.

"Or the last, I assume," he'd said, disappointed fatalism in his tone. It was a tone she realized that he was very good at.

Absently, she watched him as he began to clean up and discard the stuff he'd used, but she suddenly winced as the muscle beneath her shoulder was somehow feeling both hollow and painful.

He must've recognized something in her as she attempted and nearly failed to roll her shoulder, because Alfred abandoned his task to step back in front of her.

"Take my hand," he told her, holding out his hand to her and indicating that she should grip it. Shaking her head to demonstrate how silly she found this, she reluctantly did as he asked. Alfred's fingers were warm and calloused where she gripped them, and she couldn't hide her surprise at how
weak her own fingers felt around them.

She gritted her teeth at the unwelcome knowledge. Her always so nimble fingers, her confident grip, now felt floppy and useless.

She felt her eyes narrow as her fingers loosened and she tried to jerk away from the butler, but he must have somehow read the shock and disappointment in her eyes because she heard him sigh as he gently lowered her hands to fall into her lap.

"That," he explained, the word coming out as a sigh. "Is going to take a bit longer," he finished.

Selina let out a breath as she looked back at him.

"I think it's time we got you back on your feet Miss Kyle, don't you?"

Chapter End Notes

Constructive Criticism always welcome! :) for anyone still reading this, I am so sorry for taking so long to update and then updating with kind of a bizarre chapter. Hopefully the next ones will be more exciting! :)
Gotham’s resilience always amazed Bruce. It was such an interesting city, in the same day city workers would be cleaning up bodies from a major warehouse explosion the mayor would be holding a fundraising gala for his next electoral campaign as if nothing had happened…

Well, maybe resilience wasn’t quite the right word.

Despite the winter storm that had held the city hostage for two days and had been described as one of the worst blizzards the city had seen in nearly five decades, Gotham had seemingly bounced back overnight. It was, as a whole, still a little worse for wear, but in every practical sense it was a functioning city.

Bruce assumed it was the combination of this news and the pile of unopened mail and unreturned phone calls that had prompted Alfred to force him to leave the house. He had wanted to argue, but he knew what excuses he could come up would seem intransigent at best and Alfred would have seen through them quick enough. It was no secret that he had been patiently waiting for the day that Selina could start moving freely through the house and Alfred would have pointed it out and berated him relentlessly for such a “silly whim.” He had no argument against this or that he needed to start taking care of his responsibilities again.

For over a month he had unknowingly been standing still, his concern over Selina’s absence and then her health had been at the forefront of his thoughts everyday. It wasn’t something that he had noticed at first, his vague anxiety contributing to indefinable thoughts about her but the longer she had been missing the more focused his thoughts had become until it had been nearly all he had been thinking of the week he had walked into the GCPD to talk to Detective Gordon.

That had been well over three weeks ago. Like the city, Selina was alive and on the mend, and he had no more excuses for putting off his responsibilities. It was this fact that had compelled him into grudgingly getting dressed and leaving the Manor with Alfred that morning to complete a task he would have much rather left alone.

He could have just sent flowers and condolences, but Alfred had convincingly argued against it. It wouldn’t be the first service he had attended since that bitterly cold day when he had climbed that hill and laid his parents into the frozen ground, but that didn’t make attending a funeral, anyone’s funeral, easier.

Unlike his parents’ funeral his father’s old friend’s service had been intimate: no narcissistic political figures or vain celebrities, no money-hungry CFOs or overly-ambitious journalists. Regardless of the size, he had recognized a few faces, a couple of doctors who had sat on the same boards with his mother at Gotham General and few from his stay at The Academy. They looked a little older, but he could see recognize certain disdainful looks and overly practiced mannerisms.

One of those faces had belonged to Thomas Elliot. He had been surprised to see Tommy Elliot at the service and had little idea why he and his mother had been there. From what Bruce understood, unlike the Waynes and the Elliots, the family wasn’t ‘Old Gotham.’ Well off? Yes. But they were not an ‘old family’ and in Gotham there was a difference.

It had been less than a year ago that Bruce had forced himself into attending Roger Elliot, Tommy Elliot’s father’s, funeral. The newspaper had said it had been automobile accident faulty brakes
causing the driver to lose control and crash on the Midtown Bridge.

At the time, the unspoken rules of etiquette notwithstanding, Bruce had not had any intentions to attend. When asked why not, he had many reasons: he hadn’t known Roger Elliot very well and in his few encounters with Mister Elliot the man had somehow only lingered in his peripheral, but mostly there was the inherent problem he had with Tommy Elliot.

Bruce could hardly remember his life before Thomas Elliot. Old families tended to flock together and The Elliots and The Waynes had proved to be no different. His father had always been polite in his interactions with Mister Elliot, their friendship having slowly dissolved over the years, but his mother had made a concerted effort to keep her relationship with Tommy’s mother strong.

It took him a few years to understand most of his society’s precedents, it was a complex and contradictory system and often difficult to comprehend. In his few jaunts into the fray he had learned that their unspoken laws of civility could be just as savage as any Thieves’ Code. And contrary to the Elliots’ best efforts, it was no secret that Tommy’s mother had not come from ‘a family’ and the unctuous ladies of ‘Old Gotham’ had treated her in kind. He suspected it was this unwarranted viciousness and his mother’s need to protect the vulnerable that had continued to draw his mother to her.

There were many things expected of him while he carried the last name Wayne and while he didn’t really mind the occasional hidden sneer or less than witty comment sniped in his general direction at what a lot of people saw as unusual or outright rude behavior, he knew his mother would have expected better behavior from him. A lot better.

He knew it was his mother’s compassion and not the responsibilities to his family name that had compelled him into attendance. He had prepared for a rather cold reception from Tommy, but the boy had barely lifted his head in acknowledgment as he had greeted him in the receiving line.

Bruce had understood. He had immediately recognized that look on Tommy’s face, the anger underneath the ruddy cheeks and the tears, the only signs of his sudden hatred at the world. Though judging from Tommy’s pattern of behavior Bruce wasn’t sure if it was so sudden.

Not long after his father’s funeral, Bruce had found himself in Tommy Elliot’s neighborhood and on his townhouse’s doorstep. The same exact doorstep that he had taken his father’s favorite watch and had given Tommy Elliot an idea of what the boy had been giving out to others for years.

Pushing aside their past he had reached out to Tommy then and he had watched something unfamiliar shift behind Tommy’s pale eyes.

Tommy didn’t like Bruce.

Bruce didn’t like Tommy.

Their dislike of one another was no secret, but Bruce would never wish what he had been through on anyone. Tommy had seemed less enthusiastic about this promise of an unspoken truce, but that hadn’t stopped Bruce from offering the figurative olive branch. Months passed before Tommy crossed his path again, their eyes meeting over the floor of a well-known haberdashery, but for once the boy had not looked as if he had wanted to rip out Bruce’s heart.

Tommy’s presence at the funeral had been mystery to Bruce until he had seen him lingering around the receiving line talking quietly between mourners with a pale haired boy. Bruce wasn’t familiar with the family, they were fairly new in Gotham, but the man had been a college friend of his fathers so his attendance had been almost mandatory. From what Bruce had read, the doctor had been
another casualty of the blizzard, his snow chains proving to be no match against a pocket of black ice.

Bruce hadn’t been all that sure of what Alfred had been expecting of him, but he had solemnly made his way through the reception line, had given his practiced condolences to the black-veiled widow and shaken hands with her pale haired son. He had sat through the ceremony, though his mind had barely registered what the speakers had been saying. The look on the son’s long face, the rough sound of his thin voice, had startled something inside of him and he hadn’t even waited to put on his coat before he had made his escape.

He couldn’t remember much from the madness that had been his parents’ funeral but what he did was burned into him. He had vague memories of foreign faces and unfamiliar hands and bejeweled fingers on his shoulders. He remembered the cold stinging his tear-stained face as he had stood above them, the wind in his ears as he had walked with the funeral procession, the sun so bright and the sky so blue that he’d had to squint, and the sickening realization that nothing would ever be the same.

He remembered the powdery smell of flowers. There had been so many florist arrangements that they had run out of places to put them, and even after that, they continued to arrive as if two dozen lilies could have done a damn thing for him. The day after their funeral, in a fit of pique, he had ordered them gone, donated, thrown-out, burned. He didn’t care how Alfred had done it; he had just needed them gone.

In hindsight, he understood it was just people trying to help, their way of showing him they cared, but at the moment it had done nothing to curb his grief. He tried his best to appreciate that, but it didn’t stop the nausea that rolled around in his stomach every time he caught the distinct perfume of a greenhouse flower.

Some people had told him that time would heal his wounds and some had told him that he needed to find a way to get past it. He wasn’t sure if the former was true and he had a sinking feeling that he could never embrace the latter.

He had shamelessly worn his grief. It had been unavoidable. Despite Alfred’s encouragement, despite his respites of numbness, he had not put on a brave face. He admitted to himself that his spells of apathy had scared him more than his grief. He understood now, that it was just his minds way of shielding him, protecting him from his own emotions. They had been over powering, overwhelming his basic needs. He couldn’t eat. He couldn’t sleep.

For a few short weeks, time had passed by him in a blur. Apathy and anger his only companions, his reality at a distance, like he was outside a glass house watching everyone through the clear walls. The world didn’t seem real, like walking through a dream, like at any moment he would wake up and go downstairs to find his parents sitting in the study as if they had been waiting for him the whole time.

For months, he had been plagued by nightmares. Sometimes finding himself three or four steps away from where he had fallen asleep before he could finally out run the darkness and the cold and the blood. Always so much blood. The constant ring of the gunshot always failed to drown out the gurgling sound of his father’s last breaths or the deafening scrap as the shadow scooped up his mother’s pearls. Heavy footsteps as loud as a bass dream competed with the beat of his heart to overcome him. Often he had found himself pressed against the door, his fingers wrapped tightly around the door knob, his pajamas translucent and sticking to him like a second skin as he had tried desperately to get away.

Bruce pushed the thoughts of the funeral and his parents away as he made his way down the front hall. He hadn’t bothered to put his coat on after he had left the church and had insisted Alfred keep
the windows cracked in the town car on the ride home and still he felt too warm. Releasing the buttons on his suit jacket and loosening his tie, he rounded the corner into his study and stopped short.

The day had been mostly overcast and the fireplace was dead, but Alfred had left the curtains open and the floor lamps on. His study looked bright and warm the scene was almost inviting.

Selina was sitting, one leg bent beside her and the other straight as she propped her splinted foot on the coffee table beside a half empty plate. He didn’t understand why she didn’t take advantage of the divan. It could be neither comfortable nor hygienic to keep your foot at such an awkward angle and so close to where you ate, but she didn’t seem to be bothered by either.

He wasn’t exactly surprised to see Selina, but he couldn’t stop the sudden and unexpected wave of relief that washed over him at the sight of her. He hadn’t expected her to leave while he had been gone, but neither had he been able to completely dismiss the notion. Selina was independent, fiercely so, and it wasn’t completely out of the realm of possibility that she would have called herself a taxi or tested her luck against the weather and her ankle.

Based on their own previous injuries he and Alfred agreed it would probably take another month before her ankle had fully healed. Even with the bruises fading and the swelling reduced it was still almost impossible to tell whether she had broken it or not without an x-ray. Alfred had stubbornly broached the topic of a doctor, but Bruce had reminded him that if the girl had refused a doctor after being stabbed in the chest that it wasn’t likely that she would be keen to see one for an ankle injury so Alfred had dugout the left over air-cast Bruce had used for his own broken foot two years ago.

She had one elbow resting on her bent knee, a book open on the opposite flattened thigh. He did not remember giving her a book and he doubted that Alfred had offered her one either. His eyes roamed across the study’s book lined walls. There was not much that Selina would find interesting but there were a few antiques and if those didn’t entertain her, he knew where to get more.

After the roads had opened, he had had Alfred order her a few things. Only a few necessities and certainly nothing fancy, because anything more would have made Selina balk at what she would have undoubtedly perceived to be charity. He had learned long ago, through trial and error, that the best attempts to cosset her were to do so in the smallest of increments.

He wasn’t sure if it was the puritanical clothes that Alfred had ordered for her, but Selina had continued wearing his old clothes and the idea made a very dormant and unfamiliar feeling rear in him. He knew there was nothing behind it, that she probably just found the loose fitting garments more comfortable, but it made him feel strange and unusually selfish none-the-less.

Before her sudden and mysterious weight loss, Selina had carried the build of a word class athlete or that of a prima-ballerina. Good genes and years of climbing drainpipes and fire escapes had developed her slight but deceptively strong shoulders, and balancing on beams and fence lines had given her a low center of gravity. She always kept herself so well covered, layers of cloth between her and the world: jackets, and t-shirts, hoodies and gloves.

Bruce believed that somewhere beneath her accent and street cant lurked a latent elegance in Selina Kyle. So far it was indefinable, something he imagined the same old women who had been so unwelcome to Mrs. Elliot, would have said were ‘traits of good breeding’ as if Selina was nothing more than a young bovine put out at market. They would have commented on her excellent bearing and that she had the kind of fortunate coloring that was bound by no season.
He would have had to agree at such an assessment. He could see that she had stretched the collar of
the old navy blue jumper she was wearing, exposing the graceful curve of her shoulder and the slight
dip of her sharp collarbone. He could usually see a plain racerback or the thin strap of an
undergarment peaking out from the collar, but she had chosen to forego both this morning.

He swallowed thickly, the image making his heart suddenly quicken and his face burn for no reason.

“You just gonna keep lurking there kid or are you going to actually walk in,” she asked, never
looking up from her book as she took a bite of the apple in her hand.

“I would appreciate it if you would stop calling me kid,” he snapped, nearly wincing at his own tone.

She slowly lifted her head, her lips pursed and one pale eyebrow already raised in mock censure. But
whatever she had read in his face must have changed her mind, because suddenly she blinked, her
lips relaxing as her eyebrows knit in concern.

“What’s with the black suit?” she asked, tossing her half-eaten apple onto the plate next to her
half-eaten sandwich. “Where you been?”

For one moment, he felt belligerent; he wanted to throw her words from weeks ago back at her. Why
did she assume that he had to answer to her, that he owed her an explanation? But the moment of
temper passed as quickly as it had come upon him. He had no reason to be so ridiculous.

“It’s customary to wear black to a funeral,” he answered, trying to manage the small button at his
collar but failing. When had it become so unbearably tight? He dropped his hands to his sides in
defeat.

Her full lips turned down at the edges, but her eyes, so cat-like in the well lit room, were bright with
curiosity.

“Though I believe that they should have called it a memorial,” he answered, looking away as he
moved behind his desk. “That would’ve been slightly more accurate.”

“A funeral,” she asked, as if it was a foreign word. “Why would you go to a funeral?”

Brow furrowed, Bruce looked at her before looking back down at his desk. “It was expected of me,”
he said, matter-of-factly.

He chewed on his bottom lip as one hand aimlessly moved some of the papers around on his desk
and the other tried to loosen his collar again. He felt very edgy today and the overly stiff collar and
the offending button felt like they were choking him. Ignoring the urge to rip at his shirt, he took a
steadying breath and dropped his hand to the desk.

The only sound that filled the room was the soft shuffle of paper moving against paper as Bruce
busied himself. He had spent too long today with the wrong kind of people to keep pretending he
was normal. He knew it wasn’t a comfortable silence, he had been friends with Selina long enough
to know the difference, but he just didn’t have the energy to change it.

“You okay?” she asked. Her sudden question broke the silence and sounded so light and so
concerned that for a moment he thought he had imagined it.

He swallowed against the lump in his throat and quickly glanced up at her.

“Yes,” he answered, pulling the chair he usually used away from his desk. He had no plans to sit, but
the high back was preventing him from reaching all of the papers he needed to organize. “It was an
old friend of my father’s.”

“Sorry,” she said, the word soft and unsure.

He didn’t look up from his task, but he could hear the snap of her book closing and the thump of her air-boot on the wooden floor as she awkwardly climbed to her feet.

“No need,” he answered. “I never met him.”

He could feel her watching him as she made her way to his desk. “You sure, you’re okay?” she asked again, and he could hear something so rare in her tone that he finally looked up.

She was standing no more than an arms length away, the curve of her hip, so pronounced in a pair of old grey sweatpants, resting heavily against the top of his desk. She had tucked a heavy curl behind her ear and from this distance he could see every color of gold in her hair and the faded yellow-green bruising along her cheekbone, the lingering fingerprints against her throat and the exhaustion in the purple hollows beneath her green eyes.

Yet, she was the one watching *him*. Studying *him* carefully.

He cleared his throat looking away. “Of course,” he answered. “It’s like I said, I didn’t know him.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she said, her voice heavy with connotation.

“I’m okay, Selina,” he answered. He knew he sounded churlish, but he was too tired to keep the weight from his voice. He expected Selina to berate him for his disposition, but she simply dropped the book she had been reading onto the desk among the rest of the rifled papers.

He knew he was in a black mood. He knew that when he was feeling this way that he wasn’t any fun to be around. Both Alfred and Selina had told him as much. But he felt that if Selina could just give him a moment, which he could decompress, sort him out.

Or maybe he wouldn’t and she would get frustrated and leave him to slide even deeper into his foul mood.

“It’s okay if you’re not,” she said casually, crossing her arms as she leaned further onto his desk. “Okay, I mean.”

“I know that,” he said, looking down at the strewn papers. He was usually a lot better at keeping his things in order, but with everything that had been happening in the last few weeks he had been less than organized. The Gotham Gazette, his notebook, random papers were mixed together and fanned out across the top of father’s old desk.

“Still, crap like that….” she continued, lifting a single shoulder as she looked down at the messy desk top. “It’s never easy, ‘specially for people like you.”

He felt his eyebrows knit at her answer. “People like me?” he asked, tilting his chin as he watched her profile.

“Yeah,” she said, curling her lips into what Alfred would call a cheeky grin. “Nice people.”

He felt one side of his mouth twitch at her gentle goading, but couldn’t bring himself to smile, not even wryly.

“So,” she drawled leaning down onto her elbows as if she was looking at a war map, the simple
action drawing his eyes. “How’s the investigating going?”

“Not well,” he admitted, surveying the piles of information he had collected over the last month and half that had nothing to do with his parent’s murder.

“Why not?” she asked, propping her chin on an open palm as she looked up at him.

“I’ve been preoccupied,” he admitted, dragging a dog-eared police report from under a months old newspaper article.

“With what?” she asked, delicately lifting a sheet of paper to her face and pretending to read it.

“I thought a friend of mine was in trouble,” he said, gently snatching the paper out of her hands and placing it in another pile. “I was wrong.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” she drawled.

“I was just trying to help,” he said, mildly defensive.

“I can’t read Latin, B, but I’m pretty sure ‘I was just trying to help’ is on the Wayne family crest,” she said.

He looked down at her and could see the teasing smile behind her eyes and despite his mood something in his stomach turned.

“It’s not,” he replied.

“Whatever,” she sighed, rolling her eyes as she went back to sifting through his work.

Suddenly, he felt her stiffen beside him.

“What’s this?” she asked, but her voice sounded distant and Bruce turned his head to look at her. She was staring at one of the old newspapers he had kept and studied and annotated, when he had convinced himself that her disappearance had been connected to something much bigger than them.

“Those are just some papers I had collected,” he admitted, watching her face still even further. “It was some theories I was working on when I was looking for you.”

She quickly straightened her green eyes inscrutable when they met his.

“You were looking for me?” she asked, and the genuine surprise in her voice made him clench his jaw and he turned his back to her.

“Of course,” he said, “I know you don’t care for it, but-”

The embrace was so unexpected it felt akin to an assault. The sudden arms around his middle and the weight against his back caused him to stumble forward but he quickly recovered. Looking down he could see the navy sleeves of his old wool jumper and Selina’s small pale hands clasping her elbows. He could feel her cheek pressed between his shoulder blades and knew if he turned that her wild curls would be at the right height to tickle his chin.

He felt as if he was holding his face over a fire as he let out the breath he hadn’t know he was holding, a shaky thing to his own ears. He never knew how to react when she did things like this. He knew what he wanted to do, but he didn’t know what he was supposed to do. What was the appropriate thing? What could he do to make her stay like this?
He could never admit it aloud. He barely admitted it to himself. But he missed affection. He missed ambushed hugs from his mother, the random slap on the shoulder from his father. He had been a creature raised on affection; it had come to him naturally. And some days, days like today, he felt as if he was starving for it.

He wanted to lean into her, let her absorb some of whatever this indescribable feeling was. Selina was strong. They weren’t many things that he thought she couldn’t handle. But this was neither the time nor the place, and she already had enough to deal with.

His arms stayed locked in her embrace, his fingers curling into fists at his sides.

“Thanks,” she whispered against his shoulder blades, giving him a precursory squeeze before she loosened her grip. He shrugged his shoulders, his own warning as he gently and almost awkwardly disentangled himself.

“Selina you’re my…” he paused, turning toward her. “You’re my friend. You don’t have to thank me for being worried about you.”

She gave him a small wry smile. “I’m kinda your only friend,” she teased, her overly mischievous tone not quite reaching her eyes.

“All irrelevant,” he replied watching as she looked down at the different papers. He had seen that gaze before, disbelief and anger and guilt rolled so tightly together that they were almost impossible to tell apart.

For just a moment her eyes seemed lost and he glanced down at the picture she was staring at, reading the headline splashed across the front page. Her hand moved up to her shoulder, an instinctual gesture, as if she was trying to cover up more than her new scar.

“Besides,” he continued. “You were never in any real danger… Were you?”

He watched her from the corner of his eyes desperate to see her reaction. Her free hand stilled on the pages, and he watched as she quickly worked the cuff of his old sweater over her fingers.

“’course not,” she replied, gripping her shoulder and giving him a shaky smile. “But ya know thanks for taking the time, never had nobody do that before.”

Her admission caused him to clench his jaw and Bruce fought down his natural reaction. Selina would not care for his sympathy.

“Alfred had told me not to worry,” he said lightly. “He said you were like a bad penny. You would have eventually turned up.”

“And if I wouldn’t’ve?” she teased, tilting her head playfully.

“Then I would’ve torn the city apart until I found you.”

The sudden ferocity of the thought caught him off guard but Bruce couldn’t deny the honesty behind it. Despite what Detective Gordon and Alfred had told him, he had known something had been wrong. A feeling his still couldn’t manage to shake.

“I would’ve kept looking,” he replied, but Selina must have read something in his gaze because she looked away, but not before he caught the first signs of a blush staining her cheeks and a small nervous smile on her lips.
Once again, he could feel the lump in his throat rising and he quickly reached up fiddling with the collar of his shirt.

“Okay,” she drawled noncommittally, her head bobbing softly as her eyes continued taking in the rest of the room as if she was looking for an escape route. “So…”

Her pause filled the room and Bruce stilled his fingers at his throat as he watched her profile. Selina was so rarely at a loss for words and the heaviness in her tone made something take heed inside him.

“So what?” he asked, trying to keep his voice soft.

Her eyes moved to his and she let out a shaky little laugh.

“For fuck’s sake, B,” she said, grabbing the collar of his shirt before he had time to step back. He could feel the pads of her small fingers, the edges of her broken nails, in the hollow of his throat as she made quick work of the top button on his shirt and let him go.

“Rich people,” she scoffed. “If you’re gonna get your clothes made, at least get ‘em made right?”

Bruce stared down at her as if he had been thrust into the middle of a conversation and new nothing about the topic. “I’ll take that into consideration,” he said. “But as to what you were saying?”

“Yeah, that,” she said, shrugging. “I’m tired of reading, wanted to see if you wanted to watch TV or something.”

Bruce felt that small muscle in his jaw tick as he looked away from her. He had no evidence to support his feeling, but for that one moment he had felt that she might have opened up to him. That she might have given him a glimpse of her truth. But as was her custom, she had slid the door shut on him and no matter how well oiled or quiet she was he could always hear the sound to that inner lock latching. He understood it. She would be safe there, it was something she needed, but it didn’t stop it from hurting to know that she thought she needed to be safe from him.

Letting out a breath he turned back to her in time to see her violently scratching the small of her back beneath her oversized sweater. For one moment, he thought of taking her arm, offering her his shoulder to lean on. Would she take it? Or would she be offended that he had assumed she needed help?

Letting her sweater fall back into place, she smiled back at him, the familiar gesture entirely too innocent to be trusted. “So whatcha say?” she asked.

Bruce forced a smile as he took a step toward her and was grateful when she didn’t take a step back.

“Your choice,” he offered, holding out his arm to her like he had been taught.

The winter sun had already started to set when a scratchy ‘The End’ had rolled across the television screen and Selina had given him a nonchalant ‘night B’ before shuffling out of the room. She had been unusually quiet during the film. Bruce was usually blessed with her constant commentary on the quality of the production or the laughable dialogue or if he had convinced her to watch a silent film the inevitable overacting as he sifted and dug out her favorite pieces of popcorn for her. Selina had an unnatural preference for burnt popcorn something he couldn’t quite fathom.
Despite her silence, if she had been aiming to lighten his mood, she had somehow succeeded. He knew she watched them to indulge him and he appreciated it. He didn’t care if it was seen as weird; there was something very calming in the predictability of an old black and white movie. The good guys always got the girl and the villains always lost. There was something to be said about simplicity.

He sighed, watching the screen turn black. Neither of them had been particularly hungry so he left the half-full bowl on the table as he moved to finish cleaning his desk.

It was a task that he had forbidden Alfred from doing. It wasn’t that he was particularly keen on cleaning up after himself, but Alfred trying to organize his random notes and disconnected thoughts tended to make a mess of whatever mind map Bruce had managed to compile.

Sighing, he looked down at the top of his desk. It was just another reminder of what little distance he had made since he had started trying to piece together what had happened to his friend. Something seemed off as he looked down at the small piles he had made. He felt his eyebrows furrow as searched the area around his desk. It took him only a moment to realize what was missing. It had been a front page story in the Gotham Gazette, a whole page article and one that he wasn’t likely to forget anytime soon. An article about two promising students and the lives they had left behind. The very same article he had watched Selina react so strangely too.
Selina

Selina always liked the solarium; in those rare occasions that the sun was going to shine this was the obvious place to catch it.

The first time Bruce had brought her in here it had been the middle of the summer. With the sun streaming through the side windows she had expected it to feel like one of the shitbox apartments she and her mom had lived in when she was younger, where the tenants kept their windows down and locked because they had rather risk heatstroke than theft during a heat wave. But between the central air and the giant vines that climbed over every available surface the room had felt surprisingly cool.

In bloom the vines enormous leaves had formed a canopy against the cat slide roof and light had only trickled down on them. The shade had only dappled the floor, the sunbeams momentarily catching the rare blue-black highlight in Bruce’s hair or reflecting off the silver band of his insignia ring as he had animatedly used his hands to explain the structure of the room.

He said it had originally been a conservatory, a greenhouse so at odds with the neo-Jacobean architecture, but as the oversized structures had ‘fallen out-of-style’ his grandparents had chosen to cut the glass-walled room up. The sun-room had been added on the East side to catch the rising sun, so his great-grandfather could enjoy it in the morning.

She could see it in the shape of the room. It had the unpolished finish of something that had been tacked on without much thought to functionality. Bruce’s house was weird like that, just when she thought that she’d figured it all out, he’d show her something else he had discovered: a room or a shed or a forgotten well and she would find herself having to adjust the schematics she had in her head. Judging by the houses size, she always had the suspicion that he wasn’t telling her everything, but she was never offended.

*Only an idiot would give up all their secrets.*

Even through the glass she could see snow had piled up, covering the hedges like a thick white blanket. Flakes were still falling, softly slapping against the glass as they collected in the corners of each pane. The vines, that were usually so thick and robust with leaves, were left thin and naked in the cold, like black veins creeping along the glass walls and over the cat slide roof. She resisted the urge to look up. She knew the snow would probably be covering every inch of that glass roof, and the thought of being trapped under so much ice made her throat constrict.

She wasn’t sure who had decided to decorate it. It looked half-library and half-greenhouse; there was something about it like a savage sophistication. There was a podium with an unread book in the corner and urns filled with leafy plants. The floor was checkered, like the chessboard Bruce was so fond of; black and white squares line side-by-side, though if she looked at it from a different angle they could easily be black and white diamonds.

For the most part she knew that Bruce had used the room for training, over the last year the more it had progressed the more equipment he had added. A full-body punching bag hung from a stand and wrestling mats were piled against the far wall next to a hip-high bookshelf filled with boring gold-
lettered books. He had a pull-up bar and free-weights stashed beside antique clocks and marble
statuary. It was like everything clashed but in the most interesting way.

She knew it had been Bruce that had brought in the pair of matching overstuffed brown leather
chairs. The seats on them so big one could easily fit her and Bruce at the same time. They were deep
and rounded but their headrests were too low and the curved arms too high to be considered
comfortable.

The double doors that led into the breakfast kitchen were on her right and her crutches propped
beside the second set of double doors behind her, she had chosen to lounge on the dark wicker sofa
her bad ankle resting on an outdoor pillow.

A skinny water decanter sat on the sideboard, crystal low-ball glasses in a semi-circle on the silver
serving tray. She couldn’t help it, her mind quickly evaluating their worth versus what she could get
for them. She hadn’t lied to Bruce when she had told him that she wanted to keep things honest
between them, but appraising was basically instinct for her. She’d rather take her time and hit the
bull’s-eye than snatch and grab and waste her arrows on two point marks.

Selina stared down at her ankle. Alfred had told her it was broken, that she had needed a doctor, but
she knew what it was that he really meant. Doctors and hospitals would have been just the first stop,
and then suddenly they would have been taking a trip to the police station just to talk to Gordon.

She wasn’t an idiot and she had started to feel some of her old resentment for Alfred beginning to
rear its head at the implication. It didn’t help that his “cure” seemed more like torture everyday. He
had started her on a pair of light free weights, concentrating on the muscles in her shoulders and
back. He had warned her that the therapy was going to be as painful as the injuries, but she hadn’t
believed him until he had insisted she begin using the hand-gripper.

She hadn’t realized how weak her hands were or how rusty her skills had become until Bruce had
nearly caught her trying to thieve that newspaper from his desk. She had tried to cover up slipping
the paper into the waist of her sweatpants, had tried to make him think she had been scratching her
back, but he had been so distant that day she wasn’t sure she had needed the distraction at all.

That damn paper, she thought looking down at her foot.

It had been plaguing her for days. She tried not to think about it, she tried to ignore it, but the tiniest
pangs of guilt had begun to eat at her. She hadn’t meant to give so much of herself away that day,
but her shock at seeing those faces had overridden every trained expression she had in her arsenal.
She hadn’t been able to help herself as her fingers had drifted over the papers he had kept, over the
faces that had been staring back at her.

Muted red hair and straight teeth had been smiling directly up at her from a heart shaped face
sprinkled with freckles. The girl in the article had been holding up a second-place trophy, a kind of
arrogant tilt to her chin. Selina remembered thinking that she was pretty. With a gulp, she had
reminded herself, that she had been pretty. She had been smart.

The boy pictured had looked a little older than Bruce, his dark eyes smug and his equally dark hair
styled in short Caesar waves. The paper had said he had been a swimmer and a really talented one
apparently.

She knew, had been positive, that she hadn’t been wrong when she’d assumed these kids were
quality that someone had been looking for them. It looked like the whole of Gotham had been on the
look out for them.
What must that have been like, to have people looking for you for all the right reasons?

But, she reminded herself, somebody had been looking for you too.

Her eyes went to the double doors that led to the kitchen almost instinctually searching for Bruce. This little get-together had been his idea to begin with. He had been smart about it, had waited until she had finished her breakfast, her full belly almost a guarantee that she would be receptive to the idea and he had asked her to meet him in here before lunch. But judging by the dark and empty kitchen beside her it was still somewhere around midmorning and Bruce was most likely still on his morning run.

Tired and a little sore, she made a half-hearted effort to reach her arms overhead, trying to stretch the stiff muscles before she brought her arms down and examined her flexing fingers. Fisting her hands, she made the mistake of looking down at some of the still broken nails. Some of them had broken off past the quick, almost ripped from the nail bed, but she could see where they were growing. Slowly, but growing.

Sighing, she dropped them into her lap. She really didn’t like to think about it; didn’t like to think of all the time that had been stolen from her, or what they had planned to do to her if they had caught her, of what they had probably done to those two kids.

After she had left Bruce in the study to finish up whatever he had needed to finish up, and she had found herself alone in the guest room, she had pulled the newspaper from its hiding spot at her back. Immediately a couple of words had caught her eye.

No, not words.

Names.

Rana Vandergood…

Tyrese James…

Seeing them, putting faces to those voices that had been her only company for that month while they had frozen and starved together, had only made the thing growing inside her worse. It usually kept her from sleeping but even when she could she had taken to dreaming about them. She never quite saw them in her dreams, but she had felt them. Felt them there running beside her, running with the same fear that had always gripped her. The sound of that pale haired boys taunts running like a broken record in her head: “Suffering spoils the meat. Suffering spoils the meat. Suffering spoils the meat.” She had started waking up covered in her own sweat, hot and cold and completely out of breath as if she had actually run all night long. She could usually feel her eyes burning. Why hadn’t she done more? Why had she done something sooner? Maybe if she’d tried something, those kids would still be alive.

But she always wiped away her weakness and smothered those questions and that completely unwanted feeling. They had all had the same chance. She didn’t owe them anything. She didn’t owe anyone. She hadn’t been the one to land them down there. She couldn’t have been expected to save them. She had barely saved herself…

However that didn’t stop their faces, so full of life and promise, from floating into her subconscious at the worst possible time or stop the face of the man who had been responsible for all of it.

The man she had killed.

She felt her stomach begin to sour as the images began to fight forward.
The heavy feel, the weight of the slippery bedrock in her hand as she had swung it down.

Colorless eyes, half-closed and staring up into nothing.

Bits of blood and skin on her hands, caught beneath her broken nails.

She remembered his son too. She would remember that pale hair and that long face, that reedy voice and that lanky stride for the rest of her life. He had had an elegance about him, a certain kind of arrogance that had been bred into a certain class of people and not just taught.

If she ever saw him again…

She pulled at the collar of the sweater she was wearing, hoping to swallow against the sudden lump in her throat. She tried breathing deep, tried breathing around it, but suddenly it felt as if ghostly fingers were gliding against her throat as if someone was preparing to choke her.

Breathing deep she could feel a pair of eyes on her, someone staring at her, watching her. She didn’t know when he had entered the room, but something inside her had begun to shift. Immediately her mind began to focus, to move past the phantom strangler and she managed to swallow past the thing in her throat.

There was no one here that would hurt her. She knew that, she wasn’t stupid. But that fact couldn’t stop the feeling of light-headedness that washed over her as she opened her eyes.

Gritting her teeth, she quickly fixed her expression into one of almost nonchalance. She could never let Bruce know what she had been thinking of, she couldn’t even hint at it. All of his claims of letting it go, trusting that she could handle it herself would go out the window if he ever found out what had really happened, and she couldn’t take that chance.

Bruce was walking toward the sideboard by the wall of windows. The collar of his plan grey t-shirt dark with sweat under his old hooded jacket, the prep school crest on his chest standing out against the midnight blue. There was something oddly familiar about that symbol, but Bruce tended to have crests of some kind or another on everything.

She kind of always liked seeing him right after a run. He would usually come in, huffing and puffing, his pale cheeks rosy from the cold and effort and smelling like pine trees and clean sweat. There was something almost wild about it, a perfect contrast to his constantly restrained demeanor. But then he would shower and wash all of it away.

She sat quietly and watched as he made himself a glass of water. Despite the other two chairs, she knew he wasn’t going to take a seat. Bruce would rather his legs give out than to do something like take a break.

She cleared her throat as he took a sip of his water.

“Good run?” she asked.

He shrugged a single shoulder, holding the glass in one hand as he crossed his arms. “It was satisfactory.”

She flattened her expression as she tilted her chin at him and she watched the corner of his mouth tick up as if he knew his short answer had annoyed her.

“It was fine, the temperatures are still well below average, but the sun seems to help a little,” he answered.
He took another sip of his water as he leaned back against the sidebar. “Speaking of training, Alfred says you should be healed soon, that you’ve been gaining strength back in your hand and shoulder.”

Selina felt her eyes narrow out of curiosity, “You and Alfred been talking ‘bout me?”

“Yes,” he answered, matter-of-factly. “I was curious about your recovery,” he explained. “It’s important and I just wanted to make sure that Alfred wasn’t pushing you too hard, too soon. His methods can be rather…” Bruce paused, his eyes examining the tumbler in his hands. “Aggressive, when it comes to training.”

Selina tilted her head as she watched him, “And you didn’t think I could take it?”

Bruce smiled at her, the closest thing to a laugh he could actually produce. “Of course not,” he answered. “I know you can, but those sessions can become intense… I just wanted to make sure that at the end of the day you were both alive and well.”

Despite herself, she felt the corners of her mouth turning up. “That’s fair.”

“I thought so,” he agreed, but in that arrogant tone of his that when it was directed at her made her want to thump him.

“So,” she began, casually stretching her other leg out. “Is there a reason I’m here?” she asked, propping one hand on the arm of the couch behind her.

“Yes,” he said, quickly and efficiently putting down his glass as he turned and grabbed a thick book off the sideboard behind him. “If I recall this morning you agreed to help me,” he said, walking toward her the book by his side.

He stopped just short of the whicker sofa the book he’d been carrying outstretched to her, and Selina couldn’t stop the look of confusion on her face as she accepted it.

“Okay, yeah,” she said, playfully bewildered as she tested its weight and read the spine. “To like pick a lock or bust a safe not do your homework.”

“Well, it’s not homework,” he said straightforwardly, walking back to the sideboard and refilling his glass. “At least not the kind you’re assuming.”

Selina looked back at him unconvinced.

“German is really not that hard-” he said, taking a sip of his water. “I thought you were…” He was looking down at her with narrowed eyes. “I’m sorry, I assumed you were bilingual.”

Selina felt her eyes widen and she scoffed. “And where in the hell did you get an idea like that?”

“Because I heard you,” he explained, as if the answer were quite obvious.

She lifted an eyebrow.

“That day that you brought me to The Flea, when you were conversing with some of the other people there I heard you talking with them.”

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes, and only sighed at his naiveté, “Okay, that was street-cant,” she said. “It’s not exactly the same thing.”

He was leaned against the side-table, his back to the wall of windows, his narrowed eyes asking her to explain.
“It’s a lil’ of everything and nothing at the same time,” she explained, not exactly sure what she was explaining. “You just- You pick up what you have to, but… Lookit, personally I know just enough to get by,” she finished.

He crossed his arms and looked down at his feet as if he was digesting all of this information, packing it away to analyze later in that overused brain of his. Selina couldn’t explain exactly what it was that bothered her when he got that look on his face. Bruce didn’t exactly make her feel stupid. Could he be unintentionally condescending? Yes, but he never went out of his way to make her feel intellectually inferior, even when he probably had the right of it.

But unlike the rest of the people in her life, for some unknown reason, she actually didn’t want Bruce to think… Well, she wasn’t sure what she wanted him to think but the fact that she cared at all was something completely new to her.

“Oh My Beloved Father,” he suggested, his tone caught somewhere between a question and an answer.

She tilted her chin. “What?”

“It’s an aria from an Italian opera,” he confirmed, undisguised curiosity in his voice. “Where did you learn it?”

“Oh,” she said, feeling her cheeks heat under Bruce’s scrutiny. “My Ma,” she began, trying to speak around the tightness in her throat. “She used to sing it to me when she was…”

Selina could feel her thoughts suddenly beginning to derail along with her voice. She inhaled deeply but quietly and she refused to look away from him. She had learned at an early age that a person should never take their eyes off a threat. Physical, mental, it didn’t matter. You could never turn your back on a predator, not unless you were willing to run, and just like the memories of being in that creek she knew she couldn’t run away from these either.

She worked to control her breathing, to keep her face as passive as she could but it was happening again. Memories came to her like snap-shots: the dove grey of a fur cape, light reflecting off the sequined strap of a purple gown, half-filled crystal perfume bottles, and a vanity with makeup covered powder puffs and fancy tubes of too red lipsticks.

Like the flood of images, she couldn’t stop the sudden ache in her chest and she resisted the urge to rub the space below her collarbone or cover the new scar on her shoulder.

This had been happening too often lately, like somehow that knock to her head had cracked a piece of her mind and had punctured that wall that she had kept so carefully mended for so long. She could feel his eyes on her, she knew if she looked over he would be staring at her with that same expression he had worn when they were just kids and she had fed him that story about her mom coming back for her. At the time she had almost believed it herself.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice entirely too soft in the large room.
He was watching her, his hands gripping the lip of the sideboard beneath him as if he could hold himself in place. His capacity for self-restraint really was a thing of wonder.

She quickly shrugged lifting only one shoulder and carefully schooling her features as if she was tired of this conversation already.

“’course,” she lied. “It was a long time ago,” she finished, casually lifting her hand as if she could just wave away the visual assault and the look of concern in Bruce’s eyes.

“So,” she drawled, sniffing. “What’re we supposed to be doing here?”

He watched her for a moment more before he sighed and turned his head to look at the small mantle clock on the sideboard behind him.

“When Alfred arrives I was hoping that while he and I were training that maybe you would be able to read some of the more basic phrases to me and I would be able to respond. It’s really not that hard,” he paused, “but I understand if you can’t do it.”

Selina felt her eyebrows rise at the insinuation, “I never said that.”

“So you will do it,” he said and she couldn’t help but notice the way his eyes had brightened.

“Sure, why not,” she answered, opening the book to the first page. “I read out tha’ book and Alfred beats the crap out of ya’. Seems easy enough, but,” she looked up at him, “I still don’t get why you’re doing it.”

“Miss Kyle brings up a very good point Master Bruce,” Alfred’s voice cut through the room.

Selina felt her heart suddenly stutter and she watched as Bruce involuntary came to his feet as Alfred moved into the room two pairs of boxing gloves tied together and draped over his shoulder. She gritted her teeth as she recognized the familiar but unwanted device in his freehand.

“It’s simple multi-sensory training,” Bruce explained, accepting the set of gloves Alfred offered him.

Alfred turned in her direction and attempted to hand her the hand-gripper that she had conveniently forgotten in the study. She smiled up at him. “Can’t,” she said, innocently showing him the book in her lap. “B asked me to read.”

“Yes, well you don’t need your hands to read do you,” he answered, shoving the tool into her hand. Remembering Bruce was in the room, she quickly bit back her retort.

Taking a moment to give Alfred her most menacing glare, she turned her attention back to Bruce who was using his teeth to tighten his gloves. “And all this will help you how?” she asked.

“How could it not?” Bruce quipped, shrugging as Alfred tied the laces for him.

Selina gave Alfred a wry smile gripping the handles on her hand-gripper and pushing them together. Ignoring her sore fingers, she completed a second rep and bent her head to the first page Bruce had marked, “Alright, just tell me when to start.”

The mantle clock had barely passed the half-hour mark before Alfred and Bruce were both breathless. Boxing was certainly not a distance sport but the amount of energy it required was nothing short of impressive to Selina. It wasn’t the first time that she had seen Bruce training, but she had never noticed before how much effort he actually put into it. She had always timed her arrival when he was just finishing up because as entertaining as it could be she had much better uses for her
time than to watch a billionaire play fight with his butler.

But she admitted to herself that she had always secretly liked when he got that grumpy look on his face, his lips pursed, his eyes narrowed. His blush would creep along his sharp cheek bones, making his eyes look almost silver in the right light, and the sweat from his exertion would make his normally tamed hair begin to flop and curl along his forehead. In general, most of the boys she’d known typically smelled awful when covered in sweat and dirt, but not B. Somehow, he even made clean sweat seem elegant.

She looked up from the book in her lap when the dull sound of padded glove against padded glove had stopped reaching her ears. Bruce was standing near the wall of windows wiping his brow with the sleeve of his jacket as Alfred took a drag from his water-bottle, but both of their chests were rising and falling quickly.

She had only been half-surprised to find that Bruce’s idea had actually kinda worked. She knew she wasn’t pronouncing half the words correctly, the spellings and then the syllables felt too foreign on her tongue. But Bruce hadn’t seemed to mind. He never did. So she had done what she had done so many times before and listened carefully as Bruce had instinctually repeated the phrase before he would take a beat to come up with his reply.

Sometimes it happened when she was reading regular books too. The first time she had done it, had been forced to ask him the meaning of a word she had never seen before, she had felt as if her entire face had been set on fire. She had half-expected him to laugh at her, to wear that smug grin that tended to put her temper on edge, or to look at her with those sad eyes that tended to push her temper over the edge, but Bruce had surprised her. He had merely looked off for a moment as if he was looking for the right way to word it and then explained it to her as if he was answering a question about the weather. It was still the same every time she asked, he would pause in whatever he was doing, reading or writing or more recently whittling and answer her. Sometimes if he was too far, he would ask her to spell it out or if he happened to be sitting on the couch he would simply lean over her and read it out himself. Sometimes she would find words to ask him about that she was well aware of their meaning. It was a dirty trick, but she really did love to watch him blush.

“Don’t know why you’d want to learn such a harsh language, Master B,” Alfred said, interrupting her thoughts, his words tinged by his exhaustion.

“I gotta admit I’m with Alfred on this one B,” she agreed. “I liked that other one you were learning, the one with the old chick.”

She watched Bruce’s eyes narrow, as he and Alfred moved back to the center of the room and he asked, “Old chick?”

“Yeah,” she said, as Bruce took up his “fighter’s pose” opposite Alfred. “I used to see you sittin’ outside with her.”

“Madam Pecot,” he asked, his words rushed as he dodged Alfred’s very practiced left-hook. “My French instructor?”

“I guess, I don’t know” she said, shrugging. “I didn’t stop to ask her name, B.”

She watched as they danced around each other trading half-hearted jabs and unweighted hooks. She knew that Alfred was big on form, but that didn’t explain the look of total concentration on Bruce’s dark face.

“Wait!” He said suddenly coming up short as his gloved hands fell to his side and he turned in her
direction, “When did you see my French tea-?”

Before he could finish his thought or Selina could even consider warning him about the right hook headed toward his jaw, Bruce fell to the ground with a thud. For one moment she felt her stomach drop, but as she watched Bruce turn over, his grey eyes narrowed into a glare and listened to the very colorful words she had not once heard in Bruce Wayne’s voice almost echo in the room she felt herself smile.

“Now THAT was in English!” Selina said, not trying to contain her laughter.

“I wouldn’t be so quick to laugh, Miss Kyle,” Alfred said, pulling Bruce to his feet. “Jus’ wait until that bum ankle of your’s mends.”

“Can’t wait,” she said, giving him a wry smile. She watched Bruce as he rolled his neck and loosened up his shoulders. “You done?” she asked.

“No,” he said, that determined note to his voice matching the stance he had taken.

Rolling her eyes, she couldn’t help but smile.

Stubborn boy, she thought shaking her head.

Sighing deeply Selina burrowed herself further into the mound of covers on her bed pulling the plain white duvet to her chin. Over the clean cotton of her sheets she could still catch the lingering scents of the fireplace that Alfred had extinguished after dinner and she felt herself smile despite herself.

Overall the day had been... Not bad.

She had always been partial to sleeping on her side, curled in on herself with an arm flung over her head, an entirely defensive habit she had developed early in life, but her busted ankle and the injury to her shoulder made getting into that normally comfortable position almost impossible.

But she didn’t mind sleeping on her back, when the mattress beneath her was so soft and her belly was so full.

Besides Alfred’s marksmanship, cooking was one of the few things that Selina had a hard time finding any fault with and he had really outdone himself at dinner. She had nearly finished her second serving of roast chicken and potatoes before Bruce had even finished his first, but looking down at her plate the boy had merely offered her one of those crooked smiles that made her stomach do strange things.

Even now, as she felt her lids growing heavy, she could recall that smile perfectly. It was too sincere to be described as charming…

No, it was… Disarming.

Which she couldn’t help but think was somehow even worse. Smooth? Manipulative? Those were things she had been raised on, things she knew how to defend herself against. But sweet, genuine, disarming? She wasn’t sure what she was supposed to do with something like that. In hindsight, she knew he had begun using those things to chip away at her, but she didn’t exactly know how to stop him and she wasn’t entirely sure that she wanted to.

That day in his study, the day he had come in from that funeral that Alfred had forced him to attend,
from the moment he had stepped into the room she had felt something pulling at her. There had been something in his manner, a sort of restrained anger, a kind of exhausted loneliness, that she had somehow recognized and it was half the reason she had done what she’d done next.

Originally she had told herself that she hadn’t gotten up from the couch with plans to comfort him, but even she could recognize denial when it was so obvious. She didn’t like to think that she had wanted to reassure him, to maybe ease away a little of what he had been feeling. She knew Bruce was strong in his own right, but damn, everybody had their limits and he had seemed to be at his very end. When she had leaned over his desk her only intention had been to get him to crack a smile, to smooth out that line that had taken up residence between his dark eyebrows.

But then she had seen the newspaper headline and he had explained to her why he had had them and before she had even had the time to contemplate what she was doing she had had her arms locked around him.

Bruce was… Wiry would be the kindest word she could think of, but that didn’t seem to matter when he was always so warm as if his internal thermostat was just naturally set on high. While physicality wasn’t completely foreign to their relationship, physical affection had seemed to be nearly non-existent. Bruce had always seemed to shy away from her touch or become quite rigid when in her proximity. She wasn’t exactly sure why but she had a suspicion that maybe, just maybe, it had been her fault.

That maybe that day when she had stood just inside his double doors and had stolen that kiss from him, she had changed something between them. She didn’t like to shoulder that kind of responsibility, to have changed something irrevocably over a simple impulse. An impulse driven solely by the fact that at the time she had thought that she would never see him again.

But like that night in his study when they were kids, she had once again thrown out caution and seized her opportunity. She had taken her moment, had pressed her cheek into his back, and had breathed that unique scent that had always clung to him.

Even now, her mind drifting in that dark twilight before sleep, she could remember the feel of his rangy build beneath his expensive jacket and the suddenly unwelcome and borderline unfortunate thoughts that it had planted in her mind. Too tired to fight them any more those thoughts began flitting through her mind, lolling her like a lullaby even further into sleep.

She felt as sudden brush of warm air against her face as if there was someone standing over her, watching her. She could feel their stare; it was dark and heavy and promised her nothing but a violent end.

“Miss me pretty girl,” rasped a dark voice.

Crying out Selina threw herself from the bed. In a whirl of fresh sheets she stumbled to the floor, clamping a hand over her mouth as she landed awkwardly and pain radiated up her leg. Unable to catch her breath, her eyes moved quickly and almost wildly around the room taking in every surface and penetrating every shadow.

Ignoring the pain in her ankle, she dropped to her hands and knees pulling up the edged of the duvet, but the floor beneath the bed was empty. Gritting her teeth, she climbed to her feet and hobbled to the wardrobe, throwing open the door. She pushed the unused clothes, dresses and long jackets, from side-to-side but only found the back of the wardrobe and the shoes that were lined neatly on the floor. Fighting the bile at the back of her throat, she moved to the windows and quickly pushed back the curtains, but she could see the latches were still in place. They had never been moved.
No one broke in.

She felt her legs begin to shake and she reached out to grab the side of her bed for support.

You're safe.

With her ankle throbbing and the rush of adrenaline beginning to make her knees weak she stumbled onto the bed. She crawled all the way to the head board and pushed her back against the familiar wood. She wanted to curl into herself, but her bad ankle made that impossible, so she pulled up one leg, hugging her shin and pressing her cheek into her knee. She tried to ball her hands into fists to stop her arms from shaking but nothing she did was working. Nothing she tried was stopping the feeling of fingers gripping her throat or the burning in her eyes from her unshed tears or the violent trembling deep in her muscles or even the tremor in her unsteady breath.

She tried to take a deep breath but the feeling that she wasn’t getting enough air was only making her feel worse. She shouldn’t be freaking out like this. She was fine. She was alive. She was fine.

It had only been a twilight nightmare, a waking dream.

He was dead.

She’d killed him.

He was dead.

“All my dad really wants is your heart.”

Selina closed her eyes and gritted her teeth at the memory of that reedy voice. Something felt lodged in her throat and her chest ached from the constant pounding of her heart and for not the first time in her life she didn’t want to be alone.

For less than half-a-moment, she considered going to the boy. When she had first come here, he had shone her some of the old servant’s passages, short cuts that ran through the house like stunted veins. She could steal into his room no problem. He would probably already be asleep, half on his back, tucked in on the left side of the bed. She knew he would do it, knew he would sit up with her without complaint. They could sit down stairs and find some late night television. Maybe one of those old sitcoms, with the silly wives that he’d told her his mother had loved so much. She could fall asleep to slap-stick and a laugh-track.

But she couldn’t do that. She wouldn’t do that.

She recognized what was happening, the hatred and the fear, and despised herself for it. This wasn’t her. This was something else.

No, she didn’t need Bruce to know about this, she didn’t need anyone to know about this.

Selina breathed deeply through her nose biting her lip so hard she tasted salt and copper in her mouth. No, she would stay here. She was safe here.

She had killed him.

He was dead.

She had killed him.

He was dead.
Constructive Criticism is always welcome. Thank you to everyone still following this story. I know this chapter was kind of bland and pretty choppy, but if you are still interested I promise the story will pick up soon and hopefully with that my writing will start to smooth out. :) Again, thank you for reading.
Selina

Crutch-less, Selina rounded the sharp corner into the deserted kitchen. It was well after dinner and every surface in the dark room shined having already been scrubbed clean by Alfred earlier that evening before he'd chosen to meet her in the game room.

She and the old man had spent most of the evening playing game after game of pool and her shoulder already aching from the exercises he'd been putting her through was suddenly feeling every strike of that pool stick on cue ball that she had taken. It wasn't so much the muscles she had used, but the extreme and awkward angles that Alfred's own turns had forced her into. He would manipulate her stripes against the rails making it almost impossible for her to take a clean stroke. She had been utterly shocked by the butler's skill. Alfred had been pulling out ridiculous trick shots and sinking balls that had both annoyed and though she would never admit it had impressed the hell out of her.

She had wondered why when she had offhandedly challenged Alfred to a game of pool, that Bruce had made a rude sound almost like a snort and had quickly excused himself to go work on one of the million projects he seemed to be always working on. Now she knew.

It had taken her one game to realize that she might've been in over-her-head, but despite the giant hit to her ego, Selina had found herself actually having fun. She and Alfred weren't exactly chummy, but they had drifted into a somewhat comfortable sort of co-existence. It was like when he helped her with her shoulder or with her ankle the two of them didn't speak much, but they had shed some of their open hostility and some of their awkwardness.

When she'd let out an involuntary whistle at a particularly good break, Alfred had begrudgingly offered her some insight. He'd told her he'd learned the basics as a 'lad,' but hadn't really enjoyed playing until he'd been stationed in a city that she couldn't begin to pronounce. If she had been the kind of person that cared, his story would have probably raised more questions for her than it had answered, but the dog tags she'd found in Bruce's room now made a lot more sense.

Even after he had sunk the eight ball for what had felt, at least to her, like the tenth time, she had continued to antagonize him for a rematch and even at the time she wasn't sure why. She knew herself well enough to know half had been her pride demanding retribution for the old man's hustling, but she suspected some it was the same reason that when he had declined she had decided to take the long way back to her room.

She would like to think that it was hunger and hunger alone that had sent her down stairs to the kitchen, but Selina was aware that sometimes there was no sense in lying to yourself.

She didn't want to sleep. Sleep meant dreaming and lately her dreams had been nothing but a steady reminder of things she was determined to forget. She didn't want to be confronted by those kids and their soft pain filled voices. She didn't want to hear the reedy twang of that boy or his father's warm clipped words. No matter what she tried, she just couldn't seem to shake them.

And if she wasn't dreaming about them. Well, she'd found herself dreaming about things she would much rather ignore. Dark hair and intelligent eyes and a stubborn mouth that when she'd wake up
had left her feeling confused and oddly frustrated. She almost wished to dream about the forest and the hunters, at least those things seemed to make sense to her.

She had been half-way back to her room, when the thought of climbing into that bed and laying amongst nothing but shadows and the deafening sound of her own thoughts that had had her detouring and taking a flight of stairs that just happened to run past the study.

She had not even taken a single step past the threshold, when it had become clear to her that from the cold fireplace and the almost tomb-like stillness of the room that Bruce had already gone to bed. Ignoring the sudden and very unwelcome disappointment she felt stirring in her, she had quickly redirected herself to the kitchen.

She certainly didn't need Bruce Wayne to entertain her. She had been living alone for most of her life; she had no problem entertaining herself.

By the time she had reached the kitchen she had already formed a plan in her head, steal a snack from the fruit bowl - Bruce's kitchen was great like that, it always had food just lying around - and then she was going to sit by the fire in her room, until grey light started creeping past the curtains and her lids would finally begin to grow heavy and she had worked her way through that book she'd thieved from the study.

She had discovered it a couple of weeks ago, when she'd woken up to find the Manor completely empty. It had been around the time her dreams had started, the morning before she had found that newspaper among all the clutter on Bruce's desk. She had still been in the heavy air-cast Alfred had strapped her in and so she had spent most of that morning, either in the kitchen eating or in the study gazing at all of the things Bruce's family had acquired over the years. She wasn't even sure what century some of this stuff had come from, but it was all so... Foreign to her. Unfortunately, it was at times like this that no matter how close they were, or had drawn to him she found herself, she truly felt apart from Bruce. But that wasn't something she had needed to dwell on.

As someone who was rather acquisitive herself, like Bruce's relatives before him, she had an appreciation for pretty things, so she had been aimlessly trailing her finger along a row of leather spines when she had felt it. She'd heard that you weren't supposed to judge a book by its cover, but she had done just that. Even in her hands, it had been small but it had looked expensive and so she'd snatched it up. Leafing threw it, she had quickly discovered she had been right about it being old, like really old, so old she was pretty sure even if she had the idea to do it; she wouldn't have been able to find a fence to take it.

It had been sheer boredom and her need for a distraction that had eventually driven her to crack it open. It had taken her more than a few tries to start reading it, the language was old and hard to read, but once it had started clicking, it was just like breaking a code once you did suddenly everything just kind of fell into place. It had started off boring, but she had figured the more boring the book, the easier it would be to fall asleep. She had gotten less than half-way through, when Selina had found herself frowning and closing it. Well, it certainly hadn't been boring. She just couldn't believe that Bruce would have that kind of book in his library, when there were passages that had made even her cheeks flush. She didn't even know they had thought about stuff like that back then.

Shaking off thoughts of lost pool games and inappropriate books, Selina leaned across the spotless kitchen island. Her gloveless hand was poised just over a bright green apple at the top of the fruit bowl when the sound of brushing fabric reached her ears.

It wasn't really a sound, just a disturbance of air that had her spinning around, her bare feet barely audible on the floor. The solarium was dark, but the kitchen was much darker and Selina knew instinctively that if someone were in there, she had the advantage, a slim one, but still and advantage.
Movement from behind the half-closed solarium door caught her eye and she stilled. Facts raced through her mind: Alfred was upstairs, Bruce was in bed. With a sudden pain in her chest, she knew that whatever was behind that door probably wasn't supposed to be.

She felt her muscles tense beneath her skin, her ears trying to desperately to hear anything besides the steady rhythm of her heart. She could feel it beating in her chest, the sound slow and thick, as she held her breath.

Unlike most crooks and thieves, Selina didn't think of herself as a very superstitious person. She had no special rituals, no lucky talisman, no qualms about thieving under a full moon, but for one terrifying and humiliating moment her mind was filled with all of the old stories her Mae had told her: old ghosts like the Cuca and even the Sack Man. She knew they weren't true, knew they had no basis in reality but the ideas were hard to shake when she was sitting alone, in the dark, in the creepiest house she'd ever stepped foot in.

Brushing off her childish fears she focused on the reality of her situation and the beveled glass that stood between her and whatever was on the other side. The thought of alerting Bruce or the old man didn't even cross her mind as she crept quietly to the half-opened doors. She had been taught, when in doubt, to never enter a room at eyelevel, so she was careful to keep herself concealed as she peeked around the corner of the door.

In the last week the daily snow showers had dwindled down to just flurries and Alfred had had the cat-slide roof swept clean of the snow and ice and all the debris that had collected there since the storm. Unobstructed the full moon shined trough the panes bathing the solarium in shades of purple and highlighting the lone figure sitting silently in one of the overstuffed armchairs his pale fingers full of white rope.

Surprised, Selina caught herself before she stumbled out of her crouch. Feeling almost amused, she watched the figure hold up a looped piece of cord, the knot he had tied shining a brilliant white in the night lit room.

She almost let out a sigh, the sound born of relief and incredulity.

What kind of weirdo sat in the dark and the cold playing with rope?

Ignoring her own thought, she watched Bruce as he efficiently pulled both ends of the rope seemingly popping the knot he had formed free. His dark brows drawn together, he immediately made three loops between the fingers of one hand. With his free hand, he absentely, he reached down by his feet grabbing a mug of tea she hadn't noticed, and wrapped his long fingers around the body as he took a sip. It was an absent and some-what masculine gesture and a far cry from his usually pompous manners.

Placing it back on the floor he stayed sitting forward, his elbows on his knees as he worked at the edges of the rope. He was wearing a dark fisherman's sweater, the thick sleeves bunched at the elbows exposing the rolled white cuffs of his undershirt.

Silently, she climbed to her feet and leaned her weight into the door jamb as she watched him. She tried not to think about what he might've been like had he grown up with his parents. Would they have brought him up any different? Would he have been just like the rest of the rich kids she had seen around the city?

Would he have changed his hair, stopped taming it in that severe side part that made him look like he was in some old black and white movie? Would he have let it grow out, embrace that little curl on the end when it got too long and worn it like the other kids his age. Maybe his eyes would've been
different, more lines around the corners from smiling and laughing and not the permanent line between his brows from concentration. Sometimes when he was reading she had the unnerving urge to reach over and try and smooth it out, but she always resisted.

She wondered if he would've looked different more round and less angles. He would've probably held onto that baby fat longer, his cheeks would've been softer, letting him slowly grow into all those sharp edges that had been exposed too soon.

He probably would've been a little less awkward, his skin a little more gold from vacations in exotic places. He might've even have been charming, learning to handle children his own age, learning to manipulate his parents and his teachers and his friends' parents. His personality a little less intense from being tempered over time instead of forged.

Would he have passed her on the street, not even looking her in the eye as he brushed passed her. Maybe, he would've had that kind of smug disdain for the rest of Gotham that kids that came from his class did.

She didn't think so. She didn't know much about the Waynes, just what B had let slip every once in a while, but they seemed proactive, like they had truly given a damn and put their money and their time where their mouths had been.

Whatever time they had gotten with their son, they had done a pretty damn good job. He was weird, yeah, but she suspected that was unavoidable. The only other smart kid she knew was certifiably insane, so weird wasn't the worst side-effect to genius.

Looking at him now, all pale skin and too sharp angles, his winged-brows furrowed in thought it was almost impossible to picture that other boy. But she felt something inside her tighten at the version that sat in front of her.

She knew he had mourned his parents and every time he spent a night pouring through Wayne Enterprise boxes and files he was still mourning them. It was a strange idea she knew, but had he ever taken a second to say goodbye to the easy life he had lost that night, to the boy he would never become?

Selina almost laughed at herself. What in the hell had she been doing thinking about shit like that for? Bruce had more, had way more, than ninety-nine point nine percent of the world, why in the hell was she worried about him?

Still, she looked back at him. His attention was still completely focused on the rope in his hands but she didn't take it personally, Bruce's had tunnel vision at the best of times.

"Sup," she said.

Much to her disappointment, he didn't startle, but stilled at her voice, his eyes watching her as he straightened lifting his tea from the floor.

"You didn't jump," she observed, pushing off the door frame and moving into the room.

He calmly finished sipping his tea, "Why would I jump?" he asked, titling his head. "I knew you were there," he said, lowering his mug to the floor.

"What gave me away?" she asked, smiling mirthlessly.

"Nothing," he replied, shrugging. "I just knew."
"So, why didn't you say anything," she playfully accused, stepping further into the room, the black tile beneath her foot surprisingly cool.

"I assumed you would come in when you were ready," he answered, watching her. "I could wait."

"I've known you awhile B," she said, taking another lazy step. "I certainly wouldn't've taken you for the patient type."

"You would be in accordance with Alfred on that assessment, but some…” he looked at the rope in his hand as if searching it for the right answer. "Projects," he said, delicately. "Require time and patience, so I'm willing to learn."

Selina almost rolled her eyes. "How come you always have to use like twenty words when less than a handful would do?"

He looked back at her, seemingly unaffected by her observation. His head tilted to the side, his silhouette shifting imperceptibly. "I thought you were instructing Alfred on the finer points of billiards."

Selina flattened her expression. Didn't he know that this was exactly what she was talking about?

"Us normal folks just call it shootin' pool, B," she said, crossing her arms and giving the wicker loveseat a glance as she passed "And I was," she admitted.

He stopped fiddling with his rope and his grey eyes so dark in the moonlit room quickly ran the length of her. She watched the side of his mouth quirk up at his assessment. "He won didn't he? He beat you."

She let out a sigh, unfolding her arms, "Like I stole something."

His brow lifted and his lips parted on a half-smile at her choice of phrase. "I imagine that must have been quite the shock for you."

She glared back at him. "It's not everyday I get hustled by a three-piece," she paused looking at him. "You sure he's just a butler?"

His half-grin faltered. "I think we can safely assume that Alfred isn't just anything," he said quietly, his eyes moving back to the rope in his hand.

She felt her eyes narrow at Bruce's words, but chose to ignore it.

Not looking up from his task he asked, "So what did you wager this time?"

"How'd you know I wagered something?"

"Because, you're not likely to play a game for the sake of competition or the mere enjoyment," he said, his thoughtful voice taking the sting out of his words.

She shrugged lightly, "Just your first born," she answered, lazily crossing from a black tile to a white one as she moved toward him.

"That was rather careless of you," he deadpanned, but she could see the slight curl to his lips.

"Well," she drawled, watching his head tilt up to watch her as she stood next to his chair. "I figure he's done a pretty okay job with you. So," she shrugged, moving to the balls of her good foot and sliding onto the arm of his chair. "What the hell? Why not let 'im have another?"
Bruce didn't turn in her direction, she knew he was accustomed to her habit of perching, and he only nodded his head in agreement, "That sounds logical."

She watched him readjust his position on the seat, but she didn't know if he was making room for her or putting more space between them. Ignoring Bruce's need to retreat, she crossed her legs putting her good foot on the cushion beside him and letting her bad ankle dangle loosely between them. She could have sat on the wicker sofa, it would have been more comfortable, but she liked him in the light here. It suited him. His dark head tilted the smallest degree toward her as if he was examining her new position from the corner of his eye.

He cleared his throat. "How's the ankle?" he asked.

"Been worse," she answered, shrugging as she studied the top of his perfectly combed head. It felt like it had been forever since she'd had the opportunity to look down at him. She had never been overtly taller than B, but at least for awhile they had been eye-to-eye and then they were typically so far apart that their height difference didn't matter. Now, they were so close she could see the shadowed dip below his cheek bone.

"So what's with the rope," she asked, gesturing to the cord in his hands. "You going fishing or something."

He snorted that little airy half-laugh of his that reached the corners of his eyes. "Or something," he answered.

He quickly made three loops again, and completed the knot he'd made earlier pulling both ends until it dismantled itself.

"Lemme guess," she drawled, her voice taking on a teasing note. "You read it in a book?"

"No," he answered, giving her one of those sad half-smiles that seemed to pull at some unnamed thing inside her. "Actually my father taught me, sailing was a favorite past time of his."

She felt a single shoulder tense under her ear as that unnamed thing was pulled harder. "And he brought you with him?" she asked, reaching down and gently pulling at the rope he was holding.

"Yes," he answered, letting it slide from his grip. "I believe, he thought of himself as quite the outdoors man. He insisted on bring me hiking every year for my birthday, and even tried to bring me mountain climbing once, but I wasn't very good at it," he added matter-of-factly.

"I bet you'd prolly be better now," she absently observed, trying to duplicate the loops he had so easily created.

"Maybe," he replied, watching her fingers as he fully turned in the seat to face her. "Have you ever seen one?"

She felt her eyebrows knit at his question. "One what?" she asked, not looking up from the rope.

"A mountain," he answered, as if it had been an ordinary question.

She narrowed her eyes and lowered the rope, "Of course, I've seen a mountain, B."

Under the bright moon she could only see the suggestion of a blush against his sharp cheekbones, "I didn't mean to offend you," he said, quickly. "I only meant-"

Selina half-snickered, half-sighed at his tone. "Yeah, I know what you meant," she said trying to
keep her voice light, and seeing no reason to lie she finished, "And no, I haven't."

"Would you like to see one?" he asked, cautiously.

"Why?" she asked, her tone teasing. "You asking to show me."

"Yes," he said automatically.

Selina bit back a groan. She hated when he did that, when he was so frustratingly honest.

"Don't be stupid," she fussed, and without thinking slid off the arm of the couch and onto the seat cushion.

The moment she sank down beside him, something inside Selina instantly regretted it. Watching his rangy body stiffen by her side, she could feel heat crawling up her neck and settling in her cheeks. Okay, so maybe she and Bruce weren't quite as small as she had remembered, but when had her hips started taking up so much room? On the other hand, when had Bruce? She had honestly thought that there would be more room.

Fortunately, Bruce had already moved, instinctually making room for her, but they were still shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip. From the corner of her eyes, she could see the lone freckle on the top of his ear, the slight curl on the ends of his hair where he was letting it get too long. She could feel the constant warmth from his body radiating through his layers of clothing. He was so close she could even detect the sweet smell of the product he used in his hair over the tea he was drinking and the pleasant scent that always clung to him.

She felt his muscles harden as he went to stand, but the action was suddenly aborted, as he exhaled and his body relaxed a fraction. She expected him to sigh, to make that sound he always made when he was annoyed, but he simply looked at the thigh that brushed his own. It could not have been more than a minute, but it already felt as if they had gone too long without talking.

She heard a rough sound as Bruce cleared his throat before he said, "We could move to the sofa if you want."

She shrugged, her cotton sweatshirt rubbing against his wool sweater. "I'm cool," she said, giving him a sideways glance. "You?"

"I'm-" he swallowed. "Comfortable."

"You sure," she asked, raising a single eye-brow as she absently twined the white rope through her fingers.

"Of course I'm sure," he said, his voice tinged with slightest bit of annoyance at her patronizing tone. She snorted. "Alright," she said, her voice betraying her amusement at his annoyance. "So you're into ropes now? What happened to the carving?"

"I sent it off to Mr. Fox to finish," he said, his head tilted as he watched her fingers.

She quickly flipped her hands palms up, so he couldn't see the crooked silver lines that ran along her knuckles and the thin skin on the back of her hands. "The security guy," she asked disbelief in her voice.

"Yes," he said, "He's also… Into whittling."
"Really," she said, "He's into little thumb sized cat figurines too?"

"It was more of a pendant and it's not unusual for a person to have several interests, Selina," he answered, his tone just the slightest bit haughty.

Selina let her eyes narrow as she threaded the rope through her fingers Cat's Cradle style. On another day, she might have called him on his bull shit, but Bruce was entitled to his secrets. Everyone was.

Sighing, she unraveled it. "So how many different knots are there?"

She could feel his dark gaze on her, studying her, gauging if her interest was sincere.

"Around thirty I suppose," he answered.

She scoffed. "Why in the hell would you need to know that many?"

"Sailings complicated," he answered, matter-of-factly.

"I wouldn't know," she said, handing him back the rope. "Never been on a mountain, can't be surprised that I never been on boat either."

She watched his head tilt, his eyes a touch brighter. "When the weather turns, we could."

"Gonna stop you right there, B-"

He turned in her direction and she sank back against the arm of the sofa. Choosing the arm chair over the sofa really had not been one of her better ideas.

He continued as if he hadn't heard her, "I know you told me you don't like the water, but we could take one of my father's -"

"I said no!"

She heard his teeth click together as his jaw tensed and he sat forward, his elbows resting on his knees. It wasn't unusual for her and Bruce to have words, Selina understood that friendships of any kind were tricky things, but they had rarely been so close together when they did. She could feel the hard and warm curve of his side brushing her arm as he took a steadying breath.

She didn't know why she had snapped at him. She had no real excuse for it. She knew Bruce was just trying to be kind to her, to share something with her, but his unconditional generosity unnerved her. She simply had no defense against it.

"You're being obstinate," he said, clapping his fingers together.

"I don't know what that means," she lied, working the cuffs of her sweatshirt over her fingertips.

"Yes, you do," he accused.

"Yeah," she admitted, "I do and aint that just the pot calling the kettle black."

His head tilted in her direction, "I suppose it is," he agreed, his voice lighter. "But why do you do that?"

She crossed her arms, "Do what?" she asked.

"Pretend," he said, his dark eyebrows drawn together.
Uncrossing her arms, she shrugged, the sudden but familiar tightness in her throat almost robbing her of her voice. "Everybody's gonna think something about you, Bruce. In the City, it's better if you control that something."

He was looking at her, his eyes openly curious. "Like," she continued. "People think you're stupid, that you can't understand them, they'll say all kinds of shit in front of you thinking you're none the wiser. On the other hand, if people think your kind, then they think your weak… And if somebody, anybody, thinks that you're weak you're already dead. Get what I'm saying."

"The Law of Club and Fang," he said, nodding his head slightly.

Confused, biting into her lip, she looked back at him, "What?"

"It's from a book," he answered.

"Of course it is," she said, teasingly. "What else would fill that overstuffed brain of yours?"

She could feel him studying her again and it was too late and she was too tired to try and educate a billionaire about what survival really meant. Sighing, she looked down to the rope in his hands.

"So these knots," she said, "Y'know 'em all, huh?"

"I know most," he said, his voice somehow both soft and determined. She could see by the turn of his mouth that he was reluctant to change the subject, but looking away he looped the cord around itself.

"Which one's your favorite?"

He shrugged. "I'm partial to the hitch knot," he answered, "It's very useful."

"Okay, so if you're really into," she paused and dismissively waved her hands at the rope in his hands, "whatever this is we could make a trade?"

He looked back at her, his curiosity obviously piqued and their earlier tones clearly forgotten.

"What kind of trade?" he asked, warily.

She felt familiar warmth spread in her and her lips suddenly curl up at his willingness. "A knot for a knot," she answered.

His head tilted. "I don't follow," he admitted.

She rolled her eyes.

"You teach me your hitch knot and I'll teach you…" Selina bit her lip as her eyes went to the glass ceiling as she tried to remember what the girls had called it. "Well, it doesn't really have a name but you get the gist."

"Yes, I believe I do," he answered.

"But I gotta warn ya B, my knot aint for boats," she said, smiling down at him.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes
Author's Note: If anyone is still reading this, I am legitimately SO SORRY for taking so long to update. The last few months have been super busy for me, but that's no excuse for not updating more frequently and I truly owe y'all my gratitude. I promise the second half of this chapter should be posted in no more than a week. I truly hope after such a long wait that this chapter wasn't too much of a disappointment.
Selina

Selina stared across the chair at the top of Bruce’s bent head, the moon having turned his dark locks black. They were each perched on an arm of the too deep chair now, having immediately recognized their need for space when Bruce had nearly elbowed her in the collarbone on his second attempt at recreating the knot she had shown him. Bruce had been hesitant at first, his blue-blood manners balking at the idea but she had easily convinced him of the merits so with their feet on the seat cushion and the knees of her grey sweatpants brushing his dark trousers, they faced each other.

The usually thick vines were too thin and too far to cast any significant shadows, but despite the fair skies the wind continued to howl every once and a while, shaking the panes of glass and making the house groan in return. The room felt like it had dropped several degrees since they had been sitting in the dark, and if it weren’t for Bruce beside her she was sure she would have already been shivering. He was like a walking furnace, and his warmth just leaked into her.

Sitting here, his fingers looping a length of rope around her wrists should have frightened her, but that instinct that always steered her right was dormant drowned out by something else. Something she didn’t think she was quite ready to understand.

She watched as he made another loop, his dark brows knit as he concentrated on the rope in his hand. It had been her idea to teach him, her idea to be his test dummy. He’d been reluctant at first, whether it was at the idea of binding her wrists or touching her at all she wasn’t sure. Bruce was weird like that. She either new exactly what he was thinking or she didn’t have the slightest clue. Frustratingly, the latter was becoming more and more frequent.

She watched his bottom lip as he became absorbed with his task; his movements were slow and gentle as his entire world minimized to her vein covered wrists and a bit of rope the width of her pinky.

The rope around her wrists was so loose she worried he wouldn’t be able to tie it right and almost pulled her hands away ready to tell him to forget the whole thing when she felt his fingertips brush the tender skin along her wrist.

Unable to stop her reaction, she gasped but quickly cleared her throat to cover up the tiny but traitorous sound. She watched him but besides an almost imperceptible curl of his lip, if Bruce had noticed anything he didn’t respond.

His eyes stayed on her wrists, his long lashes casting shadows against his pale cheeks. She hadn’t been wrong about Bruce and moonlight. It cast off his hair and made his sharp angles sharper; made him a study in contrasts: black and white, light and shadow. It suited him well. Maybe too well.

For now he was stuck in that teenage purgatory, not a child, but not a man either. But she could see it, she had been gifted with a thief’s eye for pretty things, and Bruce Wayne had the potential to be devastating.

His touch light and experimental, she felt his thumb trace over the faded remnants of the bruise on her wrist again. It looked like nothing but an old scratch now, but she could already tell where the
chain had dug in that it was going to leave scar.

Damn, she was tired of scars.

“When you,” he cleared his throat as if he wasn’t exactly sure how to proceed. “Before Alfred got rid of your jacket I checked the pockets for you… I couldn’t find your bracelet. Did you lose it?”

Selina felt something in her stomach drop at his words. Of course he would notice it was missing. He noticed everything.

“Nah, umm,” she said, keeping her voice even. “I prolly just left it somewhere. Why you asking?”

He shrugged a shoulder, his thumb resting lightly on her pulse point. “I thought you might like a new charm,” he suggested.

“I have enough charms, B,” she answered, “That thing weighs a ton as it is.”

He shrugged his shoulders, his attention returning to the length of rope in his hands. It was obvious that the warm feel of his fingers brushing the soft skin on her wrist didn’t seem to be having the same effect on him as it was having on her. Outside of that first tick in his cheek, he hadn’t seemed to even notice their proximity.

She had been so absorbed, watching the angle of his cheek, the flutter of his long lashes against his brow bone. She hadn’t noticed he was finished until he called her name.

Having been caught, she felt heat crawling up her neck as she looked down at her now falsely bound hands.

“What,” she barked, her voice coming out much harsher than she’d meant.

He ignored the tone of her voice, gesturing to his finished work, “Is that right?”

Suddenly she could feel the tail of the rope sitting in the palm of her hand and she blinked at the discovery. Bruce had actually finished. While she’d been getting lost in useless observations, he’d been working.

“Let’s see,” she answered, and using her teeth she bit and pulled the small left over rope and almost like magic the rope unfurled. “Good job,” she said wryly, and she watched as his mouth tilted up at his accomplishment.

“Okay, my turn,” she declared.

It quickly became very apparent to Selina that sailing knots and restraining knots were two very different things. She felt her cheeks beginning to burn as she made her fifth attempt at trying to tie it right. Bruce had explained to her the mechanics of the old sailing knot and whether it was due to his drawn-out explanation or her loss of dexterity she had still failed to loop the rope correctly.

As if he could sense her frustration Bruce’s voice was unnaturally soft, “It’s a really hard knot,” he explained, giving her that patient little half-smile of his that never failed to either charm her or make her sneer. Fortunately, whatever disturbing feeling that sitting so close to B had unsettled inside her
earlier that night had quickly disappeared as Selina began trying to tie the knot. Again.

She exhaled a little too sharply and felt her eyes narrow as she looked up at him. She wanted to throw the rope to the ground, to tell him to forget it. Really, when was she ever going to go sailing? She fucking hated the water.

“This is stupid,” she groaned.

Slowly, as if not to scare her, he reached across the small space between them and she could feel the calluses on his fingertips as he adjusted her fingers along the loop she’d made. “Try again.”

She ignored the patience in his voice and fought the urge to roll her eyes. She would try again, but only to humor him.

Even injured she knew she was quicker than Bruce and before he could draw back, Selina had dropped the rope and had both of his hands in hers. When he looked at her, his confusion was apparent in his drawn eyebrows. But she ignored him using one hand to hold both of his against her thighs as she retrieved the rope and disentangled it. Comprehending her intention, his hands merely flinched in her lap but to his credit he didn’t try and remove them.

“It’s a hitch knot, Selina,” he said, as she lifted his hands to wrap the rope around. “Don’t you think that this is bit superfluous?”

“What like your vocabulary,” she sniped back.

“I just don’t understand why you can’t just make the knot loosely like I showed you,” he said, his shoulders rolling beneath his dark sweater.

“Like for like, B,” she answered. “I let you practice on me. ‘s only fair.”

She watched his knuckles go white as he folded his fingers together in her lap. “And since when do you concern yourself with what is and isn’t fair?”

Selina clamped her jaw and resisted the need to tug the cuffs of her sweater down as she concentrated on making the appropriate sized loop. The offhanded comment hit her harder than she liked. Bruce appreciated honesty no matter how horrible or even awkward it might be and because of that he could be careless with his observations. She tried not to take it too personally, she’d witnessed some of the harsh things he’d said to Alfred before and those weren’t even comparable.

Refusing to look him in the eye, she focused on the rope in her fingers in the hands in her lap. Unlike her own scarred hands which had been made to thieve, to con, and to pick. Bruce’s long fingers had been made for piano keys and white gloved balls. His square nails were always clean and clipped, blatant signs of his privileged upbringing. But studying them now, she could feel where he had started putting calluses on the tips from his training, could see the bruises on his knuckles where he’d forgotten to wrap his hands again before boxing, and could even see the little writing bump on his right ring finger probably put there from all those damn notes he was always taking. She inwardly sighed; if he wasn’t more careful, soon his beautiful hands were gonna start looking a lot like her own.

“So where’d you learn to tie a knot like that?”

Bruce’s voice almost startled her, but from the sound of it, she could tell that her silence had probably gone for too long and he was grasping at something to fill the space.
Swallowing, she breathed out a sigh as she wrapped the length of rope around both of his bony wrists. “This prozzie I used to know… Her and her sister, used to run this con on johns and she was always bragging about it.”

“Used to know,” he asked his voice soft and head tilting.

“Yeah, I’m not real sure what happened to them,” she admitted, shrugging. “They just kinda… Disappeared ya know.”

“That tends to happen a lot in the city,” he murmured.

She could feel him studying her response and she was careful to keep her head still as she chanced a glance at him.

“Yeah, well,” she added, her voice growing thick. “Last I heard they’d got stupid, and tried to screw over the wrong trick.”

When he didn’t respond, she looped the rope again and continued, “I heard it was one of Falcone’s men, but coulda easily been one of Maroni’s,” she said unable to keep her voice as devoid as she wanted. “Doesn’t really matter, they’re all dicks.”

“They just make people disappear,” he said, his voice soft and edged at the same time.

“All the time,” she said dryly.

“And the police-”

“Don’t do shit,” she snapped, bringing her head up to lock eyes with him.

“But Detective Gordon-”

“Bruce,” she said, refusing to look away but softening her voice. “This whole city saw what happened last time he tried to take on a family. It didn’t end well.”

His eyebrows knit as he looked away and for one moment he looked despondent, before he looked back at her, “They really have that much power.”

“You couldn’t imagine B,” she said, unable to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

He looked back down at his hands, his thumbs overlapping, one pushing against the other until the knuckle turned white and she felt a moment of regret for being so harsh with him. She wasn’t sure why she’d just said that, or why she’d just offered him that information. There was just something about Bruce’s innocence, his naivety that somehow both pushed and pulled her. There was a part of her that wanted to preserve him and a slim perverse part of her that, if only a little, wanted to corrupt him.

When he looked back up at her, his skin looked almost translucent in the pale light making his grey-eyes look almost black and he looked so young she knew the part of her that wanted to keep him safe would always win.

“Sorry,” she sighed. “Sometimes I forget who I’m talking too.”

He looked at her, determination in his eyes. “No,” he said firmly. “I’ve been coddled long enough.”

“B,” she laughed, breaking the tension that had collected between them. “What’s your definition of coddled ’cause I seen Alfred lay your skinny ass out like a carpet.”
He looked moderately offended. “I’m getting better,” he argued.

“Yeah,” she agreed, her voice playfully patronizing. “You’ve gone almost a week without a new bruise,” she said, reaching out and thumbing the ridge of his cheek. “You gotta learn to protect your left side better and stop letting the old man mess up this pretty face.”

At her words, something in him quickly drew closed as his gaze lowered to his hands and she couldn’t help but feel disappointment pooling in her chest. She wondered if it was the criticism on his technique or the fact that she’d had the audacity to call him pretty.

She watched his head tilt in confusion as he looked at his now bound hands, “This isn’t a hitch knot,” he scoffed.

Selina felt herself smiling at his tone. “I know,” she drawled. “And I gotta say I’m a little disappointed it took you this long to notice.”

Ignoring her words, he lifted his bound hands in her direction. “Untie me.”

“You gotta learn to lighten up, B,” she answered, making no move to unbind him. “Don’t you know stress kills?”

He let out a breath through his nose. “Untie me,” he ordered, through gritted teeth.

“Nah,” she answered, “I don’t think so.”

He tilted his head asking for an explanation.

“What?” she asked, reaching up to flick at his too perfect hair. “I kinda like ya this way. I could do whatever I want to you,” she purred, resisting the urge to run her fingers through the surprisingly soft lock, “and you couldn’t do a damn thing to stop me,” she finished grazing his cheek with her short nails before playfully patting his cheek. He didn’t flinch from her touch, but blinked as if he was trying to stop himself from falling asleep. He swallowed, but this close she could see his eyes darken.

She watched his bottom lip disappear behind his teeth and it was as if someone had dragged a finger down her spine. Taking a deep calming breath, she quickly determined that that was a very dangerous sensation. A little too dangerous. And with nothing but a smile or a glance, this twig of a boy had certainly not earned the right to be dangerous.

Especially, not to her.

She pulled her hand away, and tilted her head in a completely playful gesture, as she leaned forward, “Do you like being tied up?”

He stared back at her that line between his brows pronounced in his confusion. She saw the exact moment his brain had sussed out her meaning. His hooded eyes widened so quickly she thought he might try to jump away from her. “What?!” he exclaimed, with shock and a little disgust. “No!”

The absolute look of sheer terror and humiliation on his face made her laugh before she could stop herself. His head drawn back, his normally hooded eyes were so wide she could see the whites in them.

Especially, not to her.

She clasped her stomach as she tilted her head back and the full moon was so bright overhead she could see the light behind her closed lids. Her amusement having eventually boiled down to a soundless chuckle she opened her eyes to find Bruce was glaring at her, the shock of her suggestion having warn off. She felt her cheeks begin to heat as he continued to study her thoughtfully.
Barefoot, wild hair, and an oversized sweatshirt, she could only imagine the picture she made for him. Not that she cared how Bruce saw her that is.

For just a moment he was cast in shadow as a cloud moved quickly over the moon and when she could see him once more his gaze had slipped away moving past her shoulder to their only source of light. Suddenly, as if someone had snapped their fingers, he got ‘that look’ on his face, the one that told her something had just clicked on in his brain.

“The moon…” he said absently.

“Yeah, what about the moon?” she asked, glancing up hoping to see whatever it was that had made Bruce suddenly so thoughtful. “It’s full, so what?”

“No,” he answered, “It’s waning tonight. It was full yesterday.”

Selina felt her self snort. “Why in the hell do you know that?”

“Unimportant,” he answered, stepping down from the chair. He walked the length of four tiles before he stopped. When he turned back toward her she could see he had the tip of his thumb wedged between his teeth. It wasn’t such a nervous tell as a thoughtful one.

“Of course when I want you to talk I get one word sentences,” she griped.

His eyes met hers. “Sorry, I just- I thought of something,” he said, his voice slightly distant but apologetic as his eyes and his thoughts drifted away. His thumb was between his teeth again, a hard gesture to make when your hands were bound.

Sighing, she waved him over. “C’mere and gimme your hands before you hurt yourself,” she ordered.

Absently, he held up his wrists to her, his gaze moving up to the ceiling, his skin almost glowing in the moonlight. “It’s been almost a month,” he said, as if he was thinking out-loud. “Since Alfred found you.”

“Not quite,” she corrected as she worked the knot free, “Way I remember it, I found you.”

He looked back down at her, the side of his mouth tilted up. “Doubtful Alfred would see it that way,” he said.

“You’re prolly right,” she said, watching him step away as she finished untying him. “Why you asking? Why’s that important?”

“It’s not,” he said too quickly. “I was just thinking about something.”

“You already said that,” she said, not even trying to hide the suspicion in her voice.

“So I did,” he admitted. “It’s probably my brain working on too little sleep.”

Selina felt her eyes narrow as she watched him. As long as she’d known Bruce, he had always been stubborn and unflinchingly proud and that statement, that statement was a very un-Bruce like thing to say.

“It’s late,” he observed. “We should probably go upstairs…”

“Yeah, I’m pretty tired too,” she lied, pulling the cuffs of her sweatshirt over the tips of her fingers. She watched him, waiting to see that lip of his disappear, because she had a feeling that Bruce had
no intention of going to bed.

His eyes moved from her now covered hands, to her bare feet, and back up to meet her gaze. “Do you need help getting to your room?” he asked.

“I got down here on my own didn’t I,” she replied.

Play nice, a tiny voice reminded her.

“Besides, what would Alfred say you bringing an un-chaperoned girl up to her room,” she asked.

“I’m not sure either of us wants to imagine the things that Alfred might conjure up,” he replied, offering her an uncharacteristic grin.

She ignored the things that that crooked grin did to her insides. “You coulda just said, ‘I don’t know.’”

Despite common sense, she hopped up, pain instantly shooting up from her bad ankle. She tried to disguise the sudden ache, but from Bruce’s expression she knew she had done a shit job.

“Still sore,” he asked, his grin having disappeared.

“A little,” she admitted.

The main house was warm, a lot warmer than the either the solarium or the kitchen had been and she guessed that Bruce had only the parts of the Manor that needed it heated, not because he couldn’t afford it, but probably for some do-gooder reason. The two of them had been cast in and out of shadow as they had made their way through the big house, the halls were windowless and dark, only the random dimmed lamp giving off traces of light like ensconced torches in a creepy old castle.

Quickly, she sneaked a peek at the boy beside her. He hadn’t offered her his arm, like he had that day in his study, but they had walked so close together that she could feel the brush of his elbow against her shoulder, the slight graze of his knuckles against her thick sweatshirt. The entire walk back to her room they talked about all the exercises Alfred had put her, and when he had broken his ankle Bruce, through from writing the alphabet with their toes to standing on one foot as they brushed their teeth. Even as he smiled at her less than generous observations on Alfred's training techniques, she got the distinct impression that his mind was elsewhere.

When they turned the corner into her hallway, for less than a heartbeat, she felt his fingers low on her back as if she hadn't walked that hall a hundred times. She couldn’t tell if it was merely an absent or calculated gesture but either way for someone like Bruce it was pretty bold move.

It wasn’t until she had actually reached her room, her hand on the door knob that Selina had started to feel some of that rolling in her belly again, the feeling that an elephant had taken up residence on her chest. She knew her fireplace would be lit, her day old sheets clean and the scene should be inviting, but she knew with a horrible certainty that it wouldn’t. It was such a stupid feeling, but she still found herself lingering in the hall, reluctant to release him from his responsibilities of being a good host.

“Is everything okay?” he asked, when she still had failed to open the door.

His voice was so soft, so filled with concern her back immediately straightened, her head taking on a decidedly arrogant tilt. Taking an inaudible breath, she flung the door open, “Five by five,” she answered.
“Okay, then,” he replied, as if he could see past her posturing, but accepted that there was nothing he could do about it. He was still wearing that far-off look, certainly not dazed, but like his mind was putting things together, snapping jig-saw puzzles into place.

Whatever Bruce was thinking of it certainly had nothing to do with the present and the idea left her feeling weirdly frustrated. It was obvious he was keeping something from her, and she didn’t mind, she couldn’t fault him for his secrets. Hell, she had more than her fair share, but this seemed different.

The air felt heavy and despite what he wanted her to believe she knew Bruce was far from tired. She and Bruce had been so close this afternoon, closer than they had been in what seemed like forever and he didn’t seem to have noticed at all, his overworked mind simply wandering off. She could feel it in the air around him; he’d carried it from downstairs, a nervous kind of energy. He seemed so distracted, she’d bet she could stand nose-to-nose with him and he wouldn’t even notice. She wondered what he would do if she approached him. How he would react? Before she could think about her actions, Selina was already taking a half-step toward him.

To her utter shock, he didn’t step away. He just looked down at her, his eyes lazily roaming her face. She didn’t really mind looking up at Bruce. Despite his training he was still a long way from being physically intimidating and from this angle she could see the different shades of grey in his already complicated eyes.

She watched him take a deep and solid breath as if he was smelling a feast after having been starved for years. He had that same look the one he’d been wearing when he was sitting on the armchair in the solarium, like he’d been drugged.

His stubborn mouth parted as if something had just occurred to him and she felt like someone was squeezing something inside her chest, making the delicious flutter in her belly turn warm. It was supposed to be just a test, a way to see how he would react, so why was her stomach turning over itself. Why did she have the overwhelming urge to touch him? Really touch him.

She watched his Adam’s apple bob as if he was being jostled out of a day dream and he nearly shook his head as he stepped away from her something oddly unreadable in his eyes.

“What?” she accused.

He blinked at her as if he was still in a daze. “Nothing,” he said his voice hoarse. He cleared his throat. “Nothing,” he repeated, but she could see his cheeks turning the most charming shade of red.

“Good night Selina,” he said, his demeanor suddenly so foreign and formal that she was scared he might try to bow or something. The image made her stifle the sudden need to guffaw.

“Night, B,” she said, trying to hide her grin as she watched him turn to leave.

It was only after she was in her pajamas, a throw blanket thrown over her shoulders and that old book open in her lap as she settled into the captain’s chair by the fire, that Selina realized that for just a few hours she had completely forgotten about that night in the forest and the things she had done.

Chapter End Notes

Constructive Criticism always welcome. I blame this chapter on a combination of "I See the Light" and "Satisfied." I know that I said this chapter was in two parts, but after
some consideration I decided to give Barty his own third. I hope no one minds. Also, I just wanted to say thank you to every person who has taken the time to read and review this story. Every kind word and gentle critique has been duly noted and greatly appreciated. Thank you so much.
Barton

The basement in the Mathis brownstone was no different than the basement of every other townhouse that lined their picture perfect street. There was no difference in size or placement, there wasn't even any difference in what it was used for, lots of kids Barton's age preferred the solitude of their game-room basements to the formality of their parents sitting rooms. Brass tacks, there really was no difference...

Well, no difference aside from the things Barty Mathis chose to keep down there.

The room was what a lot of people called 'unfinished' all exposed brick and dusty stone floors. When they had moved in and he had claimed it for his workshop his parents had offered to have it renovated for him. His mother had had visions of colorfully painted dry wall and neat shelves with rows of alphabetized boxes for all of his tools and sawdust. Barty wasn't exactly what one would call tidy. His mother had often said that it was a product of his brilliant mind; his father blamed it on his having the soul of an artist.

She wouldn't have stopped at the walls either. She'd wanted to fix everything. She'd even planned to install recess lighting, because she claimed it was too dark to try and work down here and that all that low lighting would ruin his eyes. But he liked working in the dark, nothing but a single chain pulled bulb above his head, the looming shadows hiding all of his secrets, his interests. He found comfort in the dark solitude, amongst the broken stone floor, the weeping walls and all of his tools. He could be himself down here. His true self. His father had understood that, and with his father on his side he had easily won that argument. His mother's plans weren't going to touch a thing. He hadn't been surprised, he was an only child, his parents' miracle baby, and he almost always won. His father made sure of that.

With his father moving to the forefront of his thoughts, Barty stripped off and discarded his gloves in the small waste basket he kept by his side. He sighed running a shaking hand over his face and breathing in the sharp remaining scent of latex as he pushed his chair onto its back legs and leaned away from his worktable and the project that sat opened on it.

He didn't like thinking about his father, or where his father's 'little hobby' had landed them. His father had never admitted it, but he knew that was why he had moved them to this fucked-up city in the first place. He was sure of it. Sure, his father had had connections, you couldn't dismiss the well placed fraternity brothers he had counted as acquaintances, but impressive people and a big city weren't good enough reasons to drag his wife and son half-way across the country to start life over in a Hellscape.

They had been living in said Hellscape for almost a year now, but he still hadn't accustomed himself to the jarring culture. Gothamites were, for lack of a better word, strange. Tragedy seemed to follow them around like an albatross. Everyone he had met, from the rich to the not so rich, all had had their own tale of woe.

For being touted as the center of the universe, as a city, it was just plain weird. It was like the entire city was caught in a time capsule, perfectly frozen and encapsulated inside a dystopian diorama. It was so odd, from their fashion to their way of speaking everything always felt upside down, as if he
had been thrown down a rabbit hole.

He knew it was this chaos, this lawlessness, this no man's land type environment, that had drawn his father back here despite the man's cries of a new life. Well before his father had taken him on his first hunting trip, not the boring kind where you killed stock buffalo or some half-starved lion on a reserve but his first real hunting trip, Barty had known there was something different about his father. Despite his easy manners, there always seemed to be something hiding in his father's gaze, a haunting that the man couldn't shake and somewhere far beyond that a sort of latent violence.

However, Gotham's violence was anything but latent. It was obnoxious and powerful and stirred something deep inside him as he imagined it had his father. On his first day in this new city they had barely driven past the 'Welcome to Gotham' sign before he had witnessed everything Gotham had had to offer. Its famous skyline a mix of shiny new skyscrapers and old gothic-style buildings had done nothing to mask the depravity and inhumanity that was constantly loose in the city. He had sat staring out the back seat window of his father's car watching as deals were made on corners and people were reduced in alleys in broad daylight.

He remembered as he had been watching another person being mugged a familiar quote had drifted through his mind: 'Hell is empty.' he had thought. 'All the devils are here.' There was no denying that Gotham was certainly it's own Circle, but for a man like his father, a man like himself, it had all the potential to be a playground.

At the thought, Barty let the feet of his chair fall to the floor with an audible snap. A playground.

He sniffed at the idea. That was how it was supposed to be, how his father had planned it, but he had learned early in life that things rarely were how they were supposed to be and that unless executed perfectly, plans didn't mean shit.

Just like the plans his father had had for that little bitch.

He had wanted her heart, for reasons that after being explained a dozen and a half times Barton still didn't understand. His father was a doctor, had been, a doctor he reminded himself.

Had been.

Past tense.

Because of Her.

Guilt and rage and something very close to despair rolled around in his stomach and he had to drop the tools he had in his hands because they were shaking so badly.

He breathed out slowly, resisting the urge to swipe his work table clear. Yes, rage had turned his blood to lava, but losing his temper would gain him nothing. It certainly wouldn't make his world right again.

He mirthlessly snorted at himself as he thought back to the days after everything had gone to hell. The hours after he had found his father had been filled with hot tears and phone calls and driving too fast on blacktops made white with ice and snow. He had had to quickly push down his grief as he had worked quickly to take care of everything to try and put things right.

Almost an entire day had past before the full impact of what had happened had finally sunk into him. The potential repercussions of his father's favorite pastime and his own bad decisions had played
over in his head like a broken record. He remembered the trembling in his hands and the ice cold
dread and nausea that had taken up residence in his stomach.

She'd gotten away. Somehow, someway, she'd gotten away.

On reflection he didn't know how, but he knew it had probably started with him. Him and his failed
temptation at duplicity. Even now, he could remember it all so clearly. He had just entered the woods-
the cold stinging his cheeks and the pain in his jaw radiating through the side of his face where the
little bitch had socked him- when he had heard the gun shot. With a smile on his face he had
immediately started running, bloodlust bringing his tired feet to life as he had anticipated watching
his father at work. He remembered how he had hoped she was still alive so he could watch the
expression on her heart shaped face as his father strung her up. Because if any of those assholes his
father had collected over the last few months had deserved to get gutted it was that little bit of gutter
detritus.

But his father hadn't been to work on her, he'd been lying beside the icy creek, a face so much like
his own covered in blood. He had stood there, shock having rendered him immobile as his flashlight
illuminated the ice and snow around his father's motionless body slowly turning red.

A gust of cold wind and reality had snapped him back and before he could breathe he was half-
sliding half-falling down the valley wall and his thoughts had been focusing on the only other person
who was out there. The only person who could be responsible for what he was looking at.

Feet planted firmly on the frozen ground he had swung his flashlight left to right but he had seen
nothing but the flakes of snow that had refused to let up. There was no girl, no footprints, not even a
blood trail. He wasn't sure how or if his father had injured her at all.

The wind had howled, an awful mournful sound, and he had quickly abandoned any ideas of trying
to find her, in that moment, in that terrible moment, it hadn't mattered. But that was then.

In those first few days after that night he had watched the news obsessively. Fear having had grown
so tight in his belly that there wasn't room for anything else. He had been expecting a cop's knock on
the door. Or a big haired anchor informing him a girl had been found in the woods or maybe
wandering by the roadside. A girl covered in blood and rambling about a boy and his father because
if his father's face was any indication the girl had to have been covered in it.

At first his only hope had been that she had died of exposure, her leather jacket and ripped pants no
match against the deathly blizzard that had covered nearly every inch of land for miles. But soon he
hoped he didn't hear anything at all. He hoped she was still out there somewhere, all alone and
waiting to be found.

He often found himself fantasizing about it. The moment he would find her. The moment he could
see the recognition cross that smug face. The moment she would be laid out before him.

The work would be painstaking. Cracking open the chest cavity, getting past the breast plate without
damaging too much skin was going to be difficult but not impossible. He would be able to do it and
he owed it to his father to get it right. He couldn't wait to have her open on his table, and glide his
fingers across all that white-gold skin.

He would rather do it properly, to freeze her and take his time, but that wouldn't be an option. He
needed to keep her breathing as long as he could, to make her suffer for every minute of pain she had
put his family through. But he was realistic; he knew the human body couldn't survive that long
without skin. It wouldn't matter, preparing her would be a torture all its own.
First he would take so much pleasure in taking down her measurements, the length of her legs from hip to toe, the circumference of her throat.

*Inches and centimeters of street trash.*

Barty cracked his knuckles at the thoughts, enjoying the loosening of his overly tight joints. Soon. It was going to be very soon. He just had some ducks he needed to get in a row and he knew just the people to help him do that.

The men his father had employed, his snatchers, had found them well before the cops had even started looking for his father. He had expected the nondescript “curators’ as his father had affectionately called them to have shown up eager to cut and dispose of anything that would have lead back to them, but they had only wanted instructions, ready to keep the rather generous deal they had struck with his father.

They had wanted lists. A list of their next three quarries, a list of dates to deliver the product and a list of paydays when they would get the cash they were owed for a job well done. But while he had no need for any more product, he had plenty of other jobs for them. Jobs that he simply couldn't do.

The cops had been another story. He had been dizzy with fear as he had opened the door for two well dressed officers that had finally coming a knocking. Everything inside of him, every logical part, had been positive that his number was up. To his surprise and relief, they had not come to arrest him, but to offer their condolences. Some motorists had finally found his father's car where he had left it abandoned and ablaze and against the trunk of a tree. The car accident had been a foul but necessary answer to a delicate question. He had done his research, he had known the exact amount of time, the amount of heat, it would have taken to destroy a body. The constant slow burn would have reduced the large automobile's interior and everything inside it to ashes.

He had never paid that much attention to the man, but as he had shaken their hands and seen the tears in those officer's eyes he had finally considered that his father was probably a lot more popular than he had ever given him credit for. He had planned then that he would play the grieving son as he kept one ear on the news and another on the GCPD.

Exhaling, he reached over grabbing another pair of latex gloves from the box his father had brought him home from the hospital. He would think about all of this later, for now he needed to get back to work. His little pet project could wait no longer.

He stifled a laugh at his own word usage. It would do no good for him to wake his mother at this late hour. With the line of people that had paraded through his house the day of his father's funeral he had thought he would've had at least a couple of days of freedom before his mother would have noticed it missing. But those eagle eyes of hers had noticed its absence immediately.

Fortunately for him, it had taken only a sympathetic tilt of his head and an offhanded suggestion for her to believe that Sprinkles had run off, probably snuck away when a door was left open by a distraught mourner. Still, he was aggravated that he had been forced to postpone his art by a couple of weeks.

He took out his Tailor Tape, his hand gently moving through the small dog's thick fur as he measured the body, mentally noting its measurements. He absentily stroked its cold body as he picked up his pencil and wrote down everything down to the exact millimeter. That was the key. He had to be exact.
Barty didn't like being exact, it went against his artistic principles, but he understood the necessity for it. It was like cataloging, it was tedious and it sucked, but it was important, it was vital. His father had shown him the value in it.

It had taken him a week to go through his dad's diary and to find his old man's box of trophies. The former had been filled with stats and faces, recipes and regrets. It was obvious his father had done a lot of research before he had gotten these targets snatched up. He had kept a dossier on everyone, newspaper clippings, school transcripts, hospital records, even police reports. There were things in those files that he wasn't sure if those poor bastards even knew about themselves. If the cops had ever suspected his father, his office would've yielded enough evidence to start building a very solid case. Well, that and the box of souvenirs.

When they had been brought in, his father had taken a token off of each one, a single diamond earring from Rana, a music player from the swimmer. He had remembered seeing the girl's bracelet and immediately knowing that she must've stolen it. No way could a girl like that have afforded the kind of craftsmanship that had gone into that bracelet or the charms that had been hanging from it. Not only was such a thing well out of her price range, she would have had to have stolen it from someone with a lot of money. Even his mother had only been gifted those kind of trinkets on special occasions.

It was also had been the only solid piece of evidence he had found that his father had run into her that night. The same bracelet he had watched her wrap around her wrist, had been lying beside his father's outstretched hand and before he had lifted his father's body over his shoulder he had absently pocketed it. It wasn't much, but it was something.

He knew he could be like his father. He could do his research. He could play at detective. He could always bring it into the shop he knew sold those charms, find out when or who had purchased them. But he doubted that kind of leg work would help him. He would just find out who she had stolen them from, and that didn't give him any idea of where she could be now. And his interest in her had nothing to do with her past, only her present, and the future he planned to end.

He hadn't thought he'd been built for revenge, but before his father had brought him out hunting for the first time, he'd assumed he hadn't been built for violence either. But violence was like sushi, you didn't know if you were going to like it, until you tried it. And soon he found himself face to face with a new purpose, discovering a facet of himself that he hadn't known existed. It had been standing right in front of him all along.

Power.

A human being.

A real human being.

A real human being that he could do whatever he wanted to do to it and no one and nothing could stop him. The potential and the possibilities were endless.

His father must've seen the hunger in his eyes, a hunger that somehow didn't match his own. He had tried to explain to Barty what they were doing out there, that it was important to honor their kill, it dying so they could live. But Barty personally thought his father's reasons were complete bullshit.

Even if his father had never admitted it, the man had enjoyed killing. Shit, he probably loved it. Who wouldn't? It was absolute power at its very base. He was the thing that stood between life and death, the thing that stood between another sunrise and oblivion. The feeling that exploded inside him at the though was something akin to attraction, to wanting, to aching.
The mere idea of it was starting to make him feel things that his father most certainly wouldn’t approve of. He nearly shook just thinking about watching life leave that girl, watching her gasp and struggle.

He remembered the first time he had see that girl, that Cat, as they had called her. His father had picked him up, had brought him directly from school that day, not even giving him the chance to change out of his school uniform. He had brought him down those concrete steps and through those thick doors; Barty could even recall the whine of the door hinges and the eerie silence that had greeted them. Her cell had been the first, and he could remember as he’d looked inside that cell, at the small circle of light provided by his father's flashlight and thinking that he honestly couldn't see what all the fuss was about.

Whether it was her dirty hair or the week's worth of muck on her he remembered thinking that she was… Okay. But not exactly a head turner. His mother would've probably described her as having a pair of 'fine eyes' and he had to admit that despite the filth he could tell her skin was a nice color and smooth but he had still needed to know what his father found so fascinating. It was when she had stared down the barrel of his father's gun, not even a tremor in her hoarse voice as she had answered him, he had known.

He had seen it in her eyes. That bitch was all fight through and through.

He may not have picked up much from frolicking around the forest with his father, but he knew who to contact now, he knew how to find the curators, he knew which police offers to pay to look the other way. They had found her once. They would find her again.

She would be his first. His first try at preserving a human. He quickly shook off that idea.

Yes, she would be his first, but, before he had his fun, he would honor his father.

He would carry out his plan. Finish what his father had begun. He had to.

The needle and thread dropped from his hand as he began to imagine it as he fell into that fantasy again. He would start with her eyes and then…

Her heart.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry. I had originally mean to post this chapter two weeks ago, but some serious real-life problems entered my life. Hopefully everything will resolve itself soon, but no matter what, I will try my hardest to finish this story. If you’re still reading this: Hooray! We made it through the trough together! I am super excited about the next few chapters, but also nervous because you guys will either love, hate, or possibly not feeling anything at all towards them. I just hope they made reading through the other chapters worth it. Thank you to everyone who has read and reviewed, y'all's kind words really inspire me to keep working. Thank you so much!
It wasn't that Bruce Wayne didn't enjoy Calculus; it was easy work and he liked the simplicity of numbers, but he believed his mind could have been better off engaged elsewhere. Dragging his pen, its use an oddly rebellious move on his part, he quickly finished the last formula on his last worksheet and tucked the paper into the appropriate folder. Looking at the small pile of correspondence work he was responsible for he let out a silent but certainly maudlin breath. He didn't see the point, it was just busy work, all of it.

Deciding he needed a mental break before he started Russian History after the Revolution he relaxed against the high back chair his father had always favored. Slowly he propped a single elbow on one of the ornate arms and rested his cheek against the knuckles of his closed fist as he studied the girl sprawled on his couch. A small brown leather book was open on her stomach as she lay in her favorite spot, a small space that at the right time of day caught nothing but sunrays streaming through the study's floor to ceiling French doors. Unfortunately, today like every other day, the sky was overcast not even allowing a stray sunbeam through its tight knit of clouds and fog.

He watched as her perfect snub nose scrunched at something she had just read and he felt the side of his mouth quirk at her apparent dislike. She quickly turned a page and let out what he could only describe as a sigh of displeasure. His curiosity more than piqued now, he sat up watching as her bright green eyes moved quickly over the small pages.

Two years ago, when he had met Selina, he would have never taken her for a reader. It wasn't that he didn't think she was intelligent enough, he had been on the receiving end of her cunning mind one too many times for that, he had just thought her too practical. Selina simply didn't waste her time, much less waste her time on something so frivolous as fiction.

Suddenly she sat up slamming her back into the leather upholstery and propping her bare feet onto the coffee table. He could see the banded bottoms of his old sweatpants bunched around her slim ankles. As she lifted her hand to worry at the nail on her thumb, peeking out from the cuff of a sweater that had seen better days, he could see a strip of black leather.

It had been mid-week when he had found the old pair of driving gloves buried in his wardrobe and he had known without thinking what he was going to do with them. He had tried his hardest to appear nonchalant when he had given them to Selina, but despite his best efforts she had given him a wary look, the same one she always wore when he had the gumption to give her a present, as if she was some kind of beaten animal that feared a touch of kindness. But to his surprise, she accepted his offering much quicker than usual and together he and Selina had managed to cut off the fingertips to an almost perfect length. He could still remember the buttery feel of the leather as he had held her hands and measured out how much material to cut and the rough but shallow scar on her wrist when she had allowed him to button them closed.

The scar was new and despite its shallowness was most likely permanent. Her bruises had faded weeks ago, and her fresh scars were always covered in wool and cotton, leaving her slight limp the only evidence of the trauma that she had endured that night. But Bruce knew scars were never just skin deep. The dark half-moons beneath her eyes were still there, a pair of reminders he had of the night she had stumbled and crawled her way across his yard, reminders that no matter how badly he
wanted to let whatever had happened to her go he couldn't.

Something had happened to her.

Someone had done that.

Someone had tried to kill her and Selina was acting as if nothing had happened, acted as if she hadn't shown up on his doorstep half-dead. The memory of her telling him she didn't want to die still made him angry and nauseous and filled with the overwhelming need to hit something.

She might not remember it, or at the very least act as if she didn't remember it, but he had known that look in her eye, had recognized her awareness that she was close to death, that she was running out of time. It had been a naked look, one that had laid her bare, one that had told him that she would do anything, give anything, for another day, another hour, another minute. He had only ever seen that look once before but it was something he would never forget.

As much as Selina tried to keep her business of picking pockets and the occasional breaking and entering to herself he had gleaned for the most part that she shied away from the big hits and that she tended to work alone. He imagined this had a lot to do with Selina's inability to trust anyone farther than she could throw them. It was this inherent lack of trust and her defiance to anyone even appearing in an authoritative role, that had Bruce concluding that Selina most likely kept to her 'independent endeavors' as she had once called them.

But he also knew that when times were bad enough or if she felt the gain outweighed the risk that she would and had taken up with a crew. She had never come out and told him, but sometimes when she was distracted enough – which was easy to do when there was food around- she would unwittingly offer him a tidbit of information that she most likely wouldn't have offered him before.

She had once explained to him that no job was perfect and if someone tried to sell you that they had a 'sure thing' they were a liar. A million and one things could go wrong on a job, so thieves always needed luck on their side or as much as they could carry. That was why they were such superstitious creatures.

When he had been bold enough to tease her about this new revelation in her character, she had immediately claimed that she was different, she wasn't an idiot, she didn't believe in fairies and bad juju. But he could easily remember times when she had dodged the underside of a ladder, or questioned him about the sounds the manor made and had anyone ever died in her room, or once when they had been taking a shortcut through the park he'd seen her stop and study a patch of clover. When he had asked her what she was doing he had had to hide his grin as she had turned pink and snapped, "Nothing!"

Nevertheless, he didn't believe that this had been a job gone pear-shaped as Alfred would say. Selina was too smart for that. She wouldn't have let someone take advantage of her like that. Not again.

He'd been by her side that night when her fence had betrayed her and sold them out to the assassins. He had seen the way she had read the room, had read the situation, had read the dealer in front of her. He had a suspicion that had he not been with her she would have probably read it better, gotten herself out quicker. Selina listened to her instincts, she trusted them, so he didn't think she was likely to compromise herself like that again. But just because she hadn't been running with a crew didn't mean she hadn't been caught thieving from the wrong people.

Or that she hadn't been thieving at all.

Selina was for the most part pragmatic, there were very few things that she did that he would
consider impractical. Now that wasn't saying that there weren't things she did that he didn't find slightly bizarre, she did. Her complex thoughts, when spoken freely, frankly had the power to baffle and sometimes terrify him to some degree. Her actions were always efficient and for the most part simple, but her motives never were, so when she had stolen that newspaper from his desk his interest had been beyond piqued. It was like she had taken his tiny seed of suspicion and had unknowingly watered it.

He knew it should have unnerved him the ease in which he could purchase what should probably have been classified documents, but if he had learned one thing in the last few years - besides how to avoid a haymaker - it was that almost everything had a price and when dealing with the GCPD it wasn't even a very steep one.

It was fairly inexpensive to obtain the files he needed, the ones on Rana Vandergood and Tyrese James, the missing students that had graced the cover of the newspaper she had stolen. Neither of their cases or even the cases before them had showed any of the usual signs of Gotham's random violence or any of the classic signatures of a mob style crime, the victims didn't have any connection to any of the families, no ransom had been asked for and their bodies had as of yet not been found.

So… the police knew about as much as he did. He was disappointed, but was far from surprised. The GCPD wasn't exactly known for their proficiency or even their productivity.

He had gone to his notes next and scoured every newspaper clipping that he had kept on the two kids that had disappeared the same time as Selina. He had kept the crime reports and the op-ed pieces and even the interviews they had done with their parents and their classmates. According to their loved ones neither of them had any enemies or ties to anything that could be considered uncouth. That information did nothing to help him and Bruce had discarded it. It was actually something mentioned in one of the op-ed pieces that had originally caught his attention. The article had mentioned that both of the students had been reported missing on the night of the full moon, as had the missing college students and the marathon runner before them. At first, he had thought it was just sensationalism, something to sell the story as more than just one of Gotham's run of the mill murders, but when he had been sitting in the solarium with her the moon so big and bright behind her it had slid to the forefront of his thoughts.

Well, if he was being honest with himself, and he always tried to be honest with himself, it had certainly not been in the forefront. Not by far. With her head tilted back and her arm wrapped tight against her stomach as she had laughed that tinkling laugh of hers at his reaction to her inappropriate suggestion he had felt…

Stupefied.

He knew he should have grown accustomed to her by now. Outside of Alfred she was his closest friend and he shouldn't be reacting to her the way that he did. He shouldn't feel so agitated when she was out of the room or feel as if his chest had momentarily stopped working if she returned.

He understood some of it was simple biology. He had given the subject some thought: he was a heterosexual male only weeks shy of his sixteenth birthday, it only made sense that he would be attracted to a female companion. But he had been around other females his age, not many, but enough to know that it didn't feel the same. He felt attracted to them in the basest of ways, but he had failed to be drawn to them, connected in a way that he didn't fully comprehend.

If he had been asked to put his thoughts into words, to explain what he meant by a connection, he knew that he would fail miserably. If pushed the only explanation, the only comparison, he could give was that he felt… Entangled with her. As if there was a rope that kept them bound together, like mountaineers, and just like mountaineers that if one of them happen to fall that the other would be
there to pull them up.

Since that night in the solarium, he had begun to feel as if that rope was knotting, thickening, drawing them closer.

But did she feel it the way he did? What if this was entirely one-sided? He didn't consider himself to have a fanciful personality, he was analytical by nature but despite his constant observations Selina still proved to be harder to read than Mandarin. Nearly all of her actions were wrapped in bravado and affectation, but he knew there was more there. It wasn't beyond her to call him weirdo or freak, but she never actually treated him like one. She treated him like…

She moved again, pulling him from his thoughts as she pushed herself up to perch on the headrest of the couch. Her pale green eyes never having left the book she held open with one hand. In the last few days, she had truly begun to remind him of a large cat, pacing and prowling inside its cage, its tail twitching in aggravation. From her new position her sweater had risen up and he could see she had rolled the waistband of the sweatpants down exposing the slight shadow and dip of her hipbone-

He shook his head as he slowly sat up. He needed to study. He needed to learn about Russia after the Revolution. He needed to stop staring at her. If she had caught him, he would have had no excuse for having been watching her for so long. She was his best friend and he had been…

Damn it, had he been actually leering at her?

Waynes most certainly did not *leer*.

With a renewed interest in the rise of the Soviet Union, Bruce reached for his school work.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, I had to break the chapter up. If anyone's still reading this, I am so-so very sorry I haven't updated in forever and that I came back with an admittedly super weak chapter. As always Constructive Criticism welcome.
The remainder of the day passed quickly in a whirl of lessons and growing shadows. The “February Revolution” and the subsequent fall of the Romanovs had proved to be just as bloody as he had assumed it would be. Bruce liked to think that he was beginning to harden himself against such violence, but there was only so much torture and death he could stomach in one day. He had been quite eager to move to his English assignment and eventually onto one of his more favored subjects.

His interest in Science was less particular and more generalized. It was the rules that governed it that drew him to it. Science wasn’t as concrete and rigid as Math. No matter how one looked at it, two plus two would always be four. And it wasn’t nearly as loose as English, which seemingly decided every few years to change its rules and even its vocabulary on a whim. It wasn’t as exhaustive as learning a foreign language and it wasn’t written by the victors like History. No, Science was different.

It had the factual structure of Math (facts were facts after all) but it also had the fluidity and ability to adapt itself to new discoveries and new ideas like English. It chose to learn from its sometimes dubious and misinformed past rather than repeating it. No matter the branch of Science he chose to study, the subject was always fascinating.

But no school lesson or project, no matter how fascinating, could ever fully appease or contain his sense of curiosity.

He exhaled a sigh against his knuckles as he began to read the last pages of his correspondence. The study’s low-light had already caused his eyes to itch and skipping his afternoon tea had left behind a slow throbbing ache low in his head. It wasn’t that Alfred didn’t try to keep him well fed. He tried. But Bruce rarely listened. So, he had been only dimly aware of his butler’s presence when he had brought in the now cold mint tea and untouched biscuits that sat beside the remnants of Selina’s afternoon snack.

Turning the page in his Biology textbook, he began the dull task of memorizing another diagram of the human heart. His eyes had just begun to feel as if they were full of sand when an unusual noise caught his attention.
He was quite proud of himself for not jumping in surprise, and felt something almost like mirth as he recognized the familiar sound. He had no need to look up to know what or precisely who had produced it.

Despite the concentration, he had given his school work, he had found he could never fully ignore Selina’s presence. The few times that he had glanced at her in the last few hours, her lips had been either tilted down in a frown or up in a sneer. While it was a mood that was not completely foreign to Selina over the past few weeks, it still had compelled him to lift his eyes every few hours.

Glancing up, he was actually surprised to find her still perched on the headrest of his couch. Along with her spells of agitation and general surliness, lately she had begun retreating to her room after lunch. He liked to think that it was still her body’s way of recovering from whatever ordeal it had suffered that night, and not an excuse to escape his presence.

A sudden quiet growl of frustration from her spot on the couch had him lifting only his eyes in time to observe the book she had been reading sail across the room landing with a sounding thump against the couch.

Keeping still, only his eyebrows lifted at her sudden loss of composure. While uncommon, he wasn’t completely surprised by her show of temper. If driven to it, she could be almost frightening in her wraith, but when it came to him her anger was more prone to manifesting itself in displays of cruel words and quick barbs. She had an unusual talent for driving her bald opinion as deep as any knife.

But it was unusual to see her temper aimed at something as trivial as a book.

Exhaling slowly, he leaned back in his seat as he watched her reaction. The fire burning behind her, almost gilded her hair, casting her in a contrast of gold and brown shadows and her chest was rising and falling. He thought he could almost hear her angry exhalations as she stared at the book she had thrown.

Slowly, as if she had just realized she wasn’t alone, her bright eyes turned in his direction. He could see the slightest tint to her cheeks, and he tilted his head at her questioningly.

She sucked on a canine, before she gestured to the opposite couch with her gloved hand. “I read that whole shitty book,” she explained. “And they didn’t even end up together. The chick just left him for some douche bag and then he went on to work for his dad… Like, what the hell?”
Bruce felt everything in him go still. Out of all the possible answers Selina could have given him, Bruce had not expected that one. His brows drew together as he dropped his unused pen onto his text book and stood from his chair. “Well,” he began, trying to keep his voice neutral and gaze diverted. “Not all stories were written to have a happy ending. Actually, most weren’t.”

Not looking up, he could feel her glare as he rounded the side of his desk and stepped toward the opposite couch, “But that doesn’t mean that they don’t have merit,” he explained, matter-of-factly.

She scoffed, gracefully sliding from the headrest back to the seat. “Screw merit, B,” she said, crossing her arms as she rested her bare feet against the edge of the coffee table. “If it’s not gonna have a happy ending then what’s the freaking point?”

He stilled his momentum, taking a deep breath as he contemplated both her words and his choice of seats. He knew the empty couch would have been the practical decision, but something inside made him pause. He had noticed, whether it was a chair, a city block, or sometimes even a human being, Selina had the tendency to be territorial about her space, and wherever she chose to lounge was typically no different.

From that first week he had met her, and had learned how easily she would run if spooked. He had always tried (and sometimes failed) to respect those boundaries that she had so blatantly demarcated for herself. But then she had chosen to embrace him that day in his study, and last week she had climbed onto the seat beside him in the solarium…

Breathing deeply, he looked down at the closed book sitting harmlessly on the couch cushion. He had never feared Selina. Or at least he had never feared her physically. But lately something suspiciously in that same primal vein had started to build up inside him in her presence, and the closer their proximity the easier it grew. It had caused him to get lost in her face as she’d laughed herself tearful sitting beside him in the moonlight, and also forced him to step away from her outside her bedroom when she had gazed up at him so expectantly.

No, he would not keep running from her.

Ignoring the book and the opposite couch, he shrugged and turned on his heel.

“Sometimes it’s about the journey,” he explained, watching her as he lowered himself onto the cushion beside her. “It’s about realism.”
From the corner of his eye, he watched her sneer as she uncrossed her arms and rested her wrists on her upturned knees. “Life’s miserable enough,” she said, facing forward. “Why in the hell would someone go looking for more?”

Per usual, Bruce had already lifted his head a rebuttal already formed in his mind. Some of the best literature in the world had been written without happy endings, but something in the tone of her voice caused him to pause.

He wouldn’t have expected such a fanciful response from someone like Selina. On her best days, she typically came across as cross and cynical and on her worst, she could seem only a hairsbreadth from being nihilistic. He hadn’t thought he was capable of underestimating her, but maybe…

Like a projector moving slides, memories flitted through his mind.

“But that’s just a cover… Really, she’s a secret agent for the government.”

He could see her sitting on his divan. Her old gray hood pulled over her unruly curls as she’d spun a story about her mother being a famous entertainer and working undercover for the government.

“Hit me, and… I’ll let you kiss me.”

She’d dared him. A wiggle in her hip and a challenge in her smile as she’d thrown a roll at his head.

“You gotta learn to protect your left side better, and stop letting the old man mess up this pretty face.”

He could still feel the gentle scrape of her nails as he had looked up at her that not so long ago night in the solarium.

Like all the other scraps of her life she had bestowed upon him, Bruce carefully laid that piece out with all the other pieces that never quite fit together. He didn’t understand how he had not seen it before.
Maybe he was just like everyone else, had been too caught up in her misdirection; her ruse. Because it was hard grappling with the idea that Selina could have such an unusual but such an ordinary facet to her personality.

Or maybe, it was like his movies. Somewhere between all of the horrible things she saw, and honestly, all of the not so morally upstanding things he knew she did, maybe Selina was just looking for something that made sense to her too. If only for a moment.

Looking across at the harmless book a thought ran across his mind. A very dangerous thought…

He watched her, watched the slight tilt of her lips, and the creases around her Cossack eyes. He tried and failed to keep the grin from his face. “I didn’t take you for a romantic,” he said.

Something like fear and anger flashed in her eyes as she whirled on him. Her full lips were drawn tight, her cheeks suddenly a darker shade of pink as if he had just cast the worst of aspersions on her character. “I’m not,” she said slowly.

Bruce felt the tiniest seed of victory sprouting in his chest. It was uncommon for him to find himself with the upper-hand in a situation with Selina. When she studied him, questioned him, teased him, he felt as if she could see him. Really see him. That she could see every molecule that made him up as a person.

But when he looked back, when he studied her, questioned her, teased her, he felt as if he was like everyone else. That he was only seeing what she allowed him to see. But this was different, this was new, a piece of her that he was sure no one else in her life had ever even suspected.

He clenched his teeth, trying hard not to worsen the offense by smiling. Instead he began crafting a sentence that he was sure would border on teasing. “Well, for someone so indifferent to these characters plights, you seem very passionate about their fates,” he said, deploying as many of the “ten-dollar words” he knew she hated.

She snorted. “Whatever,” she replied, her tone flippant. “Look who I’m talking to, a kid who’s still wet behind the ears.”

“Wet behind the ears?” he parroted dumbly, before he could stop himself.
She sneered, “What? You don’t know what that means?”

“Of course, I know what it means,” he replied. “And it isn’t true, I’m not a kid.”

She scoffed at his answer. “Coulda’ fooled me.”

“We’re barely a year apart,” he argued, “So I don’t understand why you continue to bring it up.”

“That’s funny,” she replied, shrugging her shoulders. “’Cause I don’t understand half the crap you do.”

“Like what?”

“Where do I start,” she said, her voice taking on a most unflattering tone. “How ‘bout thinkin’ that having a good right-hook is gonna somehow stop you from gettin’ killed.”

“I’ve already explained—”

“Or that you literally can’t just let shit go,” she said, gesturing to nothing.

“That’s not true.”

“Really,” she asked. “So, you don’t spend all day starin’ at pictures and files and newspaper articles about your own parents’ murder.”

It was as if all the air had suddenly been pulled out of the room. He felt the sudden and vicious quip like a blow to the stomach. That was the harsh truth of Selina, when she did choose to cut, she cut to draw blood. Before he could breathe through her honest observation, he swiveled his head in her direction as he felt his own temper snap back.

He had words on the tip of his tongue. He did. Ways he could have defended himself and observations that he knew she would find rude and callous. But he couldn’t bring himself to say them. As he took her in, his eyes roaming from her curly hair to her bare feet, he could feel a change
in her. Something in her demeanor, an iciness, a caginess, a foreign thing that seemed to be almost radiating from her.

He had seen her with men before, not boys, but men. She had always held herself the same, wide legs and squared shoulders. A position he had recognized from their first interaction, but one she rarely used with him anymore. No, when she was with him, nearly everything about her changed. After all this time, her appearance and temperament were still so mercurial. She had the ability to change, like a heavy liquid sliding and evolving with grace. Her movements sometimes close enough to being described as preening. Something he would never be bold enough to say to her face.

He knew she wore masks. She wore them every day and for everyone. She had been born and raised in a place where cruelty was not just essential it was celebrated. It was more than just a survival skill, it was a badge of honor. But she was neither preening nor dominant as she sat beside him. A pair of bright green eyes trained on him as she impatiently awaited his response.

He wanted to respond. To engage with her in kind, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that, like so many times before, she had wanted to bait him. That she hadn’t just wanted him to snap. She had needed him to.

Selina was so rarely needlessly cruel. Her reactions never so disproportionate to his teasing. So, what could he have possibly done to cause that kind of provocation?

He glanced away from her, to her half-eaten plate, to the book she had so violently discarded.

No, it wasn’t what he had said. It was what he had seen. What he had inferred. What he had dared to imply.

Selina could care less if he knew what kind of books she read or even about how she felt about them, but he had done more than that. He had seen a crack, had looked beneath her mask. He had seen a part of her she had possibly not even seen herself. It had been too close. He hadn’t insulted her. He had seen her and to Selina she would rather take a punch than to be seen to be vulnerable. Vulnerability, as she had told him, could get her killed.

He cleared his throat of the sudden lump in it. “I don’t do that anymore.”

He met her eyes as he felt her head shift in his direction and those green orbs were narrowed in disbelief.
He sighed at the wordless accusation. “Well, not as much,” he admitted.

There must have been something she had heard in his voice because he felt her relax beside him. Her posture softening as fast as she had tensed up.

“I shouldn’t’ve said that,” she admitted, dropping her bare feet to the floor.

He felt his eyebrows knit in confusion as his head came up, “Are you trying to apologize?”

“I’m out of practice,” she said, dryly in lieu of an answer, nudging him lightly with her elbow, “But it was a shit thing to say, and I’m sorry.”

He met her eyes, her eyebrows were drawn and he could see her lips disappearing behind her teeth. She really was trying to be sincere. He stared forward, focusing on the useless painting that hung so ostentatiously against the far wall.

“But it was the truth,” he said, taking a deep breath. “I know,” he gulped. “I know that it’s not normal to keep looking at them—”

“Then why do you still do it?” she interrupted. Her voice having lost all its sardonic notes.

“I’m not sure,” he answered. “Compulsion, I suppose…” He took another deep breath, trying to find the right words. “I guess, I just… I still need to understand.”

“What’s there to understand?”

“The why?” he said truthfully.

“Sometimes, there is no why,” she replied, her tone barely on the civil side of patronizing.

“I know,” he said.
“But,” she said, drawling the word out. “I think I know what you mean.”

Shocked, he turned his head in her direction.

“I mean, it’s not the same,” she continued. “Shit. It’s nowhere near the same, but I think I kinda understand.

“I think it’s why I held onto my mom’s necklace for so long, ya know? Why I used to look at her picture so much. I think at first I just missed her, and then… I just wanted to know why. Why she just took off? Why she left me? Why she didn’t lov-”

He could hear the slight hitch in her voice, the moment she realized that she had just told him entirely too much. She rarely ever spoke about her mother or spoke so honestly about the woman that had abandoned her. It was times like this that he could feel that separation of their worlds that Alfred and Detective Gordon were always implying about.

He knew that no matter the sympathy he could feel for her, he couldn’t truly understand what it felt like to be forgotten by the people who had brought you into this world. Did he know what it felt like to lose a parent? Unfortunately, he knew that pain all too well. He was an orphan after all, but his parents hadn’t abandoned him, they had been taken. Selina’s had left her to face the cruelties of life in Gotham through choice.

She sniffed, but the sound was much too delicate for her. He watched as she squared her shoulders, trying to pull that heavy cloak of pride and apathy around her. “But B,” she said, knocking her knee into his own. “Gettin’ stuck in that kinda mind loop… That kind of crap is just gonna eat you up.”

“I know,” he agreed, her words conjuring an all too familiar sense of foreboding.

He listened to the soft shuffle of cotton on leather as she turned in the seat, bending her knee so her foot was curled beneath her. Her shin bumped his thigh as she sat facing his side. He could feel her studying his profile. She was so good at that. Sizing people up, breaking them down. It was probably one of the many things that made her such a successful pickpocket. But he didn’t want to think about that at the moment.

His gaze wandered to the remains of her meal and he felt his eyes narrow. When he had been sitting behind his desk, he had assumed that Selina had eaten at least half of her snack. Alfred’s cantuccini was typically one of her favorites, but by the looks of her plate he would be surprised if she had
taken more than two bites.

It was an unsettling observation. As long as he had known Selina she had never left any food behind. But choosing to pass on some of her favorite foods was a habit she’d developed over the last few weeks. At first, she’d simply stopped taking seconds, and then her plate had slowly become less and less empty until Bruce had seen her pushing nearly all of it away.

He tilted his head to face her blunt scrutinization with one of his own. He needed to remind himself that Selina was keeping secrets from him. Not harmless things that she kept to herself, but things that had the potential to be fatal. In spite of all she had said, something had happened to her. Something she couldn’t seem to shake, no matter how quickly her cuts and her bruises had faded. And he needed to see it, needed to see the denial in her eyes that stayed at war with the constant purple half-moons beneath them.

But what stared back at him, only seemed to confuse him more and he suddenly wished that he had taken his seat across the room.

Like most humans, Bruce had always had an appreciation for beautiful things. It was a weakness his father had teasingly said he had inherited from his mother. And as he gazed at his friends face as he wished all the lights in the room were on, so he could see every detail of her: the gold strands littered through her hair, the dark green striations threaded in her pale eyes, every misplaced freckle she swore she didn’t have. He knew his father was right. It was a weakness.

She was mostly backlit by the fire, but it did nothing to diminish her effect. She had an arm casually slung over the back of the couch, the collar of her old overused sweatshirt exposing the gentle curve of her shoulder. But what caught his attention was the unrelenting way she was studying him. Her new interest was most likely not due to his appearance, but what he was thinking. Not for the first time, it seemed she had as much curiosity about his thoughts as he had about hers.

Turning from her, he ran his fingers through his hair, trying and failing to sweep it comfortably to one side. He could already tell the product he had used that morning had lost the battle against the too long strands. But he couldn’t be bothered with such a vain trivial matter when he was trying to wipe his mind clear of the thoughts that had invaded.

“It’s getting too long,” she observed, her voice surprisingly light.

“What?” he asked, confusion knitting his brow as he carefully refused to look at her.
Alfred often told him that one of his biggest weaknesses was his inability to read his opponent. But Selina telegraphed nothing as she leaned forward. Before he could react, her fingertips were already smoothing the overly long lock behind his ear.

“Your hair,” she explained, her fingertips lingering on the back of his neck.

He stifled an unwanted shiver at the dull stroke of her blunted fingernails and the smell of leather from her new gloves. Briefly, he felt his lungs cease working as he fought the urge to sink back into the couch and trap her hand there.

He knew she meant nothing by the gesture. It was just the way Selina was sometimes, like when he had walked her back to her room and she had brushed against him, so naturally invading his personal space. She was just playing with him, teasing him, distracting him.

He gently pulled away from her. Resting his elbows on his knees as he took a deep breath.

“You need a haircut,” she stated matter-of-factly, as if she hadn’t just robbed him of air. “I could do it.”

Despite the lessons in etiquette he’d suffered, the friendship and the respect for Selina he carried, he couldn’t help the feelings of incredulousness. He sniggered.

“What?” she asked, mockingly offended by his response. “I cut my own hair all the time.”

“Yes, I know,” he replied baldly.

He fought a smile at the sudden lift of her eyebrows.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked, her tone unusually playful.

He turned to face her. “Well, it wasn’t like that,” he said, gesturing to his own nape but indicating the golden-brown lock that was much shorter than the rest. “Before you woke up.”
He watched the joviality slowly drain from her face as her hand moved to the back of her neck. It was such an instinctive motion now, paired with her habit of rubbing over the scar on her shoulder. “How’d you even notice that?” she asked, her voice slightly thick.

Bruce shrugged, “I notice a lot of things.”

When she just stared back at him, he sighed, “The night of the storm, when you arrived, I had to hold you while Alfred…” He felt the beginnings of something climbing into his throat and swallowed before he exhaled. He didn’t want to think about that, he met her eye line. Her green eyes were staring back at him, guarded but curious. “You really don’t remember anything?”

She gulped, her eyes moving to the hand she had opened on her lap. “Bits and pieces,” she admitted shrugging.

“Do you even remember getting into the car?” he asked, trying to keep his tone from sounding accusatory.

“Car?” she asked, her eyes narrowed in confusion.

“Yes,” he answered, feeling something cold taking residence inside him. “The car you-”

“Yeah,” she interrupted, her eyes going wide. “No,” she breathed out.

“Selina,” he said, hope springing forward at her willingness.

“I don’t-” she said, pulling her sleeves down. “I don’t remember what happened and it doesn’t even matter,” she finished, crossing her arms.

Despite her sudden defensive posture, he felt too encouraged to relent.

“Then how do you know it was a car accident? How do you know it wasn’t- “

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore!” she snapped, her voice carrying a tone of finality that
made his jaw clench.

He knew his line of questioning was getting him nowhere and now was clearly not the optimum time to push to her. He needed to be practicing patience, gaining her trust, not chasing her away with his untempered questions and insatiable curiosity. Sighing, he sat back, letting his hands fall harmlessly into his lap.

“Then we’ll talk about something else,” he said, hoping to modulate his voice into something more civil.

“Like what?” she questioned.

“What would you like to about?” he asked.

“Not this,” she answered. He could hear her temper easing.

“Understandable…” he answered, dragging the word as if was searching for a new subject. “So, why’d you try to cut it?”

“Cut what?” she asked, bemused.

“Your hair.” he said, once again gesturing to the missing lock.

“Oh that,” she laughed softly, the change of subject severing her anger. “I don’t know. It was a freaking mess and I thought what the hell…” She made a dismissive gesture, “I don’t make the best decisions when I’m hungry.”

He nodded his head, despite the fact that he wasn’t sure what exactly she was talking about. “Seems practical,” he offered, for lack of a more informed opinion.

“More like impulsive,” she snorted. “I’d’ve probably ended up looking like a boy or something.”

“That’s unlikely,” he said, not thinking. “With your coloring and bone structure I’m sure you would


Hoping Selina would overlook the color rising in his face, he quickly pursed his lips to stop anymore words from spilling out.

*Normal,* his mind barked suddenly. *Act normal.*

Usually he exercised caution with his words, but when he was with Selina they had the tendency to spring forth unbidden. *But,* he reminded himself, *I'm not normal and neither is she.* He didn’t have to try around her. He didn’t have to pretend to be someone else, someone more acceptable.

“Looked like what?” she asked, her tone overly obtuse.

Her lips curled into a smile that could only be described as mischievous and he narrowed his eyes at her.

“Are you calling me pretty?” she asked, her voice a mixture of teasing and conceit.

He studied her knowing smirk and the prideful tilt to her chin. If she could knock him down with the truth he could knock her down as well. Suffusing his voice with a confidence he didn’t feel, he replied, “And say that I was.”

He watched her eyebrows lift with curiosity at his boldness, “Then I would say,” she paused, biting her lip. “That you really need to work on your pickup lines.”

Something in her demeanor, a flirtatiousness behind those green eyes, had his face suddenly flooding with heat. “I didn’t,” he stammered. “I wasn’t trying to-”

The edges of her full mouth tilted up at his answer and it was remarkable what that simple gesture could do to his mind.

Her burst of laughter, despite being at his expense, caused his own lips to twitch and he bit down to stop himself from smiling. “It’s okay, B,” she said, nudging him with her free foot before she gestured to the bookcases that lined the walls. “I’m sure you got a book of lame-ass come-ons
somewhere in here.”

“Speaking of,” he said, his curiosity as always getting the better of his judgement. “Where did you find that book?”

“Around,” she said shrugging. “You basically live in your library.”

“It’s a study,” he corrected. “But how did you find it, I wasn’t aware that we kept books like that in here.”

“Well, I didn’t think Waynes,” she drawled his last name gratingly. “Even thought about stuff like that. Wait-”

Before he could mount an argument, she turned her head. He could feel her gaze studying him and the heat that had been so content resting in his cheeks now felt as if it was invading his neck and chest as well. “You actually know what book I was reading.”

He sighed, keeping his eyes on the gentle curve of her knee where it brushed his own, “It may not be very well known, but it’s not exactly a literary secret Selina.”

“Yeah well, popular or not it still sucked,” she said. Her gazing moving around the room until they landed on the neat stacks of correspondence he had piled on his father’s desk. “Don’t you have like school stuff to do?” she asked, her head nodding in the same direction as her gaze.

He shrugged, not ungrateful for the change in subject.

“How much you got left?” she asked, sincerely.

“Not much,” he answered.

“How far ahead are you?”

“Technically,” he replied. “Were allowed to complete our work a month in advance.”
“I didn’t ask how much you were allowed, I asked how far ahead you were,” she observed, that lightness back in her voice.

He sighed, “I estimate roughly four and a half months.”

Her laugh startled him and he watched the color in her already flushed cheeks deepen. “Of course, you are,” she said, rolling her eyes as she began to unfurl herself.

Standing, she stretched her arms above her. As her sweater rose and fell exposing a glimpse of her midriff, her words became almost inaudible to him. “Guess that means you’re done then, wanna watch tv or something?” she asked.

Bruce had an answer but his tongue seemed to be failing him as he looked away from his best-friend’s waist.

As if she could read his stupefied mind, Selina laughed at his sudden speechlessness. However, despite being dumbstruck, he could feel her intent. Without thinking his hand moved in her direction as she tried to move past him. He had only intended to reach for her arm, a motion meant to make her pause, but like always Selina had been too quick for him. His grip landed on her fingertips.

She stilled at the sudden contact and he swallowed as her gaze landed on their point of connection.

He knew he needed to let her go. She seemed tired and he had no perfectly platonic reason to ask her to stay with him. Reluctantly, he began to loosen his hold, when a soft sound reached his ears. It was the gentle inhale and exhale of air through her parted lips.

He was almost too scared to look at her. He couldn’t bear to look up and see disgust in her face, or worse… Pity. But when had Selina ever truly felt sorry for him? Summoning a foreign kind of courage, he wasn’t entirely sure he had in the first place, he darted a glance at her face. He had fully expected her to shake off his touch, so surprise shot through him as her eyes began to soften. He didn’t know what she read in his face, in his own eyes, but it had definitely given her pause.

Encouraged, he dragged the pad of his thumb along the heel of her palm, the gently-used leather almost tacky against his skin. He wasn’t sure what kind of argument was going on inside her head, but suddenly, her lips mumbled something that sounded very much like a “screw it” and her begloved hand shifted as she threaded her fingers quickly through his own.
For half a heartbeat, he had the urge to pull her back down with him but he knew that would never do. Selina was restless. She had no intention of sitting back down, but unlike so many times before she was extending him the invitation to follow her. The act was so nonchalant Bruce could only stare up at her.

She was completely unpredictable, an enigma, a puzzle he had a feeling he would never fully understand. Even after all the time he had spent with her, she still never failed to surprise him. Sometimes she could be so callous and indifferent, he worried that Gotham had stolen more from her than even she knew, but then she would crack open that door she always kept so tightly locked and he would have to reset all of his expectations.

His mind drifted back to their earlier conversation, before all of her caustic bravado, and an idea struck him.

If Selina needed happy endings, he knew exactly where he could find some.

Standing he took a deep breath, “Can I show you something?” he asked, squeezing her hand.

Speculatively, she looked down at their joined hands. Unable to read her mood, he worried he had messed up, overstepped somehow, but Selina just shrugged her free shoulder.

“Sure, why not,” she said, gently tugging her hand toward the direction of the door.

To be continued.

Chapter End Notes

I am so sorry for not having updated sooner. If you've read this far, thank you so much, I hope you enjoyed it. As always, constructive criticism is always welcome. Side note: I borrowed Bruce assuming Selina is a romantic from the Telltale series. Again, thank you.
Selina

One of the many things that Selina Kyle didn’t even attempt to understand about Bruce Wayne’s house was the maze-like system of passages that ran through it like empty veins.

They had only known each other a few days when he had turned those innocent grey eyes on her and asked her two things: would she like to see something interesting and if so, could she keep a secret?

When she had merely lifted her brows, Bruce had hurried to explain that Alfred, convinced that the tunnels were structurally unsound, had forbidden him from using them.

So, of course she had agreed to keep it between them.

Though now that she thought of it, Selina could admit that she had probably agreed to go along with him more to spite the old man than to satisfy her own curiosity. Not that there had been anything to really satisfy.

Despite the danger that Bruce had implied, she couldn’t say she’d been impressed by the dark and musty tunnels. They had turned out to be exactly what their name had suggested, a simpler but a much dirtier way to get from Point A in Bruce’s big ass house to Point B in Bruce’s big ass house.

Eventually Alfred had had the weaker spots fixed, the load bearing walls reinforced, the holes in the floors patched up, but nothing had really changed. The tunnels were still dark, they still smelled funny, and they still seemed to niggle at that completely irrational part of herself that couldn’t help but imagine hidden skeletons and dead vengeful servants.

True, that in the years that she and Bruce had crept around the bones of his house, they had never found anything more interesting than some old empty wine bottles and once a baby’s shoe, but that didn’t mean that deep inside there wasn’t something a million times more interesting.

Selina shook her head at such an absurd idea as, even with her excellent night vision, she felt more than saw Bruce turn sideways to slide through a narrow passage. Quickly, she mimicked his action squeezing through the once spacious tunnel.
Where in the past they had moved along these passages freely, now heads had to be bowed under timbered thresholds and hips and shoulders made walking side by side in the brick lined halls impossible. This new observation would have probably made her feel a bit uneasy if she would have had the time to examine it, but the quick and steady echo of Bruce’s footsteps and the fingers laced through her own kept her attention on the boy ahead of her.

Glancing down at their entwined hands Selina felt amusement tugging at her lips.

She had fully expected him to have let go by now, but Bruce Wayne was proving he wasn’t half as predictable as she’d thought he was. She had imagined that he would have tried to do it in the most gentlemanly way possible. Typical Bruce, he would have spent a good deal of time, analyzing the situation and then choosing what he thought was the best possible plan of execution. Which would have probably boiled down to pulling ahead or falling behind, slowly drifting apart until she had finally taken the hint and simply let go.

But when she had loosened her fingers, not wanting to let go, but letting him know that he could, Bruce had only tightened his grip. Selina had tried to deny it, but she couldn’t ignore the unfamiliar feeling that had awakened in her chest. It was an odd thought, but that simple gesture had made her wish she had abandoned her new gloves somewhere along the way. She wanted to feel him. She wanted to feel his nick and his cuts and all of those callouses that he had worked so hard to earn.

She hadn’t given much thought to her actions when she’d decided to take his hand in the library. The movement had just felt so natural that she’d chosen not to fight it. But what she hadn’t expected was to enjoy it so much. Like being wrapped in warm blankets with a full belly, there was something nice about the feel of his fingers between her own.

She wasn’t an idiot, she knew she shouldn’t want to get closer to him. She knew that. Bruce already saw too much for his own good. Something that was definitely not working in her favor at the moment. He had the horrible habit of getting too close and she didn’t like the way he looked at her. No, not that dumbstruck way that made her want to smirk despite the fluttering in her stomach. It was the way those sharp grey eyes studied her. Like she was one of his puzzles that he needed to piece together. It was unnerving. But that hadn’t stopped her from enjoying the way his hair had felt brushing against her fingertips.

She couldn’t really claim to be an overly affectionate person. The Home she’d been raised in had been neither doting nor generous but they had taught her how to tolerate the rank smell of nervous sweat and the coarse feel of cheap clothing. She’d been trained on the appropriate ways to get close to a mark, the brushing, the patting, the ability to keep them looking left while she went right, but the idea of doing so voluntarily felt a little alien to her.
It wasn’t that she didn’t understand the need for human contact. She did. But only when the occasion
called for it. She remembered how she hadn’t hesitated to grab Ivy, all dirty red hair and tattered
green sweater, the first time the young girl had made her way back to The Flea. Or that day in
Bruce’s study when she had seen that look in his eye that meant he was anywhere but here and she
had wrapped her arms around him, ignoring how he had stiffened as she’d pressed her cheek into his
back and breathed in his familiar scent.

Feeling her nose twitch, she was reminded of the overwhelming combination of dust and old wood
that had assaulted her the moment she had stepped back into the servant’s passage. It didn’t really
matter which floor you were on, or if you were closer to the kitchens than the attic, they all smelled
the same… Old.

Stifling a sniffle behind her free hand, she wished that Bruce’s warm scent was just a little stronger.

Looking up at the boy ahead of her, his profile flickering in and out of shadow, she couldn’t help but
wonder where he was bringing her.

He hadn’t said much as he had led her up the main staircase to the second story or what she’d heard
Alfred once call ‘the family floor.’ It was a level of the house that Alfred, while he had never come
out and said it, had basically forbidden her from entering. Anytime she had found herself wandering
on that side of the manor, the butler had the unnerving ability to pop up behind the next corner and
tactlessly imply that she needed to be elsewhere.

She could never prove she was being watched, but she had rarely walked down that hall and not felt
a set of eyes on her. It was really the only reason she continued to take the passageways between
rooms.

Her eyebrows knit in a mixture of confusion and unwelcome nerves as Bruce drew her passed the
door she knew lead to his room and for one moment she thought of letting his hand go.

“B,” she said, pulling him to a stop as they came up short of another door.

He looked back at her an eyebrow arched in question.

“Dude, we’ve been walking for like an hour, where in the hell are we going?” she asked.
“Selina,” he said, his tone bordering on patronizing as he checked his small wristwatch, “It’s hasn’t been five minutes.”

Agitation eating away at her anxiety, she cocked a brow of her own.

Instead of yielding under her scathing gaze he simply tilted his head giving her a half-smile. “Haven’t you ever heard that patience is a virtue?”

“Not when I don’t know where I’m going?” she answered.

“Aren’t you always telling me to be more adventurous?” he asked, and if she wasn’t mistaken she thought she could hear the slightest tones of teasing in his voice.

“Not when I’m barefoot with spider-webs in my hair,” she responded.

Swiftly his gaze darted to the top of her head and back, the tilt of his head suggesting the latter part of her statement had been an exaggeration but that he was willing to admit she made a point. He turned back to the door that they’d almost reached, and she listened to the twangy screech of a rarely used doorknob.

“Come on,” he said, gently tugging her hand, “We’re here.”

The paneled door swung in but all Selina could see of the room beyond was more darkness.

Against her better judgement, she allowed herself to be pulled ahead of him into the dark room. She couldn’t help but feel like an idiot. In the city, she would never have allowed herself to be pulled by anyone, anywhere, at any time.

Bruce had no idea the amount of trust she was giving him as he finally let her go.

Selina wasn’t exactly sure what she had been expecting but this was not it.
She had only made it two steps into the dark room before Bruce had shut the door, blocking out the meager light from the hall. Once again, she had felt more than seen him brush past her, and before she could follow she heard a series of familiar clicks.

Squinting, as her eyes adjusted to the overhead lights, she quickly surveyed the medium sized room. Even with Bruce standing by the light switch, her gaze instinctually sought any alternate means of escape including the open door behind him. She could see what looked to be a large bedroom beyond the threshold, but even with her eyesight it was too dark to make out any significant details.

As if he could feel her eyes on the open door, Bruce reached behind him and closed it. She shrugged. Whatever Bruce kept in there had nothing to do with her and he was allowed as many skeletons as he needed. Who was she to judge?

Trying to keep her observations seemingly offhand, she noted the only other door, but it looked closed and for the moment she chose to ignore the curiosity that it briefly inspired.

Letting out a deep breath, she made a lazy circle as she inspected the room around her and felt her eyebrows crease in confusion.

The walls were covered in… Clothes.

Well, not just clothes. Feminine clothes. Feminine clothes, that probably cost more money than Selina would ever see in her life. One wall was dedicated to shoes and coats, another to handbags and scarves. Small cubbies and drawers with crystal knobs hid things she could only imagine. Besides the clothes that seemed to hang from every inch of available wall space, there were a few pieces of furniture. A soft brown divan took up the center of the room, a large standing mirror beside the shoe collection and tucked into the corner was an old vanity- large lights framing its mirror as if the prepped for an actress ready to take the stage.

Confused by the sudden quiet, she carefully gave the corner of the room a side-long glance. Bruce was being unusually quiet from his spot against the threshold. Typically, when he had discovered something new, he could grow almost childlike in his enthusiasm. Well, as childlike as Bruce Wayne could be which in her opinion wasn’t very childlike at all. But when she glanced at him, head tilted, he simply shrugged his shoulders as he leaned against the door jamb. Shrugging a shoulder in return, she turned moving further into the room.

So, Bruce had made her trek half-way across his house to bring her to a… Closet. Granted, it was a
ridiculously amazing closet. She could give him that.

Despite the strangely spotless façade, the room smelled stale. Old makeup littered the top of the vanity abandoned mid-use as if the last person to use it had been in a hurry. Along its back, kissing the mirror were multiple golden tubes of lipstick and a line of expensive looking perfume bottles. Her fingers ghosted over their tops, enjoying the different textures of their stoppers. Her touch paused on a particular one, and she couldn’t help herself as she lifted its stopper to her nose.

It smelled strongly of soft flower petals and fancy clothes.

It smelled like rich people.

“I got her that one,” he said, his voice unusually soft. “It was her favorite.”

“Figures,” she answered, quickly replacing the stopper and placing carefully back. It might’ve smelled like money but she had no intention of smelling like his ma.

As she moved to a row of shoes with heels so high they would’ve made Babs drool, memories of what her own mother smelled like flirted around the edges of her mind. Scent was one of the few things she did remember about the woman. Her smell, her face, the sound of her angelic voice was impossible to dislodge, while other things came and went in waves.

There were memories, fuzzy images, that she couldn’t bring herself to trust like red lips and sheer robes, tightly curled hair and shining jewels dripping off ears and fingers. No longer a wide-eyed child, she realized those jewels had to be fake. Her mother never would’ve had the money for fancy jewelry and pretty clothes. Those false memories were just farfetched thoughts her mind used to fill in for a woman who had walked away from a life in Gotham and everything that had come with it.

Abandoning the display of torture devices disguised as shoes and the memories that had unexpectedly floated to the forefront of her mind, Selina approached a rack of dresses that made even her breath catch in her throat.

Like so many things in her life, Selina had never given clothes, especially clothes like this, much thought. She knew she had an eye for pretty things, but that didn’t mean she inherently knew what other people thought looked good.
Once, when she had given a rather scathing opinion on one of Barbara’s more bold outfits, the older woman had been quick to inform her that what Selina knew about fashion could fit in a thimble. *Whatever the hell that was supposed to mean?* But judging by the use of Bab’s smug tone, Selina had quickly realized that it had been an insult. In answer, she had lifted her hand in what could not be misjudged as a harmless gesture and hadn’t gone back to the penthouse for a month.

It hadn’t been her fault that that she had been ignorant of the difference between velvet and crushed velvet. For as long as she could remember, clothes had always been nothing more than a means of survival. Before Barbra, Selina had chosen her clothes for functionality. She needed something to keep her warm, wasn’t obstructive and helped her blend in. And even after Babs had explained that fashion was just a way to “express yourself,” Selina had chosen her style from the “go ahead and try it asshole” collection.

Looking down at the grubby oversized sweater and old sweatpants she wore, she wondered what kind of message she’d be sending now. Nothing she wanted to comprehend at the moment.

Sighing, she ran an appreciative eye over the rack of beautiful dresses before her. She might not know anything about fashion, but she knew pretty. Her fingers itched to crawl across every fabric, to feel the velvets and the satins, the taffetas and the silks, and materials she was sure she didn’t know their names.

She made quick work, her fingertips dragging along the carefully hanged clothes, and before she realized what she was doing, red fur was sliding between her exposed fingertips.

The fur was so impossibly soft that for one moment, she forgot what it was, and wanted to rub the tri-colored pelt against her cheek, to wrap herself in the small stole. But as she reached the end, as its dented face came into view, she recoiled as if it had been a snake.

It was a fox fur.

Something inside her ached at the sudden realization as she looked back on the row of furs. It shouldn’t have. She should have felt nothing. She had stolen more than twice as many furs in her short career. But something suddenly felt as if it was sitting on her chest as she thought of all those animals killed for no other reason than being small, being soft and being pretty.

She didn’t know how Bruce’s mother had acquired these, but she had seen some of the paintings lining B’s halls and she had a pretty good idea. Despite the cool temperature, she could feel sweat accumulating inside her gloves as images of hunting party entered her mind. Horses and dogs. Horns and guns.
Had these animals been hunted? Had they known? Had they felt scared when their instincts had told them to run or had when that first shot rang through the air, had they just felt confused? Had they been alone, their only company the constant beating of their own hearts?

Her own heart beat painfully hard inside her chest and she couldn’t stop from rubbing that familiar phantom pain in her shoulder.

She knew what that was like to be ran down and to be cornered, to be the prize in a fixed game. Life wasn’t fair, she knew that, but what had given some asshole the right to choose who lived and died. To run a bunch of kids to ground and slice them up for sport.

*Suffering spoils the meat,* mocked a reedy voice.

*No,* she thought. *Not just for sport.*

Something roiled inside her stomach and suddenly her coffee and her lone bite of biscotti threatened the back of her throat.

“Most of them are fake,” she heard blurted behind her.

Swallowing her burning agitation, she turned in his direction. “What?” she asked.

“The furs,” he explained, gesturing to the closet behind her. “They’re not real.”

She shrugged, “Who am I to judge,” she replied. “Half my clothes are made of leather.”

Bruce shook his head as if he had expected another response, but wasn’t surprised by the one she had given.

“Speaking of,” she began, letting her fingers trace along the edges of a purple dress. “Where are my clothes?”
“I can’t say,” he admitted, his dark eyes following her fingers.

“Can’t,” she asked, teasingly. “Or won’t.”

“Can’t,” he answered, his eyes meeting hers. “With the state they were in, I assume Alfred threw them out.”

“What about my boots?”

“I’m not sure,” he explained, glancing at the wall of clothes behind her. “I imagine they went the same.”

Sighing, she looked down at her feet. She didn’t know what she had been expecting, of course her clothes had been ruined and they had thrown them out. But having such an irrevocable severing from her life feet depressing. “Of course,” she said. She turned to face him, “This is cool and all but- “

“Don’t worry,” he interjected, pushing off of the threshold. “This isn’t what I wanted to show you. It’s this way,” he said, gesturing to the closed door.

“Okay,” she drawled, watching as he turned the knob. “And what exactly do you want to show me?”

“You’ll see,” he replied cryptically.

If the first closet looked as if it had been designed by an upscale boutique owner, this second closet would’ve been designed by a hoarder. A well-organized hoarder, but a hoarder none-the-less.

The room was only half the size of the previous closet, and for a single moment her heartbeat seemed to stutter as she entered the windowless room. On first glance there didn’t appear to be any other points of exit, but as she let her mind adjust to the overwhelming collection of bits and pieces, she saw the telltale signs of a second route.
She hadn’t needed Bruce to recognize the marks of a hidden door, her Mae had been thorough in her education. Selina knew exactly what she was looking for: the slight discoloration in the flooring, the way the woodgrain in the paneling didn’t quite match up, the almost nonexistent cut in the crown-molding.

Letting out a sigh, she glanced around taking in the old leather chair, the assorted knick-knacks and the books that cluttered up the wall to wall shelves. Almost every inch of space, save the slip of wall she suspected led back into the tunnels, was filled with… Stuff.

Looking back at Bruce she caught him watching her. His bottom lip was caught behind his teeth as he quickly glanced at his feet before meeting her gaze. Crossing her arms, she narrowed her eyes. If she didn’t know him so well, Selina may have even misinterpreted his look as almost sheepish.

“Okay, B,” she said, with a sigh. “What’s going on?”

“You wanted a book with a happy ending,” he explained, motioning to the wall of books behind her.

Warmth climbed into her cheeks as she shook her head. “I never said that,” she denied.

“Okay,” he granted, his voice mockingly placating. “Regardless, there’s an entire wall of them for you to choose from.”

Shaking her head, she took in a deep breath, like the other closet, she couldn’t see any signs of neglect but the smell of dust and parchment was strong and she could see why. An entire wall of books was in front of her, their assorted sizes and colors, just begging to be pulled down, pried open, and divulged of all their secrets.

Ignoring the pull, she turned to one of the other shelves. They were filled with so many things, contents that made absolutely no sense to her. She couldn’t comprehend why Martha Wayne would have kept dingy little trinkets and lavish crystal figurines on the same shelf? Or why she would have owned the former in the first place.

“What is all this stuff?” she asked, studying a small rose made of crystal.

“My mother liked to collect things,” he answered, straightforwardly.
“So, what’s it doing in here?” she asked, her eyes caustically cataloging each item. “What, not good enough for the Wayne family library?”

“It’s a study, but that’s not why…” He took a deep breath, as his unfocused gaze examined the shelves of knick-knacks. “My parents-” he paused and she knew he was trying to find the right words.

“They gave a lot of themselves, to society, to their friends, to the public, to Gotham. My mother especially… She lived a lot of her life under a microscope. Everything she did was examined and dissected.”

He cleared his throat, the way he always did when his parents were brought up. Heat and guilt rose up her neck and she looked away grabbing the closest object to her as she remembered the things she had said to him. “She believed that it was important to keep a part of yourself hidden.”

“So, you’re telling me all this… Stuff,” she asked as she twirled a jade hair stick between her fingers, “Is her dirty little secret?”

“Perhaps hidden was the wrong word,” he conceded, watching as she placed the stick back among the collection of misfit items. “I think she just wanted a place where she could be more than her name.”

Frowning, she hunched over as she looked at a silver jewelry dish filled with tiny enamel pins. “And she found it in here,” she asked.

He shrugged, “I think so.”

Plucking a small snow-globe from between what looked suspiciously like two jewel encrusted eggs, Selina held it up to the light. There was a tall black building inside, the landscape covered in glittering fake snow.

“Where did she even get all this stuff?”

“She collected them from different trips. She and my father travelled a lot before I was born and then
after when he was gone on business, no matter how short, he always made sure to bring something back for her.”

“Why?” she asked, flipping the globe over and watching all of the white flakes and glitter accumulate at the top. It was so pretty, it reminded her of the one he had brought her back from Spain or Italy or wherever it was that his butler was always dragging him off too. At the time, she hadn’t really understood why he had wanted her to have it, and hadn’t given it any more thought after she had handed it back.

“He said, it’s what you do when you want someone to know you’re thinking about them. That you care about them.”

Mulling his answer, Selina suddenly felt her cheeks tingle with heat and she quickly replaced the snow-globe.

She heard him exhale behind her. “I know I should probably donate a lot of it,” he admitted on a sigh. “But, I just- “

“Hey,” she said, rounding on him. “You don’t have to explain yourself to me,” she softly retorted. “Or anyone for that matter.”

He nodded his head, but still looked away. His gaze fixed on one of the lower-shelves.

The overhead lighting was cool but sparse, and she could only assume it had been designed that way to make its occupant as comfortable as possible. She imagined that when his mother had used it, with its overstuffed chair and heavy afghans that it had probably been a relatively cozy spot. The kind of place a woman like that could’ve finally taken a breath.

But at the moment, with no heat pumping through the vents and the cool lights only dimly lit, she couldn’t quite see this place through Bruce’s eyes. Watching him from the corner of her eye, she could see where he had pushed the cuffs of his black sweater up to his elbows and the shadows that were cast beneath the sharp angles of his cheekbones and jaw. She could even see where his eyebrows had been drawn together, and not for the first time, Selina resisted the urge to take his hand again.

She felt like she understood it now, his reason for dragging her half-way across the Manor. At first, a small part of her had hoped he was trying to impress her, that he had known so little about her that he
had thought she would be awed by a bunch of trappings of a life she would never have. That she had been wrong about his perception of her and that his earlier insight into her character had been nothing but a lucky guess, a fluke.

She could see his reasons now though and she wasn’t sure if she was more anxious or relieved at the revelation. She could see his intention, he wanted to share something with her, something positive, something that wouldn’t end in them barking and hissing at one another.

But maybe that had been the wrong move on his part. She knew that Bruce would never admit it, but maybe being here, being surrounded by all of the things that reminded him so much of a mother he would never see again, had been too much for him. And unfortunately for both of them, she had not been gifted with the ability to lighten someone’s emotional load.

Slowly, she let her gaze roam over the wall before them.

“So, your mom liked books, huh,” she asked.

He cleared his throat, but his mouth tilted up at her question. “When she found the time,” he answered.

Giving Bruce her back, she stepped toward the ceiling-high bookcase ahead of them, each inch of it covered in books of all shapes and sizes and from what Selina could see different subjects. On first glance she had been convinced there had been nothing more than the pocket-sized books like the ones she had seen sold at the corner store. But now she could see there was an array, from some the size of her hand, to ones like the giant leather bound bore-fests that lined Bruce’s study.

Taking a step closer she dragged a finger over the broken spines, the books so well used that their titles were unreadable.

“I know the study is lacking,” he said. “But I thought you might like these more. And you can borrow as many as you want.”

Her hand stilled as she felt the implication of his words like a stone in her stomach. So, Bruce thought that she was going to stay. Or at least stay long enough that she would need access to something to take up her time.
She knew she needed to set him straight, that she needed to let him know that she was so close to being healed. That soon she was going to have to go back to the City and he was going to go back to whatever it was that little genius billionaires did with their days. But she wasn’t ready to do that and she didn’t know why.

Inhaling deeply, she nodded as her eyes moved to the shelf above her head. She could see there was a second line of books. Twelve large, leather bound and golden embossed volumes that were more in line with what Selina had expected Martha Wayne to have owned. She could tell from their thick leather spines alone that she would have to use two hands if she wanted to try and pull one down.

Even squinting, she couldn’t make out the small embossed text at the bottom of each volume. They looked like numbers, possibly four digits. Curiosity getting the better of her, she pointed at them, “What are those?”

She could hear Bruce’s sigh from his side of the room. “Photo albums,” he replied, wearily.

“She liked taking pictures too,” she asked, going to the balls of her feet to try and read the covers.

“I guess,” he replied. “But those are…” He exhaled, as if he was trying to decide to tell her the truth or not. “Just pictures of me.”

Selina couldn’t keep the smile from her face, or the mischievous glint from her eyes as she turned back to the bookcase, “Okay, I’ve gotta see this.”

She had just curled the tips of her fingers around a spine, when a long-fingered hand came over her own, pushing her conquest back into place.

“I don’t think so,” said a firm voice from above her.

She should’ve heard him moving toward her, should’ve felt his sudden nearness, should’ve been prepared to counter-attack the body that was standing behind her. But she hadn’t, and worst of all, she couldn’t even conjure any self-loathing that she’d been taken by surprise.

Instead, she was overly aware of the warm boy whose chin was brushing the top of her head as his hand gently but firmly held her own against the thick photo-album.
Slowly, he loosened his grip and she slid her hand free, dropping her bare heels to the wooden flooring.

“Come on Bruce,” she said, whirling on her good foot to face him. “They can’t be that bad.”

“Yes, they can,” he argued, his tone self-deprecating.

Surprised at his continued proximity, Selina nonchalantly leaned against the bookcase behind her, the top of her curls too low to brush the hand he kept planted on the shelf above her head. Honestly, she had expected him to jump back from her and when he didn’t retreat, she couldn’t explain the sudden shiver that ran the length of her spine.

If it had been anyone else, on reflexes alone, she would have already had them on the deck. A well-placed elbow would have broken a nose, her heel would have crunched their instep, or at the very least she would have reached for her long-lost stiletto. But this was Bruce. This was the boy who had put himself on the line for her, who had been willing to take a bullet for her, who she had lied to and who still welcomed her into his home. The boy who opened his doors no matter how many times she chose to run.

She grinned up at him, her smile more smug than friendly.

“What could you possibly be embarrassed of?” she asked.

“Plenty,” he grumbled, in that same self-mocking tone. “You can ask Alfred; my mother was relentless behind that lens.”

“Oh poor, B,” she cooed. “What a terrible childhood you had. With your big ass house, and your loving parents, and your giant suit wearing gorilla for a nanny.”

Bruce’s laugh was so quick and such a rare thing to see, Selina knew that if she hadn’t been so close to him she would have missed it.

“Giant suit wearing gorilla?” he echoed dryly, but the undisguised amusement in his eyes only gave her encouragement.
“Trust me,” she said, tilting her head as she leaned her elbows onto the shelf behind her. “It’s accurate.”

“I don’t know,” he argued, lightly. “He has his good points.”

“Name one,” she challenged, raising her eyebrows.

“That you would find useful,” he asked. She watched in smug silence as he made a show out of raking his mind. His grey eyes had drifted away as his thumb tapped rhythmically on the shelf above her head.

“He’s a great cook,” he said, a look of feigned triumph in his eyes as they met her own.

She sniggered at his accurate assessment. “Okay, I’ll give you that,” she said, lowering her arms as she righted herself. “So, you gonna lemme look at these pics or what?”

“No,” he said, his voice proof his answer was final.

“Come on,” she whined playfully. “At least tell me there’s one of you dressed as a tiny sailor.”

At his answering glare, she bit into her bottom lip to stop from laughing.

“I don’t hear you denying it,” she argued.

“Beg all you want, Selina,” he said, leaning away as he pushed off the wall behind her. “I’m not showing you.”

“Oh Bruce,” she said, drawling his name. “We both know that I have never,” she lightly pushed a finger into his chest, “Ever.” She repeated the gesture. “Begged anyone for anything.”

“Oh course not,” he replied, wryly, that thick dark lock falling to the corner of his eye as he looked
down at the indentation her poking had left in his sweater. “That would be entirely too human for
you.”

She tipped her head back as she smirked, “I’m glad you’re finally starting to recognize that.”

She watched the corner of his mouth twitch up. “I’m not sure your arrogance is having the charming
affect you think it is,” he said, the words laced with an unexpected humor that belied his tone.

“And yet,” she said, pushing his disobedient hair back into place and letting her fingertip linger a
second too long. “Here you are.”

“Here I am,” he conceded.

As dark hooded-eyes looked down at her, the scent of tea and spice and whatever the hell it was he
put in his hair invading her nose, she wondered when the room had gotten so warm.

Bruce had grown so quickly, she still hadn’t decided yet if she liked looking up at him or not.
Through birth alone, he already had so much, so why did he have to be unnecessarily taller than her
too. It wasn’t that his height elicted any kind of fear in her, not even close, but it did stir something
inside of her. Something hungry and unfamiliar and nothing that she wanted or needed to examine.

Determined not to show a trace of the confusion that was suddenly swimming around in her head,
she wrapped herself in bravado, smirking as she gazed back up at him. Which as she met his dark
eyes, she quickly realized might not have been one of her better ideas.

Bruce was one of those rare people. When he looked at something, really looked at it, she knew that
thing had his all of his attention. Every thought in that overstuffed mind of his was concentrated on
that one thing.

Her breath quickened as she realized that for these few seconds, that she was that one thing. It wasn’t
the first time he had done it. When they had first met, there had been a few times that she had caught
him staring at her. At first, she hadn’t known if she should be insulted or flattered, but as she’d
watched him watch other things, she’d known it was out of an ill-conceived fascination and not any
ill intentions.

But even those glances had been from a distance. Childish and harmless and safe from the heaviness
that weighed it now.
Without looking down, she knew if she put a hand to his chest the normally slow and steady rhythm of his breath would be quick and uneven. She couldn’t explain why they were both breathing unnaturally. As far as she knew, neither of them had exerted themselves. So maybe it was the heavy air or the lack of cold oxygen, that was making her dizzy and making his pale eyes soften around the edges. He was looking down at her, his gaze calm and restrained as if he was waiting for her to make a decision.

Selina had always prided herself on her ability to think quickly on her feet, but when he looked at her the way he was looking at her right now…

It made her want to do things. Irrational things, like feel the smooth skin of his jaw, or wrap a lock of that dark hair around her finger, or see his reaction if she were to try and…

Selina gulped leaning away from him. If she didn’t move now she knew she was going to do something stupid. Very stupid.

Needing a distraction and needing it fast, she remembered one facet of the room that Bruce in all of his nattering had failed to mention.

“Where’s that go?” she asked bluntly, pointing to the opposite wall.

The sudden quite of the room was almost deafening as Bruce just stared at her. She could feel his gaze, like a physical thing, caressing her face as if he was memorizing the turns and secrets of a treasure map. Exhaling, he let out a warm breath that ghosted over the exposed skin of her collarbone and he quickly shook his head as if he was trying to dislodge an unwelcome dream.

“What?” he asked, not masking the confusion in his hoarse voice as he turned to look behind him.

“That door,” she reiterated. “Where’s it go?”

He didn’t answer, but she could see the muscles in his shoulders bunching beneath his sweater. Sensing the ridiculous lie she knew he was probably formulating in that _convoluted_ mind of his, she slid from her place between him and the bookshelf.
“Look I know it’s a door,” she said, before he could deny it. “But if you don’t want to tell me what it’s for that’s fine,” she stated, keeping a light tone to her voice so he knew she wouldn’t be offended or at least not too much.

“It’s not that,” he answered, still staring at the hidden door. Turning toward her, he asked, “Do you really want to know?”

“Well, I do now,” she admitted, crossing her arms over her chest.

For one moment, she could feel him studying her as he did whatever calculations it was he did behind those dark eyes before he made up his mind.

Sighing, he reached back for her hand.
Selina

Out of all the secret panels in Bruce’s expansive house, this one had to be the most complicated. Bruce had barely grazed his hand down the side of the wood panel when she’d heard the familiar click of a spring engaging and the panel had popped open and slid into the pocket wall beside it, revealing a door Selina could only describe as formidable.

In the years that she had been thieving she had picked her fair share of locks. She had found success trying her hand at anything from simple door latches to complicated combination locks. She had even taken the time to teach Bruce the ins-and-outs of pins and rakes. So of course, in her arrogance she had assumed that she’d seen it all. But looking at the steel door, the steering wheel knob, the multi-character keypad beside it, she knew that without some extensive training there was no way in hell that she would have been able to crack that thing.

And there had been only one other time in her recent memory that a lock had completely confounded her- the iron lock on her cell.

A chill ran along her nerves as she watched Bruce study the small key pad. She knew it was a stupid idea, silly even, but if the Waynes had no problem leaving priceless antiques in barely used hallways and rare art hanging out in the open, what kind of weird shit did they keep that they needed this kind of security to lock it up?

“Hol’ up, B,” she said, staying his hand as he reached to punch in the code. “What’s in there?”

He looked up at her, before his eyes darted from her to the keypad and back. “It’s hard to explain,” he said, letting out a deep breath. “Are you sure you want to see it?”

In answer, she narrowed her eyes as she cocked her head to the side. “Look, if you don’t trust me. That’s fine-”

“It’s not that,” he said, sounding exasperated.

“Sure, it’s not,” she countered.

“I do trust you, Selina,” he answered.

“Yeah ‘bout as far as you can throw me,” she joked.

“No, Selina,” he said, straightening so he looked her in the eye. “I trust you with my life.”

There were so few times in their friendship where Selina had trouble meeting Bruce’s eye, that for one solid moment she could only stare at him and digest his words. Why would he tell her that? Why here? Why now? If she didn’t know him better, she would think he was trying to manipulate her. Because there was no way in hell that after everything he knew about her, after everything she had done, that he could possibly feel that way. He had to be exaggerating or just plain stupid.

But even with those possible answers she couldn’t stop the fire that burned in her cheeks or the nervous chuckle that bubbled up, “But maybe not with the family jewels, huh,” she laughed.

It felt like an eternity as he stood staring at her, a slight tick in his jaw and a mixture of thread-bare patience and well-earned exasperation coloring his features.
“Look it’s up to you,” she said, “But I’m starting to getting hungry so…”

It sounded like he swore beneath his breath, before he hunched back over the keypad. Scoffing at his nonchalance, she rolled her eyes and grabbed his nearest hand, quickly cupping it around the numbers and shielding her from whatever passcode he was bound to punch in. He only shook his head in answer.

Sighing, she put her back to the vault door and stared aimlessly into the room they had just left. From her position, she could still see the edges of his mother’s private room: the wall of eccentric books, her collection of useless but clearly sentimental knick-knacks.

Separately none of those things had made much sense to Selina, but when she put them together she felt like she could see a pretty clear picture of who Martha Wayne had really been. The scene reminded her a lot of the box Bruce kept by his bed, all those strange little trinkets he kept so close to him, but hidden away.

She kept a stash like that herself. A collection of things that for no reason she could grasp she couldn’t quite bring herself to part with. The little cigarette box she had stolen from Bruce, a lucky penny, her first lock-picking kit, an article she had torn from the newspaper, it was just a random collection of useless things she had picked up and kept in an unassuming box shoved in an old fireplace in one of her squats. It was also where she usually kept her extra swag and where she had used to keep her bracelet when she had needed to make a hit.

She cuffed her wrist, her finger trailing over the now smooth scar, where her charms had used to hang and jangle. She took in a shaky breath, hoping Bruce was too concentrating too hard to notice.

Glancing at him, she counted six beeps as he punched in the code. Before she even had time to stand up, he was already turning the wheel, its quick rotation matching the dull clang of locks unhinging. Turning around, she watched as the thick door swung open with a groan.

There weren’t many times in her life that Selina could remember being impressed. Not really impressed. Not impressed to the point of speechlessness.

Years of living on the streets had left her with a mild level of apathy concerning most things. It actually scared her sometimes, how she was rarely shocked by what human beings were willing to do to each other. And when it came to material things, she found she was even less amazed.

Most people assumed that just because she had been born on the wrong side of the city, that she hadn’t seen her fair share of gaudy. When she’d finally struck out on her own, she had staked out charity galas and parties where old trophy wives flouted their newest guilt gifts and the assholes of industry bragged about all the prophets their newest investment was going to yield, but her knowledge had come well before that.

From the safety of her fire-escape perches, she’d watched as bosses and drug lords had been chauffeured around in their shining cars, their wrists weighed down with gold watches and rings shoved on every chubby finger.

Even from a young age, she had known the difference between predators and prey. Low-levelers, drug dealers, bookies and assholes that couldn’t tell their right from their left were all fair-game, but she had instinctually known that despite the potential swag dripping off of them, those kings and queens were to be avoided at all costs.
Girls who kept their hands to themselves, kept their hands.

It was a motto she still stuck to.

But that hadn’t stopped her from watching them from afar. Watched as errand boys became errand men and young girls grew into young mistresses, trading brown packages for Berettas and ponytails for dead-eyes. Each time they took another step up that ladder resulted in another staple, another trapping, that proved to the world that they had become somebody.

It had always seemed like a little too much to her, but then she had met a child billionaire and a spoiled blonde heiress and her knowledge of what money could get you and what it had the potential to provide had grown ten-fold.

But none of those experiences, had prepared her for this… She wasn’t sure anything could have.

Unlike the other two closets, or what only Waynes would have considered closets, the vault had no heat and no overhead lighting. It was cold and dark but oddly peaceful. Maybe it was the vault like door, the thick walls, or because it was hidden so deeply inside Bruce’s sprawling home, but it was the kind of place she felt like she could curl up and rest her eyes.

Darkness consumed almost everything, the walls, the marble floor, it seemed like even the very air was covered in something that seemed to absorb any trace of light that came near it. But like always her eyes quickly adjusted.

Selina felt a smirk tugging at her lips, she had always seen well in the dark.

“Rumor has it that she can see in the dark. Is that true pretty girl?” a voice echoed somewhere deep in her mind, sending an icy chill into the very pit of her stomach.

She took in a deep shaking breath, the cool air filling her lungs and clearing her mind. She really had to stop thinking about that. Clearing her throat around the small lump that had formed there, she focused on the vault like room ahead of her that looked closer to an art exhibit than a room in someone’s house.

The little light that shined in the room was sparse but bright. Hip-high show cases glowed from their positions lined against the dark walls like a giant glittering U. Lit from within, as if they were in a jewelry store, the giant glass boxes both protected and revealed the treasures tucked safely inside them. Inhaling, she felt the catch in her throat as her eyes moved from one glass exhibit to the next. She felt a humorless laugh bubbling within her.

When she’d made that crack about ‘the family jewels,’ it had been just that… A joke.

Logic told her that Bruce had made a major mistake letting her in here. Because she wanted to bust each case open like an oyster and dig each little figurative and possibly literal pearl out. Gems of every shape and carat hung from necklaces and giant earrings. Gold broaches and silver rings safely shined from their black velvet nests like glittering eggs. And then there were the diamonds… Selina couldn’t remember having such an urge before. Growing up the way she had she understood envy and jealousy. But those feelings always made her stomach turn bitterness, churning it deep in her gut. This - this felt different.

Few times had she taken just to have. She’d started stealing because she had to, she kept stealing because she was good at it, but a few times she had stolen simply because she’d wanted.

Typically, when Selina stole, she did so with nothing but the item’s value and the promise of another
week of survival on her mind. But her thief’s eye had somehow abandoned her in here of all places. Because she didn’t see dollar signs when she looked at those clear stones. She saw beauty, she saw stars, she saw a galaxy in the palm of her hand.

She could picture herself draped in them. She knew it was an irrational thought, people didn’t do those things, not even rich people, but that couldn’t stop her mind from fantasizing. She wanted to lay back on a bed of them, to feel the hard stones digging into her skin, making her sparkle with their hidden light.

Fire, her Mae had used to tell her. That’s how you tell the good ones from the costume. A real diamond has fire inside it.

A warm voice cut into her thoughts but she couldn’t bring herself to be bothered by it.

She stepped closer to the closest display. Teardrop pendants reflected rainbows inside their glass cages and for one moment she felt as if the world was swaying beneath her.

“Selina,” the warm voice repeated and she felt long fingers wrapping themselves around her wrist as if someone wanted to shake her.

“Selina!”

As if being pulled from a dream, she took in a deep breath and suddenly felt the cold air of the room and the tight hold Bruce had on her.

“What?!” she snapped, heat spreading along her cheekbones as her eyes met a pair of concerned grey ones.

“Sorry,” he apologized, not sounding sorry at all but watching her as if trying to puzzle something out. “But, you looked… Stunned.”

Trying hard to fight the blush she knew must be deepening the color in her cheeks, she let out a small scoff, “Not likely,” she mocked, trying to gently pull her wrist from his hand. But to her utter shock, Bruce didn’t immediately let go.

For a single moment, surprise robbed her of a voice, but looking at the worry etched into the lines of his young face she couldn’t bring herself to jerk free of him. She didn’t know where that concern had come from or what it had been for. Bruce couldn’t have possibly truly thought that she had been close to fainting. She wasn’t some delicate debutant or fragile flower. She was made of sterner things. She had thought he knew that.

Feeling something very close to disappointment settling into the pit of her stomach, she gently pulled her wrist free.

“Seriously, I’m fine,” she said, stepping closer to the display case she’d been edging before he’d grabbed her. “I was just a little surprised…” she admitted, leaning over the glass to look at a tray of rings. “I’m not used to all this.”

“All what?” he asked, stepping beside her, his elbow brushing her arm.

She gave a derisive laugh before turning from the case and gesturing around her with both hands.

Bruce didn’t turn with her or even lift his head, but she knew he had understood her gesture. “They’re just things, Selina,” he explained, his deep voice even but spent.

She didn’t stop her humorless laugh, “Says the youngest billionaire in the world,” she replied,
sardonically.

“That wasn’t a choice,” he bit out.

Well, neither was being left on an orphanage’s stoop soaking wet and half-dead with nothing but a locket and a note, she wanted to retort, but refrained. She knew that if she and Bruce ever got into a pissing contest over each tragedies, that would be an argument that they would both lose.

“I know, B,” she replied. “Doesn’t mean it’s not true, though.”

With that parting shot, Selina allowed her shoulder to brush his back as she moved around him. Immediately her eyes darted to the next closest display, a section demarcated for brooches and pendants, but she couldn’t quite bring herself to really even appreciate them for their market value. Despite her initial reaction to all of those dazzling gems, she could admit that not all of the cases held such enticing prizes.

She could feel those studious eyes on her as she moved onto another case. The jewels inside were even more boring than the ones before, but between a display of multi-stoned rings and different sized bangles, an empty space caught her eye.

Tapping on the glass, she could feel the question on the tip of her tongue when a memory caused her to pause.

Judging from the space, it had been used to store a necklace. Probably a set of pearls if the lonely matching earrings were anything to go by. She could almost see those tiny white pearls again as they had scattered along black pavement and later when she had been so carelessly digging through that box in Bruce’s room, some of those same stones pouring into her gloved hand.

Selina couldn’t explain it. She knew there was no rational reason for her to assume that spot had been used to keep that string of pearls safe, but she kept her question to herself.

Clearing her throat, she quickly and quietly moved to the next row.

Intentionally lazy, she let her fingertips trail along the sharp metal edge where the two panes of glass met. Tinsel thin bracelets and bejeweled cuffs flashed up at her in rows of gold and silver. Necklaces and princess chokers polished to a shine were laid comfortably against black models.

Looking at all of the beautiful displays and their lack of dust and fingerprints, Selina had just begun to feel the first stirrings of amusement as she thought about how long it probably took Alfred every day to dust and shine when something from the corner of the room her eye caught her attention.

“Holy shit…” she breathed, and as if she was in the daze that Bruce had accused her of, she felt her feet carrying her across the room of their own accord.

Placing both hands on the glass above it, Selina looked down at the jewel encrusted piece. “Is that a crown?” she asked, trying and judging by the footsteps following her, failing to keep the shock from her voice.

His warmth was more than welcome in the cold room, as he stood beside her and studied the circlet. “Technically, it a diadem,” he replied.

Unable to resist, she rolled her eyes as she leaned on her elbow, “And what the hell would you need with a diadem.”

To her surprise, Bruce merely shrugged, “I’m sure one of my ancestors had their reasons.”
It was such a rich person’s response, she only chuckled at his answer, surprising both of them. “So, what’s it all doing in here?” she asked. “Why isn’t it locked up somewhere?”

“My father said it was because my great-grandfather didn’t trust banks,” he answered, matter-of-factly.

She raised an eyebrow in his direction.

“Black Tuesday,” he answered, as if that was supposed to mean something to her. It didn’t.

“Well, I can see why you didn’t wanna lemme see it,” Selina took a deep breath wondering if she really wanted to hear the answer or if Bruce would even give her one. “This place could float half of Gotham for a decade,” she exaggerated.

“That’s not why I didn’t want you to see it,” he said, turning to her, his own elbow resting on the top of the case. “I mean it is, but it isn’t.”

Confusion knitted her brow. “Then what was your problem,” she asked, sliding a step closer to him.

Bruce sighed, and his eyes drifted to the crown before they met her own. “I didn’t-” He exhaled again, lifting a hand to push back that stubborn lock of hair. “I’m not ignorant Selina, I know you think I take my money for granted and for the most part you’re right. It’s not something I think about it… But I know you do and I didn’t want-” he paused, as if he wanted to find the best way to explain himself. “I didn’t want to offend you.”

“You thought something like this would offend me?” she asked. “How weak do you think I am?”

“Not weak at all,” he answered. “I just didn’t want you to think that I was-”

“Rubbing it in my face?” she interrupted.

“For lack of a better term, yes,” he agreed, honestly.

Selina felt her eyes narrow as she stared back at him. Out of all the things she could’ve accused Bruce of, wielding his wealth on people like her, people who lived hand to mouth, would have been on the bottom of that list, if it had shown up at all.

If anything, the boy was usually guilty of being stupidly generous. Something she assumed he had inherited from his parents.

“B,” she said softly, reaching for his free hand. “That never crossed my mind. Why would you even think that?”

“Selina, I’ve seen normal people get offended for much less than this,” he admitted, looking away.

“Yeah, well we’re not normal people,” she stated, dragging him along.

“No, we’re not,” he agreed.

“So,” she said, walking backward. “I think it’s time for you to show me something fantastic.”

Sometimes Selina wondered how Bruce fit all of the knowledge he had inside his head. The only other genius she knew had traded a bit, or maybe a lot, of her sanity for brilliance. That kind of deal
made sense to her. Life was a shitty checks and balances system, wasn’t it? So, what had Bruce given up to be this intelligent?

Well, if she was being honest. He didn’t always make the best decisions and he was a terrible judge of character. Exhibit A – him bringing her in here. The boy had actually brought a self-professed thief into a room that was the equivalent of a giant jewelry box.

It wasn’t so much that she wanted to steal it or even that she needed to steal it which were typically, her two driving forces to find a mark. She couldn’t explain it. The undeniable draw that each piece had on her that something inside her that craved the kind of security that things like that could bring her.

But she couldn’t even entertain the idea of snatching something from here, and not just because the old man watched her like a hawk. No, it was because of the boy whose fingers fit so perfectly between her own and a stupid promise she had made him when she had never thought to see him again.

But if it had been anyone but Bruce acting so stupid she just wasn’t sure she would have been able to help herself.

Listening she could still hear his even voice, a faint hum in the background as she looked at another piece.

When she had asked him to show her something fantastic he had quickly tried to drag her to the other wall, but the moment something had caught her attention she had quickly slowed him down.

She was not sure how she had missed it on her first round. Unlike the obviously blank space that had once held his mother’s string of pearls, the case she had slowed down to examine had been entirely cleaned out. Not even a velvet stand left to show it had ever existed.

When she had asked, what was supposed to have been in there. Bruce had studied it before explaining that those had been loaned out to a museum on the opposite coast, but that he didn’t think she would have liked them anyway. When she had lifted a brow at this claim, he had given her a rare but not unheard of smug look and told her that historically they were rumored to be cursed.

She had been overwhelmingly tempted to give him the finger at the implied accusation, but she had only rolled her eyes. Never-the-less she had given the cabinet a wide berth.

As Bruce had finally hauled her to their destination, Selina seriously questioned his definition of what fantastic was because the jewelry he had showed her was to put it nicely - simple.

But seeing the small bit of alertness that had entered Bruce’s dark grey eyes, Selina had listened patiently as he had explained how Alexandrite had come from some mountain range in Russia and that the stones could change color depending on the light they absorbed and the angle at which you could see them.

Despite the interesting contrast of the bright green gems shining from their lacy gold setting, she thought that their history seemed to be a lot more interesting than the actual stones.

“So, it changes color,” she said, cupping her jaw and sliding her elbow onto the glass case until her arm lay flat. “So, does a five-cent mood ring?”

Squeezing her fingers lightly, his lips twitched as he looked at her like he was trying to figure something out. Bruce’s arrogance wasn’t rare but Selina couldn’t recall it being overly common either. But when it did rear its prideful head his egotism was almost always tied to his intelligence. It
wasn’t unusual to find people who thought they were the smartest person in the room, Bruce just happened to not always be wrong.

He leaned into the case one long finger pointing at the smallest gems that framed a center stone that was nearly the size of a pigeon’s eggs, “That’s a little over one carat,” he explained as if she didn’t know what a carat was, “Alone, it is worth close to fifty-thousand dollars.” Selina felt something deep in her lurch at the idea.

Fifty-large for something not even as big as her front tooth.

“If you’re going to work in goods Selina,” he continued, losing none of the haughty tone he had adopted. “At the very least you should know how much their worth?”

She felt her eyebrows lift almost into her hair line, as she gazed up at him from her nearly prone position, “Are you saying I don’t?”

Bruce just smiled at her. “I’m saying that I was with you when you tried to sell a jade Netsuke for fifty dollars.”

Damn, that felt like forever ago, she thought, surprised he had remembered that. She could only stare back at him before his words had fully sunk in and she scoffed.

“Wait,” she said, sliding back up to stand and meet his eye. “Are you actually trying to tell me how to do my job?”

“I wasn’t aware that thieving was considered an official vocation,” he answered, dryly.

“Well, last time I checked neither was grumpy-ass child billionaire,” she sniped. “At least I actually do something to put a roof over my own head and food on my own plate. I don’t just wake up in the morning to a warm bed and a full belly.”

“You could,” he said, “You don’t have to keep stealing. You could stay here. Stay with-“

Selina felt her eyes round as she watched him swallow the word they both weren’t ready to hear. Her own stomach knotted in response. For a girl who had never run from a fight with this boy, she had been dreading this confrontation. When Bruce had questioned her about her accident, despite all of his prying and knowledge, she knew he didn’t know anything. But now, here, they both knew the truth. They both knew that her staying here was simply impossible.

And she really wasn’t ready to have this conversation. She wasn’t ready to see the look of disappointment lining those dark eyes. She wasn’t ready to leave.

Swallowing, she tilted her head as she studied him. “Does my business really bother you that much?” she asked.

“Of course, it does,” he answered straightforwardly.

She felt a humorless smile pull at her lips. “Then you really shouldn’t have brought me in here,” she said, not hiding the disappointment and cynicism in her voice as she stepped away from him and blatantly let go of his hand.

“You promised to keep things honest between us,” he said, shrugging his shoulders as he slid his hands into his pockets. “I’m holding you to that.”

She scoffed, shaking her head at his answer. Sometimes his naivety was almost too much to bare.
“Kid you have got to start wising up,” she advised.

“So, I’ve been told,” he murmured.

She gave the room one more glance and sighed. She couldn’t believe she had voluntarily walked into a room with only one exist. But she had just been so… Entranced seemed way too strong a word. Attracted maybe too weak. But watching the light reflect off all those pieces, like tiny rainbows filled with fire had made her very breath catch in her throat.

She knew some of the old cats used to call them sparklers and now she understood that phrase. She understood a lot more. Bruce had shared with her things she wasn’t sure even her Mae had known. He had explained to her all of the different diamonds, the differences in cuts and colors. In all her time working she had never even seen a colored diamond before. Because of her instructions, and later out of habit, she’d simply just snatched whatever she could and worried about the rest later but now… She wasn’t sure that a cheap watch and some costume jewelry was going to cut it anymore. Shaking those thoughts, she turned away from the display.

Taking her last lap around the room she came up short as she gave a row of eternity bracelets a second glance.

“I had no idea you liked diamonds,” Bruce observed, once again coming up beside her.

“Neither did I,” she replied honestly.

“Did you want to…” His words almost faltered and once again, like a pendulum, Bruce’s voice held a note of hesitancy. It was strange how something so small as indecision could undermine the almost aristocratic confidence he had been born with. And Selina couldn’t help it, she honestly liked seeing him a little flustered.

“Did I want to what?”

He made a strange dismissive gesture with his hands, and she felt her eyebrows knit in answer.

“I can open any of the cases,” he said, once again sliding his hands into his pockets. “If you wanted to, I don’t know…” he hedged, as if he was afraid she would be offended.

“Play with them?” she asked.

“I wouldn’t have put it that way,” he answered. “But sometimes when my mother would loan them out, her friends would spend hours just trying them on.”

“Why?”

He shrugged.

“Rich people are weird,” she said, taking a few steps from him.

“That’s a no then,” he asked, his shoulders turning inward.

“I didn’t say that,” she answered. Turning, she leaned her elbows against the case behind her and she knew the smile she had given him would most likely be read as mischievous. “So, I just point at a case and you’ll open it.”

“That’s what I said,” he replied, lifting a single shoulder. “And I can just put them on,” she drawled.

“That’s the idea,” he said, taking a step closer to her.
“Any of them?” she asked, again.

“Any,” he clarified, the tips of shoes inches from her own bare toes.

“Even the crown?” she tested.

“It’s a diadem,” he corrected. “But yes, even the crown.”

Biting her lip, she moved past him but could still feel his gaze on her back. Soundlessly popping her knuckles, she slowly walked around the small room, her eyes taking in every single piece of jewelry encompassed in their well-lit homes.

She paused as something small and gold, something that shouldn’t have made her look twice in a in a room full of rubies and emeralds, caught her eye. Selina didn’t know what it was about the dainty looking jewelry that seized her attention, maybe it was the delicate metal work, or the half-carat jewels, or maybe it had stirred her insatiable curiosity because it was completely alone. Isolated in the corner, the only jewelry in the entire case.

“What’s in here?” she asked, inclining her head toward the glass box in the corner.

He stared at it for a moment and Selina could almost see the pictures and information quickly flashing through that overflowing mind of his.

“Wedding jewelry,” he said, dismissively.

Curios, she leaned over the case, her nose nearly touching the glass. “Wedding jewelry huh,” she repeated, mockingly.

The jewelry set, because that’s what most of these stupid cases were filled with, sets, was probably the least assuming jewelry in the entire room. They were simple. The black gems were significantly smaller and the gold filigree less gaudy than any of the other stones and metal she had been drooling over the last half hour. They had an elegant appearance but they seemed far from fragile and she thought there was something quite beautiful in that. Which surprised her as small and unassuming were a far cry from what what she was typically drawn to.

A faint memory of Barbra drunk-ranting one afternoon after an old college roommates wedding flitted through her mind and she asked, “So, like something old, something blue, crap like that.”

“No exactly,” he explained. “They’re technically heirlooms. My mother wore them, and my grandmother, and my great-grandmother. They supposedly go on for centuries.”

“That’s weird, B,” she said shrugging.

“Not to mention rather archaic,” he agreed.

“Well of course,” she said, sardonically. “How could I forget archaic?”

He looked up at her and she couldn’t resist scrunching her nose at him teasingly.

“But it was tradition,” he said, a strange note of resignation to his voice.

Selina resisted the urge to roll her eyes as she looked down at the jewelry set again.

It felt weird to think of him getting married. Of having some little socialite wife, who always knew what to say and what fork she was supposed to use. Of his house being overrun with a bunch of Wayne brats with stiff black hair playing polo or chess or whatever it was that rich kids did.
She’d never really thought that far ahead before, never given any thought past tomorrow. But Bruce had a future, obligations to keep, he had a family name to uphold.

Is that the life he had waiting for him, when he stopped playing detective and hanging out with the detritus of the world? Is that the life he wanted? A life with tea times and ballet recitals and debutant balls? Sweet smoke from imported cigars and amber drinks in low-ball glasses.

And then she would just be that girl that he had kinda been friends with once upon a time.

She took a deep breath to steady her heartbeat, she had begun to feel mildly nauseated at the thought.

She listened as Bruce shuffled his feet beside her, but when he spoke his tone had lowered several octaves, “Have you decided which ones you want to wear?”

“Naw, I’m good,” she said, clearing her throat. “We should probably be getting back before Alfred thinks I kidnapped you again.”

“Has he accused you of that?” he asked, confusion painting her features.

“No yet,” she said, lightly “But it’s only a matter of time.”

She saw him reach for her and she allowed it enjoying the gentle feel of his long fingers threading through her own.

“Are you sure you’re ok?” he asked, concern mixing into his voice.

“Yes,” she lied. “C’mon, I’m hungry and you missed lunch,” she insisted, squeezing his hand as she moved to guide them back out the door.
Selina Kyle very rarely admitted to being wrong, but as she gazed at her reflection, she had to confess that it might just be possible that Bruce Wayne had good taste. It wasn’t something she would have ever really applied to his character before. With his severe part, fishermen sweaters, and leather shoes, the boy dressed as if the car had just been invented. Most of the time, she half expected for him to walk down to breakfast in a pair of short pants.

The ridiculous image drew a snort from her as she continued to pile her mass of curls onto the top of her head. While the ends were still pale as ever, winter had darkened her roots to a golden brown and she didn’t expect to see any stripes of gold running through her curls again until at least after the first Summer heatwave. Resigned to the mess that was her hair, she let out a long breath between her teeth as she gave up and dropped her hands to her sides and her hair tumbled down. She shivered as the tips brushed against the sensitive skin along her collarbone.

She shook her head forcing the hair back over her shoulder, it was a habit she had lost since she’d started chopping the untamable mess off at her chin years ago, and examined the purple work of art, or what most people would have called a dress, that she had decided to keep. Thick purple straps and the still modest but lower than she was used to neckline exposed the faint traces of freckles that were sprinkled across her chest. Ultra violet silk flared from her waist, making the hips she was slowly developing seem wider, but she didn’t mind, because for one of the very rare times in her life Selina felt…

Well, she felt the same way she did when she looked at Bruce.

Just the thought of him made something in her stomach swim around and she still wasn’t sure if she liked the sensation or not. Well, if she wasn’t lying to herself, she knew exactly how it made her feel. But, those kinds of things weren’t very useful to her circumstances so did it really matter?

Turning around to check her other side and marveling at the sight, she smiled to herself.

Yes, she thought, it mattered.

Because, despite how much she needed to deny it, to pretend that she didn’t want something so far out of her reach, to reject the idea that maybe someone had crawled beneath her skin and into her veins, she wasn’t sure if she wanted to do that anymore.

Bruce made her want things, things she had never even considered before, things that had someone accused her of them six months ago, she would have probably told them to kindly fuck off if she acknowledged the ridiculous accusation at all.

Selina had never given it much thought, but now, when he raked that pale gaze over her, she wanted Bruce to like what he saw. She wanted him to remember the way she smelled and like it the way she did every time she had the chance to breathe him in.

Turning fully to the mirror, she heard the faint jangle of her bracelet and couldn’t resist shaking her hand to feel the familiar weight of her mother’s locket against her wrist.
She couldn’t believe Bruce had found it and on one of his runs of all places. He said it had just been laying there on the trail where she must have dropped it…

Her eyes narrowed on the ornate frame of the standing mirror, before she locked eyes with her own reflection. She couldn’t remember ever going out on that trail. When Bruce had invited her once, she had quickly informed him that jogging was a scam. In typical Bruce fashion, he had given her half a grin and a shake of his head and taken out on his own leaving her behind…

Selina exhaled at the memory. If she hadn’t dropped it there than who had?

In answer, ice quickly filled her belly as she slowly raised her wrist. Rust spots speckled the silver charms that lay so innocently along her skin.


Her blood.

His blood.

Their blood.

Selina’s toes instantly began to tingle inside the triangle-toe of her high-heels as rigid air gushed into the room. Her gloveless fingers began to shake as she looked to the reflection of her bed and to the set of windows behind her.

Alfred had cracked the window that morning to air the room and he must have forgotten to close it, because the floor length curtains were dancing in the breeze and snow was dusting the sill and the floor in wet puddles.

Suddenly a gust of wind grabbed the drapes, pushing and pulling as if it was caught in an invisible game of tug-of-war. She needed to shut the window. She knew that. She needed to shut it now. She needed to shut out all the noise and the cold and whatever else that was lurking behind all that darkness.

Because despite the fact that Wayne Manor had one of the best security systems she had ever encountered, she knew someone was there. Good hunters were patient weren’t they. They bided their time. They planned, they prepared, they stalked, they killed. They won. They always won.

Instinct sent commands to her body, but like being caught in the hypnotic gaze of a predator, Selina couldn’t tear her attention away from the curtains. The gentle sway of the fabric as their partner retreated and the audible snap they made when the wind came rushing back.

Between the sound of the dance and the beating of her own heart, she almost missed the nearly inaudible thud of something falling to the hardwood floor behind her. Paralyzed, she felt her breath seize in her chest as the dark toe of a large snow boot emerged from beneath the bottom of the curtain.

It made no sense. She should have seen them crawling over the sill. She should have at least seen their outline as they hid behind the floor length drapes. But it was unmistakable. There was someone in her room. Someone who…

Crawling up her arms like a million tiny spiders goose bumps erupted all over her.

Feet refusing to move, a scream stuck in her throat, she could only watch as the curtain retreated and her intruder was revealed piece by piece. Their heavy boots were caked with snow and dark brown
spots covered the knees on the greens and browns of their camouflage, but the thing that made her knees turn to water was the shiny rounded end of a rifle.

_Not real,_ she told herself and despite every instinct within her, Selina squeezed her eyes shut. This wasn’t real. It couldn’t be. It was just her imagination.

But if it was just her imagination, why could she still hear the thud of his heavy boots? Why could she still _feel_ him behind her? Feel his rage and his abhorrence and his… Hunger. She clenched both her fists, hoping the pain in her palms would drag her from this nightmare.

_Not real_, she repeated. She couldn’t be a victim. Not again.

Still her muscles refused to obey, to strike out, to run away. All she could do was listen to his heavy footfalls as they played out of sync with the deafening beat of her heart. Her only haven, her only refuge, was the darkness behind her lids and her teeth began to chatter as a phantom hand began dragging itself along her nape. Fingers circling around the base of her vulnerable throat.

“Well, don’t you look absolutely delicious,” whispered a warm voice into her ear.

Selina jerked awake, teeth still chattering, her throat still tight.

Laying prone in her bed, she made no move to retrieve the sheets and comforter that lay bunched around her feet as she allowed herself to adjust. Trying to get control of her breathing she concentrated on the soft mattress dipping beneath her as she tried to stop her heart from ripping itself free. Despite the fire burning in the fireplace, the central heat that always kept her room comfortable, her skin was broken out in a rash of goosebumps as if the winter night was still creeping along inside her veins.

She lifted her head from the smooth sheet, her eyes moving to her windows more out of habit than concern. She knew what she would see and her assumption didn’t fail her. The thick curtains were pulled closed and she knew that if she were to draw them back, the latches on the windows would be in place. The way Alfred had left them that night. The way he left them every night.

There was never any wind, or snow, or dead men trying to finish a job undone, but that didn’t stop her from sitting up and letting her eyes roam over every inch of her spacious room or stop her from wishing that it was any other time than the middle of the night.

Just a few months ago, it had been her favorite time. She had loved burning all that daylight just waiting for the city lights to come on and the streets to clear of its more normal citizens. It had always been the time that she felt herself come alive. But he had robbed her of that, like he had robbed her of so many things.

The nightmares weren’t always the same place, or the same time, or even the same people. But they always ended with her waking to any empty room, gritting her teeth and trying to squeeze a breath through the tightness in her throat.

Tonight, was no different as she put a hand to her burning chest. Her heart beating against it rapidly, each straining thump a painful reminder of a memory she couldn’t quite escape.

She rested her back against the headboard and tried to swallow, but her throat was so dry it felt like she couldn’t take a solid breath. She closed her eyes, letting her head fall back against the decorative wood. The violet material of her satiny pajamas was clinging to the small of her back and she suppressed a shiver.

She needed to get up, to change, to find a glass of water and wash down the stale bile she was sure
was still lingering somewhere in her esophagus.

She needed to scream, to rage, to cry.

She needed to breathe.

She rested her elbows on her knees as she dragged her fingers through her sweat dampened hair and almost cackled as she caught sight of her bare wrist. Her bracelet, the locket. Hell, even that beautiful dress. How had that not been her first clue that it had all been in her head?

She let out a hollow laugh.

Because it was always in her head.

Taking in a deep shaking breath, she threw her legs over the side of her bed. If there was one thing she had learned from all of her sleepless nights it was that staying in bed never helped.

The gentle chiming of the grandfather clock echoing down the second-floor hall alerted Selina to the fact that it was only three in the morning as she rounded the last turn of the stairwell. Like most of the manor, the staircase was made of some overly expensive wood and not for the first time she felt her woolen socks slide dangerously against the over-polished surface. Pushing down her pride, she grabbed for the handrail, but not before she felt the familiar pinch in her ankle as it threatened to roll over.

Gritting her teeth against the curse threatening to spill off her tongue, she leaned onto her good foot and rotated her bad ankle. Breathing through the fading pain, she gingerly lowered it to the next step. She didn’t care what Bruce and Alfred had said, there was no way in hell that that had been just a bad sprain.

Keeping her fingers gripped around the wooden rail, she was cautious of each step she took as she continued her trek down. In hindsight grabbing the socks had probably not been one of her brighter ideas and it wasn’t like she had lacked choices in footwear. Not two days after she and Bruce had spent the afternoon looking at worthless knick-knacks and priceless jewels, she had come back to her room after dinner to find a small number of brown packages sitting on the end of her bed.

Curiosity and pried had warred within her at the sight and she had tried to leave them packed-up and undisturbed. She really had. She had had a point to prove to Bruce. Despite her predicament, she could take care of herself and she needed him to remember that. It was hard enough living under his roof and not feeling the subtle pangs of debt hanging over her every day.

But if losing over a month of her life and almost being someone’s dinner had taught her anything, it was that there were much worse things in life than accepting a gift from Bruce Wayne.

In the end, it had taken only two hours for both her acquisitive and inquisitive natures to drive out her doubts and before the night was over she had unpacked all of them and found herself only able to sit and stare at the small collection of clothes and footwear.

When she had first swum up from that morphine filled haze, the clothes she had found hanging in the closest and stacked in the wardrobe had been – well rather, pointless at the time. With her slow healing bedsores and the crude stitches in her shoulder, she had had no use for clinging tights and
heavy sweaters. The pile of Bruce’s old training clothes that she had been given had been more than adequate and as long as she had not been going anywhere she had been satisfied to walk barefoot and gloveless.

But after seeing his mother’s closet and remembering the feel of solid boots on her feet and the smell of leather on her hands something foreign had begun to stir inside her. A wanting for something more than the comfort of her old uniform of the occasional bloodstained hem or crudely patched knee. And if she had any plans to get back to the city, she couldn’t let her pride continue to turn a cold shoulder on what Bruce had offered her.

The first thing she had discovered as she had dug through the few bags was that rich people made quite the production out of packing up. Every bag had been filled with more fancy tissue paper than it had clothing. Something that would have sent a certain redhead she knew on a tirade. But despite the uselessness, Selina had found that she didn’t really mind all the frippery. It had actually been kind of nice. But it was what she had discovered at the bottom of those bags that had made her knees feel the slightest bit weak.

Sitting in a nest of pink paper, soft and black and smelling warmly of new leather had been her jacket. Well, it had not exactly been her jacket. There had been no rips or tears from a combination of overuse and bad decisions and all the zippers and buttons were all in perfect working order. But it was close enough. Almost as close as the pair of heavy boots she had found boxed up. The black mid-calf boots were the same color and size as her original pair, only missing the duct tape wrapped around the toes and heel to keep them from falling apart.

Despite the familiarity, accepting them wasn’t easy. It never was. Years of dodging sickly-sweet words and crocodile smiles had her wary of even the smallest kindness. And had it been wrapped in false pity or tied together with an unpayable debt, it would have been simple enough to reject, but Bruce was, and never had been, a snake in the grass. His kindness was so genuine, so… Uncomplicated.

She sneered at the idea. Of course, generosity was always easy when you had it to give. It was the hard times, the times when the decision to be selfish or not stood between your conscious and your next meal that the true origins of generosity shined. When you played a zero-sum-game, kindness, generosity, cruelty and survival were separated by a razor thin line.

Unfortunately, she had the feeling that if the decision came down to Bruce’s needs versus her own, or anyone’s for that matter, Bruce would always serve himself last. That was just the kind of self-less chump his parents had raised. She would like to think that she would return the favor. But she wasn’t so sure she had been born with that kind of moral code or maybe a decade of surviving on her own had slowly starved it out of her.

For days, she had waited for Bruce to bring it up, to at least mention the packages that had been left in her room. But on the third day, when dinner had come and went and he had still stayed silent, she had finally confronted him. To her surprise, he had merely shrugged, in that somehow both aristocratic and nonchalant way of his, and told her to keep what she wanted and that they would donate the rest.

And she had.

So, when she had stripped out of her clinging pajamas, the cold still carved deep in her bones, she had grabbed for the warmest items she could find: a wide-necked sweater the color of ashes that nearly hung to her knees and a pair of wool tights and chunky socks.

Socks she was very much regretting as she slid onto the ground floor. They weren’t something she
would have typically chosen for herself. But neither were the cashmere pullover or leggings. They were made for people who spent winter nights lounging by the fire through choice and not fear of freezing to death. But they were thick and they kept her warm and lately despite the heated floors and the roaring fires keeping warm had become a problem.

The temperature only slightly dipped as she moved along the first floor, the only sound the soft shuffle of her socked feet as she headed toward the kitchen. Once when Bruce had caught her memorizing the first-floor layout, she had told him, and still stood by her statement, that his house was just too big. Whole rooms were left locked-up, their fireplaces dead, the furniture inside draped in nothing but dust sheets. It echoed and it groaned and it was so full of empty space and shadows that it was too easy to imagine unnatural things lurking in the sometimes impenetrable dark.

She had been raised close to the heart of the city. Her midnight lullabies a mixture of wailing sirens and overused horns and the occasional shouted argument. Things she had never in her life thought she would miss, but in these predawn hours she felt the absence like an ache.

Selina hugged herself at the unwanted thought. She knew it made no sense to miss something as depraved and heartless as Gotham, but it was still home. The place she had come from, the place she would always come back to.

Sighing, she rounded the corner only to feel her feet come up short at the sight before her.

If the moon had been bright and the night clear, she would have probably passed by the study without a second thought. But with no lamps lining its walls and no moon beams streaming through the large windows, she couldn’t ignore the weak shafts of light spilling from under the oversized doors.

Selina fully acknowledged that, like Bruce, curiosity tended to be one of her more annoying weaknesses. But she knew she could probably still ignore the tiny voice that urged her to pry. It was past three in the morning, whatever anyone was doing in the study at that hour she had no problem letting them keep to themselves.

But something inside her, that tiny string that occasionally pulled at her gut when a certain boy was in her vicinity, had her feet moving in the direction of the study. She had a feeling she knew exactly who was on the other side of that door, and she couldn’t bring herself to ignore him.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, I hope you enjoyed it. I'm sorry that this chapter was so short, but I hope to have the rest up very soon.
Selina

The long dark hall outside the study was chilly enough to cause goosebumps beneath the soft sweater Selina wore, but she ignored the sensation as she faced the large double doors. It was one of the two sets that opened up beside the fireplace and she knew that there was only a one in three chance that the current occupant would likely being facing her approach. Judging from the golden light that crept along her toe line, the room was decently lit likely killing the person’s night vision and darkness, always her greatest ally, had cloaked her in shadows. But that didn’t stop her ducking her head from eye level as she turned the doorknob.

The well-oiled hinges made no sound as she slowly eased the ancient wooden door open. Despite the hour, the fireplace was burning high its bright flames tinting everything in the study with a palette of golds and browns. Including the young man seated not so regally in the center of his couch.

He was hunched forward his thin navy robe left unbelted and pushed to either side of his dark pajama clad knees as he studied something spread open on the coffee table. Even bent, his shorter hair stayed perfectly in place. The haircut, that she had pointed out he needed, still left him looking as if he had traveled from a different century, but her favorite stubborn lock no longer fell across his brow robbing her of the opportunity to push it back into place.

Pushing down her disappointment she followed the thin black cords that dangled from his ears to the small black box they were connected to and the neat stack of oversized leather books beneath it. Curiosity pricked her senses as she recognized the thick spines and gold-lettering.

She could not quite remember when he would have had the time to go back and get the illusive photo-albums, but then again, she and Bruce didn’t spend every waking moment together either. If they had, being two creatures so accustomed to their own forms of isolation, they would have eventually driven each other insane, and the overcrowded tabletop was probably a good example of that.

Neither she nor Bruce were exactly in the habit of cleaning up after themselves and the remains of their evening were littered across the coffee table. Two books he had chosen and her deck of cards still lay forgotten and unused beside the board game that had ended with Bruce turning ten shades of red and almost forfeiting.

In hindsight, she still stuck with her decision to play her last two letter tiles. It hadn’t been her fault that Bruce had refused to bend the rules and allow her to use the alternate spelling to sucks, or that as she had so flippantly tried to explain to him, that the rules stated that she had to get rid of those S and X tiles somehow.

In the end, Bruce had soldiered on and proved he didn’t talk like a dictionary for nothing. He had squarely crushed her, but the color that had spread from the curve of his cheeks to the dip in his throat had been a victory of her own making. It wasn’t something she was particularly proud of but she could admit it to herself, getting Bruce flustered, watching his eyes widen and his cheeks color, was one of the few things that gave her true enjoyment.

Now, studying the stoic face bent over pages filled with motionless memories, there wasn’t even the
tiniest hint of a blush.

She wasn’t surprised, Bruce brooding wasn’t exactly a rare occurrence, but she struggled to understand what could possibly be among those pages that would have put a crease in his brow.

True she had never met his parents, had never had any more than a glimpse of what Wayne family life had been like, but she was positive that there been warmth there. There had to have been. Because it had been laughter, genuine laughter, his laughter that had stopped her climb up a rain soaked fire-escape, had made her pause and watch a family of three.

She had seen blueblood families before, strolling through the park with their overworked nannies or flitting from one exclusive party to the next. And they came in all different shapes and sizes, but there was always a fog of coldness surrounding them, a distinct lack of warmth in the interaction, an untouchable quality that only reminded her that she was and always would be better off on her own.

She knew Bruce couldn’t have come from that kind of environment. The snapshot she had of his family in that alley, before all hell had broken loose, was filled with laughter and affection and an easy banter that had touched something inside her more than she liked.

And unlike other heirs and beneficiaries she had seen he had felt his loss deeply. Too deeply. That night was like a cut that had been stitched but hadn’t healed and years later he still felt it.

The pain, the loss, the guilt, they were melded together inside him and he carried them like an albatross around his thin neck.

But that really wasn’t her business. Everyone, even child-billionaires, deserved their privacy and if Bruce needed to lock himself away to sort through whatever it was that was keeping him up then that was on him.

And judging by the creases around his dark eyes, he needed to lock himself away.

Resigned to finishing her trip to the kitchen, Selina started to shut the door when she saw it. It wasn’t a real smile, more like a distant relative or possibly an ancient ancestor of a smile, but the signs were there. The smallest tick of his doll lips as he gazed down at something.

Despite her personal belief that everyone deserved their privacy or at least the ability to keep their secrets, Selina had very few qualms about actually spying on people. Like busting a safe, it was just another aspect of her job that she just happened to be quite good at it.

In most line of work, secrets were just another form of currency and like everything else she dealt in the bigger, the darker, the rarer, the secret the more it was worth. She wasn’t voyeuristic per say, she got little enjoyment from watching humans not at their best, but money was money, and so she watched and collected her information with something a little less than apathy.

But watching that small smile that brightened his face, made something inside her twist. It made her, a girl who had broken into more homes than she could count, for once feel like an intruder.

Letting out a breath, she was just stepping back, her tread no more than a whisper on the floor, when his head shot up, his dark eyes meeting her own. There were no signs of surprise on his face, no astonishment or embarrassment. He looked as if seeing her wandering around his home in the middle of the night was a perfectly normal occurrence, or at least one that he welcomed.

The idea that he had caught her or worse that he had always been aware of her presence provoked a minor feeling of annoyance inside her, but the absence of questions in his dark eyes soothed the bumps in her ruffled pride. She didn’t like questions and appreciated his lack of, ‘Can’t sleeps?” or
No, the only sound in the room was the familiar pop and crackle of the fireplace, as she abandoned the threshold and the useless shadows it had provided. An apologetic smile tugged at her lips as Bruce gave her a welcoming glance and pulled one of the wires free from his ear.

Silent conversations were nothing new to them and she knew that this was as much of an invitation as she was likely to get.

Warmth and the comforting scent of burning pine enveloped her as she passed the mouth of the fireplace, her shadow looming over the room for a moment. Bruce moved as if he wanted to shut the book in front of him, his long fingers holding half the pages ajar but he let them fall open and abandoned his hunched position. Almost as if on instinct he slid over slightly giving her the cushion closer to the fire as she rounded the edge of the table.

She could feel his gaze on her as she approached and could hear the soft muffled sounds of what could only be music blaring through the small black earpiece he had left dangling. It hadn’t been often, but she’d seen him wearing them before, when he was alone pouring over schoolwork or the times she had watched him trying to hone his technique with the punching bag, but she had never thought to ask him what it was or what he had needed it for.

“What’re you listening to?” she asked, plopping down onto the overstuffed couch.

“Grieg,” he answered, his tone as usual matter-of-fact as he gave her a sidelong glance.

Selina almost snorted at his reply but merely shook her head as she leaned into the backrest returning his perusal.

But Bruce only shrugged a shoulder at her reaction. “Here,” he said, holding the small black piece out and urging her to take it.

Giving the earpiece a speculative glance, Selina only blinked before she took the tip he was offering. Rolling her eyes, she mimicked his gesture and slipped the small device into her ear. Whining trumpets and a heavy bass drum filled her ear and immediately Selina had the urge to pull it free, but resisted. If Bruce could listen to this crap, obnoxious instruments with no lyrics, at deafening volumes than so could she.

It wasn’t half bad, a little over-the-top, but something she thought maybe she could grow to appreciate one day, but today was not that day. She gritted her teeth as the crescendo—a term Bruce had explained to her—nearly rattled her eardrum. Yanking the small earpiece from her ear, she worked her jaw noticeably.

“That’s loud,” she said, stretching her jaw to make her point as she handed him back his earpiece.

He chuckled softly. “It’s from a play,” he replied, turning it off and thoughtlessly tossing both earpieces onto the stack of photo-albums.

“Yeah,” she said, “I can tell it was sounded very dramatic.”

“It’s actually a satire,” he said, faintly smiling like someone who would laugh at their own joke. “It’s like a comedy,” he explained. “It’s supposed to pose the question: What is the difference between man and monster?”

Selina couldn’t contain her scoff, “Not much if you ask me.”
Questioning eyes looked back at her, but she turned her head pulling the cuffs of her sweater over the chill still left in her fingers, “So, what’s the answer?” she asked, drawing her knees up. “What’s the difference between a man and a monster.”

“According to Henrik Ibsen,” he answered, “Man believes ‘to thyself be true.”

“And monsters,” she asked, watching his profile. “What do they believe?”

“‘Be true to yourself and to hell with the world,’” he answered, his voice unusually grim.

At his words, said so straightforward and with such finality, something cold and combative began swirling inside her.

“So,” she drawled, “what you’re saying is putting yourself first makes you a monster.”

Bruce inhaled sharply, as if he was choosing his words as carefully as if he was defusing a bomb. “I don’t think any conclusion is that easy. Too many factors and variables have to be taken into account before making such a broad strokes opinion.”

That cold sensation that had begun stirring inside her turned absolutely icy. “Just answer the question, Bruce,” she replied, her words as frozen as she felt.

“Generally, yes,” he admitted. “Caring for others is what separates us from our primordial selves.”

The mirthless laugh that bubbled up from her throat sounded foreign even to her own ears. “Well, that’s pretty damn easy to say around the giant silver spoon sticking out of your mouth,” she snapped, letting her feet fall to the floor.

“Selina, I wasn’t- “

“Let me ask you a question Bruce,” she interrupted, fully turning on her cushion to face him. “Do you think we want to grow up and be thieves and hookers and junkies and runners? Do you? You think that’s what we want, what we aspire to be? Because we couldn’t possibly wanna be anything else huh.”

“Of course not,” he said, the thin line between his brows more pronounced than she had ever seen it.

Selina didn’t attempt to hold back the sneer that she knew distorted her face. Hell, if Bruce thought that thieving made her a monster, what would he think if ever found out what she had really done that night. He’d likely never speak to her again.

But that was a risk she was willing to take, because she wouldn’t take back what she had done. She couldn’t. She was only alive because of what she had been willing to do, only breathing because of a combination of luck and ruthlessness. And no one had the right to judge her for it. Not even Bruce Wayne.

Her heavy breath slid through her clenched teeth as she met his eye, “Fair warning B,” she said, fighting the urge to poke him in the chest. “I have and I will do whatever it takes to survive and I’m not going to let you or anyone else make me feel like a monster for that,” she declared, her chest suddenly heaving.

Dark eyes softened as the corners of his mouth turned down, “You’re not a monster, Selina.”

“Yeah, I know that,” she bit out, but the trembling of her bottom lip nearly unmasked her.

This wasn’t her, she didn’t get her feelings hurt over something as dull as words. She didn’t get her
feelings hurt period. In the seventeen years, she had been on this Earth, she had been called a lot worse by people a lot more dangerous than Bruce Wayne, so why did her throat feel as if it was slowly squeezing shut.

“Do you?” he asked, and she nearly jumped as his calloused hand cupped the balled fist on her knee. Despite everything that had happened between them, her first instinct was still to draw away from him and the irritation rolling around in her gut didn’t make her choices any easier.

Letting out a breath, she unfurled her fist and let him twine his fingers through her own.

“You’re right,” he admitted, dragging his calloused thumb over her bare knuckle. “My parents, the money… It makes it entirely too simple for me to make snap judgments.”

She opened her mouth, a comment on the tip of her tongue, but Bruce lightly squeezed her hand.

“Please let me finish,” he pleaded.

In answer, she hesitantly pursed her lips, lifting her eyebrows to encourage him.

Sighing, he continued, “I can admit I’m ignorant when it comes to how ninety percent of the world lives, but you’re wrong if you think I am too naïve to understand that there is a difference between survival and cruelty or hunger and greed. I’m not blind or immune to other people’s suffering just because of my last name.”

The knot in her throat loosened at his words and Selina exhaled a shaky breath, squeezing his hand in return.

“I’m not going to apologize for how I survive Bruce,” she confessed, glancing down at their joined hands.

“I wasn’t asking you to,” he replied. “But I’m also not going to apologize for how I live either, or…” he paused, his fingers tightening against her own. “Believing that you’re capable of a lot more than just surviving.”

His voice was so honest, so serious, it began to unwind that ball of tension in her stomach. No, not unwinding it, whirling with it, snaking against it, making it something else altogether. Heat swept up her back and across her face. He had to know what he did to her when he said things like that, when he looked at her like that. Didn’t he?

Maybe he didn’t. Maybe he was completely oblivious to the words that came tumbling out his mouth. Words that had the tendency to cut just often as they healed. But whether they were harsh opinions or simple statements, they always had one thing in common. They were all honest.

Staring down at their entwined hands, she felt it again, that sudden and swift need to flee or do something very stupid, the same one she had felt that night in the solarium when she had grazed her fingertips along all his sharp angles or that afternoon inside his mother’s closet when the world had seemed to fade away into nothing but him and her. But those were moments of foolishness and forgetfulness, because the world still existed and she needed to remember that it always came back.

Gulping against the sudden thoughts running through her mind, Selina ignored the bewilderment on his dark features as she disentangled her fingers. Clearing her throat and trying desperately to hide the heat that had crept into her cheeks, she quickly scanned the room.

“Anyway,” she started, sitting forward and discreetly wiping the sweat that had formed in one palm
as she gestured to the small tape player with the other. “I’m surprised you have something so normal, I would’ve bet you had one of those old timey record players.” “What?” he asked. His confusion at the abrupt change in subject pronounced in his perfectly groomed brows.

“A record player,” she insisted. “You know, the kind with the big horn.”

“A phonograph?” he asked, his dark eyes not moving from her face.

“I guess,” she replied, letting her gaze roam around the room. “I just thought you’d have one. Your house is creepy like that.”

Bruce looked back at her the slight amusement in his face fading as he understood her implication, “My house is not haunted Selina.”

She lifted a single shoulder, not particularly interested in her side of their perpetual argument. “You sure about that B,” she asked. “You don’t get this much money without picking up a few ghosts.”

“But I think you are right,” he continued, leaning forward and matching her posture. “Not about the ghosts,” he stated quickly. “But at some point, there must have been some form of sound system in place.”

She lifted a brow in curiosity.

“When this was my father’s study,” he continued, encouraged by her interest. “When he needed time to think or make a big decision sometimes he would lock himself in here and listen to music.

“I just- I haven’t found the source yet,” he admitted, as if they mystery truly perplexed him.

“I didn’t even know you were looking,” she said, nonchalantly as she glanced down at the glossy pages of the opened album.

“I don’t tell you everything,” he said, his voice as close to suggestive as Selina had ever heard it.

“Oh, of course,” she crooned. “How could I forget how mysterious you are,” she said, sarcasm dripping from her words as she gave him a wry smile. “Speaking of…” she drawled, reaching out to grab the edge of the closest album. “What kind of blackmail material have you been hiding in these?”

Selina didn’t know much about photography. The use of light and shadow, foreground and background meant nothing to her, but in the few album pages she had seen it had appeared Bruce’s mother had really had a gift. Even if her portfolio had been filled with only one subject and that subject happened to be a dark-haired boy with an arrogant chin.

When Bruce had told her that his mother had been ruthless with her camera, he had not been exaggerating. Pages and pages were filled with pictures of him in every possible stage of his life.

There was a shot of him, grin shy one baby tooth, and his father bundled in puffy coats with fur line hoods as a giant mountain loomed behind them. Another of him sitting in his mother’s lap her thin arms wrapped tightly around him as they gazed from a window seat at the skyline of some foreign city.

There were pictures of him playing in the sand on private beaches and at the wheel of a windswept
boat, hiking between redwood trees and walking beside neon-lit skyscrapers. Summers, winters, weddings and birthdays and every holiday in between swept past in a blur of glossy color as she turned another page.

She had known Bruce had had money. She had known that he had had love. But she hadn’t known that Bruce’s life hadn’t just been good it had been freaking amazing.

She had never given it much thought. Her childhood had been severed in a series of moments, like a serrated blade slowly slicing through a piece of thick twine, but his had been cut cleanly, like a stick of butter beneath a meat cleaver. Her memories were muddled and suspect and lost to time, but his were always here, bright and colorful evidence of a great life.

Maybe it was the late hour, the lulling warmth, the flood of happy family memories combined with sleep deprivation, but something pulled the next words from of her mouth, “Does it get any better?” she asked, before regretting the question immediately.

“Sorry, that was a stupid question,” she said. “Of course, it doesn’t.”

Bruce looked up at her from the picture he was examining. “What do you mean?”

“Losing your parents,” she started, feeling something rise in the back of her throat. “It didn’t get any better for me and my ma took off a long freaking time ago.”

“And your father,” he asked, cautiously.

She snorted, “Your guess is as good as mine.”

Bruce nodded his head in understanding, but it didn’t stop the warmth that had begun blooming in her cheeks at the admission. Where she came from illegitimacy, absent parents, it wasn’t uncommon, but she felt the odd need to explain it to him anyway.

“All my paperwork, even my birth certificate, just said ‘father unknown,’” she said, trying to keep her voice level. “But I think my mom knew, she just…” she broke her thought on a sigh, the right words escaping her at the moment. “She probably had her reasons.”

“Anyway,” she breathed, turning a new page just to occupy her hands and her mind. “I can barely remember my Ma, so I can’t imagine what it’s like for you.”

He shrugged. “Somedays are worse than others,” he admitted, studying the page she had revealed. “And Alfred, he tries but… It’s not the same.

Selina gave him another questioning look.

“It’s hard to explain,” he continued, “Because the worst times aren’t even birthdays or holidays or anniversaries or anything like that. It’s the times that I forget that their gone, like that odd moment before you wake up or when something good happens and my first thought is to go and tell them.”

Selina nodded her head less in agreement than in understanding. “Wait,” she said, putting her hand on the forearm he had braced on his thigh. “Good things, actually happen to you?” she asked, her voice both flippant and skeptical.

“Occasionally,” he answered, matching her tone as his gaze drifted to the fingers she had lightly curled around his arm.

“Really,” she asked. “Name one?”
“Meeting you,” he answered.

Selina would have loved to scoff at such a line, but the earnestness in his voice was so genuine, she couldn’t resist the urge to look away as she withdrew her hand. Unseeing, she focused on the photo-album still laying open on the coffee table. She could still fill his gaze, that gentle caress looking for some kind of reaction to his admission.

_Damn it._ When he said things like that, it roused to life those butterflies in her belly, their tiny wings fanning the heat in her face back to a roaring flame. But she couldn’t react. She had no trained response, no planned come back to such caring, such honesty, such love.

Her mind cutoff that avenue of thought. No, she couldn’t think of Bruce like that. If he knew her, _if he really knew her_, there was no way in hell he would ever feel anything close to that.

No, he deserved better. He deserved a lot better than two dead parents, a certifiable butler for a guardian and some no name thief for a friend. He deserved the life he had been born into, maybe not the one filled with black ties and champagne flutes, but the one full of warm smiles and open affection. He deserved the life that had been caught on these pages.

Pushing down the sudden feelings of sadness that swept through her, Selina turned the page not even feeling the thick paper as she laid it flat.

Catching the gasp in her throat, feelings of self-pity fleeing her, everything inside Selina froze as she looked at the small four by six photograph that stared back up at her.

It lacked the candid atmosphere of all the other pictures. No, it was formal, so formal actually, that Selina was surprised that it hadn’t been made into an oil painting and hung along with the rest of the ancient art that lined their halls. But it wasn’t a Wayne ancestor staring back up at her from the photo, but a small boy. A small boy looking angrier than any toddler had the right to be.

Selina bit into her lip as she gazed down at the grumpy toddler. That was the Bruce Wayne she knew, the same scowl, the same knit in his brow, the same...

With the quickness and dexterity that only a true thief could possess, she quickly slipped the picture free from the page. “How, B?” she asked, holding the picture up for his inspection. “How?”

“How what?” he asked, glancing down at the picture she held between them.

“How do you have the _exact same haircut_?” she burst out, unable to hold her laughter at bay anymore.

Selina wrapped her free arm around her stomach as she glanced back down at the picture in her hand. Thick black brows and equally dark hair parted severely to the side looked absolutely ridiculous on the toddler-sized Bruce. What had his parents been thinking? On the other hand, what baby had that much hair?

Between what she knew could only be described as tear-inducing laughter, she managed to squeak out, “You look like a middle-aged bank-teller.”

“That seems oddly specific,” he answered and judging by the glare he was giving her, Bruce found nothing funny about her humorous observations.

“Just call ‘em, like I see ‘em, sport,” she replied.

He only sighed in response to her goading, “That’s enough, Selina,” he said, moving for the photo
and failing as she pulled it from his reach. “You’ve had your fun, now give it back,” he said, grabbing for it.

Reflexively Selina moved the picture out of his reach, hiding it behind her back as she brought her chin up to meet the fierce glower he was sending in her direction.

“Oh B,” she chuckled, planting her good foot onto the cushion and sliding up the backrest, “You know I can’t make it that easy.”

“Selina,” he answered, his voice void of any humor.

“If you want it,” she continued, not in the slightest bit intimidated by his warning. “Then you’re going to have to come and get it,” she finished, turning on the headrest and hopping to the floor.

Turning, she couldn’t hide her smug grin as Bruce stared back at her, every line in his young face unamused by her challenge. It wasn’t hard to read that he had no intention of lowering himself to play her games.

“Fine,” he snapped, turning in his seat to face her, his eyes lowering to his white-knuckled hands on the headrest. “Keep it.”

Stunned by the ease in his surrender, Selina stepped forward. Damn, how was she supposed to know he was going to get so upset over one stupid picture. Disappointment had almost settled in her gut, when she saw the slight twitch in his fingers. The small tell was the only warning she got, and she jumped away, her socks slipping against the floor, as Bruce lunged for her and caught nothing but air.

Ignoring her misstep and hoping Bruce had been too busy with his own embarrassment to have noticed, she waved the four-by-six out of his reach. “You’re telegraphing,” she mocked.

For one moment as she read the intent in his eyes, Selina thought that he might actually abandon all of his well-bred manners and follow her over.

“And you’re being childish,” he sneered, retreating to his feet.

She only smiled in return, the smile that never failed to have him narrowing his long-lashed eyes in her direction and he didn’t disappoint.

For one moment, they just stared at each other, two players caught in a duel, eagerly waiting for their opponent to make their move. For all of the times that Selina had caught Bruce practicing she had never really sparred with him before. Yes, they had had the occasional awkward collision, an accidental tumble here or there, but she had never needed to read him. Not physically, at least.

“It’s the middle of the night, Selina,” he said, breaking through her observations as he took a couple of calculated steps backward, “I’m not going to chase you.”

“Sure, you won’t,” she argued, watching him as she took her own calculated steps along the opposite length of the couch.

The fire was warm against her back as she continued to mirror Bruce’s slow progress and slid herself between the armrest and the fire place. Bruce stood at his own end, his thin pink lips flattened in answer. But despite his impressive scowl, he couldn’t quite strike the amusement from his eyes.

She wasn’t sure who was imitating whom as she stopped and fully-faced Bruce the middle of the thick couch once again between them, “You gonna keep stalking me B, or you actually gonna do
something.”

He placed both of his long-fingered hands on the headrest. “By all appearances you have the hostage, so you have the upper hand,” he said. “My only options are to negotiate or…” His voice trailed off.

“Or what?” she asked.

“Or attack,” he answered, dryly.

At his words, Selina feinted left before turning on the ball of her foot and heading right and Bruce did not let her down as he took her bait rounding the end of the couch before he realized his mistake. Backlit by the fire, he wasn’t breathing hard, but Selina could see the rise and fall of his chest, and the color that had come into his cheeks.

Even when he didn’t want to, though she doubted the sincerity in his objection, when it came to a challenge, not matter how stupid, Bruce just couldn’t help himself.

“You know, I think I’ve seen that same scowl before,” she teased, holding the picture of him up for examination. “Yep, there it is.”

She could only describe his answer as annoyed bordering on enraged. Laughing, she mounted her end of the couch, her toes digging into the armrest as she secured her balance.

From her new position, she could study her options and she was quickly aware that they were many. On this side of the study, there was plenty of open space and she knew she could easily elude him and expand her territory. She took a quick glance at the cluttered coffee table, she would have to avoid the board and the photo-albums, but she could be could be clear across the room before Bruce even knew what she was about--

“Who’s telegraphing now?” Bruce asked, interrupting her plans.

Her eyes met his as he brought his chin up. It was such an arrogant gesture she had to refrain from retrieving the throw pillow at her feet and throwing it at his smug head.

Exaggerating an aborted lunge, Selina laughed as Bruce’s shoulders dropped and he once again fell for her ploy.

“Still you, kid,” she taunted.

Grey eyes narrowed on her as he took a cautious step back, his long legs coming up even with the opposite arm rest.

“Alfred’s right,” he declared, running a hand along the leather stitching of the head rest. “You are a cheeky little minx.”

She had to resist throwing back her head as she snorted, “Is that all the old man’s gotta say?”

“No even close,” he replied.

At the unfamiliar challenging note in his voice, Selina felt the side of her mouth tilt up, “I’m all ears.”

As if answering her invitation, both of Bruce’s hands came down to rest against the armrest. “Well, he doesn’t think you’re a particularly nice girl,” he said, dryly.

“Yeah,” she questioned, touching her chin in thought. “And if I remember correctly, neither do you,”
she accused, pointing a finger in his direction.

He shrugged a shoulder, ignoring her accusation as he recounted, “He believes you’re prone to skullduggery.”

“Skullduggery?” she asked, in mock disbelief. “Now, you’re just making up words.”

“He thinks your selfish,” he continued, as if she hadn’t said anything.

“That’s fair,” she answered, sucking on a canine.

“Amoral.”

Rolling her eyes, she placed both hands on her hips, “You’re breaking my heart.”

“And that all you really need in life is a firm hand,” he said matter-of-factly, his arms flexing beneath the sleeves of his robe as his knuckles went white against the armrest. “I believe his exact words were, ‘all that bird needs is a strong man to take her over his knee-“

For one moment, Selina’s ears were filled with a slight buzzing sound as if there was a hive of bees hidden somewhere in the room. Distantly she knew her eyes had grown wide and that the close-lipped smile that contorted her face probably looked on the crazy side of deranged, but she didn’t quite care as a familiar anger boiled up and began to slide through her consciousness.

Darkness hovered at the edges of her vision as sheer anger forced her loose knees to straighten, “Screw that son of a bitch! I’d like to see his limey chauvinistic ass try-“

Selina had more words to her threat. She knew she did. But the brief appearance of Bruce’s tactless smirk confused her, fleecing her of thought, as she felt the world beneath her shift.

It took her mind only half a moment to absorb and digest what had happened. Bruce had pushed his end of the couch.

She was vaguely aware of this fact as her arms reflexively swung out to balance herself. For a fraction of a second, she thought she was going to keep her feet, that her low center of gravity and her natural gift for balance could combat Bruce’s cleverness, but neither bested the worst socks in the world.

She wasn’t even allowed the feel of her toes slipping free, just the sudden weightlessness of flight and left with no other choices but to let gravity pull her face down onto the overstuffed couch.

Still stunned by Bruce’s actions, the feel of a warm body crashing into her own drew a surprise squeal from between her lips. It quickly dissolved into an unexpected laugh at the feeling of long fingers grazing her ribcage as they searched beneath her for the treasure she had hidden between her palms.

Despite the lengthy body nearly wrapped around her Selina managed to wiggle onto her side, planting her foot against the back of the couch as she prepared to use Bruce’s precarious position at the edge to knock him loose.

Unfortunately, as she kicked off, Bruce’s grip only tightened around her waist and instead of his lanky frame falling to the ground as she had planned, they both rolled off the couch, barely missing the thick edge of the coffee table. She let out a soft sound of alarm as a surprisingly firm chest and stomach broke her fall.
Not willing to waste her advantage, Selina used the body beneath her to turn over, ignoring the audible grunt from her opponent. She wasn’t about to give him the opportunity to pin her, which left her with only one option.

Before Selina could give her idea too much thought, she straddled him, using her weight against his chest and her knees to pin his elbows to the floor, leaving his grasping hands laying uselessly by her ankles.

She tried to breathe through her nose as she looked down at the boy beneath her. There was a dark pink tint to his pale cheeks and his usually perfect hair, knocked loose from their jostling, was in disarray. She had expected to see the tiniest traces of fear or possibly even regret in his dark eyes for the things he had said to her for the things he had done, but he just stared back up at her as if their position was nothing new.

Bruce had shocked her. He had actually shocked. Him. Bruce Wayne.

How much gall had he had to conjure up to say something so… Intentionally infuriating.

“Alfred really say that?” she asked, between breaths.

“No,” he admitted, the smallest hint of a smile playing around his parted lips. “But he was the best candidate out of our mutual acquaintances” —he took a deep breath— “and most likely to both say something that brash and enrage you to the point of distraction.”

Selina stared down at him a strange mixture of pride and annoyance welling up in her chest. “I have to admit,” she said, her voice mildly impressed. “You’re getting better at all of this.”

“At all of what?” he asked, his arms wriggling beneath her knees.

Accepting his surrender, she leaned forward taking her weight off his restrained forearms as she gave him her own haughty look, “Learning to fight dirty.”

“I think I’m getting the hang of it,” he admitted, his fingers suddenly digging into the backs of her thighs.

A yelp, a genuine yelp, escaped Selina’s lips at the unfamiliar thrill that ran along her spine at Bruce’s unexpected forwardness, but like most things that night the sensation didn’t last long.

She was already mid-roll before she realized what Bruce had done. Quickly, she tucked her chin to her chest and let instinct and gravity take over as she safely tumbled over Bruce’s head and onto her back. Riding on instincts and reflexes, her feet had already planted themselves firmly onto the floor as she prepared to launch herself to her feet, when an unfamiliar weight landed on her midsection and Bruce’s face dangled inches above her own.

Disbelief ran wild along her nerves.

Bruce had flipped with her, robbing her of that precious second she had needed to spring up and he knew it as the most arrogant smirk she had ever seen graced his face.

Some part of her knew she should feel uncomfortable, that having someone looming over should have been activating all of her cavewoman instincts to fight or flee, but Bruce had left all of his vulnerable places exposed, his eyes, his nose, his gut, even his groin. She knew Alfred had trained him too well for such an error to not be intentional. They both knew it would only take one hit to completely unman him and he had left himself open anyway.
“Honestly,” she said, breathless. “I did not know you were capable of that.”

“You underestimated me,” he answered, equally breathless. “There are plenty of things I’m capable of.”

“Yeah, like what?” she questioned, her mouth curving up. “Knowing which fork to use.”

“For starters,” he said condescendingly, pushing off his hands and leaning away from her.

Catching her breath and resisting the urge to roll her eyes at his tone, she held the picture up, grudgingly offering him the prisoner between her fingers. “All yours,” she said.

Dark eyes narrowed and a crease formed between his brows as Bruce stared at the small photo, as if he had forgotten what it was they had been fighting over. Gently he took it from her hand, his robe swishing out around them like a cape as he threw it behind him, letting it flutter to the table without a thought. She almost glared at the cavalier treatment of her former hostage, but she knew as well as he did that this wasn’t about the photo.

It never had been and the jutting of his chin, that infuriatingly aristocratic gesture as he looked back down at her only accentuated that fact.

‘Keep it up B,’ she thought, winding the billowing fabric of his robe around her wrist. Without warning, she tugged the fabric as hard as she could, but to her shock he didn’t fall to the side. He fell forward, hands slapping the floor beside her head, as he caught himself. Eyes wide as he stared down at her.

She could feel the rabid rise of his chest, see almost every striation in his grey eyes, smell the cool mint on his breath and before she could listen to all of the reasons why it would be a very bad idea, Selina pulled him closer.

Lifting her head, she closed her eyes, her intentions very clear as she aimed for the corner of his lips. And she met air. Eyes snapping open, she felt heat race up her neck as she watched Bruce jerk away from her as if she had tried to bite him. Something she was entirely contemplating at the moment.

He’d pulled away from her. He had actually pulled away from her.

Numb, her fingers lost their grip and fell lifelessly to her side as she let her head fall back to the floor. Fine, if he didn’t want to kiss her that was fine. That was perfectly fine. She had offered to kiss him before and he had rejected her, very politely, but he had rejected her all the same. So, why did this feel so different.

Fire burned behind her eyes as she fought the urge to cover her face or worse run from the room. She couldn’t let him know this bothered her, couldn’t let him see her reaction.

How had she read the situation so wrong? She was good at reading people. She had to be, but lately….

Lately, she had been making all kinds of mistakes, making choices she had no business making, saying things that could only come back to bite her in the--

The rough feel of a calloused fingertip brushing a stray curl from her face stopped every thought drifting through Selina’s mind.

A sudden wakefulness ghosted over her skin as she opened eyes she hadn’t realized she’d closed,
and met a hooded gaze as it followed the path of his fingers.

The fire beside them reflected off the curves in his black hair and its bright flames painted his skin in shades of dark gold and pink making the blacks of his eyes seem almost blown out.

She was aware of his breath as it moved between his barely parted lips and the slight tremor in his hand as he trailed a rough fingertip along the shell of her ear, the curve of her jaw, the point of her chin. The calloused pad of his thumb lingered at the corner of her mouth and her own breath caught in her throat as he placed his hand beside her head again.

Her pulse jumped inside her veins and she let her eyes drift closed as his warm breath gently caressed her cheek, her nose, her lips. Feeling slightly dizzy, she inhaled sharply, filling her lungs with pine and mint and Bruce. Bruce. He seemed to be everywhere and nowhere and some impatient creature deep inside her wanted to growl as he eluded her again.

Fingers blindly framing his face, she could almost feel the last threads of her self-restraint dissolving when she felt something stroke her nose and a pair of warm lips met her own.

The first was just a brush. Soft and experimental and everything she had always expected of Bruce. The second was longer, deeper, and the pressure of his firm lips meeting the coaxing of her own was everything she had always wanted from Bruce. The third, the third tasted like peppermints, made her toes curl, and was nothing she had ever thought Bruce capable of.

Thoughts of self-preservation tried valiantly to form in her mind, but nothing could take shape as his mouth slanted against her and she dragged her fingers through his impossibly soft hair. The world beyond them was quiet as the rush of blood in her ears muted everything but his sharp inhale as he kissed her again. Nothing else mattered but the faint shudder that ran the length of him and the gentle thump of his heartbeat echoing her own.

As his untried but perfect bottom lip naturally slipped between her teeth, she felt a dozen molten butterflies take flight in her belly-

“Master Bruce!”

At once, every winged ember inside her died, drowning in an ocean of ice water at the sound of shock and disapproval in the booming voice. Clenching her teeth at the mixture of frustration and humiliation that was suddenly sprouting inside her, both she and Bruce turned their heads to meet Alfred Pennyworth’s familiar glower.

Chapter End Notes

I've never been so nervous to post a chapter before. Thank you for taking the time read, I hope you enjoyed it. : )
Chapter 25

Alfred

Early Autumn was always quite the remarkable sight at Wayne Manor. The mild weather was very different from the bleak south London days of his youth or the inescapable heat of the desert villages he had toured in his twenties. Crisp air filled with the lingering scents of freshly started chimneys and broken pine needles drifted through the open windows and the centuries old forest that lined the property had already burst into a map of red and gold and every natural color in between. The small cold front that had swept through earlier that week had taken the permanently quilted grey sky and the last traces of Summer with it.

But the red and gold tableau against its canvas of sapphire blue skies had absolutely no effect on Alfred Pennyworth.

None. Not even a little.

He was not a man given to glamorizing or nostalgia or any of the overly sensitive sentimentality that plagued most people.

Quite the opposite actually.

If given the option, he typically tried to avoid the past. It was a concrete immovable object that he had no control over, something his mum had taught him was best to put behind you and go on.

It was inevitable that from time to time memories came to him: a worn football on the laces of a muddy boot, a cup of tea on red formica, foreign places filled with foreign tongues, and blood and heat and things he hoped to never see again. When the things he had done and the things he had had done to him swam up, he simply reached for a couple fingers of the strongest drink he could find and waited until he could push them down and move along.

Even before his service, he had been known as a hard man. He did not dwell. He did not romanticize. He was practical and efficient and had no time for flights of fancy. He had no time or inclination to entertain an artist’s eye or the lyrics that were only found inside a poet’s heart.

No, his mind was more often than not filled with actual important things.

Like the mental and physical health of the most valuable person in his life.

It wasn’t an easy job taking care of Bruce Wayne, far from it. And today, unfortunately, through proximity alone that job happened to include discovering what could only be the nefarious motivations of a certain pale haired thief.

He could admit to himself, as he stomped along the empty main hall, that he had no proof that it had been her that he had seen on the monitor that morning. Hell, he couldn’t rightly prove it was a person at all. Even with the best cameras money could buy, he had been left with only snatches of shadows and the rustling of a few bushes.

But deep in in his gut, he knew, just like he knew that girl was nothing but a world of grief wrapped in pretty paper. A bit of fluff that was anything but.
What he didn’t know however, what had him moving swiftly through the manor’s halls, was what she was doing at the manor.

Knowing her, she had likely gotten herself into a bind. She probably needed something. Girls like that always needed something. They were the kind that kept a pitiable palm out front and a couple of fingers crossed behind their back.

It was in their nature. Hell, it was probably in that girl’s very DNA.

Well, whatever she was here for, the little nuisance would probably only bring more problems for Master Bruce when the boy found trouble easily enough on his own without the help from a girl like that. Especially one like Miss Kyle who was drawn to bad choices like a fly to honey.

Her need for the seedier side of life seemed nearly pathological as if deep down she couldn’t help what she was: a liar, a thief, and with a face like that the potential to be so much worse. She was a wicked thing naturally prone to mischief, something he could usually turn a blind eye to, but she had the uncanny ability to talk the boy into damn near anything. And that was something he just could not so easily overlook.

Simply put, Master Bruce had no business being around a girl like that. Selina Kyle had simply seen too much in her young life to be any good for him. No, he needed a girl from his own background, who understood the structure and the constraints that came with money and privilege. A safe girl, a sweet girl, a girl who didn’t swear like a dock hand and knew her way around a butterfly knife.

Bruce needed a pretty bird that would drive back all the shadows that boy had in his eyes. Not a girl as broken as he was. Everyone knew two broken things couldn’t fix each other.

If she had not taken a role in the boy’s life, Alfred may have actually admired the girl. She reminded him of the birds back home, brutal, and hardy, and taking zero shite from anyone. But that was the problem wasn’t it.

Because if it hadn’t been for a hand full of half-truths and a half-dozen corrupt cops, Bruce may never have even laid eyes on the girl. Had they encountered her anywhere else, Alfred wouldn’t have given the girl a second glance before he had shepherded his charge to the opposite side of the street. He had learned early in life there was little need to invite trouble when it could be easily avoided.

And trouble was what that girl was through and through. The kind of trouble he could not avoid or ignore so on the off chance she found her way to the manor, he made a point of keeping an eye on his ward.

Even without the cameras, unless he slipped inside the old servant’s passages, it wasn’t difficult keeping track of Bruce’s movements in and around the manor’s grounds. He could be typically found training or studying or doing one of his more abnormal hobbies. It was only when Miss Kyle made an appearance that Alfred suddenly had the inclination to make a few extra rounds or take his tea in front of his bank of monitors.

In his opinion, watching the two teenagers through the well-placed cameras was simple surveillance not spying. He was being smart, taking control, being preemptive, not being some old gossipmonger peeping over a garden wall.

This morning it had been through those cameras that he had seen something creeping along the hedge rows; a petite shadow that had the preternatural talent of knowing the exact range of every camera lens and how to avoid them.
When the shadow had slipped past a third camera, he knew its exact destination. He was proud of himself for his patience, as he had waited for more than an hour, before he had let trepidation guide him down the main hall.

He sighed as he noted the thin strip of light escaping between the double doors. He had never thought to tell Bruce to keep the doors open, he had never felt the need. Bruce had few acquaintances and even fewer friends, and when he did entertain, his behavior could be so strange that Alfred often forgot that he was a child.

Shaking his head, he reached out, gently pushing open the slightly ajar door and taking in the scene before him.

His shoes made an awful squeak as he found his usually solid step skidding across the wooden floor as he came up short just inside the double doors. Alfred would typically not have forgiven himself for such a misstep, but it was not every day that one found the Master of Wayne Manor moving around his study, a strip of wide black cloth wrapped tightly around his eyes.

Confusion kept him silent as he studied the spectacle that was his young charge. Even slightly bent, his pale hands sticking out of the nearly too short cuffs of his sport coat, he could see where the summer had granted the boy a few inches. An inevitable outcome given his late father’s stature that had doubled his reach, but had unfortunately eaten away the few pounds he had finally gained over the spring.

Alfred had never had children of his own, no younger siblings either, so it was a strange thing for him to witness the youth that was draining from Bruce every week. Changes that would have probably had his mother in tears and his father looking at a mirrored reflection of his own adolescence.

The unmistakable squeak of rubber sole on floor must’ve have caught the young man’s attention as a dark head suddenly snapped in the direction of the threshold.

“It’s against the rules to leave the room,” Bruce said, in that unmistakably imperious tone that belonged more on a hanging judge than a teenage boy.

“I didn’t,” answered a rough voice dryly.

With an audible clunk, something heavy landed on the wood floor before rolling across it. Taking another step into the room Alfred watched as Bruce’s head followed the sound of the round paper weight. Despite being accustomed to Bruce’s not so normal training techniques, confusion still gripped him as he quickly scanned the room searching until his gaze landed on a mop of dirty curls.

Selina Kyle was perched pretty as you please on the top of Bruce’s desk, a single leather gloved finger covering her ill-concealed smirk in the universal sign for quiet.

Watching Bruce take another hesitant step forward, his dark head cocked for what he could only assume was any indication of where the girl was, Alfred decided that whatever it was the two of them were doing, it was certainly not the kind of trouble he had been getting up to at their age.

Simple curiosity kept him silent at the threshold as he prepared to witness Bruce Wayne embarrass himself, but the boy did not wave his arms about the way that Alfred would have expected someone who had been blind-folded to do. He had expected him to stumble around like a lad playing Blind Man’s bluff. But Bruce navigated his way around the room as if he was in possession of all his senses, easily skirting the coffee table and the end of the button cushioned couch until he stood mere feet from the edge of his desk and the seven stones of trouble propped on it.
Alfred’s gaze flicked back to the girl, but her attention was fixated on his unsuspecting ward as he took a step away from her. Demonstrating how she had earned her alias, she slinked from her perch. Unpredictable as ever, she took a step toward the boy, her booted feet somehow silent as she moved across the wood floor.

Soundlessly she wiggled her fingers, seemingly testing their dexterity, as she reached forward. It was at that moment that Alfred noticed the small scrap of red ribbon that was dangling from Bruce’s jacket pocket. The tips of her fingers had nearly made contact with the tiny edge of red, when he heard a loud sniff and Bruce’s fingers were suddenly gripped around her dainty wrist.

Surprise flitted across Miss Kyle’s pale eyes, but she made no attempt to wrench her wrist back and Bruce made no move to release her. Fingers still wrapped loosely around her wrist the boy quickly used his free hand to unknot his blindfold.

From his position by the door, and Bruce’s back to the room, he had little to no angle to observe the boy. His only view was the back of a dark head and the clean lines of a sport coat stretched over narrow shoulders. He could see nothing of the girl or of Bruce’s expression but he could only assume he was wearing one of triumphant.

“I win,” he stated, releasing her wrist “Did you though?” the girl asked, her question closer to an observation as she hopped back up, settling herself on the desk and bringing the two of them nearly eye to eye.

“You said that I wouldn’t catch you,” he said, almost smugly and from the movement of the boy’s elbows Alfred assumed the boy was idly wrapping his now useless blindfold around his hand like he did when he taped his knuckles. “And I proved you wrong.”

From the girl’s scoff, Alfred could only imagine the look she was training on the boy. “Those’re some pretty bold words coming from you,” she teased, her voice equal parts challenging and amused.

“I can be rather bold when the occasion calls for it,” Bruce said lazily, and if he had not known the lad so well, he would have said his words were practically… Flirtatious.

Alfred almost shook his head at the notion. He would have found the entire situation humorous if the secondhand embarrassment wasn’t making him internally cringe.

“Oh, B,” Miss Kyle nearly crooned, humor laced through her tone as she reached for the tail end of the scarf in his hand, “You’ve got the potential to be a lot of things, when the occasion calls for it.” Suddenly, she tugged the loose end of the long black fabric and like a dog on a leash, Bruce allowed himself to be pulled forward. His thighs nearly brushing the girl’s knees-

Unable to watch this too awkward flirtatious moment any longer, Alfred locked his hands behind his back and cleared his throat.

In the blink of an eye, Miss Kyle brought her feet up and using Bruce’s chest almost like a spring board propelled herself backward, gracefully rolling off the opposite side of the desk somehow managing not to disturb a single sheet of paper from one of the numerous stacks.

Almost in tandem with the girl, all the lingering tan from Bruce’s summer holidays leached from his face as he jumped and spun away from the desk as if the girl’s very wake had been on fire.

“Al-fred,” he exclaimed, his words springing forth as fast as he had jumped away from the trouble makers lingering presence. “How long have you been standing there?”
“Long enough,” the girl replied for him.

Alfred glared in her direction before narrowing his eyes back on the boy before him.

“We were just,” he stammered, as if they had been caught in the backseat of an auto and not doing whatever the hell it was they were doing. “It’s sensory deprivation training,” he explained, gesturing to the black scarf still in his hand and extracting the shiny red ribbon from his pocket.

Alfred had a cutting rejoinder, but kept the words to himself.

“Of course,” he drawled, stealing a glance at Selina Kyle as she propped a hip lazily against the desk beside her. “Perfectly normal adolescent activities.”

An uncharacteristic snort escaped the girl standing behind Bruce, “The Old Man’s got jokes,” she chuckled as she moved from the desk to the back of the couch, grabbing up the worn leather jacket she had tossed there so carelessly.

Alfred felt the pounding in his ears as his blood-pressure rose at the little thief’s arrogance and casual dismissal.

No, she was definitely not the kind of girl Bruce needed in his life.

As if she could sense his disdain, Miss Kyle merely smirked at him as she pulled on her jacket. “I’d love to stick around,” she said, sarcastically, “but I’ve got places to be.”

Judging from Bruce’s narrowed grey eyes and obstinate expression, her sudden departure was a complete shock to him.

“I thought you said-” he started, taking a step in her direction.

“Yeah, I forgot about this thing,” she said, and for the first time, Alfred could see the slight tinge of pink that had started running along the girl’s sharp cheek bones as she jerked open one half of the veranda doors and the crisp smell of burning leaves and autumn cold invaded the library.

“But I won the game,” he replied, his tone mere notes away from being down right childish.

His words seemed to slow her. “Yeah,” she drawled, indifferently, “I’m gonna have to hit you back later, B,” she said, before disappearing into the midday sun.

It should have been a casual farewell, but the tension the departure left behind was much too strong to ignore.

“Well, what was that about then,” Alfred felt forced to ask as he tried to keep his tone casual.

Frowning, Bruce slumped onto the couch. “Nothing,” he answered. “Just a wager.”

From the deep furrow in his dark brow that had slowly evolved into a mulish attitude the boy had had for the next few days, Alfred assumed it had been much more than ‘just a wager’ between two friends. Looking back, he had never taken the time to find out what the terms of that bet had entailed or if the young girl had backed out on her end, but more important he had never found the inclination to finally have that ‘talk’ with the boy, to finally lay down any rules.

At the time, he hadn’t seen the point in dragging them both down that road. He had been too careful, too new, too inexperienced in his parental role. His own father had made an embarrassing muck of the birds and bees and Alfred had just assumed the boy would find out the way he had through telly and mates, and magazines you kept hidden between your mattresses.
And if he was being honest with himself, maybe a small part of him had been in no rush to have Bruce acknowledge what was clearly happening between him and Miss Kyle. If they were happy to play they were platonic, he was happy to let sleeping dogs lie.

In hindsight, as he glared down at the two teenagers tangled together on the study floor, fire light and shadows dancing along their lines, letting sleeping dogs lie had turned out to be a terrible idea.

Alfred Pennyworth had always been a light sleeper so the sound of muffled voices drifting down the main hall had easily roused him from sleep. Initially he had felt no alarm at the sound, it was not unusual to find Bruce, restless and sleep deprived, watching television, or reading a book, or possibly doing any number of things that would alarm any normal parent.

Still shaking off slumber, he hadn’t bothered to check the time on his watch as he had slid it on or looked down at his feet as he slipped into his house shoes. He had been in the middle of pulling on his dressing gown when a feminine shriek had cut through the night air. Instinct had had him reaching for his gun and before he had taken a moment to think about what he was doing he had found himself racing to the study.

Had adrenaline not been pumping so swiftly through his veins, his outburst at discovering the pair may have never happened. Given the opportunity again, he would like to think he would have gone about it more tactfully. A nice heavy footfall down the hall, an audible coughing fit outside the doors, or had he been feeling very generous he may have even chosen to not make his presence known at all and trusted the boy to use some common sense.

The two teenagers wrapped in each other certainly would not have noticed had he chosen to silently walk away. Hell, they probably wouldn’t have noticed if a marching band had come parading through.

No, his sudden outburst, his flare of anger, had been born from a combination of relief, surprise, and disappointment. Relief at finding both children in his care alive and well. Surprise to find them the cause of the pre-dawn racket. And disappointment that, despite their fully clothed bodies, they had clearly crossed some invisible line.

From their very telling positions on the floor he wasn’t sure what he had expected them to do in response. Maybe some scrambling, some stuttered explanations, even some jumping away from each other as if they both had contracted the plague. He had expected at least something in the catalog of responses he would have had had he been caught with a bird at that age. But they did none of those.

He would like to chuck it up to a just ‘kids these days,’ but Bruce Wayne and Selina Kyle were far from your average teenagers.

Even fully dressed in her baggy jumper, a girl, any girl, of Bruce’s acquaintance should have been mortified, or at the very least slightly embarrassed to be caught in such a position. Of course, that little piece just sat there, like the cat that had gotten the canary.

Suddenly, the gun in his hand felt entirely too heavy and like a glaring overreaction. Taking a deep breath, he rested his back against the opened door as he reigned in his temper.

Regardless of their behavior and what may or may not have transpired had he not barged in, he felt an overwhelming sense of relief at the all too normal position he found himself in. These were the kind of things guardians dealt with, not kidnappings and assassins, and psycho clowns. Normal folks just had to deal with lads with too many hormones and girls too pretty for their own good.
And for now, he was one of those people, charged with navigating a teenage boy with hearts in his naïve eyes for a girl well outside of anything he would ever be able to handle.

That thought killed all the humor that had slithered in, and he looked back at the pair. Somehow, dealing with assassins and psychos wasn’t looking so bad.

Exhaling, he looked down at his watch before he made a noncommittal gesture with his free hand. “Are either of you aware it’s four in the bloody morning,” he asked, for lack of a better kickoff and nodding his head in the same general direction.

Silence answered him as Bruce stayed crouched over the girl as if he was shielding her from prying eyes. For one moment, he and the boy merely stared at one another, the air pulling tighter with tension as the seconds passed until with a very un-lady like snort, Miss Kyle burst into a short laugh.

Head falling back to the floor, she quickly blew an errant curl from her face before releasing another laugh. The sudden humor had Bruce’s head tilting back in her direction and Alfred felt like he was intruding when she suddenly smiled up at the boy. It was an oddly sweet smile. Suspiciously sweet, actually. But it was all the warning she gave Bruce, before she delivered a playful smack to his chest. Her touch proved all the prodding the boy needed to climb from her.

Moving as if he was recovering from some invasive surgery, Bruce rose to his feet. Standing, he quickly wrapped his robe around himself, knotting the belt efficiently before he offered Miss Kyle his hand. To Alfred’s surprise, the girl accepted it as she sprang gracefully to her feet like the little woodland sprite she was.

Turning his head to give them the illusion of privacy, he ignored Bruce’s glare and watched as Miss Kyle slowly relinquished Bruce’s hand to right her jumper and wipe away specks of nonexistent dirt. Always alert, her gaze quickly moved from Bruce to him and back again.

When the pregnant silence only stretched on, Alfred felt himself clearing his throat, “As I said Miss Kyle, it’s very late.”

She simply shrugged her shoulders in response, stepping around Bruce as if he was nothing more than a footstool. Alfred would have found her seeming nonchalance impressive, if he hadn’t seen the color growing along her cheeks.

As she paused beside him Alfred realized he must have run out of favors, because it was clearly too much to ask for her to just silently quit the room.

“Great timing their Jeeves,” she said, and looked as if she wanted to cheekily pat his arm, but something she read in his face must’ve lead her to reconsider.

Resisting the urge to add his own off-color reply. He turned back to Bruce, only to find the boys pale eyes running over her quickly and the slightest tick in his lips.

“Catch you later B,” she called over her shoulder, a conspiratorial note in her voice as she finally stepped from the room.

“Not tonight you won’t, Miss Kyle,” he barked after her retreating form.

She merely burst into another fit of laughter.

Insolent girl.

Alfred closed his eyes for a moment as he listened to her swagger down the hall. Her usually
whisper-soft tread was replaced with a heavy near skipping-step as if the girl wanted him to hear how casually she felt about his interruption and his dismissal of her. The arrogance behind the sound would have been annoying if he couldn’t see it for the blatant deflection that it was…

Deflection.

Alfred shook his head at the thought.

A conman’s favorite tool.

How could he have been so blind? It was his job, his sworn duty, to protect Bruce from all sorts of danger. Including those that came with a halo of curls on their head and a pair of devils on their slim shoulders.

Over these last few weeks, having her here, seeing her every day, it had been so easy to overlook certain aspects of her personality. Hell, he had almost started enjoying her clever cheek and the way she could so easily coax a smile from his surly ward. Seeing them together, he had almost forgotten what that little girl really was.

A liar, and a thief, and too pretty by half. She was a girl who had seen and done things, no child that age should have even known about.

But it was not just about where she had come from or where she was going. She had floated in and out of Bruce’s life like a sailor, feeding him lies from the first moment they met.

Bloody hell, the girl had abandoned him to the mercies of an assassin the first chance she got at freedom; had lied to him about the worst moment of his life, had gone missing and shown up at their door starved and beaten and half-frozen to death and still refused to give them even a hint as to who had done it.

She would never be any good for the boy, but Bruce refused to see that. He probably never would.

Alfred’s first reaction to a threat was to grab the boy and run. Unfortunately, he had a feeling he would never be able to run fast or far enough to get away from this threat. There would never be any protecting him from her.

Turning back to face the study, he glanced at Bruce’s averted profile before gazing down at his watch. Despite the urgency he was feeling, he would allow the boy a few more moments to gather himself. He had been in that position a time or two or four himself in his youth, but after that there would be no more stalling. It might be late in coming, but it was beyond time he talked to the boy.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Notes: This un-BETA’d so constructive criticism always welcome.

I’m not sure if anyone is still reading this, but if you are: I am SO sorry for not updating sooner. Between school, work, and trying to write and rewrite from Alfred’s point-of-view, I unfortunately got caught in this chapter for a very long time. I promise that I am working very hard on the next few chapters and they are going to be pretty big and will once again be from Selina and Bruce’s POVs.
Selina

The strained smirk she had been maintaining since Alfred Pennyworth had entered Bruce's study, slowly drained from Selina's face as she topped the second story landing. Ignoring her sore ankle and the heavy pounding of her heart, she took her first few steps down the long hall. She had taken the stairs too quickly and she knew she should slow down. It was a long trek from the family hall to her room and if she ran it wouldn't be doing her aching ankle or her over-worked lungs any favors.

Rounding the first corner into the maze of halls that shaped the second floor, she slowed her pace barely noting the feel of the thick rug beneath her socked feet. The change in texture was something she usually would have noticed, but somewhere between the study and this hall, her thick sweater had begun to feel like an oven and the leggings she had been so keen to wear, now clung to her in all the wrong places and she couldn't quite see past that.

At some point sweat had begun to pool at her lower-back and the slick feel only added to her frustration. If she had worn anything beneath her cashmere sweater, even just a bra, she may have stripped it off just to escape the suddenly unbearable heat, but for some reason she could never fully shake the idea that she was being watched. There was little doubt in her mind that there were cameras hidden inside the Manor. The stupid thing was so massive, it only made sense to keep more than one layer of security. The idea that she might be popping up on some monitor somewhere might have kept her top in place, but it didn't stop her from slowing her pace even further.

Even now, she wasn't sure why she had taken the stairs so quickly or why she had forced the audacity so hard. Her jaw still ticked and her throat burned from the bark of a laugh she had sent the old man's way. She’d had no need to do that. She had never been worried about the judgment behind those cornflower blue eyes, Alfred's opinion of her was like the tide, high and low, but never steady and that had been just fine with her. No, she hadn't been running from Alfred at all.

Looking over her shoulder, she scanned the hall for any signs she was being followed. She knew it didn't make sense, that Alfred was probably still down stairs giving Bruce an earful about the dangers of wicked females, but it never hurt to be sure. Satisfied she was still alone, she leaned against the nearest wall. She knew resting was never the best idea and that the last place she needed to be caught was close to Bruce's room, but she didn't care.

She was going to allow herself this second. This moment to catch her breath.

She knew she shouldn't be so winded. At home, she could out run any mark and top a roof before most people could reach the second floor, but that had been months ago. She hadn't even run from the scene downstairs, and between the sweat dripping down her spine and the stitch in her side she knew she was still a long way from the girl who had cart-wheeled along steel-beams and scaled fire-escapes for sport.

No, that girl had been smarter. She had stuck to the code. She had known when to run. She had known to keep moving. That girl had remembered the rules that had kept her alive: Always move forward and never turn back.

She could run now. She knew she could. She could let her feet take her where they needed to go.
She knew it was what she should do.

She should keep going, straight to that third floor, straight to her room. It would be nothing to just grab her boots and jacket and just take off. She could be changed and gone, half-way back to the city before the old man was even done with what Selina was sure was a less than flattering evaluation of her character. Leaving would be a smart move. A good move.

Bruce could run back to whatever it was he did with all of his time and she... She could finally get her head on straight.

It would be the best decision for both of them.

But what was best for Selina Kyle and what Selina Kyle wanted had never found a way to live in harmony.

She had spent most of her life wanting things that most people took for granted: a week with a full belly, clothes that weren't dirty and taped together, a roof over her head that no one could take from her. But she had learned from a very early age, that those things tended to come with very strong strings. Strings that would have eventually turned into chains. Chains she swore she would never wear again.

When she had first decided to flee the home, she had made a rule for herself never to stay in one place too long. She figured seeing the same faces, the same places, had the dangers of making you cling. Routine made it way too easy to grow attachments. True attachments, attachments you might one day consider friends and Selina Kyle had no friends. So, by her thinking, if she kept herself clear, if she had no real attachments, no real connections, no real responsibilities, she had no problems.

It was easier just to keep things simple. Simple was good. Simple didn't leave you. Simple didn't shove a knife in your back. Simple didn't reach inside your chest and rip out your heart. Simple was uncomplicated. Simple kept you alive.

Simple had been working just fine until the night she'd chosen to nick a wallet and a pint of milk to feed herself and her favorite tom. And it was clear that simple had chosen to up and leave her as she had had been swaggering down an alley and the sound of a gentle laugh had halted her in her tracks. Simple had abandoned them both as that gentle laugh had quickly turned into a guttural scream. A scream overfilled with the agony and horror that a pair of innocent grey eyes had just witnessed.

She had always called it curiosity that had stayed her, but she knew then, like she knew now, it had been something else altogether different. It had been something a lot more complex than inquisitiveness that had held her in place on that fire escape and not let her go. Something that had forced her to stay as she watched that family fall apart, had kept her still until the sounds of sirens and the shouts of angry cops had filled the air.

Hell, even common sense had taken a vacation when she had first spied him- bundle of dark hair and expensive clothes and a smile that had reached his eyes. Yes, commonsense had fled her and something foreign had taken its place. Something she had never felt before, as if not a string, but a thread inside of her had been suddenly caught by an invisible hand. That phantom grip had then proceeded to draw her across town to a cemetery to watch as a boy had lowered both of his parents into the ground; it had jerked her into the middle of nowhere to see where he had called home.

Her curiosity should have been sated then. She should have severed that cord and pushed that boy behind her. She should have never given him a second thought, but like a sore tooth, she couldn't leave it be. She had had no business breaking into his house, especially on a night when a goat
headed anarchist was on the hunt for heirs like it was the freaking French Revolution. If she had been caught, Alfred could have shot her dead and no one would have blinked an eye. But she had gone anyway, against training, against common sense, she had still gone.

She'd been so stupid then.

Taking in a deep breath she leaned her head against the wall behind her.

But, what had time really changed?

It hadn't been the last time she'd found her way back to Wayne Manor. Even after some of their worst fights, this place, that kid, always had a way of calling her back and idiot that she had become, she never fought it.

Selina let her eyes roam down the long hall, the second floor was as dark and quiet as the rest of Wayne Manor. Any other night she may have found something oddly comforting in the warm pools of lamplight that dotted the rugged floor and the gentle ticking of the oversized grandfather clock that was always a minute off, but tonight had not been any other night.

No, tonight had begun with a nightmare and ended with…

Well, not exactly a mistake, but certainly not one of her better life choices.

She nearly groaned as images of fire washed skin and dark eyes drifted across her inner eye.

What in the hell had she been thinking?

She had kissed Bruce.

Bruce Wayne.

Child-billionaire, Bruce Wayne.

Gotham's Little Prince, Bruce Wayne.

Poster Child for Modern-day Monarchy, Bruce Wayne.

But worst of all, the thing she hated to admit… Her Friend, Bruce Wayne.

Again, the question raged at her, what in the hell had she been thinking?

She had kissed Bruce. Well, technically she had tried to kiss him. But due to the boys ever quickening reflexes she had missed terribly and just when she had thought her humiliation complete, Bruce had made the attempt himself. Unlike her own ambush style, the boy had drawn it out, had lulled her, had had her twisting like a worm on a hook before he had finally kissed her back.

Selina resisted the urge to caress her own still tingling lips. The taste of soft peppermints still lingered there and deep in her belly those lost butterflies still smoldered.

It wasn't really something that she should be thinking about. It hadn't been that big of a deal. Not really. It wasn't as if Bruce had been the first boy that had tried to kiss her. Far from it. When she had been younger one of the older boys in the home had tried once or twice, but she had been small and quick and had easily ducked his advances. Quiet and agile, she had managed to avoid him for another two years when one evening he had cornered and tried again, but by then she had grown bigger and smarter and kneed him hard enough to leave him on the deck in a pool of his own vomit. After that, he had been the one taken to avoiding her.
Unfortunately, he hadn't been the last asshole to try it. She had never been completely naïve about her own looks. When she had been young she had hoped she would never be the kind of head turner that some of the girls she had known had turned out to be. Turning heads rarely turned out well for anyone. But she had been told more than once, that the bag of flesh she carried around was just a body, bone and muscle and blood and skin, nothing more. But despite that advice, Selina had always held onto the idea that it might only be a body, but it was her body. The one thing that was hers alone, that would never leave her, never betray her, and so she had fought ruthlessly to keep it for herself, to decide what she wanted to do with it and when and where and with whom.

No, Bruce had not been the first boy to try and kiss her, but he had been the first boy that she had ever wanted to try.

It felt like a lifetime ago, that an impulse created out of childhood curiosity had driven her to steal her first kiss. The tight-lipped peck had been everything she had been expecting from the boy, quick, gentle, and bathed in ten shades of innocent. A far cry from the way he had kissed her tonight. No, that kiss hadn't been any of those things. That kiss had been something else entirely.

Something so foreign and so overwhelming, that maybe, just maybe, she could admit that it scared her just a little. Not in the usual way fear graced her life, nothing in the way he had touched her had made any silent alarms ring in her mind. Quite the opposite, actually. For the first time in a long time, she had felt sheltered and curious and just the slightest bit hungry. Hungry for things neither of them were prepared for, but she knew if Alfred had not come charging in she may have kissed Bruce until her lungs burst.

Thoughts of the old man had doubt crowding the edges of her mind and her eyes flying open and checking the hall for any signs that she had been followed. When nothing more than shadows and silence answered, she let her gaze linger at the opposite end of the hall and its promises of darkness and freedom. She really should move, she knew that, common sense told her so, but her feet stayed rooted, her socked-toes digging into the plush rug beneath them.

She needed to go. She had already been here too long and if she had needed any other sign that she needed to leave, Alfred barging in on them was undoubtedly it.

It made no sense to stay anyway. To even dare to want it went against everything she had ever known. Everything she had ever learned. Everything that had kept her alive for so long.

For one of the few times in her life, her instincts were at war with everything she knew and the feeling was akin to suffocating. It was such an uncommon feeling to find herself so indecisive. Gotham had raised her to always put herself first and she tried never to deviate. But this, this was different, it was confusing and... Something she couldn't quite recognize.

For as long as she could remember she had been living on a tight rope. There was a certain balance to her kind of life, the weighing of a scores worth if she succeeded versus the potential punishment if she failed. She had been brought up to study every mark: Was that a wallet or a gun beneath that tailored suit? Would that woman catch on to her quick hands? Would that man turn out to be undercover? Would this act of desperation end with her dead in a ditch, or in a pair of steal bracelets? Or if she was smart and quick and luck was with her did it mean a couple of hot meals and a pair of fresh boots. Her life may not have been carefully planned out by any parent or even herself, but she never forgot that one misstep, one bad move, could mean death or worse.

Like the decision to follow a bad mark down an even worse alley, a cold voice reminded her.

Visions of cold moldy cells and blood on snow had Selina's breath staggering through clenched teeth. She bit into her lip as she pushed that thought from her mind. She didn't have time to tackle all
of the mistakes she had made in the last three months.

Stilling the sudden panic that had flared inside her, she gazed once again down the empty hall.

Maybe her instinct was wrong, maybe leaving would really be the best option.

The sounds of shuffling slippers and two familiar voices floating up the stairs had Selina's head whipping in the opposite direction. Damn it! What had she been thinking stopping here? She should have known she wasn't going to escape the boy in his own house. Especially, not when she had nearly made camp outside his bedroom door.

As she saw the top of a salt-and-pepper head clearing the landing, Selina felt the first bursts of street-born instincts come to life. Her first impulse was to beat feet, but she ignored it, already scanning the nearly empty hall for a place to hide.

Despite the late hour there were few shadows deep or dark enough to disappear entirely, and the end table was much too thin, but judging from its size the grandfather clock standing so proudly at the end of the hall would provide more than adequate cover.

Keeping the ever-nearing Bruce and Alfred insight, she slid silently along the wall until her back met the right side of the massive clock. It was such a large piece Selina knew that if she kept her back to the wall, she could safely slip beside it and neither Bruce nor Alfred would ever know she was there.

Listening to the pause in their footfalls, she inhaled deeply as she ducked her head and peered around the corner. Both Bruce and Alfred were still facing her, but their minds seemed to be too preoccupied to pay her any notice even if they had spotted her.

In the dim light, she was surprised to see the scowl and the near glare that Bruce was sending in Alfred's direction. It was only when she caught the tail-end of the Old Man's words that she finally understood the sudden flash of anger on Bruce's face.

"-the last thing I need are a couple of grey-eyed, tow-headed brats running around."

Despite her years on the street, Selina felt her cheeks burn as she understood the insulting insinuation.

"Alfred, your knowledge of basic genetics leaves something to be desired," Bruce replied, his tone caustic.

"Don't change the subject," Alfred barked back. "That girl is pure bedlam and you have no business-
"

"Selina's my friend, Alfred," Bruce broke in, his voice laced with anger, "I thought you would have accepted that fact by now," he finished as if that should end the conversation.

"Friend?" the butler scoffed, "The girl looked like a lot more than that."

Bruce took a deep breath, his hand wrapped around his doorknob. "Maybe she is."

"Maybe she is," Alfred grunted disbelievingly, hooking both hands behind his back, a normally mocking gesture that lost some of its potency in his pajamas and robe. "Tell me this then, if she's such a good friend, has she told you what happened to her that night she stumbled up here half-dead?"

Unexpectedly, she felt Bruce's attention a second before his gaze moved from his door to the
grandfather clock and she eased herself behind the clock's corner. She knew the shadows had done their job, she hadn't given away her position, but still she felt the need to hold her breath.

"Not yet," Bruce answered as if he was admitting something shameful as he opened the door to his room and entered Alfred trailing behind him.

_Not yet._

The words echoed inside Selina's mind as his bedroom door clicked shut.

_Not yet._

What in the hell had that meant?

_Not yet._

Had he been…

Selina swallowed against the confidence and implications that lived in those two words?

_Not yet._

Memories of all the times he had questioned her, every argument that had started with a seemingly innocent inquiry, every time he had casually mentioned her injuries, every time he had blatantly hounded her about what had happened that night, flooded back to her in a wave.

Had that been Bruce's endgame all along? Had he only been nice, to get what he really wanted? A truth that he had no right to.

Is this why he had shown her his mother's secret room? Why he had made her gloves and gifted her clothes she didn't need? Why they had had so many late night conversations where he had fooled her into giving him secrets and where he had plied her with sweet words she didn't need to hear either? And all those gentle brushes, had been like trying to lure a stray cat and that kiss… That stupid kiss!

Had it all been bull shit? Had she been a mark too stupid and blinded by the right hand to recognize what the left hand had been doing all along?

Humiliation and rage turned to ice in her belly. Ice that finally drowned those burning butterflies.

Fists clinched, she took a step toward his room, before the memories of other arguments too muffled to understand reminded her that those doors were too thick for eavesdropping. Disappointment had nearly taken root, when her eyes settled on the clock beside her. Yes, the bedroom doors might be too thick for spying, but she knew about small dark doors that weren't.

Letting out a deep breath, Selina studied the overgrown watch beside her, and regardless of her mood, felt herself grin. She knew why this clock had been built to such oversized proportions; why, in spite of its massive frame, it happened to be so light. She knew exactly why it always ran one minute too slow and what happened if you held the pendulum and wound that minute hand to a certain hour.

Selina Kyle had always had a good memory, and she remembered everything from that day so long ago when Bruce had dragged her up here and shown her what exactly this clock concealed behind it and exactly where that led.

To be continued…
Chapter End Notes

I am so sorry for the short chapter and for leaving it on a cliff hanger, this was originally tacked onto the end of 25 and then the beginning to 27, but the next chapter is both pretty long and pretty big so I wanted to have something to share with you guys in between. I hope you don't mind. I'm very excited about the next chapter and I hope you will be too. :D

If I haven't responded to your comment, I promise I'm getting on it right now. Thank you guys for everything. :)
Selina

Stepping into the old servant’s passage, goosebumps erupted across Selina’s skin. The predawn temperatures had caught her by surprise and shuddered in her chest. She had almost forgotten what this kind of cold really felt like, the kind that leaked into your bones and refused to leave. The kind that usually made anger a hard beast to harness, but gritting her chattering teeth Selina vowed to do her best.

“Not yet.”

Those two words still echoed in the back of her mind like the beat of a drum.

“Not yet.”

Who would have thought two words would have ever had such an impact on her? She certainly hadn’t. She had been born with a thick skin that had only grown thicker and trained to spot a mark and fellow fraudster from a mile away.

But maybe that was the problem.

Because, cause her training hadn’t prepared her for him.

She wasn’t sure what ate at her most: his nosiness, or his arrogance, or maybe… Just maybe, it was that thing that had eaten her up her entire life. The knowledge that no one had ever stood in her corner, and with the way things were going, no one ever would.

And those two words had just proved it. All his smiles and his gifts had never been given freely. He had been expecting something from her all along. She should have seen it; should have recognized all the signs of a good con. What in her life had ever given her a reason to believe otherwise?

Hell, even her own mother had abandoned her. She wasn’t sure why she had expected more. Why she had thought that some kid billionaire would have taken her side.

Anger, dulled but still strong, coursing through her, Selina took a deep breath and instantly regretted it. Despite the frigid air, the lingering musty scents of mildew and un-use filled her nostrils. Resisting the urge to rub her nose and barely giving her eyes the chance to adjust to the sudden and total darkness, she continued tiptoeing her way down the servant’s passage.

The last time Bruce had taken her through here it had been midday and light had been filtering in through random cracks and something he had called arrow-slits, but in the dead of night even her superior vision was struggling to make out her own hand. Darkness had grown impenetrable and Selina slowed after she barely saw the bottom of a wooden support beam as it skimmed the top of her unruly curls. Trying her best to mimic the soft but quick shuffle of the mice she knew occasionally scuttled between the walls, she lowered her head and continued.

Her tread was as silent as dust motes as her eyes ate up what they could. Even hurrying, she made a point of cataloging every hidden nook and door. She hadn’t found herself in the passages since that
afternoon Bruce had brought her to see his mother’s overstuffed closet, her makeshift hoard, and her giant vault worth more than half of Gotham, but she was making her way just fine.

Slowing her steps as she reached the thin door to Bruce’s room, for a moment she let her gaze wander past it. Straining her eyes, she could make out the small hidden door that she knew belonged to his mother.

Selina had never taken the time to think on it, but she couldn’t help but wonder at the woman’s behavior. Why had Martha Wayne lived so much of her life behind there, hidden away? No, not hidden. She hadn’t really hidden anything, she had chosen to keep it to herself, sharing it with the people who had mattered most to her.

But even so, it was like she had been forced to live only half her life, half the time….

Damn, what a load that must’ve been?

The unwelcome thought had Selina shaking her head, an unamused smile playing along her lips. Oh yeah, the burdens of a billionaire were just simply terrible.

Shaking off the absurdity, she turned back to the door beside her and to the boy who stood behind it.

Judging from the snatch of conversation she had heard between him and Alfred, he was probably brooding behind there, his temper growing worse by the moment. He did that from time to time, a bad day that he let evolve into a sulk. In the past, she had always let him stew, it was not her job to make him happy or to piss him off more.

But tonight, she didn’t have luxury to let him get his head on right, and she was more than willing to match his cold anger with some anger of her own.

Taking a deep breath, she tested the small door latch.

She had never actually used Bruce’s hidden door before, but she knew, like his mother’s door it probably opened into some ridiculous and extravagant closet. Clenching her teeth against the possibility of a squeaky hinge, she pulled it open.

The door was silent as it swung toward her and she let out a deep breath at her luck. Inhaling she was instantly wrapped in warmth and the smell of cedar-wood and leather. Breathing deeply, she tried to ignore the abnormal feel of calm that washed over her at the instant recognition of that unique blend of scents that she usually only found on Bruce. But something about it lacked that final note, perhaps the sweet smell of his hair, that finished that magical mix that clung to him and pulled on something inside her.

Leaving the door open in case she needed a quick escape, Selina slid between a pair of new sport coats positioned just right to conceal the telltale lines of the hidden door. Noiselessly the coats fell back into place, and she exhaled as she straightened, quickly surveying the large closet before her. Even with the darkness that bathed everything insight, she could make out enough to know that she had been right. The closet looked like a younger and more masculine version of his mother’s.

Instead of rows of furs and every style of shoe known to man, she could see the outlines of thin sweaters and dress pants and an entire rack of unfortunate turtlenecks. She didn’t need the light to tell her what colors they were all in… Black, black, and probably more black.

Despite the anger still rolling in her gut, she couldn’t stop herself from reaching out a hand and grazing a line of neatly hung sweaters. She wondered for one moment if she were to press her nose into the fabric if it would smell more like him or more like the manor.
If she wasn’t sneaking around she might have laughed at the preposterous idea.

What in the hell was wrong with her?

First, she had caught herself almost feeling sorry for what had been one of the richest women in the world only to turn around and find herself itching for said richest woman’s son. Maybe it was her lack of sleep or the emotional rollercoaster she had hopped on in the middle of the night, or one of the many changes her life had taken in the past few months, but there was definitely something incredibly wrong with her.

Her fingers still gripping a cashmere sleeve was a perfect example. She had been so ready to storm in here, to press her ear against that door and hear every awful backstabbing word that boy had to throw and now… Now, she was ready to breathe him in.

Disgusted with herself, she threw the sleeve back and turned from the rack. She needed to focus, to find out what Bruce knew, or at least what he thought he knew. And she needed to know what kind of info he had been trying to charm out of her.

Charm out of her?

The idea shot a slim arrow of doubt straight through her thoughts.

She had seen Bruce’s attempts at manipulation before. They had been so obvious, so untutored, (his use of reverse-psychology had been some of the worst she had ever seen) that like the brat he could occasionally be, he usually just ended up trying to demand what he wanted. The kind of self-righteous asshole-ness that usually lead to her responding in kind and storming off with the intention of doing the exact opposite of what he he had intended.

But this time had been different.

He had never been so sneaky; never exploited their friendship, or preyed on the doors she had left cracked open for him. She couldn’t have read him so wrong, could she? Could she have really been so blinded by a handsome boy with pretty words?

Shit!

If he hadn’t believed her side of the story, then why hadn’t he just come right out with it and asked her. Really asked her! And not tried to play this childish game of cloak and dagger.

If he was playing a game at all?

Or had she just been looking for the betrayal, had she been hoping Bruce would give her a reason to run, to give her the push out the door that she hadn’t been able to give herself.

Not yet.

Two simple words that had dragged up so much more than just anger inside her. They had awakened and echoed things she had wanted to keep tucked safely in her past.

Muffled voices dragged her back to the present and the reason she was standing in Bruce Wayne’s ridiculous closet. Frozen, she stared at the dimly outlined door. She could just leave. She knew that. She still had time. She hadn’t seen anyone and no one had seen her. She could just leave and never find out what he had really meant by that, or how he really felt about her.

But what would that accomplish? Nothing. That’s what.
Taking a deep breath, she faced the door and on the balls of her socked feet she quickly crept closer. Squatting down, she nearly pressed her cheek to the wooden panel as soft murmurs began to take on the shape of vowels and consonants. Thin beams of light wiggled through the doors seams, and as she pressed her ear near the edge she began to catch every third word and the slightly hoarse notes of Bruce’s late night voice and the gravely accented tones of Alfred Pennyworth.

“-that girl is never going to trust you enough to tell you the weather much less what happened to her. But this is not about what secrets she is keeping. It’s about what that girl is.”

“And what exactly is that?” came Bruce’s caustic voice. Selina could almost picture his half-meditative and half-flippant posture.

Quickly, she pressed her ear to the seam hoping to hear Alfred’s response more clearly.

“A hungry dog can’t be loyal,” was his reply. “People like that will do anything to stay ahead and you have no idea what a girl like that is willing to do.”

“I’m perfectly aware of what Selina’s capable of,” Bruce answered. “You have no need to remind me, she does that well enough on her own.

“But, you’re both wrong,” he continued. “Because, she has never asked me for anything.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“You do, and your evidence to the contrary?” he asked, his voice growing more formal.

Alfred’s response was too faint to catch but Selina pressed her ear closer her in hopes of catching at least one more word.

“I don’t know,” Bruce admitted, “but I don’t particularly care. Selina’s invitation here wasn’t based on whether I agree with her reasons for staying. I’m not going to force her out, because she doesn’t want to share the- “

Warmth bloomed in her chest as she missed Bruce’s last fading words, but it was impossible to miss the growing agitation in Alfred’s answering sigh.

“Believe me, I know what it’s like to have your head done in by a pretty face,” came the rough English voice. “And that girl’s face is a lot prettier than most, but she’s still trouble and the kind you don’t need. The kind your parents entrusted me to keep you from.”

The weight of Bruce’s silence killed the ember that had alighted in her. The worst part was that she couldn’t disagree with the old man. Alfred was right, she had a certain way of dragging trouble into Bruce’s life. It was nothing new to her and by staying here it wasn’t going to change that. But, something inside her grew cold at the idea that Bruce might agree with him, that that might be the reason for his silence.

“Trust me when I say I’ve known a lot of birds like her in my time,” Alfred continued, his tone surprisingly more measured. Pausing he released a sigh, as if what he was about to say he was reluctant to admit. “I’m not saying it’s not admirable what she’s been able to do, but the things that girl must have done, what she might do… You don’t make it to her age without a little blood on your hands.”

His words sent a chill down her spine and ice into her fingertips. She could almost feel it now, the rock so slimy and so heavy and everything she needed and despised gripped in the palm of her hand.
No, she told herself, shaking free of the memory. Alfred didn’t know. Alfred couldn’t know. She unclenched her fist, letting go of the phantom rock as Bruce’s voice drifted back to her ears.

“You may have known girls like her in the past, Alfred,” Bruce’s voice cut clear through the door. “But you don’t know Selina. She’s a survivor. No different than me… Or you.”

“That girl is as close to being like you as a cat is to a dog,” he shot back, “And that is the exact reason why I can tell you she’s not right for you.”

A hush once again fell between the two and Selina felt her teeth grinding together.

“And what exactly is right for me?” Bruce asked, his voice full of petulance and misplaced anger.

“Going back to school for one,” Alfred answered as if he had been carrying that suggestion in his back pocket for a while and it had been burning a hole.

Selina glared at the sliver of light that crept into the room, but she could only picture the scowl Bruce was probably directing at the old man.

“We’ve talked about this,” Bruce replied, his voice unusually calm. “There’s no benefit in me attending the academy or any other school. But that’s irrelevant—”

“But it’s not, is it? Cause you need to get out of this house. You need to be around people that don’t lie, cheat, and steal for their bread and butter.”

“Yes, because entertaining the spoiled daughter of a hedge fund manager or the son of a racist oil baron would be such an improvement,” Bruce barked back. “You act as if Selina was sent here with some nefarious agenda. Do you think she’ll feed me poisoned apples or slip in my room in the dead of night and cut off my hair?”

“More likely your throat.”

Selina felt the shaking in her fists and slowly unfurled her fingers before the knuckles popped and she gave herself away. She had failed to understand Bruce’s references, but Alfred’s had been clear as day.

There was an audible scoff and the tension that had been building in her shoulders eased out at the flippant tone in Bruce’s voice, “Didn’t my father ever tell you that exaggeration is the quickest way to lose an argument.”

“No, Master Bruce,” came Alfred’s calm voice, “But your father did entrust me with the thing most important to him in this world. Both of your parents trusted me to protect you and I’m trying to do that. Even if it means telling you things you don’t want to hear.”

Even through the door Selina felt the tension rise behind it. Bruce’s parents had always felt like a no-fly zone, one that she had been unafraid to trespass on, but Alfred had always been better than her at respecting those boundaries. He only stepped onto that mine field when he really need to.

Which meant that he really believed in what he was saying about her. The old man had never had qualms calling a spade a spade and what he thought of her was pretty clear. He thought she was a liar and a thief and had the potential to be what? A murderer.

Well, he was wrong about that last one. There was no potential there. Just facts…

And Bruce had…
He had defended her. Actually, defended her.

The idea was so far outside her experience she had no way to respond. It was just another erosion on her anger, the anger that had sustained her not only tonight, but for most of her life.

“It’s late,” Bruce’s clipped tone caught her by surprise and she felt her eyebrows lift in response. “And this conversation has exhausted itself.”

“Very well,” the old man replied, and in her mind’s eye could almost mold a picture of a defeated and disgruntled Alfred. His customary stance: arms behind him, one hand cupping the other wrist as he prepared to lecture Bruce. “But can I give you some advice.”

“Can I stop you?”

“You need to keep your wits about that girl,” he explained as if he hadn’t heard Bruce at all. “She has you wrapped around her little finger, and she knows it.”

“Be that as it may,” Bruce began, and Selina felt her lips tilt up at the admission. “I don’t think- “

“That’s right! When it comes to that girl you don’t think,” Alfred snapped. “Look, you’re a smart lad, but you need to keep your head and you could start by not looking at her like a starving man who just found a good meal.”

The statement had been plain innocent compared to the usual things that had been hurled at her since she the day she’d hit puberty, but Selina couldn’t control the warmth that suddenly flared in her cheeks.

“How very original of you Alfred,” Bruce drawled. “Do you have any other overused similes or metaphors you would like to impart?”

“Being cheeky with me doesn’t make it not true,” Alfred replied plainly.

Face burning, Selina held her breath hoping for a slice of the barest sound, but only silence reached her. The quiet was heavy and she instinctually knew behind that door, there was a wordless conversation happening and that their argument was far from over.

“Goodnight, Alfred.”

Bruce’s quick and concise reply mad her nearly jump back and Selina could almost see Alfred’s barrel chest rising and falling in frustrated resignation.

“Goodnight, Master Bruce.”

The muted sound of Alfred’s retreating footsteps and the shutting of Bruce’s bedroom door were the only sounds that greeted Selina’s ears as she stood silently beside the closet door. She knew she needed to retreat as well, to find her way back through the tunnels and up to her semi-permanent room and examine everything she had heard. But before she could stand fully erect the sound of something being thrown and the steady but soft thump of footsteps crossing the floor reverberated through the door. By the time she began to stumble back the swinging door was being thrown open.

Selina Kyle wasn’t used to being caught. It was such a rare occurrence that she knew her eyes had to be the size of dinner plates as firelight flooded the closet exposing her for the eavesdropper that she was.
No one had ever dared to call her sheepish before, but there were few words she felt described her more as she looked up at Bruce and felt her eyes widen even more. Thick, dark brows were lowered over a pair of flashing grey eyes and the robe he had been wearing was nothing but a ball of navy silk in his fist. She could see the faintest traces of sweat lingering along his hairline, as he tilted his head, a wordless invitation that she should come in.

Even from her half-crouched position she could see the tension in him, in the rigid line of his shoulders, and the almost mechanical step in his gait. She wasn’t sure why she accepted the muted request, but neither spoke as she climbed to her full height and brushed past him.

Keeping her back to him, she made her way across his room. She fully expected him to slam the door and turn on her with the same wraith that he had shown Alfred, so when she heard nothing behind her, she quickly glanced back catching his figure from the corner of her eye.

Lit by the closets overhead lights, she could see Bruce tossing his balled robe into an adjacent corner. He had an arrogant and casual way of discarding things that never failed to rub her the wrong way, but she continued to watch as he moved to the opposite corner and pulled open a drawer of expensive flat-laid t-shirts. But when he reached behind his head for the collar of his t-shirt Selina read the intentions in his actions and quickly turned back to study his room.

She spent so little time in here, and so infrequently, she couldn’t recall any major changes. She figured Bruce’s room was no different than any other teenagers room give or take a few billion dollars. But, it still had the chameleon personality of an adolescent. Or maybe it had just been so long she couldn’t remember every tiny detail of what it had looked like before.

Alfred must have tended his fireplace at some point during their argument because where there should’ve been smoldering wood, near embers and ashes, there were unusually high flames. The unexpected bright light stung her night adjusted eyes and she was forced to redirect her gaze to the darker end of Bruce’s ridiculous bedroom.

The drapes on his massive bank of windows had been thrown open allowing bright moonlight to chase away what should have been shadows. And between the moonbeams and the fireplace the room was divided into equal parts golden and silvered light. Each somehow crossing the planes of the center piece of his room: his enormous bed. Which at this hour was in complete disarray. His duvet was in a heap and the sheets were a tangled mess, as if he had tossed and turned all night.

The idea of him wrapped in the dark fabric sent a completely foreign feeling stirring into the center of her gut and she had a hard time remembering why it was she had come in here in the first place.

Ignoring the unwanted and unfamiliar stir in her belly, Selina ripped her gaze away from the bed, not caring if the firelight still burned her unadjusted corneas. Her eyes moved over the two large leather arm chairs that sat empty and the tall pile of books standing between them.

From her place in the middle of the room the titles were hidden from her view as each faced Bruce’s favorite chair. Though she figured they would probably be beyond her, Selina didn’t resist the urge to step over and see what subjects he had been studying in his spare time.

Hoping he was still distracted, she took a quick surreptitious glance toward him and felt her breath hitch at the sight that greeted her.

Deep in his closet, Bruce was still rummaging through his drawer as if he had so many options among his colorless field of black and grey and midnight blue. But it wasn’t the overpriced t-shirts that had caused her face to heat. No, it was the sudden sight of pale skin stretched over sharp
shoulders and the contrasting dark dips and pale curves of muscle that was carved in his back.

Bruce had been such a slight boy when she had first met him that she had always just assumed that beneath his thick sweaters and tailored coats, he would have the body of a stick insect. But as she watched him, his muscles working in perfect accord as he held up and then quickly discarded another shirt she could see his build was much closer to that of a feather weight fighter. A feather weight fighter on the cusp of his weight class.

For one moment, it felt like she was someone else, someone completely disconnected, watching her closest friend change. But as he bent to open another drawer, her mind came quickly back into focus and Selina jerked her eyes away. The last thing she needed in this world was to be caught spying on him, as he stood half-naked, like some kind of pervert.

It shouldn’t have bothered her. Shouldn’t have affected her in the least. She and Bruce’s relationship had always been a little… Odd for lack of a better word, but after that kiss everything seemed…

Different.
Heavier.

It shouldn’t have, it wasn’t like she hadn’t kissed him before, but the way he had kissed her and the way she had kissed him back had been… More.

Determined to push it and all the confusion it had dragged with it from her mind, Selina let her eyes focus on the stack of books and their gilded titles.

On first glance, they looked big worded and boring and maybe had her night not been filled with strained conversations and uninvited memories she wouldn’t have given them another thought. But as she took a second look, her mind began to race as the hair on her neck began to rise.

These weren’t just books. Not some not so innocent late night reading you would find to peak a boy’s interest. True, she didn’t recognize the titles, but she wasn’t stupid. Judging from their spines the books covered a load of topics. Topics that had absolutely nothing in common. They covered everything from the effects of prolonged abduction to astronomy and its effects on mythology. There was a book on famous POWs and an entire encyclopedia sized tome on… The Moon?

Selina swallowed as a fuzzy memory nibbled at the corners of her mind. Hadn’t Bruce mentioned the moon before… His face, all pale skin and sharp angles, swam to her. Yes. Yes, he had mentioned it that night in the sun room. He had started acting so strange and then he had mumbled something about the moon. She had always assumed it had been because of her effect on him… But maybe it had been something else. Maybe…

He couldn’t possibly think.

No. No, that was crazy. It had to do with something else, because that night, the night she had run and fought and clawed for her life there had been nothing. No moon. No stars. Just cold and snow and everything wrong with the world. No, that night…

That night…

She couldn’t think of that night right now. She didn’t want to think of it at all.

Selina fist and flexed her fingers as she tried to shake the numb from them. She shouldn’t be panicking. This was nothing. This probably had nothing to do with her. Bruce studied a lot of different things for a lot of different reasons. Hell, once he had spent an entire week hanging by the
pool just so he could measure the effects of different foreign pollutants on native water plants.

There were probably a million reasons Bruce might have been looking that kind of stuff up. He was always doing weird things like that.

Taking a much-needed breath, Selina felt her heart begin to calm at her own explanations.

She was okay. She was fine. Everything was fine.

That was behind her now. Well, behind her. She would’ve laughed at her overreaction, if it hadn’t rushed through her so quickly and hadn’t been happening so often lately.

Letting out another shaky breath, she turned toward the mantle that framed the very slowly dying fire. There was a small framed picture of him and his parents, unlike the pictures she had seen filling up those photo albums, this one was a little more formal, but she would still be hard pressed not to see the warmth there.

Next to it were a couple of discarded coins but she couldn’t see the faces and didn’t know the currency. Down the line, there were little trinkets engraved with languages she couldn’t read, but coming to the end of his mantle, among all these dustless artifacts, was a tiny statue that she recognized immediately.

It was a small figure, mass produced and cheaply made, but the very sight of the small souvenir made the edges of her lips curl.

She remembered quite clearly the day she had liberated the small brown figurine with its crappy painted black wings from a particularly nasty street vendor. Every Summer he had staked his tent just beneath the Westbury Bridge, selling his crappy knockoffs and unlicensed merch. It was a pretty genius spot; hundreds of tourists came out to watch the millions of noisy rat-birds that roosted there take flight every sundown.

It had been a pretty nice hunting ground for herself too. Busy, dark, and the sudden spectacle of the colony almost blacking out the sky, had made work easy for a pickpocket like herself. When she had originally spotted the vendor, she hadn’t had plans to lift something from him, but when she had noticed his habit of leering at young girls and a certain redhead who had accompanied her a few times she figured he was fair game.

She had given the plastic thumb-sized knick-knack to Bruce on his last birthday. Well, it had been more of a joke on her part. She couldn’t help herself, after he had made the mistake of admitting to her his childhood fear of them. Well, admitting seemed like he had been willing to tell her, when she had actually won the story off him on a good hand of cards.

She couldn’t believe he had actually kept it and somewhere where people could actually see it. Weren’t mantles built for preening? When she burgled, it was usually where she found all the best swag, vases and statues and anything else that dumbasses thought looked expensive.

Lazy footsteps had her spinning around in time to see Bruce pulling a clean t-shirt down. For a disconnected moment, she wondered why he had needed to change his top in the first place, but as her gaze reluctantly traveled to the still exposed small strip of skin and the lines of muscle that bookended his narrow hips the thought fled.

And not for the first time tonight, she felt like being alone with Bruce probably wasn’t one of her better ideas.

Breathing, she crossed her arms and widened her feet as he pulled his closet door shut and leaned
back against it. His hair had been mussed and his cheeks red as he looked back at her over the expanse of his room. And as she stared back at him, dressed in a simple t-shirt and bare feet poking out of his pajama bottoms, Selina was reminded that even going to bed Bruce Wayne failed to look close to common.

For one beat she let the silence and the tension grow. It was not every day you were caught spying on one of your closest friends, only to find out that that closest friend had been spying on you too. But as the seconds past, she felt her patience unravel.

“You don’t look surprised to see me,” she said, her voice more accusatory than she meant it to be.

“I’m not,” he answered dryly, before casually pushing himself off the door. She watched as he approached, but he gave no signs of elaborating on his statement as he flung himself into his favorite chair.

His eyes focused on the fire beside her as the flames deepened the shadows in his black hair and not for the first time Selina thought that he looked like he had just stepped out of a ghost story, like he was as out of place among wailing spirits and rattling chains as the hour hand on a wall clock. At any other time, she would have found humor in the melodrama, but looking at his long frame, she was doing well enough to curb the need to pull her sleeves over her fingertips.

He didn’t look up at her as he asked, “The walls in that closet are over two inches thick.”

“Okay,” she replied.

“So, how much did you hear?”

Selina sighed, so they were going to just jump right in. Well, she could do that.

“Enough,” she answered, honestly.

“And?” Without thought, she quickly took the offensive, “And what did you mean by ‘not yet’?”

He looked up at her and she could see the dark pink splotches on his cheeks, “Not yet?” he echoed, “So, you were out in the hall as well?”

“Yes.” “And, that’s all you took away from everything that I said?”

“No,” she admitted, “but I figure it’s more important than whatever in the hell the Oldman was rambling about.”

“Alfred never rambles,” he replied, staring back at the fire, “he always says precisely what he means.”

“Well,” she said, leaning back into the wall behind her, “it doesn’t make him right.”

“But, it doesn’t make him wrong either.”

“Oh, yeah?” she drawled lifting an eyebrow. “So, I look like a three-course meal to you then?”

Dark eyes shot in her direction, as he gave her one of his stares which meant that he was not going to dignify her accusation with a response. His lips parted as if he wanted to say something, but he just shook his head and ran a hand through his already unruly hair letting out an audible breath.

Looking down at him, she knew that the playful boy who had chased her around his study mere hours ago was gone.
She could have tried to drag him back. She could have smiled, tried to disarm him by playing coy, but she had the feeling that Bruce was not in the mood to be charmed out of his sulk and she was in no mood to hold his hand.

Resting her foot against the wall behind her, she uncrossed her arm as she exhaled. “So, is this shin-dig by invitation only?” she asked, her tone as flippant as the occasion called for.

“What?” he asked, his dark brows knitting.

“The pity-party you’re throwing yourself,” she said, gesturing at him with both hands, “Is it an open thing or just a party for one?”

He leaned back in his chair a certain elegance in his slouch. “I do not throw myself pity parties,” he said, narrowing his eyes.

“Pity-party,” she said, waving a hand in her nonchalance, “temper-tantrum, what’s the difference?”

“I’m not throwing a temper-tantrum either. I’m not a child, Selina,” he replied, his voice both angry and matter-of-fact.

“If you’re not a child then stop acting like one.”

Glaring back at her, he just shook his head leaning onto his knees as he clasped his hand. Watching as his knuckles turned white, she could no longer hold her tongue.

“Seriously, B,” she snapped, reaching the end of her tether, “What’s your problem?”

“Other than you sneaking into my room and spying on my private conversations?” he asked, leaning back into his chair.

“Yeah,” she shrugged, “other than that.”

He closed his eyes for a brief moment as if her admittance and lack of remorse were draining. For the first time in this long night he looked young and tired and weighed down by things no teenage boy should be weighed down by.

“Alfred,” he started, opening his eyes to stare at her. “What he said… He’s not wrong.”

“He isn’t?” She looked back at him speculatively.

Reading the question in her eyes, Bruce gave an exasperated sigh. “Not about that,” he clarified, and she knew he was referring to Alfred’s comparing her to a fully served meal.

“Then about what, because the old man said a lot of shit Bruce and none of it was flattering.”

“He was right when he said you don’t trust me,” he admitted.

“I trust you,” she lied, regulating her tone.

“No, you don’t,” he replied, his own tone resolute.

She leaned further into the wall letting the wainscoting dig into her lower-back as she crossed her arms and stared at the books beside his chair, “I trust you as much as I do anyone else.”

“Of course,” he said, gripping the arms of his chair, “What a compliment to my character.”

Selina stared back at him, with his head bowed, she could see the rough lines his fingers had cut through his hair and the subtle twitching in his jaw.
How had the night gotten so far away from them? How had they gotten here?

“I don’t know what you want from me, Bruce” she admitted, letting her arms fall to her sides.

“I want you to trust me,” he answered, looking up at her.

She scoffed, “Well, that’s not something that comes easy to either of us, now is it.”

His head snapped up, “What do you mean by that?” he asked, not disguising his confusion.

Selina scoffed. “Really?” she asked, unable to see how a boy who saw everything could lack such self-awareness. “You think I don’t see you with your little notebooks.” She could see the dawning realization on his face and she couldn’t help her smug reply. “That I don’t see you writing down all your little notes. Your little theories,” she said, patronizingly.

“You wanna play detective Bruce? You wanna talk about honesty and trust? How about you take a good long hard look in the mirror before you start pointing fingers?”

Bruce stared at her, those dark, long-lashed eyes studying her. She recognized that look, the same one he got when his mind was snapping things into place. Exhaling, he planted his hands on the cushioned arms of his chair, his long fingers pushing him to his feet.

For a moment, she thought that he was going to approach her, but he only gave her a quick glance before he turned away.

At first, she had the baffling thought that his intention was for the windows, but he quickly turned toward his bed efficiently lifting a knee onto it as he moved the tangled covers around.

Curiosity and confusion nearly had her calling to him, but before she could, he emerged from the pile of bed clothes, something small and dark clutched in his hand. Taking a final deep breath, he turned back in her direction, moving so swiftly across the room that had she been given the space she would have taken a step back.

He kept his prize clutched between his hands, his long pale fingers a sharp contrast to its dark cover. Meeting his eyes, she lifted her brow not trying to conceal her aggravation or her puzzlement. He stared back at her, his hooded eyes studying her as he took a deep breath and she could almost feel his moment of indecision passing over him.

With no preamble, Bruce dropped a hand away as he moved to offer the notebook to her, the same notebook that she had seen him scribbling away in every time something had the audacity to pop into his head. A court reporter took less notes than this kid, so why was he giving it to her? For a breath, she simply stared at his offering, curiosity and suspicion warring and leaving her motionless.

“How about you take a good long hard look in the mirror before you start pointing fingers?”

Sighing, she stared down at the book before she reluctantly took it, its smooth spine sliding in her hand. “Why’re you giving this to me?”

“You’ll understand. Look inside.”

“Here,” he ordered, his voice neither soft nor rough, “take it.”

Sighing, she stared down at the book before she reluctantly took it, its smooth spine sliding in her hand. “Why’re you giving this to me?”

“You’ll understand. Look inside.”

“I don’t want to look inside,” she countered. “I just want the truth.”

She could see the traces of guilt in the lines around his pretty eyes as he held her stare. “I’ve been keeping notes,” he admitted.
“I can see that,” she said, gesturing with the book. “On what?”

In answer, his eyes drifted down to the book by her side. “See for yourself.”

Groaning, she quickly thumbed through the pages. Like shuffling a well-worn deck, her eyes ate up blurred images on wide-ruled paper. Even from her quick perusal, she could see the change in Bruce’s handwriting over the years, and his attempts at doodling in the margins and his bolder attempts at sketches in free space: the city skyline, the rough draft of moon phases, the round shape of a single pearl.

She took a deep inhale. She had known the book on sight, but now that she had it in her hands it just felt… Wrong. An invasion of privacy that even she wasn’t comfortable with and she didn’t know why.

But, this was not what she had meant when she had demanded equality. This was not trust. This was… Something else. This was misguided and silly and over-the-top, but it wasn’t trust. And it certainly wasn’t what she had meant and it sure as hell wasn’t what she wanted.

Snapping it shut, she held it out, “There I looked,” she said shoving it at him. “Now, take it back.”

Bruce took a step back from her, shaking his head. “No.”

“I’m serious,” she said, holding it out as she stepped toward him. “I don’t want it.”

“You wanted me to trust you, Selina,” he said. “There’s your proof. That’s everything I’ve written down since my parents… It’s everything. Even the notes I took down about the night you were attacked.”

“The night I was…” Frustration robbed her of words as it roared through her veins. “Why would you even- You know what? Never mind.” Taking a much-needed breath, she opened her eyes to look at him.

“You call this trust,” she said, wielding his notebook, “this isn’t trust,” she finished, tossing it onto his bed. “Look Bruce, I don’t know what you thought would happen when you gave me that, but just because you’re willing to share your secrets, doesn’t give you the right to mine. It just makes you stupid.”

“I didn’t assume it would entitle me to anything,” he replied, head turning from where the book landed, “If you’re not willing to tell me what happened to you, that’s fine, but we should stop pretending it was an accident. When we both know that it wasn’t.”

That brick of dread that she had been carrying in her belly decided to flip over at his words.

“You don’t know that,” she said, ashamed of the crack in her voice. “You don’t know anything.”

“I know you came here hypothermic, half-starved, covered with bed sores, a knife wound in your shoulder and bruises the size of fingerprints around your throat,” he stated, his voice stern and commanding. “I know no car accident could do that.”

She crossed her arms as he took a step forward, the rhythm of her breath suddenly matching the tempo of his own. He was so close, she could smell him and the way it cut through her temper made her hate him just a little.

“No car accident did,” she admitted. “But I don’t see where that’s your or Alfred’s or honestly, anyone’s business.”
“Fair enough,” he replied, “but if that person who did this is still out there then- “

“I never said it was a person and even if it was…” she felt her words trailing off, as if they got stuck somewhere in her throat.

“Then what?”

She narrowed her eyes as she glanced back at him. It would be so easy to tell the truth, to tell him everything that had happened to her. But what then? They would never find that kid and even if they did, then what? Boys like that never paid for their crimes. But Bruce would know, he would know what she had done to that monster and he would never understand.

She exhaled, “It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course, it matters,” he said, his voice taking on that self-righteous tone that made her teeth ache.

“Why?” she spat, “Why?! Why is it so important to you to know what happened to me? Is it your self-righteousness or just some morbid sense of curiosity?”

“It’s neither of those things, I just want to get to the truth,” he said as if it should be obvious, “And I need to know, because I care about you.”

Looking at the far wall and then her feet, she knew her voice sounded defeated before she even opened her mouth, “I-I don’t know how to tell you this, but that’s not a very good idea.”

“So, I’ve been told,” he answered. “Between you and Alfred, I’m reminded at least once a day that I fail to make the best decisions.”

“Well, I guess, I’m solid proof of that, huh,” she said, failing to keep the self-deprecating note from her tone.

She could feel his heavy gaze as it landed on her.

“How so?” he asked.

She shrugged. “I’m a real shit choice when it comes to choosing a friend,” she gave him a cynical smile.

“You can’t possibly think that,” he replied.

“Hey, you were the one that said Alfred was right,” she said, her voice droll.

“Not about that, but…” his words trailed off and the pleasant color to his cheeks flared again.

“But what?”

As silence answered her question, the tension eased between them, but where it usually felt like a slowly deflating balloon, tonight it felt like the lull between waves.

Taking a deep breath, he took a step toward her and every nerve in her perked up.

“Is that all I am to you?” he asked, a quiet but heavy note entering his voice. “Your friend?”

At the seriousness in his tone and the look in his eyes, something inside her screamed that he was too close and that this was too soon and that he might say things that he could never take back.
“Yeah,” she said, cautiously. “What else would I be?”

His dark eyes raked her face, gauging her responses, and Selina wished she had her leather jacket.

“But, you kissed me,” he stated, as if that alone explained everything.

The fresh memory of his taste had heat creeping up the back of her neck and she could feel the solid pounding of her own heart.

“So,” she replied, “And sorry kid, but technically, you kissed me,” she answered, gesturing to both of them in the small space he allowed her.

“Only, because you tried to kiss me first,” he accused, “Why?”

Selina shrugged, her eyes moving to the top of her socked-feet nonchalantly, "Does a girl need a reason to kiss a cute boy?"

“No, of course not,” he answered factually, “But you do.”

Selina stared back at him, silence the only answer she was willing to offer him.

Something passed over his features, as if a curtain had just lifted, and she glimpsed something behind it she had rarely seen before. Bruce was always so confident, a boy born of money and privilege, so to see it slipping from him was unnerving.

“Did you-“ he began, taking a large gulp of air, “Did you not like it?”

At his words, some combination of relief and embarrassment left her feeling just the tiniest bit lightheaded.

“No, Bruce,” she said, crossing, and uncrossing her feet as she stared and tried to hide the inappropriate laugh that had bubbled up inside her, “It was- It was fine.”

She knew her sangfroid had probably come off a little too strong and she peeked up to catch the side of Bruce’s mouth ticking up. Immediately, she recognized the self-satisfaction in the gesture and had the urge to throw one of his prized trinkets at his smirking face. But she refrained, what she needed to say was going to wipe it off anyway.

“It was just everything after that,” she admitted.

His self-satisfaction quickly dissolved and she instantly regretted the loss of it.

“I don’t understand. What do you mean everything?”

She pursed her lips looking back at him as knowledge and finality drained the last true dregs of the anger that had been smoldering in her since she had stepped foot in the hallway. She hated to do this, but Bruce needed to hear it. It was beyond time that he did.

“It’s this,” she said gesturing to the room around them, “I think sometimes you forget who you are.”

“I don’t understand,” he repeated.

“Of course, you don’t,” she mumbled, but judging by the sudden stiffening in his shoulders she could tell he had heard her. Well, shit, if he really wanted to know than who was she to get in the way.
“You’re right,” she admitted. “That kiss, that kiss wasn’t something friends just do, but we’re not stupid, we both know we could never be more than that. Not really.”

“No, I don’t know that,” he answered, crossing his own arms. “Why not?” he asked, in that princely tone that only proved her point for her.

Her temper getting the best of her, she stepped toward him, “Because, you’re Bruce freaking Wayne!”

“It’s just a name, Selina. It’s just money,” he said, unwilling to match her pitch. “It doesn’t mean anything.”

“It means-” she spat back, “It means that one day, when you’re done playing recluse and detective and whatever else it is you try to do, when you’re done pretending, and you go back to being Bruce Wayne, you’ll forget that you even knew a street rat much less that you actual called one your friend.”

For a moment, the only sound in the room was her breath as her words sunk into him. From the look on his face and the step he took from her, she could see that he had probably rather she had slugged him.

When he spoke his voice was deep and hurt, “You really think I would do that? You really think that little of me?”

“No,” she admitted, stripping some of the bitterness from her tone as she let her naked hands fall to her sides and stared at the ground by his feet. “But I know the way the world works.”

“You may know how the world works,” he replied, taking another step away from her, “But if you think I could ever forget you, you’re wrong. But maybe there is some truth in what you’re saying, because I’m starting to think that we’re not friends and maybe we never were.”

Her head snapped up, how dare he not think they were friends, but as his hooded eyes met her own they brought her up short.

“Because you have always felt like more.”

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for not updating sooner. I promise I'm working on it :)}
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bruce

"Because you have always felt like more."

Despite the fire, a chill climbed up Bruce's spine as the weight of his statement hung between them like a teetering avalanche ready to destroy everything in its path. He knew he shouldn't have said it. His words had been unfair to the bond that stretched between them, to their friendship that was undeniable.

True, she wasn't quite considered family like Alfred and their relationship was far from as formal as the ones he had formed with Lucius and Detective Gordon. Somehow, Selina had always resided somewhere in-between them, in a murky area he never studied too closely. But if he was honest with himself, he had never felt with any of them, what he had felt from the start with the girl standing by his fireplace, silence and mayhem pulled around her in equal parts.

It was such a strange feeling, seeing her so close, only five steps from him, but knowing she may as well have been a mile away.

She had not moved at his confession, not a single muscle, not even a twitch. But he didn't need her to, he could almost feel her surprise. He couldn't fathom why she was so stunned. His words had been far from monumental. They had been simple and they had been honest. But maybe things like honesty and simplicity were just a little too unfamiliar to them.

They were friends yes, even she could admit that, but at least for him, they had always felt like something more. And after she had kissed him, he had felt like maybe, just maybe, she did as well.

Despite the narrowing of her pale eyes, he took a step toward her, gaining back some of the ground he had ceded. If he was in for a penny, he may as well be in for a pound, as Alfred was want to say.

"And I think you feel the same way."

She did nothing to conceal her surprise at his statement, lifting a single brow skeptically.

"You do."

"Yes, I do," he answered plainly, squaring his shoulders as he slid his hands into the pockets of his pajama pants.

Her head cocked to the side and he knew whatever she was about to say, that he most likely did not want to hear it.

"For being a genius," she said, "you don't really know much, do you?"

Confusion brought him up short and his hands slid free. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, you and me," she said, nonchalant as her gaze drifted to the opposite wall, "We don't fit."

"In what way don't we fit?"
"In a million ways," she said, turning pale eyes back to him, "Alfred was right, Bruce," she pressed before he could interrupt, "You need to be with some like-like you."

"Someone like me?" he asked, confusion and anger beginning to creep along his overwrought nerves. "Selina, you are like me."

"How? How in the hell are we anything alike?" She scoffed. His words seeming to ignite a fire in her as she quickly cut the distance between them.

He wanted to take a step back, retreat from the vehemence in her words, at the frustration in her inflection, but he stood his ground, even if his thoughts were whirling too fast to catch and hold onto.

How in the hell are we anything alike?

The question rolled over in his mind without a concrete answer to give. How could he convince her to see something that he didn't fully understand himself? How could he simplify something so complicated, describe something so intangible?

"I can't explain it," he admitted, cold sweat continuing to break out along his spine.

"Of course, you can't explain it," she accused. "Because it's crazy."

He could only stare back at her in answer. How could she think it was crazy?

"Alfred's right Bruce, you've locked yourself up in here and maybe- maybe you think you feel something for me because you literally never see anybody else. No girls. No boys. Nobody."

The small amount of truth in her statements sent his attention to the floor. Why did she and Alfred believe that their friendship had been born by proximity and not choice or that he needed copious amounts of human interaction to know his own mind? Why did they think that what he felt could not possibly be real?

Taking a deep breath, he took a step toward her. She had held his hand. She had held him. She had let him kiss her and she had kissed him back. If those things had meant nothing, if that wasn't real, he wanted to know. Her affections, flirtations, they had started out so small, so easily misinterpreted by his inexperienced mind, but if what they had wasn't more than friendship he needed to know. He needed to recalibrate, but one of them was going to need to take that first step, and he knew it wasn't going to be her. It probably never would be.

Glancing up at her, he caught sight of her fingertips disappearing into her wide cuffs, and he could see that his prolonged quiet, his silent rebuttal, had deflated some of the anger that had built up in her. Sighing, he let his gaze move to the fireplace. He had never been particularly gifted with words, but he knew what he needed to do even if it ended badly.

"I've never needed people, Selina," he began, already feeling the tell-tale heat crawling up his neck. "At least not how you think; not in the way most people do."

"I've always had trouble developing," he thought back to his earliest moments, of the awkwardness of his fellow toddlers on playdates, the short lived artificial bonds that he had not formed with his short list of nannies. "Sincere relationships."

He forced himself to meet her eyes, though he wanted to look away, to not see the potential emotions that she might let through. But he continued to hold her gaze as she continued to hold his. And it wasn't censure or pity he read in them, it was curiosity and for some unexplainable reason it gave him the courage to continue.
"For the longest time, it was just my parents and Alfred and I thought that that was enough. So, when they-" he felt the words catch in his throat and forced himself to clear it. "After they died, it felt like someone had thrown me into a bottomless pit."

He took a deep breath, slowly stepping away.

"Alfred tried everything. He enrolled me in school, but the curriculum, my classmates, it was worse than before. I was angry all of the time and I couldn't acclimate but I needed to finish my education, so Alfred got me tutors but it didn't really help with..."

He could still remember the rage that had driven him to do such stupid and reckless things. The burns, the cuts, the fights, the rooftop balancing acts... It was a miracle he had lived through it. No, not a miracle. It had been Alfred.

He cleared his throat as he felt the familiar tightness beginning.

"Then one day, Detective Gordon showed up and he had you with him and when I met you for the first time in so long I had felt..."

"Felt what?" she asked, her tone hesitant.

"Something," he said matter-of-factly, "Like my life would never be the same. I had finally found some hope. I'd thought that my parents were finally going to get justice and after I got to know you, selfishly I had begun to think that I had finally found someone that I didn't have to try with."

He nearly glanced away at his own words, but Selina only crossed her arms in answer.

"But then, it had turned out that you had been lying the entire time. And I was so angry at you, and at Alfred, and at Gordon and at everyone and everything..."

He ran a hand through his hair as he tried to wrangle in his thoughts. Those would never be his happiest memories.

"Of course, you were," she said, her arms relaxing by her sides. "Why wouldn't you be?"

His attention darted back to her and he could see the compassion growing in her pale eyes. Somehow, he had known, even when he hadn't, that she would understand. There was a warmth in that kind of knowledge, in the confirmation of something he hadn't been looking for. But he couldn't let it linger, he could only hope she continued to understand.

"But, it never stopped the way I felt about you, Selina," he sighed, as he looked away. "The way I feel about you, as if we're... Connected," he confessed, hoping she would understand this too. "As if you see me, the real me, and you don't pretend that I'm fine, or treat me like a child, or walk on eggshells around me. You know what I am and you don't flinch, you don't pity me, you don't..." "I don't what?" He looked her right in the eye.

"You don't look at me as if I need fixing," he confessed. "When you look at me, you see me, and I see you too."

He held his breath, scared that he had gone too far. That he had said the wrong thing, that he had given her all the reason she needed to run. But she stood her ground and the sudden flare of color in her cheeks made her look far more innocent than he knew she was, but when she spoke her words were just as cold as he'd dreaded.

"Really?"
"Really," he confirmed, ignoring the cynicism in her question. "I care about you, but that doesn't mean I'm blind to your vices," he paused to let his statement sink in, "You've never been nice or harmless and you sure as hell don't put others first even when you probably should."

"Wow B, you really know how to make a girl swoon," she said, her words flippant but her fists bunching beneath the oversized cuffs of her sweater.

"I wasn't finished," his said, instilling his delivery with the steel he felt he needed. "You're not perfect Selina, but you're far from heartless. I know you wish everyone thought you were, that you wish I thought you were, but I don't. I know you."

He watched her head tilt toward the fire at his words, at his truths.

"You con and you steal, but I have never known you to prey on the weak. I've seen you do things for reasons I may never fully understand, but you have never targeted anyone helpless. I know you've had to survive and fight for everything, and yet you're not nearly as jaded as you want to be."

Her eyes moved from the fire and the anger he saw in them nearly had him stepping away from her. "Are you done?" she asked caustically.

"No," he said, squaring his shoulders, "I'm not."

"Well, I am," she said, definitively, unfolding her arms as she started toward his bedroom door. She passed by him, and he almost reached for her, but thought better of it. He wasn't going to try and hold her, but he hoped she would at least-.

"Please, hear me out."

"Why?" she asked, her expression exhausted as she whirled back toward him. "So, I can finish listening to what a selfish asshole I am."

"No, that's not." he cut off his own words as he took a much needed breath, "Please."

"Fine," she said, her hand gesturing for him to continue.

He knew he should have been grateful for the opportunity to explain himself or at the very least intimidated by her potential reactions, but he was surprised to discover that he felt neither, just a need to finish what he had started.

"I know you want to deny it, and by all means do, but if you were really as uncaring as you claim to be, then you would have never told me the truth about what you witnessed that night. You would have strung me along, rung everything you wanted from me, something as monetarily invaluable as a conscience wouldn't have gotten in your way."

Something like guilt flickered across her pinched features at the reminder. They never spoke of her lie or why she had chosen to tell him the truth, but as she looked away all anger and beauty he knew he needed to press before he lost his advantage.

"I don't know if you want me, not," he took a deep breath, "not in the way that I want you, but I don't think you're nearly as indifferent to me as you want to be."

"And I think you hate yourself for it."

Her head swooped up as she stared at him and her reaction was all he needed. He could see it now, the legitimacy in his statement, that they both could. But that wasn't all, and he rushed forward afraid
to lose any of the momentum he had found.

"You see it as a weakness, you do, and you hate it."

She stared back at him, their truths sitting between them, laid bare, but somehow still so muddled. He didn't know how to make himself any clearer. How could he make her see?

"Selina, I've felt entangled with you for so long that I wouldn't know how to start unraveling myself and I don't want too."

Once again, she was motionless, her eyes lowering to the floor, but not like an animal cowed, but like an angry tiger ready to pounce.

"You and Alfred seem to think that because I haven't been around other people that I couldn't possibly know myself, but it isn't true. I know what I want and just because I haven't felt this way about someone before doesn't make the way I feel about you any less real."

Her eyes stayed fix to the floor before him, but he could see the tension leaking from her, in the slight dip of her shoulder and the flexing in her small fingers. But she said nothing. Her only signs of life, the deep rise and fall of her chest.

They were both tired. He could see it in the shadows beneath her eyes, in the quivering in her mask. She was like him. She felt too deeply, but she had always been better at covering it up. She was so skilled in her deception that sometimes he couldn't tell if she cared about anything at all, but then he would see them, the cracks, and the crevasses in her perfect disguise.

He could see them now, but as her silence stretched he could feel the skin along his cheekbones beginning to burn. He could only inhale and exhale to combat the heat, but if she continued he was sure he was likely to sweat through his shirt again.

He had never felt the need or the want to fill quiet so quickly before.

"But if you don't, if you don't feel the same way then I won't- "

"Then you won't what?" she asked, her voice both hoarse and accusatory.

He took a deep breath. Once again, he hated saying what he had to say, but it needed to be said. "Then I won't bring it up again."

She only shook her head taking a step back, but the distance between them felt like a punch to his gut.

He knew she wanted to walk away, to climb those stairs, and disappear into the night. She stood only ten paces from the door, from the escape she so desperately wanted, and she had always been quicker, but if she chose to go he had no plans to stop her. He would not even entertain the idea.

He could see it, see that she wanted to deny everything he had accused her of and maybe had it not been near dawn, he would have found it amusing, but nothing was amusing when the sun was so close to rising.

She crossed her arms, usually such a defensive posture, but the early hour must have been getting to her too because he could see the firm grip she had on her elbows and the look of panic in her eyes born from things he may never understand. It was beginning to take a toll on her, resisting her instincts to run, but she must have read something in his face, because her eyes softened as she took a deep breath.
"Look Bruce, it doesn't matter what I feel because this," she said nodding her head to indicate the two of them, "You and me. It won't work."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Why would it?" she said dryly. Her bottom lip sinking beneath her teeth as her eyes moved to the ceiling as if it would somehow give her the answer. When she turned back to him, there was a defeated look he had never seen behind her mask. "It won't work because," she gave a morose chuckle. "I can't believe I'm saying this again, but Alfred was right Bruce, I'm not the kind of friend you need much less anything else. You need someone who gets your world and I just don't. I'm not sure I ever will."

That wasn't true, not even in the slightest, but he wouldn't argue with her. There was no purpose in giving her reasons, when she had no intent to listen to them. Like any good debater, Selina was only focused on her own side, which told him more than enough.

He knew from personal experience that people who recycled arguments had no interest in any point of view but their own. There was no discussion, as they never had any intention of ceding their point. Like himself, she may have been using different words and coming at it at from different angles but she was attacking the same problem.

Disappointment settled like a stone in his gut as he stared back at her. She should have looked soft in the firelight, her tunic sweater swamping her in cream cashmere and her tights and socks making her look like she should have been bundled up at a ski lodge.

And maybe to someone that did not know her, someone who did not care about her, they would not see what he could see that even in the trappings of a comfortable life, she still looked wild and beautiful and the kind of danger that Alfred was always trying so desperately to keep him from. A danger that ate at the corners of his mind and preyed on his curiosity, a danger that he was drawn to but could clearly never have.

"I suppose you and Alfred have it all figured out then," he couldn't keep the caustic tone from his speech.

She only shrugged, fueling the temper he fought to keep in check.

"And so what we want doesn't matter," he asked.

"Has it ever?"

"I suppose not," he said.

Bruce could do little but agree with her now. He had read this entire situation wrong. Humiliation stung his eyes, and he forced them close and lowered himself into the closest chair. There was something freeing in letting the potent feel of disillusionment take a grip of him. He had felt this before, many times before, when Detective Gordon had admitted that they had caught the wrong man, when Selina had confessed to seeing the man without his disguise... The list could go on and on, but he had no time and no desire to revisit them all.

Despite the heat flaring all over him, he knew it would be unfair to hold this against her. This argument, this realization, it had been about distrust and class divisions and things that they had never really confronted before. It was about so much more than her rejecting his suggestion for more.

Regardless of what people thought of him, he had been told no before. Not often, but he had. This argument, these feelings, they weren't about that. He had always known rejection was on the table
and he had admitted what he had felt anyway. What he still felt despite her reaction, her complete 
disregard of his feelings and his friendship.

What a child he had been, how naïve, how outright stupid, to think that she had felt something, a 
connection, that had never existed. How had he miscalculated so severely? How had he thought... 
How had he thought she had seen more, that she had looked past his name, past his money, past 
his... problems. But maybe they were both right, maybe his life was too much to ask her to disregard, 
maybe his life was too much to ask anyone to disregard.

Abandoning the etiquette lessons he had been raised with, he hunched forward to rest his elbows on 
his knees as he let his gaze roam over her fire-lit profile. How had he read her so wrong?

"You know I didn't think it mattered to you," he said, his words coming out flat.

"What didn't matter?" she asked, and could hear the exhaustion and curiosity mirrored in her own 
tone.

"All of it? Any of it?" he answered.

As if his words had sent an electric charge through her, she quickly straightened, all signs of the 
night disappearing. "Of course, it matters," she snapped back, her indignation apparent in her voice 
and the sound of her restless steps. "It matters a lot!"

"To you, it matters to you," he retorted. "It never mattered to me."

"Well, good for you, Bruce Wayne," she replied. "It must be real nice to only see what you want."

"I'm not blind, Selina," he argued, resisting the urge to return to his feet.

"Maybe not, but Bruce the day you were born it was prolly front page news. I was left on a stoop 
with a note and a necklace, so you sure as hell, have no idea what it's like to be on the other side of 
the poverty line, much less what it's like to be stuck there, to live in it day after day."

He wanted to argue with her, to prove her wrong, but he couldn't. She was right. He could read and 
listen and educate himself to what it was like to live on the streets, to live a life of survival and not 
comfort, but he could never really know what it was like. But those thoughts were for another day, 
not tonight.

Tonight, had been about them, about all the obstacles he had never known had lain between them. 
Obstacles that he had never even considered. When they had started, he had thought they were 
friends, thought that they could be more than friends, but he was beginning to question if they were 
even that.

He suddenly felt like a raw nerve and if the pain in her face were any indication so did she.

"You win, Selina, you have made yourself more than perfectly clear," he conceded. "No reason to 
elaborate any further."

"So, that's it," she asked and he could hear a note of something like panic in her words, but couldn't 
bring himself to open his eyes.

"That's it," he answered, giving in to the exhaustion that had plagued him all night as he leaned back 
in his chair.

He could hear her footfalls as she approached his closet, so soft and light and nothing like the girl
that they belonged to and then their sudden pause as she reached the hidden door. Bruce felt shame rush over him as for the first time in his life he wanted her to go. Tomorrow they would start again. Tomorrow they would reset. But for tonight, or what little was left of it, he wanted to be alone.

Breathing deep, he let his eyes drift shut as he waited for the door to open, for her to make the escape she had been so desperate for, but the sound that broke the heavy silence was not her absconding, but her voice, raw and angry and like nothing he had ever hear from her.

"So, were not even friends anymore," she stated.

Involuntarily his head came up as his eyes popped open at her absurd accusation. She was staring at him in disbelief and he could see something in her eyes, in her posture, a defensiveness that he had not seen since those first few days he had known her.

"Of course, we're still friends," he reassured, despite wanting to bark at her for having so little faith in him. "An unrequited crush is nothing to jeopardize our friendship over."

She nodded her head, and he couldn't bear to watch her walk away, but just as she went to push the hidden spring, she paused again, "It's not."

Her statement confused him, but he had little patience for guessing games and riddles. No, a part of him simply wanted to ignore her, to be left alone to lick his wounded heart, but he had never been good at ignoring Selina Kyle and tonight was no different.

"It's not what?" he asked.

For a moment, she only stared at the hidden panel beneath her hand as she took a deep breath letting it out audibly, and then taking a step away from it. "It's not completely unrequited."

Anger sliced through him, unexpected and shameful. There were few things he would not tolerate, but he would not stand for this kind of charity. Not from her. "I don't want your pity Selina."

"Good," she said matter-of-factly, taking a step closer to him, "'Cause I wasn't giving you any."

Her answer, her reaction, puzzled him and for one moment Bruce simply watched as the dying firelight danced across her skin and the color that had drained returned to her cheeks. He knew there was something in her words that he wasn't gripping, an inherent social cue that he still had no frame for.

What was she trying to say?

Could she mean -

"So, you're acknowledging that you might actually care about me," he asked, his own words a mixture of anger and curiosity.

"I never said I didn't care about you, Bruce," she admitted, her voice unexpectedly softer.

"You didn't give me any evidence you felt otherwise," he accused, matching her tone.

"You decided to tell me you've been spying on me for weeks, and that you like me all at the same time, that's a lot to take in in one night."

Guilt and wounded pride heated his face but he couldn't really feel remorse for what he had done. "I never spied on you, but if I remember correctly, you were the one found hiding inside my closet."
"I wasn't spying," she said, her cavalier words not matching the pink blossoming in her cheeks.

"Then what would you call watching me and listening to my conversations through the door?"

"Collecting information," she countered, and as he watched one socked foot take another step closer to his chair, he noted the nonchalant almost arrogance in her remorselessness.

"Collecting information," he echoed. "What information could you have possibly gained from that?"

"More than I'm going to ever tell you," she said, an almost teasing note as she saddled herself beside his chair.

He looked up at her, but didn't attempt to move over, to give her room. His chair, though large, wasn't nearly big enough to seat them both side by side, and he doubted she wanted to sit with him anyway.

"So, what do you know?" she asked, suddenly. "About what happened."

"Not much," he admitted, and it was the truth. Despite everything he had dug up, every book and article and half-formed theory he had followed. His knowledge of what had happened to her was still next to nothing.

"Truly?" she asked, her eyebrows arching.

"Truly."

She sighed, a gesture he was sure her exhaustion had let slip through. "Then, let's keep it that way."

"But Selina, if-"

"If nothing Bruce," she said, looking down at him, "This is my life not yours."

When she looked at him like that, unwavering determination and iron will, despite their history, he trusted her to know what she was doing. She was right, this was her life, and maybe, Alfred was wrong, maybe this wasn't about her trust in him, maybe this was about something else.

"I think, I understand," he said, suppressing a sigh of resignation.

"Do you?" she asked. Her gaze so direct, so intense, that had he not known her, he may have felt fear.

"Not entirely, but I'll try."

She continued to stare down at him, those calculating green eyes trying to decipher something in him, trying to find the answers to questions she had never asked. She looked contemplative, her quick mind running scenarios and outcomes, checks and balances. He saw the moment it happened, the tick in her cheek, the slight curl to her lip as she finally unlocked whatever she had been looking for.

"Good," she said, and Bruce wasn't sure what he'd said or what he'd done, but it must've been the right thing because before he could blink, she had perched herself on the arm of his chair. She was so close that he could almost smell her and when she spoke there was a warmth in her voice that made him gulp.

"So, you've really thought about this, huh?" she asked, waving a hand to gesture between them.
At her casual reference, Bruce couldn't stop a self-deprecating smile from curving his lip before he answered, "More often that I'm willing to admit."

He watched the edges of her mouth curl up before she sobered again, "Look I don't like labels or whatever in the hell you want to call it and I'm sure as shit not going to be shoved into some box, not by you or anyone else."

Despite her nearness, he felt slightly wrong footed at her accusation. "That was never my intention," he said quickly. "I just needed to know."

"Needed to know what?" she asked, his confusion reflected in her.

"That what I felt, that it wasn't one sided. That I wasn't delusional to think that you might feel the same way."

At his confession, she said nothing, only looked down at him from her perch. Nervous energy thrummed along his veins, as her wide set eyes and full lips once again became a language he couldn't read. He had studied her so often, had narrowed down so many of her masks, so many of her posturing shields, so many of her deceptive motions, that to be once again shut out was unnerving.

"You're not completely wrong," she admitted, "But, you kept notes on me B, that's pretty messed up."

"I didn't keep notes on you. I kept notes on your attack," he said, making sure to distance himself from any misconstrued accusations of voyeurism.

"Really?" she asked, like an exacerbated mother.

"I was trying to help." "I know you were," she turned toward him, her arm moving behind to prop against his headrest, "that's the only reason I didn't lose my shit on you."

He could feel her fingers whispering along the skin of his nape, but he resisted the urge to lean back. "I'm not going to apologize for trying to do what's right."

"Of course, not," she said, her words not matching her actions as stroked him affectionately, and it took everything in him not to turn into her touch, "How could I forget it's harder getting an apology from you than a compliment and those are like pulling teeth."

"That's not true," he said, turning toward her.

Selina scoffed, "Sure, it's not."

He stared back at her, and for the first time he could the slight hurt beneath her mirth, the real belief behind her facetious tone. How could she not know how he felt about her? How could he have been so unintentionally obtuse?

"You know how I feel about you Selina, I don't need to spell it out."

"Let's say you did," she drawled, and as he watched he began to see the playful gleam in her eye develop as she waited for his reply. She was a lioness with her eyes on an easy kill. "I mean you kind of owe me don't you."

For one moment, he could only look back at her. She had been accurate when she had said there were things between them, good and bad, and some in areas he wasn't sure about. There were
certainly things they needed to talk about, but even now he saw nothing insurmountable. Both she and Alfred were right, nothing about them would be easy, but when had he ever liked things easy.

It was a new feeling for him to be so unsure of himself, but he knew what he felt about her and if she was so determined to pull the truth from him, then he was willing to oblige.

"I've never known anyone like you. Someone that has survived what you have, that lives life on your own terms, that is unbearably honest with me even when it doesn't benefit you," he began and he instantly felt her hand still in his hair, her entire body frozen, as if she had suddenly found herself on the edge of a knife.

"You're a self-professed thief and yet you're still one of the few people that I trust, and sometimes when I look at you, for one minute, it feels like I can't breathe and then you say something so clever and intelligent and I worry that..."

Taking a sharp breath, he felt the heat flaring in his face as he barely caught himself. He couldn't set those words loose. Not now, maybe not ever.

"That what?" she asked.

Sighing, he looked away from her. "That I more than just like you."

Quickly, he closed his eyes as he felt her fingers gently tighten in his hair as she tipped his head in her direction. He didn't want to look at her. He couldn't. He couldn't see the condemnation in her answer. Once again, he had somehow laid himself bare and he couldn't –

Whatever thoughts had been racing through his mind abruptly derailed as he felt the warmth of her lips cover his own. For a single heartbeat, he had felt lost and found and everything in between.

Selina

For just a moment the world tilted beneath Selina as she sunk into their kiss. She knew she would probably regret it, but she had needed to stop him. Stop him from saying words, words that she wasn't ready to hear, words that she couldn't hear, beautiful words that he was likely to take back later.

She'd been born in a viper pit and raised among wolves, but even she had a breaking point. Who knew it might be a beautiful boy just as messed up as she was, because she sure as hell hadn't.

But those were thoughts for another time, a time when his lips weren't pressed so gently against her own.

She could still feel his surprise, in the tentative way he parted his lips and the gentle press of his hand as he found her waist. She didn't jump at his touch, didn't pull away as the heat of his grip reached her through her sweater. It was so warm and so soft, she could feel a sense of loss as she pulled away from.

He looked so lost as she pulled away from him that Selina knew she had done the right thing. They needed to be on the same page and then they could... Then they could...

Her thoughts nearly trailed off as she leaned her forehead against his own.

"I'm confused," he admitted, his sweet breath brushing her chin.

"No labels," she whispered against him mouth hoping he understood, "Just us."
"Just us," he agreed and relief flooded through her as she took another sip of him.

Curiosity had always been one of their worst shared habits and now was no different as their lips brushed one another. She wasn't quite sure what a good kiss should be like, but she knew it wasn't like the uncomfortably smashed faces in his old black and white movies or the disgusting kisses she'd seen given to a john.

No, this was nothing like either of those.

When she pushed for more he yielded and when she pulled away he followed, parting his soft lips before wordlessly asking her to return the favor. It was so soft, so new, so different. She could still taste the mint on him, light and airy and nothing like the hunger coursing through her.

Calloused fingertips brushed a curl from her face and something inside her ignited as she felt him cupping the curve of her cheek. His hair, so dark and so soft, slid between her fingers and before she knew what she was doing, she was falling into him: into his warmth and his touch, his kindness... And his... And his... His everything.

She knew they probably needed to stop and that if she gave herself time to think about it, she'd only start regretting it. Regretting the kiss, the night, the whole damn thing. But she wouldn't. Not right now. Life had robbed her of so much already, her mother, her childhood, hell, sometimes she worried it had taken her very soul, so was it so awful if she took something back for herself. Just a minute. Just a moment.

She pushed all those worries, that future headache and heartache, down, passed the butterflies and the tenderness, and the unexpected ache that had unexpectedly sprouted within her. And it wasn't hard to do when her body was too focused on the warm hand that was almost trembling as it moved down her arm, along her waist again, before landing firmly on the broad side of her thigh. When she felt those long fingers tighten their grip, she couldn't help but smile against his mouth.

There was power in this. She could feel that now.

Babs had once told her there was a certain power in her beauty if she only knew how to use it. But as she pulled back from Bruce, as she saw the look in his eyes, she knew that's not what this was. This wasn't some lust crazed idiot. This was Bruce.

He didn't treat her like something to be acquired, no, he looked at her like he could see through all the bullshit. He could see through all of the crap and somehow, someway, he still liked her.

Biting into her bottom lip she could still taste him, and as his dark eyes tracked, his breath hitched against her side. And Selina felt her own breath still as she noticed her new position: her bottom against his thighs, her feet hanging off the other armrest.

Crap, when had she fallen into his lap?

It was something she should have noticed, but just like in the library and the study and the sunroom or every time she was close to him, the world had once again fallen away, becoming blurry and insignificant.

Forgetting herself had never been a problem before him. It was a dangerous thing to do, something she had been trained against her entire life, but she couldn't bring herself to care as she watched his hooded eyes. But, she needed to swim up from this lake of stupidity and bliss that she had fallen into. They both did.

But his lips, so red and swollen were like a hit of something wonderful, and when one of the edges
curled she couldn't help herself but peck the rounded corner.

When he fully smiled against her mouth, the motion only encouraged her more and she felt his hand abandon her thigh to get lost somewhere in her hair.

She couldn't help wanting deeper, of wanting something more than but she knew they needed to stop. If they continued like this, it would be too much, too soon, and they both might end up regretting it. Because if a few kisses had left them this far on the back foot she couldn't imagine what anything more would do to their friendship.

Pulling back from him, she couldn't stop the old man's words from whispering in the back of her mind, as Bruce looked back at her as if she had stolen something from him. He had been right, Bruce did look at her like he was starving, but not like dinner. Bruce was too damn noble for something that thoughtless. No, he was more into giving too much of himself, of trusting too much, of giving second chances to people who sure as hell didn't deserve it.

There was something depressing about that thought, because she knew he wouldn't always be this way... That they wouldn't always be this way. He had to know that. He was a Wayne, he had been born with the world at his fucking feet and she was a nobody from nowhere. Their worlds should've never collided, but somehow they had and here they were.

And here was all they needed for now.

The next time Selina drew away from him, she wasn't sure how long they had been kissing, but as she pulled back further, she noticed the shadows along his angles had deepened and the fire that had been roaring when she had entered had since crumbled to near embers. His cavernous room felt so soft now, a cocoon of firelight and burning pine and the feel of Bruce beneath her.

She brushed a hand through his hair, letting her fingers linger in the soft strands. His eyes had grown so dark, so drowsy, he looked as if she had slipped him something. She had never seen them look so black, or so... resigned.

Something too close to fear shot through her as she saw the rare dejection in them, like his next words were going to be one of his biggest regrets.

He closed his eyes as if it was hard to look at her as he rested the side of his forehead against her shoulder. She could feel his breath on her neck, sneaking beneath the collar of her sweater, and it should've been a warm comfort, but the look in his eyes had left her frozen.

He inhaled deeply, before pulling away as he let his head fall back against the head rest.

"Alfred will be up soon," he said, voice so rough it was almost unrecognizable.

Confusion gripped her for just a heartbeat, before she almost laughed at her own paranoia. Despite the curving twists and turns the night had taken, they were still somehow them. Of course, his disappointment and regret would match her own. Seeing the confusion mirrored in his own face, she thought that maybe, he was right, maybe they really were alike.

Chuckling despite her disappointment she leaned into him.

"You kicking me out," she teased, resisting the urge to run her nose along his hairline. This close, his smell was almost enveloping her and he smelled so good. Too good.

"Never," he replied, turning his head as she felt a tingle run up her spine as his grip momentarily tightened on her hip. The heat that crept along her skin was so foreign she knew only time would
help her identify it.

Staying here, staying with him, this whatever it was, was dangerous, but when had she ever shied away from danger. But she knew it was a bad idea, because it was too later or too early and if Alfred caught her in here she didn't think she or Bruce would have a choice if she was gonna keep staying here or not. She couldn't blame the old man, if she was in his shoes she would keep Bruce away from her too.

Unable to resist, she leaned forward, brushing his cheek with her lips, but when he turned his head for more she bit her lip. If she started to kiss him again, she didn't know when she would stop and then Alfred would definitely catch her in here.

"I should go," she whispered, starting to disentangle herself from his lap.

She felt rough fingertips grip her own as she climbed to her feet. For one moment, she thought that Bruce was trying to pull her back into his lap and she almost relented but as she looked into his eyes she knew different.

"Please, stay," he said, tightening his hold, "just a little longer."

"And watch Alfred have a conniption, no thanks," she joked.

"That's not what I meant," he explained, rising to his feet, his grip growing firmer. "And you know that."

She hated that she had known exactly what he had meant. And she hated that he knew she had known what he had meant. She wasn't sure she had ever realized how well he could read her, or how she felt about it. But she didn't look away as she pulled him forward.

"I wasn't planning on jetting," she said, only half-a-lie.

"Yes, you were," he said matter-of-factly, but his voice had an unfamiliar tone to it as if he didn't hold that half-truth against her.

She could only shrug in return, gripping him tighter as she pulled him toward his closet door.

She wasn't sure why she was dragging him behind her. His words had caused twin embers of doubt and regret to flare inside her. This was a bad idea touching him, kissing him, telling him things that were better left unsaid. Nothing good could come of it, just aches and the loss of a friendship she hadn't known she wanted.

Just the idea of wanting someone put her on edge. Reminded her of things outside these walls, the world that had kept turning despite their best tries at ignoring it.

"I have to go back," she blurted, as that hollow pit inside her began to ease back open.

"I know."

His answer felt like a balm as it brushed against her nerves, that reminder of his willingness to let her run and his understanding of why she had to.

It was that same combination that had had her turning back from the door earlier. That knowing that he would put his wants aside, that he would let her go to keep them intact. She had never had any intention of doing it, but somehow he had found a way to pass a test she had never given.
It was that same knowledge that had her turning back to him now.

"But maybe not today," she said, looking up at him.

She watched the realization dawning over his dark features. The surprise, the relief, and the something more that had him leaning down and pulling her to the tips of her toes as he pressed his lips to her own.

It was only when dawn began to spill pink across the floor and she felt his fingers cupping her face again and that intoxicating combination of his touch and his smell pulling her under, that she knew it was beyond time that she left.

"Alright, I really gotta go," she said, and she couldn't help the awkward pat she gave to the shoulder beneath her palm.

"I know," he repeated.

Gently biting his bottom lip, he looked down at her as he gently sprung the catch and pushed open his closet's hidden door.

Selina couldn't stop the sudden heat that rose to her cheeks at his look. Even after everything, leaving him, just for tonight, should have been easy, but something tugged on her, like one of those threads that usually lay dormant between them had morphed into a bright new color that she hadn't known existed before.

"Later, B," she said, turning into the small dark room, but before she could take more than two steps inside, she found herself whirling around, reaching back through the hidden door to still one more kiss from him.

It was just a peck, so sweet and so chaste, that she couldn't quite believe it had come from her and before it was over she pushed him away and turned on her heel.

She wouldn't look back this time.

Slivers of morning light had already begun leaking across the walls as she stepped into the tunnel and with no one to witness, Selina finally let the smile that had been threatening her loose. What she was feeling felt almost like bursting from within her and it was such a foreign feeling to her, so new and strange, that she was nearly clear of the tunnels, before she realized she hadn't noticed the cold or the smell or even the rough stones beneath her feet.

She almost laughed at the realization.

What in the hell was Bruce Wayne doing to her?

Chapter End Notes

If you've read this far, sorry for the late update. April got really crazy. Well, I really hope y'all enjoyed this new chapter, it was a tough one to write, but I hope to have the next chapter out soon. Also, if you get a chance, make sure to check out the great twitter and Tumblr accounts trying to #savegotham

I will now go and hide after this chapter XD
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!